

RECLAIMING CRIMEA: UKRAINE'S CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AND THE LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER

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Abstract

This article explores how Ukraine's cultural diplomacy contributes to the global culture war over fundamental values underpinning the international order. Using a mixed method approach it analyzes the strategic narratives about Crimea employed by the Ukrainian Institute in its cultural diplomacy initiatives in years 2020–2024. The analysis identifies a strategic narrative framework composed of a sovereignty macro-narrative and three supporting micro-narratives: decolonial, humanitarian, and humanizing. Their discursive construction indicates an alignment with the ideological assumptions of the liberal international order and a strategy of persuasion centering indigenous rights, human rights, and personal freedom, while backgrounding immediate state interests in order to generate support for the fundamental claim of "Crimea is Ukraine." In doing so the framework both draws legitimacy from and reinforces the liberal international order exemplifying how states may act within a symbolic struggle to advance their own interests.

Keywords: Ukraine; Crimea; Ukrainian Institute; cultural diplomacy; strategic narratives; liberal international order

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Introduction

“Krym – tse Ukraina!” [Crimea is Ukraine!] is Ukraine’s primary declaration being made in its fight to reclaim the Black Sea peninsula illegally occupied by Russia since 2014. This assertion is not just a declaration of territorial integrity. It is also a voice in a global culture war over what values should define international politics. The struggle plays out between the liberal international order (LIO), which consolidated after the end of the Cold War as a unipolar system grounded in a set of shared values including human rights, minority rights, sovereignty, democracy, and personal freedom,¹ and the challengers intent on its fundamental revision. In this conflict Ukraine positions itself on the side of the LIO against Russia’s persistent objection to its core principles which its assertion of “Krym nash!” [Crimea is ours!] echoes.

In the current information age this battle is largely fought using stories. As Joseph Nye observes, following the democratization and the globalization of political and information systems, “outcomes are shaped not merely by whose army wins but also by whose story wins.”² Strategic narratives provide these stories. They are constructed by actors of international politics in order to shape the understanding of reality others have and thus influence their behavior.³ By reining in the overload of information modern audiences are subjected to, they provide interpretative frameworks that guide perceptions and subsequent actions in ways aligned with the sender’s interests.⁴

Cultural diplomacy, understood here as a distinct branch of public diplomacy, constitutes a crucial channel for disseminating strategic narratives and consequently an arena for their confrontation.⁵ In this sense cultural diplomacy represents one of the stages upon which the global culture war over fundamental values unfolds. Culture is unique in that it appears benign making audiences more open to interaction than they would be in the case of overtly political

¹ Daniel Deudney and John G. Ikenberry, “The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 179–196, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210599001795>.

² Joseph S. Nye, *The Future of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 19.

³ Alistair Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, “Strategic Narratives: A Response,” *Critical Studies on Security* 3, no. 3 (2015): 341–344, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2015.1103023>.

⁴ Karl Gustafsson and Linus Hagström, “Narrative Power: How Storytelling Shapes East Asian International Politics,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 4 (2019): 389–391, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1623498>.

⁵ Nicholas J. Cull, *Public Diplomacy: Foundations for Global Engagement in the Digital Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 108–110, 120–123.

messaging.⁶ Admiration for an actor's culture can thus provide a strong foundation for long-lasting receptivity to its goals and narratives.⁷ For Ukraine its cultural diplomacy has become an important tool in advancing its interests, including its claim to Crimea, and countering Russian strategic narratives that seek to legitimize its aggressive revisions of the LIO, many of which target Ukraine directly.

Despite its growing significance Ukraine's cultural diplomacy has received little scholarly attention. Existing research mostly chronologically traces main trends in its institutional development and provides some general critical assessments as well as recommendations for future improvements. Researchers tend to take on a state-centric perspective viewing cultural diplomacy as a crucial soft-power instrument of Ukraine's foreign policy. A slight comparative leaning is also common with Ukraine's cultural diplomacy initiatives evaluated in relation to those of other European states, especially more robust Russian efforts. Authors further emphasize the strength of Russia's soft power along with its use of misinformation as the key reasons as to why Ukraine must strengthen its cultural diplomacy.⁸

While this body of literature reveals some notable trends, most works follow a similar trajectory resulting in a high degree of homogeneity. What is missing is more targeted research of how Ukraine's cultural diplomacy operates in practice especially as a factor in larger symbolic struggles. The case of Crimea is especially relevant in this context. The peninsula has become a microsome of the global culture war over the international order: should it be defined by

⁶ Stephanie Christine Winkler, "Soft Power Is Such a Benign Animal: Narrative Power and the Reification of Concepts in Japan," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 4 (2019): 483–501, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1623171>.

⁷ Milton C. Cummings, "Cultural Diplomacy and the United States Government: A Survey," *Cultural Diplomacy Research Series*, 2009, 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1623171>.

⁸ Olha Filatova, "Kul'turna dyplomatiiia Ukrainy: dosvid, problemy ta perspektyvy," *Pytannia politolohii* 40 (2021): 50–57, <https://doi.org/10.26565/2220-8089-2021-40-06>; Serhii Hololobov, "Kul'turna dyplomatiiia yak skladova derzhavnoi polityky u sferi kul'tury na suchasnomu etapi ukrains'koho derzhavotvorennia," *Publichne upravlinnia ta rehional'nyi rozvytok* 18 (2022): 1057–1074, <https://doi.org/10.34132/pard2022.18.04>; Mariia Kushnarova, "Ukrains'ka kul'turna dyplomatiiia pid chas viiny: dosvid, problemy, perspektyvy," *Natsional'na biblioteka Ukrainy imeni V. I. Vernads'koho* 67 (2023): 35–53, <https://doi.org/10.15407/np.67.035>; Larysa Mytsyk, "Cultural Diplomacy as a Tool for Shaping the International Image of Ukraine," *Literature and Culture of Polissya* 15, no. 105 (2021): 70–84, <https://doi.org/10.31654/2520-6966-2021-15i-105-70-84>; Oksana Rozumna, *Kul'turna dyplomatiiia Ukrainy: stan, problemy, perspektyvy* (Kyiv: Natsional'nyi Instytut Stratehichnykh Doslidzhen', 2016); Vitaliy Tereshchuk, "Cultural Diplomacy as a Tool of Ukraine's Foreign Policy: Institutional Dimension," *Historia i polityka* 28, no. 35 (2019): 59–70, <https://doi.org/10.12775/HiP.2019.015>.

norms of sovereignty and non-aggression, or the interests of great powers and spheres of influence? Examining Ukraine's efforts to shape international perceptions of Crimea thus provides insight into how states contribute to this struggle while advancing their key interests.

