

THE INFLUENCE OF MAJOR GEOPOLITICAL FACTORS ON A REGION'S TOURIST INDUSTRY AND PERCEPTION BY TOURISTS. CASE STUDY: CRIMEA

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ABSTRACT

Periodically certain countries or regions of the world are affected by various types of political unrest, such as wars – including civil, revolutions, power struggles etc. In some cases, these regions have significantly developed tourist industries. In case these political events are violent, the result is predictable: a complete or almost complete halt of tourism in the region, most often accompanied by the destruction of the tourist infrastructure. But when these events are not violent, the effects on tourism may vary. As of 2015, the Crimean Peninsula is one of Europe's geopolitical hotspots and one of the world's disputed territories. This reputation comes from the fact that in March 2014 the territory switched sovereignty from Ukraine to Russia, following what many other states have qualified as an invasion and/or an illegally-held referendum. The purpose of this article is to examine the effects this series of events has had on the area's tourist industry. The article features the results of a research based on a survey, which was meant to evaluate the respondents' perception of the region. This survey was conducted among subjects from numerous European and former Soviet countries. The results have shown that there are certain differences in the perception of Crimea between Europe and the former Soviet states. These differences have the potential to shape the tourist industry of the region in the near future.

Keywords

Crimea, Russia, Ukraine, tourism, influence of politics on tourism

JEL classifications

L83, F59

Introduction

Crimea is a peninsula located in Eastern Europe, on the northern shores of the Black Sea. It is bordered by the Black Sea to the west and south, by the Azov Sea to the east and it is linked in three points in the north to the Kherson Province of Ukraine. The dominant type of landform in the peninsula is steppe, which covers all the area, except the south, which is home to the Crimean Mountains, located right next to the southern shores (Podgorodetskiy 1988). The climate of Crimea is temperate and less harsh than the one of the Russian and Ukrainian steppe, due to the influence of the Black Sea. Summers are quite warm with average temperatures around 24°C along the coast (Parubets 2009).

The southern part of the peninsula is the main tourist region of the peninsula, as it is there that starting with the 1950's numerous seaside resorts have developed. The most renowned of these are, from west to east, Foros, Simeiz, Alupka, Koreiz, Haspra, Yalta, Partenit, Alushta, Sudak, Koktebel and Feodosiya. This area has become known as the *Crimean Riviera* or the *Ukrainian Riviera*. The main points of interest on the eastern coast are the cities of Sevastopol (administratively separate from the rest of Crimea) and Yevpatoriya (Krymova 2015). There are some other point of interest inland, such as the districts of Simferopol and Bakhchisaray.

The Crimean Peninsula has a very long and reach history, which was shaped by a long string of nations, such as the Taurids, Scythians, Greeks, Goths, Huns, Khazars, Bulgars, Crimean Tatars (who gave the peninsula's name), Karaites, Jews, Germans and finally, Russians and Ukrainians (Andreev 2013). But the theme of this article is mostly related to the region's more recent history. Crimea first became part of the Russian Empire in 1784, after its annexation by Catherine the Great, following the treaty of Küçük Kaynarca (Starikov & Belyaev 2015, p. 225). After this point it was the site of many wars which had a great significance to Russian and Soviet history: the Crimean War (1853-56), World War I and the Russian Civil War (1914-17; 1917-22) and World War II (1941-45). The forced expulsion of the Crimean Tatars represented one of the greatest mass deportations in Soviet history (Seitovna 2011). The

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most notable event in Crimea's post war Soviet history took place in 1954, when Nikita Khrushchev, the leader of the USSR decreed the transfer of the Crimean Province from the RSFSR to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. This transfer was motivated by the fact that the region had close economic, trade and cultural ties with the Ukrainian SSR, but also by the geographic proximity between Crimea and the Ukrainian SSR (Starikov & Belyaev 2015, p. 83). At the moment of the transfer, the political impact was limited, as it consisted simply of redrawing some internal borders of the USSR. This also marked the point when the development of tourism in the region truly began. Soviet authorities started investing in the development of various tourists establishments such as spas and resorts and it shortly became a well known and appreciated destination throughout the USSR and the Eastern Block.

