

**Security Council**

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Letter dated 22 April 2021 from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

I have the honour to transmit herewith the Chair's summary of the open Arria-formula meeting of the Security Council held on 17 March 2021 as a follow-up to the Arria-formula discussion of 12 March 2021 on the situation in Crimea (see annex).

I would appreciate your kind assistance in having the present letter and its annex issued as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) Vassily **Nebenzia**



Annex to the letter dated 22 April 2021 from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

Summary of the open Arria-formula meeting of the United Nations Security Council held on 17 March 2021 as a follow-up to the Arria-formula discussion of 12 March 2021 on the situation in Crimea

Introduction

On 17 March, the Russian Federation hosted an Arria-formula meeting with a view to providing members of the Security Council and all other interested States Members of the United Nations with an opportunity to familiarize themselves with first-hand information on the situation in Crimea from representatives of national minority groups, the education sector and young people residing in Crimea. The obvious need for such a meeting stemmed from the groundless refusal to participate by the sponsors of the Arria-formula discussion of 12 March, who opted for a one-sided politicized event with a carefully calibrated list of loyal briefers without reliable or verifiable information.

The meeting was held virtually by videoconference and was live-streamed on United Nations WebTV¹ and YouTube.² It was chaired by the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, Vassily Nebenzia, and was attended by the representatives of 30 other delegations³ to the United Nations, including all current Security Council members, except Estonia (the main host of the Arria-formula meeting of 12 March). Despite the fact that representatives of all of the States Members of the United Nations were invited to attend and to make statements, the delegation of Ukraine for the second year in a row expressed no interest in engaging in the discussion.

The guest panellists represented four national-minority groups – Crimean Tatars, Ukrainians, Belarusians and Bulgarians – as well as two educational institutions and young people. Specifically, the participants were briefed by the Rector of the Crimean Engineering and Pedagogical University, Chingiz Yaqubov; students of the university; the head of the Ukrainian Community of Crimea, Anastasia Gridchina; the head of the regional national-cultural autonomy of Crimea “Belarusians of Crimea”, Roman Chegrinets; the Vice-Chair of the Bulgarian regional national-cultural autonomy of Crimea “Paisius of Helindar”, Ludmila Radeva; and the head of the Educational Centre for Children and Youth Creativity, Vera Pautova.

A concept note was released prior to the discussion, providing the background. It reminded participants about the seventh anniversary of the reunification of Crimea with Russia, following the rejection of the outcomes of the 2014 coup d'état in Kiev by the population of the Peninsula and the subsequent referendum organized by the local authorities in response to public demand. The results were unequivocal: of the more than 82 per cent of voters participating in the voting, more than 96 per cent had

¹ English version: <http://webtv.un.org/search/the-situation-in-crimea-follow-up-to-the-arria-formula-discussion-of-march-12-2021-on-the-situation-in-crimea-un-security-council-arria-formula-meeting/6241574193001/?term=Arria&sort=date>; Russian version: <http://webtv.un.org/search/the-situation-in-crimea-follow-up-to-the-arria-formula-discussion-of-march-12-2021-on-the-situation-in-crimea-un-security-council-arria-formula-meeting/6241832342001/?term=Arria&sort=date>.

² English version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwOJ5kPHUxk>; Russian version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2QgLzIFLjhY>.

³ Compared with 24 delegations at a similar event hosted by Russia the previous year.

voted in favour of reunification with Russia. This figure had become the genuine expression of the free will of the people. The referendum had allowed Crimeans to exercise their right to self-determination, enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, and had led to the inclusion of two new territorial units in the Russian Federation on 18 March 2014: the Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol.

Statements by the panellists

Speaking as a Crimean Tatar, Mr. Yaqubov explained that the university that he headed had initially been created 28 years earlier, primarily to provide Crimean Tatars with job opportunities. So far, it had already prepared around 35,000 qualified specialists of various nationalities, making itself famous for promoting intercultural dialogue, and had gained respect on the Peninsula.

However, it was only after the adoption of a new Constitution by Crimea in April 2014, that the 6,000 students of the university (more than 60 per cent of whom are Crimean Tatars) obtained an opportunity to study in all three State languages of Crimea: Crimean Tatar, Ukrainian and Russian. Prior to that, Ukrainian had remained the only State language on the Peninsula.

Also, before 2014 there had been no budget allocations for the university, despite the strategic importance of the university for the Peninsula. This situation had changed after the reunification with Russia, when the university was modernized and re-equipped. The same situation was typical for the rest of the Peninsula's infrastructure, he added.

Speaking of human rights violations, Mr. Yaqubov requested the meeting participants to take note that the only violations that Crimeans faced were not related to Russia and were the following:

- (1) Restrictions on freedom of movement: academic exchanges and participation in scientific conferences for the residents of Crimea should not be refused, but allowed, with due recognition of their Russian citizenship;
- (2) Restricted access to information about Crimea: positive information about the processes and developments on the Peninsula should not be blocked abroad. Crimeans should also face no obstacles in their participation in various international forums and their right to express their views;
- (3) Hatred and intolerance, which was promoted by Ukrainian media towards Crimeans and ran counter to the basic United Nations principles, should be stopped.

