

“Out in the Cold” and Kremlin’s Weaponization of Culture.

Dear Editors and Readers of *Science*,

The article on the state of science in Crimea, “Out in the Cold” (1), triggered strong objections from a large group of scientists from Europe, Asia, and the Americas. In a Letter to the Editor (2), they pointed out that placing the news feature on Crimea under the heading “Science in Russia” contravened UN General Resolution No 68/262, which called on everyone “not to recognize any alteration of the status of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol . . . and to refrain from any action or dealing that might be interpreted as recognizing any such altered status.”

Below we provide a detailed analysis of the article, highlighting how some of its formulations, emphases, and omissions contribute to the propaganda goals of the Kremlin. The article, in our view, could confuse the international audience—in this instance, the global scientific community—by exploiting the concept of fair play and the need to hear both sides, so important for our democratic principle of freedom of speech.

In a comprehensive analysis of current Russian government propaganda activities, Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss emphasized that “the Kremlin’s tools and techniques for the international ‘weaponization of information, culture, and money’ draw on a rich vein of tradition: tsarist forgeries, the Bolsheviks’ ‘useful idiots’ and the use of corruption as a method of control, all directed at muddling minds and turning the West against itself . . . Freedom of information and expression are sacrosanct in Western culture. They are key to any idea of globalization based on liberal democracy. The more freedom of information we have, the thinking goes, the greater the debate, and the greater the common good. But what if a player uses the freedom of information to subvert its principles? To make debate and critical thinking impossible? Not to inform or persuade, but as a weapon?”(3) We urge the Editors and Readers of *Science* not to neglect this charged context when discussing the international dimensions of science as a social institution. The recent news feature on Crimea is a clear case in point.

a) The article asserts that “*The [Ukrainian] government has made it illegal for Ukrainians and foreigners alike to travel to the peninsula via Russia.*” (All quotes from the article are highlighted in italic font).

This statement is factually incorrect. Ukrainian citizens have no restrictions whatsoever to travel to Crimea via any route they chose. Ukraine, as the only internationally recognized sovereign power in Crimea, has the full right to define the rules of entry to its territory. Moreover, some countries (e.g., Israel) have made it illegal for their citizens to bypass Ukrainian authorities when visiting Crimea. The article’s assertion that Ukraine restricts freedom of movement as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is therefore unfounded.

b) The article states that: “*Pro-Russian men in Crimea, including many young scientists, mobilized into regiments. ‘It was scary. We didn’t have any weapons,’ says one IMBR scientist who requested anonymity because he says ‘Ukrainian fascists’ are targeting him.*”

In our view, the article misrepresents the process by which the Russian Federation took over the Crimea in the spring of 2014 and does so, unfortunately, in line with the Kremlin’s falsehoods. There was no mass mobilization of “pro-Russian men” into unarmed “regiments.” Russia rented a military base from Ukraine in the city of Sevastopol, which hosted around 30,000 Russian troops immediately prior to annexation. Before the illegal referendum, Crimea was flooded with heavily

armed Russian special operations forces in unmarked uniforms, dubbed “polite people” in official Russian news coverage. Government building, airports, and other key institutions in Crimea were taken over by regular Russian troops executing a pre-planned annexation scenario, as Putin himself later acknowledged (4). Seeking to avoid bloodshed, the Ukrainian army did not engage the invaders militarily.

We are particularly concerned by the use of an anonymous quote to bring to the pages of *Science* the phrase “*Ukrainian fascists*,” reproducing one of the major examples of smearing rhetoric used by the Russian propaganda machine. That this is a Moscow falsehood was made clear by the chairman of the Association of Jewish Communities and Organizations of Ukraine, Josef Zissels, and other prominent leaders of the Ukrainian Jewish community in their open letter to Putin published as an ad in *The New York Times*, Canada’s *National Post* and Israel’s daily *Haaretz* (5): “The Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine are not being humiliated or discriminated against, their civil rights have not been limited... Your [Mr. Putin’s] certainty of the growth of anti-Semitism in Ukraine also does not correspond to the actual facts. It seems you have confused Ukraine with Russia, where Jewish organizations have noticed growth in anti-Semitic tendencies last year.”

c) The *Science* article uncritically repeats the assertion of a purported “*anti-Russian feeling*” an interviewee allegedly experienced in Kyiv. Many readers may not be aware that several Slavic languages make a distinction between the word “Russian” (*ruskii*) as an ethnicity and language and “Russian” (*rossiiskii*) when referring to the state. The quote implies that the reaction of Ukrainians against the Russian Federation’s aggression has spilled over into animosity against ethnic Russians or Russian-speaking Ukrainians. But nothing can be further from the truth. Numerous studies have demonstrated that the events of the Euromaidan revolution had a civic rather than ethnic character (6, 7). Russians and Russian-speakers are not discriminated against in Ukraine.

d) One of the gravest tragedies unfolding in Crimea is the plight of the Crimean Tatars (or Qirimli), who were dismissed by the author as “*an ethnic minority*.” Crimean Tatars were the most numerous ethnic group in Crimea before World War I; they constituted almost 25% of the Crimean population (i.e., they were the second largest ethnic group) before Stalin’s deportations in 1944; and they were the indigenous population of Crimea for centuries, long before any colonization projects of the Russian Empire. Not having a homeland state anywhere else in the world, Crimean Tatars are recognized as an indigenous people of Crimea by Ukraine and the European Union, among others. This is an important point as it destroys the official Russian mythology that Crimea is a “historically Russian land.” The Crimean Tatars have opposed and boycotted a staged referendum in March 2014, and have since suffered many forms of repression from the new authorities. The article fails to mention persecution, including murder, disappearances, and arrests, of the Crimean Tatars, including Crimean Tatar scientists, under Russian occupation (8, 9). Just last week the Russian authorities banned the Mejlis, the supreme elected governing body of the Crimean Tatar community, violating Crimean Tatars right to self-government protected under the UN Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples (10).

e) The article dwells at length on local scholars being “*shunned by the West*” but receiving “*a warm embrace from Russia*,” listing minor funding and equipment support, while neglecting to discuss the Russian state’s illegal seizure of Ukrainian state property, including scholarly facilities, worth many billions of dollars. Not included in the published article are the remarks from several interviewees that many scientists have chosen to stay in Crimea because they had no opportunity

to relocate their equipment from the annexed peninsula. However, many laboratories not bound tightly to equipment fled Crimea, relocated to mainland Ukraine.

Unfortunately, the West has in the past and is still rather accustomed to understand Ukraine through the Russian narrative, hence both the angle chosen in this article and the general heading it has been published under by *Science* is particularly regrettable. Prior to the publication, we had alerted the Editors of *Science* that their reporter had (potentially) unknowingly violated Ukrainian law by entering Crimea bypassing Ukrainian authorities and that his interviews with Russian media were circulating in local media and catering to Kremlin's propaganda. Although the News Editor doubted "that his story will be of any value to Russian propaganda," at the end the article did indeed become a useful element complementing active elements of Kremlin propaganda, with "daily pounds out two sides to every story, both of which are false" (11).

In summary, we believe that complex matters require particularly great care and sensitivity, and the case of Crimea is definitely one of them. In our view, the published article significantly lacks both. Should *Science* wish to address the situation in science in Ukraine in the future, we are confident both the Ukrainian authorities and the academic community in Ukraine and abroad will be more than happy to assist.

References

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