This state of affairs continued until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, when following a referendum across the whole Ukrainian SSR, Ukraine became an independent state, encompassing Crimea. The following years were marked by growing political tensions in the newly formed only autonomous republic of Ukraine. The root of much of this tension were the ethnic differences between Crimea and the rest of the country. Another important issue concerning the peninsula was the Russian Black Sea fleet. Ever since its foundation, the bulk of this fleet was stationed in Crimea, more exactly in Sevastopol (Sosnovskiy 2014). ethnic and cultural differences reached their peak in early 2014, when following the toppling of the pro-Russian government of Viktor Yanukovich, major riots, which came to be known as *Euromaidan*, broke out in Kiev and across Ukraine and a new government, led by Arseniy Yatsenyuk. The reason why these riots spread to Crimea was the abolition of a law concerning regional languages which had the potential to cancel the privileges the Russian language held in many regions of the country (Shevchenko 2014). The end of February 2014 saw daily demonstrations in Simferopol, Crimea's regional capital, both pro-Euromaidan and anti-Euromaidan. On 27 February government buildings and military bases in many points on the peninsula were surrounded by unidentified and unmarked troops, which came to be known popularly as *little green men*, and checkpoints were established at the two points linking Crimea to the Ukrainian mainland, effectively cutting off ties with the rest of Ukraine in establishing a de facto government of the peninsula, completely autonomous from the one in Kiev.

On 1 March 2014 Sergey Aksyonov, the leader of this self-proclaimed government, asked Russia for assistance in maintaining peace and public order in the region. By the next day Russian troops exercised complete control over the peninsula. On 16th March Crimean authorities held a referendum on the future status of Crimea, namely whether the region should join the Russian Federation or remain part of Ukraine. The official results were overwhelmingly in favor of becoming a federal subject of Russia, with over 95% of the votes in favor of such a union (www.ria.ru). The voter turnout was above 83%. A treaty of accession was signed on 18th March and the formal change of sovereignty was completed within days.

Effects of Crimea's sovereignty change on tourism

For most of the period from 2003 to 2013 tourism in Crimea has had an ascending evolution. The only exception was 2009, when the drop in tourist arrivals was due to the world economic crisis. For most of this ascending evolution the yearly levels of tourist arrivals were situated between 5 and 6 million tourists, both internal and international arrivals. It is also worth mentioning that for all this period the number of "organized tourists" was between 1-1,3 millions yearly (mtur.rk.gov.ru). Organized tourists are those who spent their holiday in officially registered establishments. The rest are those who preferred private apartments and other forms of accommodation.

In 2014 a visible drop in tourist arrivals occurred, down from 6,1 million arrivals in the previous year to only 4 million. This change can be attributed to the political events that took place that year and their consequences, which were described in the previous sections. The target announced by the Crimean Tourist Authority for 2015 was 4,5 mil. (crimea.ria.ru). But as of September 2015, after the summer season, only 3,4 mil. tourist arrivals were registered in the Republic of Crimea (see fig. 1).

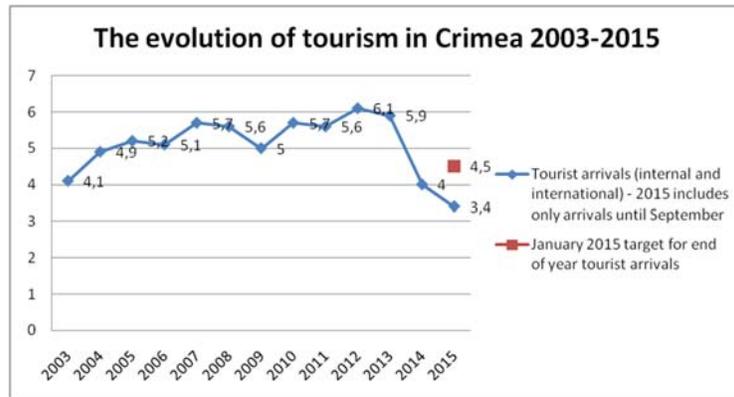


Figure 1 Tourist arrivals in Crimea over a period of 12 years
Source: mtur.rk.gov.ru