This article addresses the outlined gaps by examining the Ukrainian Institute's three major recent projects concerning Crimea. The Ukrainian Institute is currently Ukraine's primary state institution for cultural diplomacy. It was established in 2017 under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs amid renewed interest in this field following the Revolution of Dignity. Since beginning operations in mid-2018,⁹ it has developed a diverse portfolio of activities ranging from promotion of Ukrainian culture and language to communication campaigns, research publishing, and diplomatic events, all supported by a robust online presence. Following Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Institute has contributed to Ukraine's official war messaging and expanded significantly through increased donor funding, thus intensifying outreach beyond Europe.¹⁰

Guided by the centrality of storytelling to these initiatives the article takes on a strategic narratives perspective. The aim here is to identify the key narratives used in the projects, examine their discursive construction, and interpret the reasoning behind it. The following section outlines the research design and the specificities of the employed mixed-method approach. The next section, then, discusses the results of the analysis and to this end, it reconstructs the Ukrainian Institute's strategic narrative framework, moving from a general overview to a detailed examination of the overarching macro-narrative and three supporting micro-narratives. Finally, the concluding parts summarize the findings and situate them within the broader context of the global culture war over the LIO.

Research Data and Methodology

The methodological framework is based on a mixed-method approach which combines critical discourse analysis (CDA) and thematic narrative analysis (TNA). CDA is the primary methodological tool in this framework with the analysis drawing specifically on Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model. The model is designed to analyze discursive events in detail by focusing on their three key aspects: text, discourse practice, and social practice.

⁹ Tereshchuk, "Cultural Diplomacy"; Ukrains'kyi Instytut, *Zvit pro diial'nist' za 2018 rik* (2019), 4–5, <https://ui.org.ua/reports>.

¹⁰ Ukrains'kyi Instytut, *Richnyi zvit 2024* (2025), 18, <https://ui.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/annual-report-2024-spreads.pdf>.

The first stage of the analysis constitutes the descriptive phase of the process. It centers the discursive event itself with attention given to elements such as vocabulary, grammar, and structure. The second stage is dedicated to discourse practice. It examines the processes of production, distribution, and consumption of a discursive event constituting the interpretative phase of the analysis. The third stage is the explanatory phase and focuses on social practice. It is concerned with how a discursive event connects to the broader social context, especially the power relations and ideological structures within which it takes place.¹¹

Narrative analysis, specifically thematic narrative analysis (TNA) as outlined by Katherine Riessman, is the second component of the methodological framework. TNA focuses on the *what* of a story asking what is happening in a narrative rather than how or why. TNA thus allows for identification of specific strategic narratives and preservation of their integrity in the analytical process which would be otherwise lost.¹²

It must be mentioned that TNA and CDA differ in their epistemological perspectives. CDA is rooted in critical realism, whereas TNA aligns itself with interpretivism. For the purposes of this work TNA is reinterpreted within CDA's critical realist paradigm. This view assumes that objective reality exists but that access to it is mediated by a socially constructed layer.¹³ This contrasts with interpretivism which considers reality to be entirely subjective.¹⁴ Narratives should thus be understood not merely as a way of subjective construction of meaning but a form of social practice which both shapes and is shaped by an underlying reality.

The data selected for the analysis consists of three projects of the Ukrainian Institute dedicated to the topic of Crimea from 2020 to 2024. This period is covered by the Ukrainian Institute's first strategy.¹⁵ All three are available in English and online making them widely accessible which ensures their relevancy to the international focus of the analysis. Firstly, "We are Crimea," produced in 2020 in collaboration with Ukraïner, is a series of videos and articles based on interviews with culturally and politically influential Ukrainians from Crimea. The

¹¹ Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London: Routledge, 2013), 132.

¹² See Catherine K. Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2008), 80–114.

¹³ Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 4–5.

¹⁴ Catherine K. Riessman, *Narrative Analysis* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1993), 4–5.

¹⁵ Ukrainian Institute, *Strategy 2020–2024* (2020), <https://ui.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/strategy-ui-en-web-2.pdf>.

participants were given virtual reality headsets through which they revisited personally meaningful places on the peninsula, sharing their memories of life in Crimea and offering reflections on the occupation.¹⁶ Secondly, “Crimea 5am” created in 2021 is composed of several elements. Its main part is a documentary play written by Natalia Vorozhbyt and Anastasiia Kosodii based on interviews with unjustly imprisoned citizen journalists from the Russian-occupied Crimea and their families. The play was performed in several countries and published in book form. A dedicated website provided updates and supplementary materials. Additionally, a public awareness campaign took place featuring an installation of broken, red doors inscribed with information about the prisoners, placed in several locations internationally at different points in time.¹⁷ Lastly, “Crimea: History and People” is an online educational course consisting of video lectures and written materials dedicated to the history of Crimea and of the Crimean Tatars.¹⁸ The multimodal character of the projects is taken into account with the linguistic, the visual, the auditory, and the performative elements all acknowledged in the analysis. However, all these aspects are treated as a discursive whole which reflects the focus on the overall meaning constructed regardless of the mode through which this is done, rather than the role specific modes play and interaction between them.

The analysis followed several stages. The first step was the familiarization with the materials during which preliminary narrative themes were identified. This was followed by the main coding phase conducted manually using a coding table based on Fairclough’s three-dimensional model with an additional layer dedicated to TNA. This TNA layer was used to identify key narrative themes which were then analyzed using layers corresponding to Fairclough’s CDA model. Once the coding was completed, strategic narratives were reconstructed based on the narrative themes identified in the TNA layer. The CDA layers were then used to identify patterns in discursive construction and function of specific narrative themes as well as of the broader strategic narratives they constitute. In short, TNA served to identify the narratives articulated through the projects, while CDA examined how these narratives were constructed and contextualized them.

¹⁶ “We Are Crimea,” Ukrainian Institute, accessed July 14, 2025, <https://ui.org.ua/en/sectors-en/en-projects/we-are-crimea-2>.

¹⁷ “Crimea 5am,” Ukrainian Institute, accessed July 14, 2025, <https://ui.org.ua/en/sectors-en/en-projects/documentary-performance-crimea-5am>.

¹⁸ “Crimea: History and People,” Ukrainian Institute, accessed July 14, 2025, <https://ui.org.ua/en/sectors-en/crimea-history-and-people-2>.