Ms. Gridchina began with the statement that the secession of Crimea from Ukraine and its subsequent accession to Russia had become a direct consequence of the political crisis in Ukraine.

Denouncing attempts by certain States to politicize the discussions within the United Nations, she referred to the Arria-formula meeting of 12 March on the alleged "violations of the human rights of Crimeans by Russia" and expressed her indignation at the fact that the residents of the Peninsula had not been allowed to speak at the event.

Ms. Gridchina highlighted that, ironically, accusations made against Russian Crimea at the above-mentioned event were more applicable to Ukraine itself, where people lived in an atmosphere of fear and violence owing to the spread of hatred. Journalists and religious leaders were being suppressed and persecuted. As a vivid example of that, she mentioned that, despite being an ethnic Ukrainian herself and promoting and protecting Ukrainian culture and language on the Peninsula, she could not freely visit Ukraine because of imminent prosecution.

She further criticized Ukraine's policy of protecting the State language at the expense of national minorities, which were being suppressed. Forceful Ukrainization and the promotion of Russophobia not only alienated Crimeans from Kiev, but also Ukrainian regions and citizens.

Referring to allegations that access to the Peninsula was being hindered, Ms. Gridchina pointed out that it was Ukraine alone that tried to limit access to the Peninsula for both Ukrainian citizens and foreigners in order not to allow the truth to be spread about life in Crimea.

Mr. Chegrinets addressed the genesis of the coup d'état in Kiev of 21 February 2014 that had led to the referendum in Crimea in line with the provisions of the 1970 Declaration on Principles of International Law. Noting that the overwhelming majority of the Belarusian diaspora on the Peninsula were in favour of its reunification with Russia, he remembered that back then, tens of thousands of Belarusians residing in Crimea had participated in the events of the "Crimean spring", joining people's emergency volunteer corps, volunteering in preparation for the referendum and exercising their inalienable right to self-determination.

In response to the will of the people, the "aggressive northern neighbour" of the Peninsula, Ukraine, had introduced all sorts of collective punitive measures against Crimeans, economic, energy and water blockades, as well as the sabotage carried out by Ukrainian nationalist groups with the approval of Kiev. He provided concrete examples: the explosion of power supply pylons and the cutting-off of the North Crimean Canal, which used to supply up to 85 per cent of the water to the Peninsula. In his view, such activities amounted to genocide.

Mr. Chegrinets protested against the allegations made at the Arria-formula meeting of 12 March that the Crimean health-care system was unfit to address the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic – not only did Crimeans receive timely and necessary health care, but also they had access to the world's first and most advanced vaccine, the Russian Sputnik-V. Such a much-needed cure could have helped the dire spread of the coronavirus disease in Ukraine itself, but remained unavailable to Ukrainians owing to Kiev's Russophobic policy.

The choice that Crimeans had made at the referendum of 2014 had helped the Peninsula to avoid the socioeconomic catastrophe that Ukraine faced today, accompanied with mass impoverishment, unemployment and the bankruptcy of industries and enterprises.

Mr. Chegrinets urged the participants not to believe the Ukrainian propaganda about the Peninsula and invited them to visit Crimea to witness with their own eyes how Crimeans of all nationalities really lived.

Ms. Radeva, representing the Bulgarian community in Crimea, refuted the rubber-stamping of the terms "annexation" and "occupation", which were insulting to the Crimeans. A fraction of countries that used them ignored the free choice of the people of Crimea to rejoin Russia, expressed in 2014. She called the allegations that Crimeans cast their votes "at gunpoint" as laughable, since such forced voting would not be possible because people would just not appear at the polling stations. Instead, she stressed, people had celebrated the referendum.

More than 1,500 foreign news and media outlets were accredited. Being a journalist herself, Ms. Radeva explained why many of the media representatives did not tell the truth about the referendum: "Some of them came with the editorial task of negatively covering the events". She wondered whether true media freedom existed in countries not recognizing the reunification.

Ms. Radeva pointed out that Russia, in turn, had never objected to the reunification of Germany, even despite the fact that it was done without any referendum, and added that Western countries had eagerly supported the secession of Kosovo from Serbia, also without any consultation with the people.

She reminded participants that “Crimea has been Russian since the eighteenth century, when it was first included in our country by Catherine the Great, while in 1954 it was given as a present to Ukraine, ‘as a sack of potatoes’ without consulting the people and in violation of the laws of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)”. The massive Ukrainization that had followed since then had led to Crimeans’ unwillingness to remain part of Ukraine.

Throughout the 23 years of being part of independent Ukraine, Crimeans had never felt at home; they had never supported nationalists and Russophobic “Maidans”, neither in 2004, nor in 2014. Those who favoured the 2014 coup d’état, on the contrary, threatened to “teach Crimeans how to love Ukraine”. One of the popular Maidan chants was: “Crimea will be Ukrainian or empty”.