From 2009 to 2013 most of the tourists who visited Crimea (65-74%) were internal tourists, (Ukrainian citizens). This share rose to levels above 85% in 2014 and the first three quarters of 2015, but the internal tourists are now Russian citizens, who formerly represented only about 25% of total tourist arrivals (crimea.ria.ru). The majority of the remaining after the annexation to Russia were Ukrainian citizens. As far as preferences for certain locations in the peninsula go, the vast majority of tourists, choose the southern coast. In 2013, more than half chose the biggest resorts in the south of the peninsula: Yalta 34,8%, Alushta 19,2% and also Feodosiya 6,7% (mtur.rk.gov.ru). A significant 19,2% chose the western coast resort of Yevpatoriya and 4,9% the nearby Saki. Only slightly over 6% chose inland regions such as Simferopol or Bakhchisaray as the focus point of their holiday (see fig. 4).

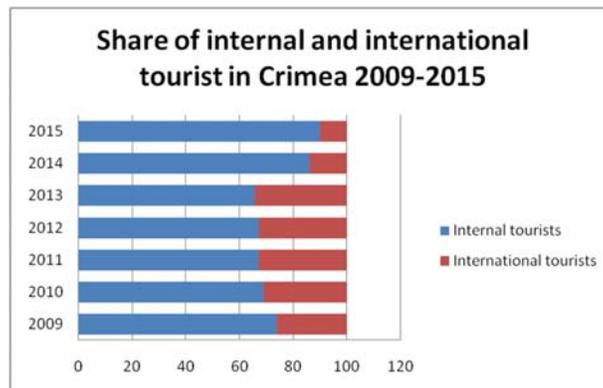


Figure 2: Internal and international tourists in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (until 2013) and Republic of Crimea over a period of 6 years
Source: Own work based on data found on mtur.rk.gov.ru

Prior to 2014, approximately 75% of the international tourists consisted of Russian citizens, the rest being from other countries, including Turkey, the Baltic countries, Western Europe and the USA. Starting with 2014 the role of international tourists was taken by Ukrainian citizens. In other words, since the Crimean change of sovereignty the number of visitors from Russia has roughly doubled, but the bulk of visitors prior to the events of 2014 – the ones from Ukraine, that is – has visibly decreased. Since this moment the non-Russian and non-Ukrainian component of tourist arrivals has almost completely disappeared. Simply put, the mix of visitors to Crimea has become less diverse and clearly consists predominantly of an internal component (see fig. 3).

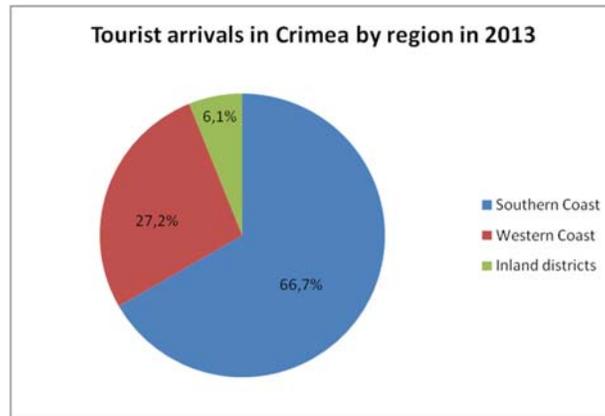


Figure 3 Popularity of Crimea's tourist regions in 2013

Source: Own work based on data found on mtur.rk.gov.ru

This situation is not something to be desired, as one of the objective declared by Russian authorities in 2014 was that of developing tourism in Crimea (Wojazer 2015). It is a well known fact that in the case of every destination it is desirable to draw as many tourists as possible from other countries instead of from within its borders. As of September 2015 this is not the case in Crimea.

Methodology

For a more clear understanding of what draws people to visit or not visit the peninsula we will interpret the results of a quantitative research based on a survey among respondents from several European countries and also from Russia and other former Soviet countries. The main purpose of this research was to determine whether geopolitical events influence tourist image of the region or not in the eyes of respondents from different national backgrounds. Two main hypotheses were formulated prior to commencing the gathering of responses. The first was that politics does play a role in shaping a tourist destinations, even if the events that take place are not violent. The second was the assumption the respondents from Western countries are most probably not very familiar with the region's tourist potential, unlike those from former Soviet countries. The distribution of the survey was controlled, the main selection criteria being the respondents' country of origin.