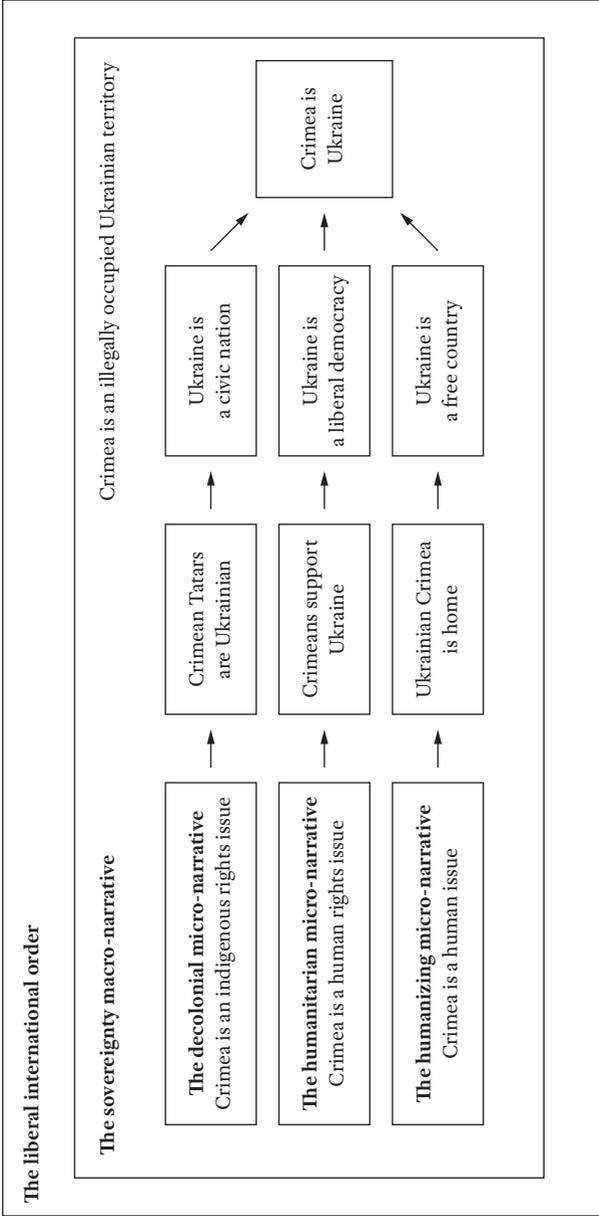


Figure 1: The Ukrainian Institute's Strategic Narrative Framework
Source: Compiled by author.

The Ukrainian Institute’s Strategic Narrative Framework

The analysis identified four strategic narratives including one macro-narrative and three micro-narratives (Figure 1). The sovereignty macro-narrative constitutes the ideological backbone of the Ukrainian Institute’s strategic narrative framework and anchors the fundamental claim of “Crimea is Ukraine” in the context of the liberal international order (LIO). However, the framework derives its persuasive power largely from the micro-narratives. The micro-narratives are: the decolonial micro-narrative centering indigenous rights; the humanitarian micro-narrative focused on human rights; and the humanizing micro-narrative rooted in individual experiences. They frequently overlap but each tells a separate story and constructs the issue of Crimea differently. What unites them is the ideological assumptions established by the sovereignty narrative. The micro-narratives focus on tangible issues grounded in liberal values generating emotional engagement more effectively than the general contents of the sovereignty macro-narrative would be able to. Within each micro-narrative Ukraine is positioned as the natural solution to the problem at hand allowing for the redirection of the emotional capital they accumulated towards the macro-narrative. This in turn strengthens the claim “Crimea is Ukraine.” What follows is a closer examination of each component of this framework.

The Sovereignty Macro-narrative

The overarching macro-narrative in the Ukrainian Institute’s projects is the sovereignty narrative. This narrative claims Crimea as an integral part of Ukraine’s sovereign territory the occupation of which by Russia constitutes a violation of international law and an encroachment upon Ukrainian sovereignty.

The macro-narrative never takes center stage and it is instead seemingly purposefully backgrounded. While it is occasionally explicitly articulated, as in the below example, this is done through brief and concise paragraphs that do not occupy significant space within the projects. The language used in such cases is legalistic and relatively dry which establishes a tone of authority without drawing overt attention:

Russia occupied the Crimean peninsula as a result of its armed aggression against Ukraine, which continues to this day. Most countries and international organizations

do not recognize this violent and illegal cleaving away of a part of Ukraine, nor its unlawful incorporation into the Russian Federation.¹⁹

More often, however, the sovereignty narrative is expressed implicitly primarily through repetition of specific linguistic choices. When referring to the Russian presence in Crimea since 2014 the projects avoid the neutral term “annexation” which has become common in the mainstream international discourse.²⁰ Terms “occupation,” “temporary occupation,” “Russian occupation” and seldom “attempt of annexation” are preferred.²¹ This appears to be an intentional choice meant to reject the discursive normalization of the situation. Common use of words such as “unlawful” and “illegal” further supports the framing of Russia’s intrusion into Crimea as a violation of international law, while “armed,” “violent,” or “seized” emphasize the sense of coercion.²² This lexical register creates an unambiguous position on Crimea which remains ever-present throughout the examined materials.

The backgrounding strategy is crucial in positioning the narrative as common sense. Here, “common sense” refers to ideological assumptions so deeply embedded in social practice that they are perceived as self-evident. Because of this they are rarely questioned as to do so would appear irrational and extreme, making them imperative to the reproduction of existing power structures.²³ The sovereignty narrative achieves this status by aligning itself with the core values of the LIO. For instance, the narrative’s lexical choices clearly reference international law. The international consensus regarding Crimea is also emphasized and the narrative appeals to the authority of respected institutions

¹⁹ Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, “Jamala and Her Crimea,” *Ukraïner*, December 20, 2020, <https://www.ukraïner.net/en/jamala-and-her-crimea>.

²⁰ See, for example, BBC, “Ukraine: Putin Signs Crimea Annexation,” *BBC News*, 2014, March 21, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26686949>; Neil MacFarquhar, “Putin Contradicts Claims on Annexation of Crimea,” *The New York Times*, March 9, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/10/world/europe/putin-contrary-to-earlier-assertions-suggests-planning-to-seize-crimea-started-in-early-2014.html>.

²¹ See, for example, Ukrainian Institute and EdEra, “17. Russian Occupation of Crimea in 2014,” *Ude-my*, accessed April 26, 2025, <https://www.udemy.com/course/crimea-history-and-people/learn/lecture/30947212#content>; Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, “Oleg Sentsov and His Crimea,” *Ukraïner*, December 19, 2020, <https://www.ukraïner.net/en/oleg-sentsov-and-his-crimea>; Natalia Vorozhbyt and Anastasiia Kosodii, *Crimea Sam* (Kyiv: IST Publishing, 2021).

²² See, for example, Ukrainian Institute and EdEra, “17. Russian Occupation of Crimea in 2014.”; Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, “Akhtem Seitablaiev and His Crimea,” *Ukraïner*, December 10, 2020, <https://www.ukraïner.net/en/akhtem-and-his-crimea>; Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, “Jamala and Her Crimea.”

²³ Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power* (London: Routledge, 2015), 13.

such as the United Nations General Assembly reflecting the LIO's multilateral approach.

By situating itself within this liberal hegemonic framework the sovereignty narrative gains discursive power. The fundamental claim of "Crimea is Ukraine" grows from a national position into a defense of liberal norms. This is further reinforced by its non-polemical articulation marked by the use of high modality. What results from this is a narrative that presents itself as so self-evident that it does not need to be defended as it derives its legitimacy from integrating itself into the dominant ideology's common sense. The sovereignty narrative thus blends into the background and becomes naturalized in the audience's mind as a non-controversial shared understanding.

The Decolonial Micro-narrative

The first micro-narrative found across the analyzed projects is the decolonial narrative which focuses on the historical and current experiences of the Crimean Tatars. Within this narrative the issue of Crimea is presented as a matter of indigenous rights. The peninsula is portrayed as the ancestral homeland of the Crimean Tatars which has been subjected to centuries of Russian colonization, the current occupation being just its latest stage.