Referring to human rights violations, Ms. Radeva stated that they had been committed not by Russia, but by Ukraine and its Western supporters, which had made threats either to arrest visitors or limit the freedom of movement through visa restrictions. She argued that, if there had been genuine belief in the “annexation” of the Peninsula in the West, there would have been signs of solidarity and support in the form of unhindered issuing of travel documents instead of collective punishment.

Concluding the list of panellists, Ms. Pautova, the Director of the 51-year-old and largest multidisciplinary educational centre on the Peninsula, with 8,000 pupils, stressed that the necessary improvement and renovation of the educational facility had become possible only after 2014, when the healthy economic and political environment necessary for the development had been established.

The access to support from the State made new educational programmes possible, aimed at developing friendly inter-ethnic and interreligious communication among children, something that had been absent during the Peninsula’s “Ukrainian period”. The educational centre had finally become accessible to children with disabilities, who, together with all the other pupils, had obtained the opportunity to study in all of the three State languages of Crimea.

The panellists provided video footage with interviews of Crimeans in Yalta, answering affirmatively to the question of whether they had taken part in the 2014 referendum.

Statements by delegations to the United Nations

Of the 31 delegations present, 16 took the floor. Those of them that had co-sponsored the Arria-formula discussion of 12 March repeated their positions of non-recognition of the reunification of Crimea with Russia in 2014, which they referred to as “illegal annexation and occupation”. They reconfirmed their commitment to continue implementing such an approach “including through sanctions” until there was “the full restoration of Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity in internationally recognized borders”. They also repeated allegations of “violations by Russia” of human rights on the Peninsula, including those of the Crimean Tatars. The panellists kept refuting such unsubstantiated claims in their replies.

In addition, a representative of the United States, also a co-sponsor of the Arria-formula discussion of 12 March, assumed that the discussion initiated by Russia was “a misuse of the country’s seat on the Security Council”.

The Permanent Representative of France, Nicolas de Rivière, indicated that his participation did not imply the recognition of the views expressed by the participants. He added that “those who live today a normal life in Crimea deserve respect, but this does not change the illegality of Russia’s annexation of Crimea”. However, Mr. de Rivière did not answer the question of why in that case ordinary Crimeans, who deserve respect, are deprived of the right to freedom of movement and face inhumane travel restrictions on the part of the European Union.

The Permanent Representative of Germany, Christoph Heusgen, repeated his position that the events of 2014 were a “violation by Russia of the Budapest Memorandum of 1994” and heard an answer from Mr. Nebenzia that the document was not limited to the single aspect usually referred to. He also alleged that some of the panellists were not representatives of civil society, but “were on the payroll of a repressive regime, receiving instructions on what they have to say”, however, without providing any further substantiation.

Among other delegates taking the floor was a representative of China, who recognized that information provided by the panellists was conducive to the comprehensive understanding of the situation. He stressed the need for political settlement of disputes through dialogue.

Diplomatic solutions to protecting the legitimate interests of the countries of the region were also promoted by the representative of India, who noted that the views of the panellists contradicted those expressed by the briefers in the Arria-formula discussion of 12 March.

Representatives of Belarus, Ethiopia, Mexico, Nicaragua, the Sudan and Syria also took the floor to present their views on the topic under discussion, calling the Arria formula useful.

Interactive discussion

A number of delegations asked questions to the panellists about humanitarian and other challenges that Crimeans faced in daily life. Those were comprehensively addressed by the university students.

In particular, they refuted claims about alleged artificial demographic changes on the Peninsula. On the contrary, Crimean Tatars residing in Ukraine tended to return to Crimea in search of a better life.

The students clarified that the topic of Crimean Tatars was being utilized by Ukraine to ignite inter-ethnic tensions on the Peninsula. They provided examples of Ukrainian propaganda in that regard: during the preparation of the 2014 population census, the Ukrainian media had speculated that the real reason for the census was the intention to prepare the deportation of Crimean Tatars.

The students also denounced the allegations regarding the “violation of rights of Crimean Tatars”, explaining that the representatives of that nationality enjoyed the same rights and freedoms as other Russian citizens throughout the whole territory of the Russian Federation.

Addressing the challenges, the students deplored disrespect by Western countries of the democratic choice that Crimeans had made in 2014. A number of countries practised the restriction of movement vis-à-vis Crimean residents, which was essential for student exchanges.

Ms. Radeva took the floor to address the statement by the Permanent Representative of Germany, who recalled the referendum in Ukraine of 1991, observed by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (the predecessor of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), when “90 per cent were

in favour of the independence of Ukraine, including more than 50 per cent of Crimeans”. She reminded him of the all-Crimean referendum of 20 January 1991, which was neglected by Kiev and often disregarded by the West. The outcome of that referendum was very similar to that of 2014: attendance was more than 80 per cent; “in favour” of autonomy within USSR was more than 93 per cent.

Conclusion

The Arria-formula meeting proved once again the value of direct interaction between the States Members of the United Nations and the actual inhabitants of Russian Crimea. Their invitation to any possible further Crimea-related discussions is indispensable, provided that the organizers are aiming to have unbiased useful discussions.