The conducted survey consists of 15 questions. These can be split in the following categories: questions with the purpose of evaluating the respondents' knowledge on the subject (Q1-4), questions with the purpose of determining the respondents' desire or willingness to travel to Russia, Ukraine and Crimea (Q 5-8), questions with the purpose of determining the respondents' reasons for the answers given to the questions in the previous category and their image of the region (Q9-11) and identification questions (Q 12-15). Question 9 consists of two parts. Choosing which one to answer depends on the answer to the previous question.

A number of 264 respondents have been located and questioned. The whole process was done entirely online. The survey below was put into an electronic form with the help of Google Drive's facilities. It is also worth mentioning that a setting was instated allowing respondents to fill in the survey only once. The interpretation of the results was done with the help of Microsoft Excel. The vast majority of the respondents were young people with finished higher education or attending some form of higher education. The respondents' average age was 23,5 years. In regard to the countries of origin, the most numerous groups were: Russia (66), Romania (60), Poland (28), Italy (20), Norway (17), Ukraine (14) and other former Soviet countries (13). The rest of the respondents came from other EU countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, UK). Responses from the first three groups can be considered significant from different points of view. Russia is the country that currently has de facto control of Crimea, Romania is the nearest geographical EU neighbor of Crimea (Podgorodetskiy 1988) and Poland has cultural, historical and linguistic ties to both Russia and Ukraine (Magocsi 2010). As for the rest of the countries, ever since the current unrest began, the EU and EEA officially have a common policy regarding this issue. Some respondents have visited Crimea before: 10% of the European respondents and 48% of those from Russia and other former Soviet countries.

It is also worth mentioning that a significant part of the respondents from EU countries have at some point attended international Russian language courses at the Pushkin State Russian Language Institute in Moscow (like the author of this article) or attend international relations programs that focus on Russia, therefore it is highly likely that they were more familiar with the issues surrounding the survey's topic than the average European. The majority of the respondents from Russia and other former Soviet states were students of Russian philology at the already mentioned institute. 120 or 62,2% of the respondents were women, while the rest were men. In the case of European respondents the male-female ratio was almost even (47%-53%), but in the case of Russia and the former Soviet states female respondents constituted a majority (79%).

The answers from European respondents were gathered through English-language version of the survey. The answers from more than 90% of the respondents from Russia and other former Soviet states were gathered with a Russian language version of the same survey. All the respondents answered "yes" to Q1 (Are you aware of the events that took place in Crimea in March 2014?), therefore no answers were eliminated from the analysis of the results. The collection of the respondents' answers was conducted between 15 Sep. and 27 Sep. 2015. The survey was not addressed to Crimeans.

Results and discussion

The analysis of the results shall be done dividing the respondents in the two categories defined in the previous section: European respondents and respondents from Russia or former Soviet countries. From this point forward, for practical purposes, the first category shall be named simply *Europeans* and the second category shall be named *Former Soviets*. The reason for this is that there were certain consistent and repetitive differences in the answered received from both sides.