The narrative's prevalence is visible in the discursive privileging of the Crimean Tatars within all of the analyzed projects. In "We are Crimea" three out of four interviewees are Crimean Tatar; "Crimea: History and People" is wholly dedicated to the peninsula's history framed through a Crimean Tatar lens; and "Crimea 5am" is dedicated to stories of Crimean Tatar citizen journalists. This is likely an intentional choice given that the Crimean Tatars constituted only around 12% of Crimea's population prior to Russia's takeover.²⁴

The main element of the decolonial narrative is the historiography it constructs. Its protagonists are the Crimean Tatars whose indigeneity is strongly emphasized. On the lexical level this is done through repeated labeling of them as "indigenous" along with the use of terms like "native land," "ancestral homeland," or "their [Crimean Tatar] homeland" in reference to Crimea.²⁵ They are also never referred to as just "Tatar" always appearing as "the Crimean Tatars."

²⁴ Kerstin S. Jobst, *A History of Crimea: From Antiquity to the Present* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025), 337.

²⁵ See, for example, Ukrainian Institute and EdEra, "2. Introduction: Why You Should Learn about Crimean Tatars," *Udemy*, accessed April 26, 2025, <https://www.udemy.com/course/crimea-history-and-people/learn/lecture/30947012#content>; Vorozhbyt and Kosodii, "Crimea 5am," 17, 158.

This constitutes a rejection of what Finnin has termed “discursive cleansing” or the Soviet attempt to erase their region-specific following the Sürgün [exile] meaning the 1944 deportation of Crimean Tatars from Crimea.²⁶ Furthermore, the narrative firmly rejects the claim that the Crimean Tatars are “merely descendants of the Mongols”²⁷ which is an idea rooted in Russian historiography that was used to portray the Crimean Tatars as foreign invaders and a threat to Slavic inhabitants of the peninsula through association with the brutality of medieval Mongol invasions.²⁸

The Crimean Khanate is strongly valorized within the decolonial narrative as a flourishing civilization which moves it from the margins to the center of Eastern European historical discourse. A key element of its portrayal is the deconstruction of the Khanate’s conventional depiction as a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman suzerainty is acknowledged but so are numerous markers of independence including Khanate’s own currency, civil bureaucracy, judicial system, and diplomatic relations. Its military and political significance is emphasized for instance by noting that regionally influential actors such as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Muscovy paid tribute directly to the Khanate. This is visually reinforced with maps of its extensive territory. Achievements of the Crimean Khanate in the fields of culture and education are also emphasized through mentions of poets such as Umer Ashek or Khan Jan Mohammad, the Zincirli Madrasa, and vibrant depictions of court life.²⁹

The primary antagonist in the decolonial narrative’s historiography is Russia, constructed as a colonizing power. Every instance of its entry into the Crimean Peninsula is framed in negative terms. The annexation of Crimea into the Russian empire is described as an “invasion” and “catastrophe,”³⁰ while the Bolshevik take-

²⁶ Rory Finnin, “Forgetting Nothing, Forgetting No One: Boris Chichibabin, Viktor Nekipelov, and the Deportation of the Crimean Tatars,” *The Modern Language Review* 106, no. 4 (2011): 1091–124, <https://doi.org/10.5699/modelangrevi.106.4.1091>.

²⁷ Ukrainian Institute and EdEra, “4. Origins of Crimean Tatars and Their State Crimean Khanate,” *Udemy*, accessed April 26, 2025, <https://www.udemy.com/course/crimea-history-and-people/learn/lecture/30947084#overview>, 1:45–1:50.

²⁸ Filiz Tutku Aydin and Fethi Kurtiy Sahin, “The Politics of Recognition of Crimean Tatar Collective Rights in the Post-Soviet Period: With Special Attention to the Russian Annexation of Crimea,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 52 (2019): 42, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2019.02.003>.

²⁹ Ukrainian Institute and EdEra, “Section 3: The Crimean Khanate,” *Udemy*, accessed April 26, 2025, <https://www.udemy.com/course/crimea-history-and-people/learn/lecture/30947120#>; Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, “Akhtem Seitablaiev and His Crimea.”

³⁰ Ukrainian Institute and EdEra, “5. The Crimean Khanate as a Political and Military Player in Eastern Europe,” *Udemy*, accessed April 26, 2025, <https://www.udemy.com/course/crimea-history-and-people/learn/lecture/30947088#content>, 4:30–4:45.

over is labeled a forcible annexation.³¹ Russian presence in Crimea is delegitimized as artificially created through a deliberate strategy of displacement. Emphasis is placed on explaining the formation of contemporary ethnic Russian majority in Crimea through settler colonialism. In section 5 of “Crimea: History and People” a map of Crimea appears alongside this explanation. Initially filled with figures representing the Crimean Tatars, the map shows about half of them then disappearing, replaced by a new Slavic population, thus reinforcing this framing.³²

The narrative also deconstructs Russian epistemic violence particularly through critique of colonial historical revisionism. The already discussed valorization of the Crimean Khanate is part of this effort. Another one of its key elements focuses on the Hellenization and the Russification of indigenous toponyms under the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. These processes are discussed³³ and countered within the projects through the widespread use of Crimean Tatar toponyms. These forms are often privileged over later imperial and Soviet versions with phrasings such as: “Mamashay (Qt – Mamaşay; Orlivka since 1945) in the South-West Crimea near Sevastopol (old Qt – Aqyar).”³⁴

Russian rule over Crimea is discussed primarily through the lens of its negative effects on the Crimean Tatars with the Sürgün constituting the defining point of the narrative. The lexical register used to describe it includes terms such as “tragedy,” “abominable act of violence,” and “genocide” leaving no room for ambiguity. All of the existing justifications propagated by Russia are strongly rejected as “slander” and “myth.”³⁵ The Sürgün emerges as the most frequently referenced historical event throughout the narrative, dividing Crimean Tatar history into “before” and “after.”³⁶ The narrative also stresses its

³¹ Ukrainian Institute and EdEra, “11. Crimea during the Revolution and Civil War (1917–1921),” *Udemy*, accessed April 26, 2025, <https://www.udemy.com/course/crimea-history-and-people/learn/lecture/30947176#content,4:04–4:10>.

³² Ukrainian Institute and EdEra, “9. Modernization: The Colony as an ‘Imperial Garden,’” *Udemy*, accessed April 26, 2025, <https://www.udemy.com/course/crimea-history-and-people/learn/lecture/30947168#content,2:20–2:30>.

³³ Ukrainian Institute and EdEra, “9. Modernization: The Colony as an ‘Imperial Garden’”; Ukrainian Institute and EdEra, “14. Claiming the Homeland. Deportation and Return of Crimean Tatars,” *Udemy*, accessed April 26, 2025, <https://www.udemy.com/course/crimea-history-and-people/learn/lecture/30947190#content>.

³⁴ Ukrainian Institute and Ukrainer, “Akhtem Seitablaiev and His Crimea.”

³⁵ See, for example, Ukrainian Institute and EdEra, “13. Ambiguity of the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic,” *Udemy*, accessed April 26, 2025, <https://www.udemy.com/course/crimea-history-and-people/learn/lecture/30947188#content>; Ukrainian Institute and Ukrainer, “Jamala and Her Crimea”; Vorozhbyt and Kosodii, “Crimea Sam,” 8.

³⁶ Ukrainian Institute and EdEra, “13. Ambiguity of the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic,” 8:55.

long-term effects for instance through the biographical profiles of the projects' protagonists, most of whom were born in Uzbekistan and only later returned to Crimea.³⁷

Parallels are drawn between past and present Russian policies emphasizing colonial continuity. They emerge both organically through natural similarities, such as the post-2014 influx of Russian settlers appearing as a continuation of earlier methods of demographic engineering, and deliberately through specific narrative constructions. One example of the latter is the story of Veciye Qaşqa which opens the "Crimea 5am" play. Her life is recounted in short sentences starting with deportation to Uzbekistan at 10 years old and ending with a heart attack during her arrest by Russian occupation forces in 2017.³⁸

The Crimean Tatar resistance to these attempts is then naturally framed in anticolonial terms. The Crimean Tatars "reclaim," "return," and repatriate which emphasizes their rightful ownership of the land and status of indigenous people.³⁹ They are also morally valorized in both historical and contemporary contexts appearing as "innocent people," "faithful Muslims" who "renounce all terror."⁴⁰ Their historical and contemporary resistance is portrayed as grounded in values of peace and democracy. The short-lived Crimean People's Republic of 1917 is framed as a pioneer of democracy and gender equality while the Soviet era dissident movement is praised for its non-violent character.⁴¹ Their peacefulness is further highlighted with contemporary examples such as the story of Reşat Ametov who, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, took part in a protest against the occupation for which he was brutally murdered.⁴² Therefore, a strong contrast exists between the portrayals of the colonized and the colonizer in the decolonial narrative. This frames the issue in terms of two opposing moral extremes prompting the audience's alignment with the struggle of the righteous indigenous people against the violent Russian colonization.

³⁷ See, for example, Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, "Akhtem Seitablaiev and His Crimea"; Vorozhbyt and Kosodii, "Crimea 5am," 69.

³⁸ Vorozhbyt and Kosodii, "Crimea 5am," 28.

³⁹ See, for example, Ukrainian Institute and EdEra, "14. Claiming the Homeland. Deportation and Return of Crimean Tatars," 9:15; Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, "Mustafa Jemilev and His Crimea," *Ukraïner*, December 12, 2020, <https://www.ukraïner.net/en/mustafa-jemilev-and-his-crimea>.

⁴⁰ Vorozhbyt and Kosodii, "Crimea 5am," 140, 164.

⁴¹ Ukrainian Institute and EdEra, "1. Promo Video," *Udemy*, accessed April 26, 2025, <https://www.udemy.com/course/crimea-history-and-people/learn/lecture/30947250#content,0:47-0:57>; Ukrainian Institute and EdEra, "14. Claiming the Homeland."

⁴² Vorozhbyt and Kosodii, "Crimea 5am," 28–29.

The Humanitarian Micro-narrative

In contrast with the historical perspective of the decolonial narrative the humanitarian narrative shifts to a more immediate timeframe. It tells the story of ordinary Crimeans' civil resistance to Russian occupation authorities since 2014 and of their subsequent persecution. Discursively, it is the simplest out of the identified narratives. It contrasts the righteous Crimean civil society with the deplorable Russian occupation forces. In doing so it constructs a clear moral binary positioning the issue of Crimea as a question of right and wrong grounded in human rights considerations.

The narrative portrays civil resistance as a spontaneous, grassroots response to Russia's occupation of Crimea. It primarily relies on stories of real people. Frequently provided biographical information of the story's protagonists emphasizes the ordinariness of their lives prior to the narrative's main story. For instance, the audience learns that Rustem Sheikhaliev finished a technical high school, worked as fruits and vegetables seller at Simferopol's Central Market, had three children, was known in the community for his honesty in business, and often helped to organize children's parties.⁴³ These and other details amount to a series of diverse genre paintings depicting hard-working Crimean citizens leading normal lives.

The year 2014 marks a rapture in these biographies with a sudden appearance of systemic violence in the narrative.⁴⁴ Crimean citizens' resistance against this intrusion is framed as stemming from an internal sense of moral obligation. This is best illustrated through excerpts from speeches of arrested citizen journalists delivered mostly in court which are included in the "Crimea 5am" project.⁴⁵ The following quotation from Nariman Memedeminov's last speech before his verdict was announced provides a clear example:

No wonder the authorities, the government structures, the public prosecutor, and their ilk cannot wrap their enlightened heads around it: "Like, why can't you just stay at home? What on earth makes you crowd the 149 courtrooms and protest in front of buildings? Why all these banners, all these protests? Why do you raise the money for these families? Why all these coins?" They fail to see that it is our nature, the way we are. Whenever one of us is in trouble, we all feel out of place, this is called solidarity... This is what I call unity!⁴⁶

⁴³ Vorozhbyt and Kosodii, "Crimea 5am," 47–48.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 47–48, 69–70, 92–93.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 134–162.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 149–150.

With a hint of irony Memedeminov contrasts the authoritarian logic of the Russian state unable to comprehend civil resistance with the community's understanding of it as a moral reflex. Resistance is therefore positioned as morally superior and grounded in shared values of a unified community.

Additionally, the humanitarian narrative highlights the inter-ethnic character of Crimean civil resistance creating a sense of a shared struggle across an entire population. While the Crimean Tatars remain dominant in the narrative as "the vanguard of the resistance,"⁴⁷ they are not the sole actors. "We are Crimea" also includes the story of Oleg Sentsov who is a Ukrainian film director from Crimea opposed to Russia's occupation and a former political prisoner.⁴⁸ Furthermore, when discussing shutdowns of independent media, Ukrainian channels are mentioned alongside the Crimean Tatar ones⁴⁹ and visual materials depicting anti-occupation protests feature images of crowds holding both Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar flags.⁵⁰

This empathetic portrayal of the civil society is contrasted with a depiction of Russia as a violent, neo-totalitarian regime. Numerous examples of morally valorized acts of resistance are paired with extensive accounts of human rights violations they are met with. These abuses are shown to the audience primarily through personal testimonies of victims accompanied by visual materials which reinforce their authenticity. The narrative's protagonists recount arrests of civil activists full of unprovoked violence and carried out in the presence of terrified children and elderly family members.⁵¹ It is explained how charges of terrorism are fabricated through constant surveillance and sham legal procedures.⁵² Other stories also speak of the activists' displacement and their inability to return to Crimea.⁵³

Russianness is deindividualized in the humanitarian narrative. Russians feature almost exclusively as agents of repression: they are border guards, masked soldiers, shadowy men with rifles.⁵⁴ They are nameless and faceless, visually appearing in military or police uniforms, usually captured in carrying out acts of

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁸ Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, "Oleg Sentsov and His Crimea."