The main sources of information on the 2014 events in Crimea

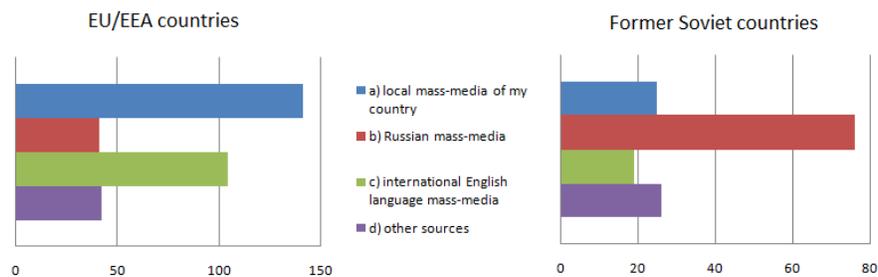


Figure 4 Subjects' main sources of information
Source: own work

As far as sources of information go, Europeans primarily named the mass-media of their countries (83%). English-language international mass-media was also popular, with more than half of the Europeans naming it (60%). Russian mass-media and other sources were less popular, with just under one quarter of Europeans naming them. Former Soviets on the other hand massively named Russian mass-media as their main source of information on the subject (82%) (see fig. 4). The only notable exception in this group were Ukrainians, less than half of which named Russian mass-media, most likely in light of the events that led to the straining of relations between the two countries. English mass-media has had a low popularity among members of this category most likely because of the existing language barrier, constituted by the fact that in most Former Soviet countries English is spoken as a foreign language by less than 10% of the population (www.levada.ru).

Awareness of Crimea's pre-2014 status as a major tourist destination

Q3: Are you aware of the fact that Crimea was a major tourist destination of Ukraine prior to March 2014?

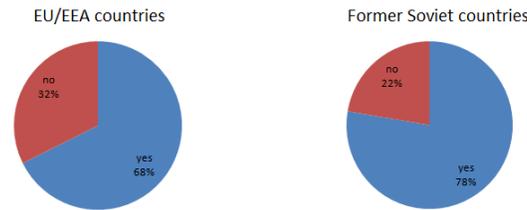
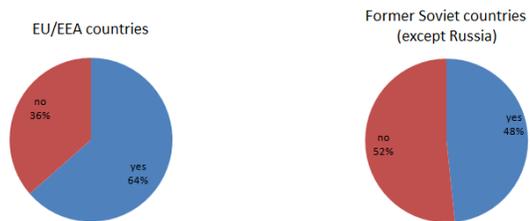


Figure 5 Awareness of Crimea's pre-2014 status as a major tourist destination
Source: own work.

The fact that Crimea was a major tourist destination of Ukraine until the point when it joined Russia is relatively well-known among Europeans, with 67% of them saying that they were aware of this fact. This percentage rises to 77% in the case of Former Soviet respondents (see fig. 5).

Willingness to consider spending holidays to Russia



Willingness to consider spending holidays in Ukraine



Figure 6 Survey subjects' willingness to travel to Russia and to Ukraine
Source: own work.

Another topic analyzed was the respondents' willingness to travel to Russia and Ukraine. Note that these questions were not addressed to Russian and Ukrainian subjects, respectively. Among Europeans, almost two thirds (63%) states that they would be willing to spend their holidays in Russia. Among Former Soviet respondents the percentage of those willing to do so was only just above half (52%) (see fig. 6). At a first glance, this may be surprising but most of these responses came from Ukraine and Latvia (a country which also has a history of strain relations with Russia), whose views are likely to be shaped by recent political events. When it comes to Ukraine, Europeans and Former Soviets have similar views. Only 52% from each group stated that they would be willing to travel to this country. Respondents were also asked to identify the places they would like to visit in each country. On average, European respondents named 2.14 locations. Interestingly, 9 European respondents have named locations in Crimea when asked which places they would like to visit in Russia. Only 3 have done so in the case of Ukraine. The average number of locations named for this country was also lower, only 1.61. When asked which places in Ukraine they would like to visit, 3 Former Soviet respondents named locations in Crimea but, oddly enough, all of them have stated that they considered Crimea to be part of Russia.

Opinions on the political status of Crimea

Q7: What country do you consider Crimea to be part of?

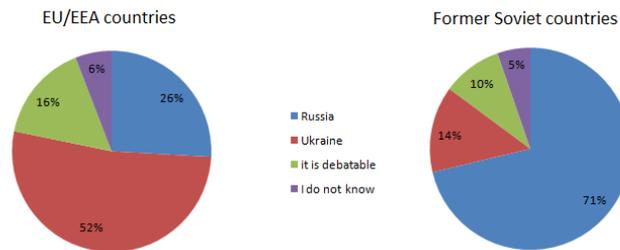


Figure 7 Survey subjects' opinions on the political status of Crimea

Source: own work.