⁴⁹ Vorozhbyt and Kosodii, "Crimea 5am," 9.

⁵⁰ Ukrainian Institute and EdEra, "17. Russian Occupation of Crimea in 2014," 0:54–0:58.

⁵¹ Vorozhbyt and Kosodii, "Crimea 5am," 64–87.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 59–60.

⁵³ Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, "Mustafa Jemilev and His Crimea"; Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, "Oleg Sentsov and His Crimea."

⁵⁴ See, for example, Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, "Mustafa Jemilev and His Crimea"; Vorozhbyt and Kosodii, "Crimea 5am," 70–72.

violence against Crimeans. Their characterization is consistently negative. Russians appear to the audience as violent, opportunistic, and emotionally numb. They benefit from the occupation at Crimeans' expense and remain indifferent or even actively supportive of the suffering they cause. This is exemplified by citizen journalist Amet Suleimanov's description of FSB soldiers with whom "(...) it is futile to strike a conversation and expect real empathy from them, it's beyond their power. They are machines. Completely insensitive. For them, nothing matters but the order to obey and the decree to put into effect."⁵⁵ Similarly, Russian society as a whole is described in a generalized manner: "a lot of people there don't like Putin, and their number is growing every year. But their opinion about Crimea is uniform – they all believe Crimea belongs to Russia. This mentality is very deep-rooted there: 'we'll capture what's ours and we won't give it back'. It's disgusting, but they really do think like this."⁵⁶ The humanitarian narrative thus explicitly frames Russians as a homogenous collective of cogs in a totalitarian system which contributes to the construction of a moral divide between the oppressors and the oppressed.

Importantly, the identification of some segments of Crimea's population with Russianness is excluded from the story. Protagonists of the humanitarian narrative are only Crimean Tatar, Ukrainian, or both. While Oleg Sentsov is ethnically Russian this is not acknowledged within the narrative which further exemplifies the intentional aligning of Russianness with the oppressor group.⁵⁷ Crimean Tatar and Ukrainian remain the only morally legitimate identities within the narrative.

The humanitarian narrative also constructs parallels between contemporary Russia and the former Soviet Union contextualizing current abuses within a longer tradition of state violence and further delegitimizing the occupation. Brutal interrogations and show trials of civil activists followed by imprisonment in distant penal colonies echo Soviet-era practices. This tactic is not limited to implicit comparisons. Russia is indeed directly labeled as "the Soviet Union 2.0"⁵⁸ and the Crimean Tatar leader Mustafa Dzhemilev, himself a victim of Soviet repression, asserts that the ongoing violence sometimes exceeds that of the Soviet Union.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Vorozhbyt and Kosodii, "Crimea Sam," 98.

⁵⁶ Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, "Oleg Sentsov and His Crimea."

⁵⁷ Zoya Svetova, "Krymskoe delo," *The New Times*, May 31, 2014, <https://www.newtimes.ru/articles/detail/83077>.

⁵⁸ Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, "Oleg Sentsov and His Crimea."

⁵⁹ Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, "Mustafa Jemilev and His Crimea."

The Humanizing Micro-narrative

The final, humanizing micro-narrative narrows its scope even more centering personal stories of exile and loss following Russia's intrusion into Crimea. Unlike the previous two micro-narratives, which derive their persuasive power from greater and more abstract values, the humanizing narrative is grounded in the subjective experience. By focusing on individual lives, it humanizes the issue of Crimea and encourages the audience to identify with the narrative's subjects. Within this narrative Crimea then appears as a personal homeland which positions the conflict as a primarily human issue.

The humanizing narrative is noticeable in the prevalent use of personal testimonies in the projects' materials which position the individuals as the main protagonists of the story. For instance, "We are Crimea" is based on interviews with prominent Crimeans who revisit their home through a virtual reality experience. This format quite literally allows the audience to look at Crimea through the interviewees' eyes prompting development of an emotional connection. Outside of the virtual reality segments the visuals of the project remain simple. Interviewees are positioned against plain backgrounds ensuring all focus remains on them by eliminating unnecessary distractions.⁶⁰

Similarly, "Crimea 5am" includes a documentary play built around interviews with imprisoned Crimean Tatar citizen journalists and their families. All productions of the play remain minimalist. Performers in plain clothing are seated around the stage and read out the script without fully embodying the characters. One performer will often take on multiple roles and there is little physical movement involved. A screen will usually constitute the most dynamic element on the stage displaying additional contextualizing details, photos of the play's heroes, and occasional visual effects.⁶¹ This minimalism allows the audience to directly engage with the stories being recounted providing a window into the realities of life in occupied Crimea.⁶²

Language plays a crucial role in establishing a focus on the narrative's subjects and appealing to the audience's sense of empathy. The use of first-person voice, rhetorical questions, pauses, and exclamations creates a sense of being

⁶⁰ "We Are Crimea," Ukrainian Institute.

⁶¹ Crimea 5am, "Crimea 5am, Documentary Performance in National Center Ukrainian House, Kyiv, Ukraine," *YouTube*, November 4, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=totG97u3d5M>; Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, "Ukraine, 5 a.m. – A Staged Reading Followed by a Discussion," *YouTube*, June 13, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zpjOFvl-plM>.

⁶² Vorozhbyt and Kosodii, "Crimea 5am," 13.

directly spoken to, while dialogues and reported speech capture the authenticity of real-life conversation. The language is very emotive, especially when subjects speak about their exile and the occupation's terror clearly communicating the subjects' emotions during these experiences. For example, Jamala expresses that she feels "caged and helpless" due to her inability to return to Crimea,⁶³ while Aishe Asanova recalls her outrage at seeing armed men pointing guns at her husband in front of their frightened children.⁶⁴

The humanizing narrative also seeks to universalize the issue of Crimea through appeals to shared values of home, family, or dreams. One article from the "We are Crimea" project introduces its subject as follows:

Most of us have favourite scents, things, places, and memories that are associated with home. Where the home starts, anxiety and uncertainty vanish. Home holds us like strong roots hold a tree, tells us who we are, where we are from and what path we follow.⁶⁵

Here, the discursive construction is inclusive thanks to the use of collective pronouns and the generalization of the experience of home which establishes a common ground between the audience and the narrative's subjects.

The narrative is further characterized by strong individualization of its protagonists. Their names are consistently provided along with biographical details such as levels of education, professions, number of children, hobbies, and personal preferences. For instance, a section of "Crimea 5am" is dedicated to the wedding memories of the speakers. The recollections vary in tone with Elzara Suleimanova recounting her nikah with joy, comparing it to a "fairytale," while Suria Sheikhalieva remembers it through the sad context of her mother's battle with cancer at the time.⁶⁶ Such details add depth to the narrative allowing the audience to perceive its subjects as diverse individuals and connect with them. This is further reinforced through the visual and auditory dimensions. Within the "We are Crimea" project the interviewees are seen in photographs and speaking on video, often with silent close-up shots of their faces. "Crimea 5am" similarly includes extensive photographic material depicting the people whose stories are being told making them appear more real to the audience.