Q7, which inquired as to the political affiliation of Crimea revealed great differences in the perceptions of the two groups. Among Europeans, still 52% consider Crimea to be part of Ukraine, while 21% stated that the issue is debatable or they do not know and only 27% consider that Crimea became a part of Russia in March 2014. Among Former Soviets on the other hand, views on the subject are radically different, with 72% considering Crimea to be a part of Russia (see fig. 7). 90% of Russians have given such a response and also 30% of Ukrainians. Only 14% of Former Soviets considered Crimea to still be a part of Ukraine, with an equal share considering the issue to be debatable or not knowing what answer to give to this question.

Willingness to take a trip to Crimea free of charge

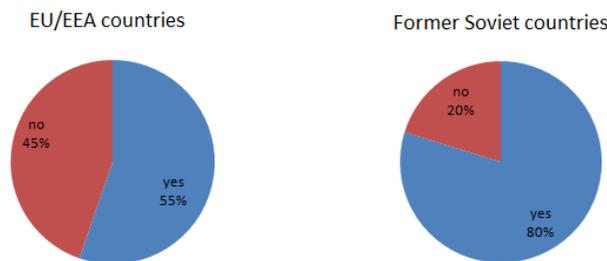


Figure 8 Survey subjects' willingness to travel to Crimea free of charge

Source: own work.

When it comes to travelling to Crimea itself, there were again visible differences between European and Former Soviet respondents. It should be noted that the survey's subjects were asked if they would be willing to take a trip to the region free of charge. This was done in order to avoid hearing motivations related to the costs of such a trip to Q9.2. Only 55% of Europeans would agree to travel to Crimea, even free of charge. This comes in visible contrast to Former Soviets, 82% of which would not hesitate to do it (see fig. 8).

In what concerns the motivations for agreeing to travel to the peninsula, both camps named the curiosity to discover a new destination as the main driving force: 74% of Europeans and 56% of Former Soviets. However, a higher proportion of Former Soviets stated that they heard good reviews of the peninsula and that they consider it to be a place with good value for money qualities. Surprisingly, few respondents from all countries, including Russia, stated that they were impressed by the marketing campaigns advertising the peninsula. Russian subjects especially have made use of the last choice of Q9.1, that which allowed to give other reasons for visiting Crimea. 14% of Russians have mentioned Crimea's nature and/or historical significance. 6% have mentioned that they have friends or relatives from the region as a good motivation to visit and 4% said that they were there before and they would gladly undertake such a trip again. Another 6% on the other hand, have used choice e) to mention the fact they had been there before and even though they were impressed by the places they saw, they were unhappy

with the quality of tourist services. See detailed graphical representation of the answers in appendix 1, fig. 1.

As it has already been mentioned, a significant number of respondents stated that they would not agree to travel to Crimea, even free of charge, especially among Europeans. The most commonly cited reasons for such a decision were the unwillingness of travelling to a territory with an unclear political status (68%) and the ongoing war (65%). While the first motivation is understandable, the second one is rather surprising. It is worth mentioning that the choice related to the so-called ongoing war was introduced deliberately, but is not considered to be a valid concern, as there is no ongoing war in Crimea itself, nor was there one since the Second World War. The change of sovereignty, although it was considered illegitimate by most UN member states, was done in a peaceful manner and there were no shots fired or victims. The war that worries the subject who checked choice d) is most likely the War in Donbass. Although this area is also located in Ukraine's eastern half, the conflict that started in April 2014 has not spread outside Ukraine's Donetsk and Lugansk Provinces as of October 2015. Therefore, worries related to the ongoing war either come from the fear of it spreading to other neighboring regions or simply to lack of information or misinterpretation of information. 10% of the respondents have used Q9.2's last choice to express various concerns related to the Russian occupation. All the other possible motivations cited in the question's structure were checked by less than 22% of the survey's European subjects. Over 90% of the European subjects have checked at least one choice related to the political status of the peninsula. The structure of the Former Soviets' answers to this question was similar to the one of the Europeans'. The main difference is that far fewer of them stated that they would not be willing to travel to the region. See detailed graphical representation of the answers in appendix 1, fig. 2. The graphs in the appendix were put there because the size and complexity were considered too big for the main body.