⁶³ Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, "Jamala and Her Crimea."

⁶⁴ Vorozhbyt and Kosodii, "Crimea 5am," 66.

⁶⁵ Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, "We Are Crimea," *Ukraïner*, February 24, 2021, <https://www.ukraïner.net/en/we-are-crimea>.

⁶⁶ Vorozhbyt and Kosodii, "Crimea 5am," 44–51.

Overall, the narrative achieves a paradoxical sense of objectivity through subjectivity. The audience accesses Crimea through the lived experiences of individuals which invites emotional identification with their perspectives. The connection of the audience with the story's protagonists supports the narrative's credibility because they appear real and thus relatable. Their stories are grounded in personal memory allowing the narrative to assert a special kind of authority. Its claims are correct precisely because they are based in subjectivity. One scene of "Crimea 5am" captures this well. As Suria Sheikhalieva speaks of her husband's dream to own a house and his daily hard work, a Soviet-era Photon TV broadcasts "jokes about Ukraine." She talks over the noise until someone finally turns the device off after which she is able to continue in a softer voice.⁶⁷ This scene symbolically captures the struggle between depersonalized state propaganda and individual truth. Out of the two competing voices, Suria is who the audience trusts, exactly because she appears deeply human.

The claim to Crimea in the humanizing narrative is thus personal. Stories of childhoods and marriages are recounted full of mundane but intimate memories of assembling furniture at night,⁶⁸ preparing pilaf, grazing sheep,⁶⁹ drinking coffee at sunrise.⁷⁰ These elements make Crimea appear as the home of the narrative's protagonists. Their belonging in the land does not need to be proclaimed; it is shown through experiences of everyday life on the peninsula. This bond is strengthened by the subjects' emotional attachment to and intimate knowledge of Crimea. For example, in "We are Crimea," Akhtem Seitablaiev describes the Khan's Palace in Bakhchysarai as his "place of power,"⁷¹ while Jamala refers to a small part of Crimea's coastline as "my shore, my pier."⁷² The interviewees recognize locations they are shown, are visibly and audibly emotional at seeing them, and detail changes to the environment that occurred since their last visit.⁷³ Furthermore, Crimea is repeatedly referred to as "home" or "homeland,"

⁶⁷ Ibid., 55–57.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 54.

⁶⁹ Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, "Jamala and Her Crimea."

⁷⁰ Vorozhbyt and Kosodii, "Crimea 5am," 58.

⁷¹ Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, "Akhtem Seitablaiev and His Crimea."

⁷² Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, "Jamala and Her Crimea."

⁷³ Ukrainian Institute, "Akhtem Seitablaiev and His Crimea | We Are Crimea," *YouTube*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OIsNNnKstw8>; Ukrainian Institute, "Jamala and Her Crimea | We Are Crimea," *YouTube*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sV-uRLBA9V8>; Ukrainian Institute, "Mustafa Jemilev and His Crimea | We Are Crimea," *YouTube*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WK0lOmtW9WE>; Ukrainian Institute, "Oleg Sentsov and His Crimea | We Are Crimea," *YouTube*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GhbTx14s9Hc>.

described as “native” and labeled as “my” or “our” reinforcing the emotional importance of the peninsula.⁷⁴

When directly addressing the Russian occupation of Crimea the humanizing narrative retains its focus on the personal. The occupation is shown through portraits of personal tragedies it caused highlighting the human cost of Russia’s invasion. The affective range of the narrative is drastically different before and after the invasion. The past is filled with warmth constructed by joyful and loving memories. In contrast the present is dominated by sadness, fear, and longing. The occupation consequently appears as an emotional rapture. Its primary consequence within the narrative is the loss of home. “We are Crimea” is based on stories of those who cannot return. Interviewees speak of their exile with pain, describing being cut off from their families,⁷⁵ missing funerals of loved ones,⁷⁶ and being unable to show the land of their childhood to their own children.⁷⁷

In “Crimea 5am” this is articulated through the voices of families of fathers taken away from home by Russian authorities. These men are imprisoned in distant cities like Rostov-on-Don or Novocherkassk with the voices of their wives and children foregrounded as they recount the trauma of separation. One scene illustrates how the occupation intrudes into the category of home. It begins with Khalide Bekirova speaking of how her son Muhammad made a cutout of a tree representing his family but with his father absent. When asked why, the boy points to a part of his cutout, explaining he is in the shadows, behind bars, chained by FSB officers.⁷⁸

Narrative Resolution: Crimea is Ukraine

The natural resolution to all of the Ukrainian Institute’s micro-narratives is the return of Crimea to Ukraine. The linking of a micro-narrative’s main story with this endpoint is done most explicitly in the decolonial narrative. In addition to the earlier discussed elements, the narrative’s historiography also constructs a sense of a shared fate between the ethnic Ukrainians and the Crimean

⁷⁴ See, for example, Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, “Jamala and Her Crimea”; Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, “We Are Crimea”; Vorozhbyt and Kosodii, “Crimea 5am,” 129.

⁷⁵ Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, “Akhtem Seitablaiev and His Crimea”; Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, “Jamala and Her Crimea”; Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, “Mustafa Jemilev and His Crimea.”

⁷⁶ Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, “Jamala and Her Crimea”; Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, “Mustafa Jemilev and His Crimea.”

⁷⁷ Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, “Jamala and Her Crimea.”

⁷⁸ Vorozhbyt and Kosodii, “Crimea 5am,” 112.

Tatars. It highlights episodes of cooperation between the two and marginalizes those of conflict. Historical parallels which link elements of their past highlight the themes of solidarity and shared values. For instance, the Crimean People's Republic and the Ukrainian People's Republic are connected through the narrative's emphasis on their mutual respect.⁷⁹ Russia is also important to this narrative construction functioning as a shared enemy.

Importantly, Ukraine is not a major actor within the decolonial narrative and appears only as a background presence paralleling the Crimean Tatar experience. This positioning, especially in contrast with Russia's militant presence, paints Ukraine as a natural ally to the Crimean Tatars, united with them through a common experience of Russian colonial subjugation. Developments such as the recognition of the Crimean Tatars, Karaites, and Krymchaks as indigenous are highlighted as examples of Ukraine's commitment to indigenous rights. However, the fact that even such symbolic steps were not taken until after the Russian takeover is omitted.⁸⁰ Together these elements provide a historical basis for the legitimacy of Ukraine's claim to Crimea. Words of Mustafa Dzhemilev included in the "We are Crimea" project capture the logic of this historical link:

There was a time when a significant chunk of Ukraine was part of Crimean Khanate, now we are part of Ukraine. From time to time we change our status but if we separate, Ukraine will be lost to us, so under no circumstances should that happen. We will be part of Ukraine. We [the indigenous people] are the founders, a part of Ukraine as a country, so we see our all, our own, in Ukraine.⁸¹

In the decolonial narrative Crimea is then Crimean Tatar and the Crimean Tatars are an integral part of the Ukrainian civic nation bound to ethnic Ukrainians by a shared history. The claim "Crimea is Ukraine" thus becomes a statement in support of indigenous rights.

Within the humanitarian and humanizing narratives, the connection between Crimea and Ukraine is constructed much more implicitly, mostly through contrast with conditions of life in Crimea under Russian occupation. The humanitarian narrative focuses on violent repression of a morally valorized Crimean civil society. Support for Ukrainian control over Crimea is framed as a natural reaction of Crimean society stemming from its deep-rooted values.

⁷⁹ Ukrainian Institute and EdEra, "11. Crimea during the Revolution and Civil War (1917–1921)," 2:06–2:28.

⁸⁰ Ukrainian Institute and EdEra, "17. Russian Occupation of Crimea in 2014," 8:15–8:23.

⁸¹ Ukrainian Institute and Ukrainer, "Mustafa Jemilev and His Crimea."

While Ukraine is not presented as flawless with occasional criticism of its failures in integrating Crimea allowed, it is also implicitly positioned as aligned with values of the Crimean civil society.⁸² In this context Ukraine's claim to Crimea becomes a matter of ensuring Crimeans' rights, freedoms, and protection from totalitarian state impulses.

The humanizing narrative similarly relies on an implicit sense of Ukrainian governance being preferable. The strong contrast in the tone of the presented personal stories, between the joyful past and the fearful present, communicates that life under Ukrainian administration is remembered positively. The idyllic vision of Crimea as home is a vision of a Ukrainian Crimea. Return of Crimea to Ukraine thus means the return of the possibility to live freely in one's homeland.

A key tactic used by all three micro-narratives is individualization. Each includes specific voices of Crimeans who explicitly state that Crimea is a part of Ukraine, that its return is necessary, and that they identify as Ukrainian. In making these statements they represent both themselves on a personal level and larger communities to which they belong. For example, when Server Mustafaiev, an imprisoned Crimean Tatar citizen journalist, states that he is a citizen of Ukraine he does so simultaneously as a Crimean Tatar, a representative of Crimean civil society, and an ordinary Crimean inhabitant.⁸³ His multifaceted identity makes him an embodiment of the core issues in all three micro-narratives. Through Mustafaiev's assertion, along with numerous others, Crimea's belonging to Ukraine is framed as the general will of the people. The audience is encouraged to align themselves with the macro-narrative's advocacy for Ukrainian sovereignty because the individuals who embody the tangible issues that they have come to care about through the micro-narratives endorse it.

Therefore, Ukraine's positionality within the strategic narrative framework is quite unique. Despite being an ever-present referent, it rarely appears as an active actor. Even when it plays a direct role within a micro-narrative, as in the decolonial narrative, it remains in the background with a rather supplementary function. In fact, the micro-narratives are in general characterized by a limited number of actors. They all center on a binary relationship between just two agents. In the decolonial narrative these are the Crimean Tatars and Russia depicted as a colonizer; in the humanitarian narrative the focus is on the conflict between Crimean civil society and Russia's neo-totalitarian system; in the humanizing narrative the emphasis is placed on individual suffering under

⁸² See, for example, Ukrainian Institute and Ukraïner, "Oleg Sentsov and His Crimea."

⁸³ Vorozhbyt and Kosodii, "Crimea Sam," 134.

a destructive Russian occupation. This produces simple narrative structures with a clear moral binary and a single antagonist bearing full blame for the situation in Crimea. Ukraine is not an explicit part of the equation. Instead, it is a goal to which the “good” actors aspire becoming central to the micro-narratives’ resolution despite its absence from their main stories.

Ukraine’s Strategic Narratives within the Global Culture War

The issue of Crimea does not exist in a vacuum. The peninsula’s occupation represented one of Russia’s first major challenges to the LIO paradigm. Forcible seizure of territory was something many in the Global North considered unthinkable, yet it became a reality marking an early battle in the global culture war over the world order and later escalating into Russia’s large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In this context, Ukraine’s state interest in Crimea, the restoration of its territorial integrity, is directly aligned with the LIO as it relies on the international community’s continued commitment to the equal sovereignty of all states.

This alignment is reflected in the above-described strategic narrative framework of the Ukrainian Institute which both is supported by and supports the LIO. On one hand, the framework derives legitimacy from liberal ideological assumptions. Each of the identified micro-narratives focuses on tangible issues grounded in the LIO, whether its indigenous rights, human rights, or personal freedom. Ukraine is consistently positioned as the solution to the described issues in Crimea and thus appears as a guarantor of liberal values with support for its sovereignty becoming synonymous with upholding these values.

On the other, the strategic narrative framework also reinforces the LIO. The sovereignty macro-narrative which most directly references its institutional and normative architecture is backgrounded in favor of the micro-narratives. The audience’s attention centers on the fates of specific people and communities. From engagement with these smaller stories arises interest in the topic of Crimea more broadly which in turn translates into support for Ukraine’s territorial claims. Ultimately, this reaffirms the value system in which Ukraine’s state interests are supported as morally correct. That is of course the liberal international order.

Conclusion

This article examines how the Ukrainian Institute, as Ukraine’s primary state institution in the field of cultural diplomacy, constructs strategic narratives about

Crimea to address international audiences in its initiatives produced during its first strategy for years 2020 to 2024. The analysis identified a strategic narrative framework composed of a sovereignty macro-narrative, within which the fundamental Ukrainian narrative claim of “Crimea is Ukraine” is grounded, and three supporting micro-narratives: decolonial, humanitarian, and humanizing.

The macro-narrative presents Ukraine’s claim to Crimea supported by international law. It remains in the background subtly aligning the overall framework with the liberal international order (LIO). The three micro-narratives function as accessible entry points for the audience generating interest in the topic of Crimea through tangible issues of indigenous rights, human rights, and personal freedom. The decolonial narrative portrays Crimea as the ancestral homeland of the Crimean Tatars and paints Russia as a colonial power whose attempts to subjugate Crimea span centuries and continue to this day. The humanitarian narrative focuses on the on-going human rights violations contrasting Crimean civil resistance with Russian neo-totalitarianism. The humanizing narrative centers personal stories of tragedy resulting from Russian occupation and frames Crimea in emotional terms as a lost home.

All three micro-narratives position Ukraine as the natural solution to the problems they describe without overt focus on the state. Ukraine is decentered and instead implicit links and explicit proclamations by symbolic figures articulate support for the core assertion of “Crimea is Ukraine” connecting back to the sovereignty macro-narrative and the larger context of the LIO.

This strategic narrative framework exists in a two-way relationship with the LIO. It both draws legitimacy from its ideological assumptions in positioning support with Ukraine as synonymous with support for liberal values and strengthens it against revisionist attacks with the emotionally engaging micro-narratives backing up the LIO’s fundamental principles. In this way the work of the Ukrainian Institute demonstrates how actors of international politics interact with wider culture wars within which they are embedded entering a symbiotic relationship in which they both shape and are shaped by these grander clashes over fundamental values.