Views on the financial aspects of Crimea as a tourist destination

Q10: Do you view Crimea as a cheaper or more expensive vacation alternative to your country? (excluding transportation costs)

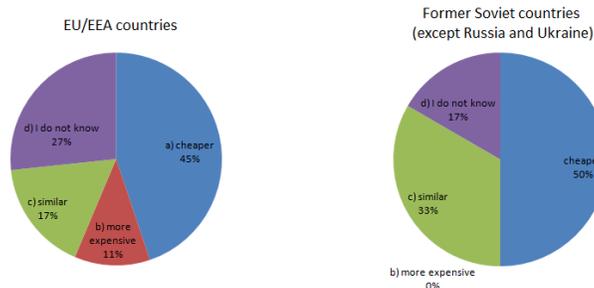


Figure 9 Survey subjects' views on the financial aspects of Crimea as a tourist destination

Source: own work.

Q10 asked the subjects how they see Crimea as a tourist destination from a financial perspective compared to their own countries. This question was not addressed to Russians and Ukrainians, as they may both consider it to be part of their own country. The similarities between the two camps consist in that a majority of the members of both consider Crimea to be cheaper than their own country and only a small minority in the case of Europeans (17%) and none in the case of Former Soviets consider it to be more expensive (see fig. 9).

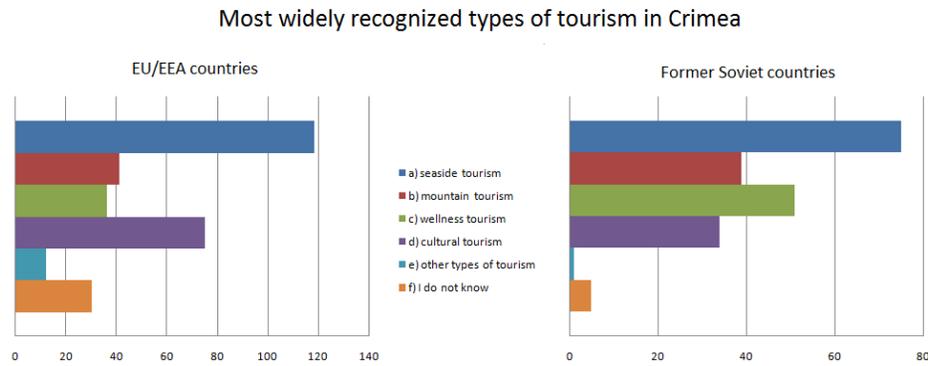


Figure 10 The most widely recognized by the survey's subjects types of tourism in Crimea

Source: own work

Finally, respondents were asked to name the types of tourism they consider to be most fit for Crimea. Unsurprisingly, seaside tourism was the most common choice among both Europeans (69%) and Former Soviets (80%). A great difference between the two camps is that a much higher share of Former Soviets recognized Crimea's potential for wellness tourism: 53%, as opposed to just 22% of Europeans (see fig. 10). Also, 17% of Europeans stated they did not know what forms of tourism are fit for the region, as opposed to just 5% of Former Soviets.

Conclusions

The first obvious conclusion of this research is that while most people of former Soviet states consider Crimea to have become a part of Russia, most people from other countries in Europe have not yet accepted the de facto Russian control, many of them considering it to be an illegal occupation. Furthermore, while a vast majority of Russians are willing to take a free trip to Crimea, almost half of Europeans are not willing to do it. It should also be noted that if only such a thin majority are willing to take a hypothetical trip free of charge, in the more probable real situation of having to choose between more paid options, the share of tourists who will choose Crimea will be even lower, under the pressure of already well established and more popular vacation alternatives. This goes to prove the first hypothesis formulated previously in the article: political events have played a massive role in changing the image of Crimea in the eyes of international tourists. The motivations given by this group show that an ongoing war in a neighboring province can greatly influence people's decisions on travelling to a region, itself directly unaffected by the conflict. Also, mass-media has played a great role in shaping the opinions of people on the subject. Given this, it can be assumed that opinions will be hard to shift until the international political status of the peninsula will be fully clarified. Until this happens, it is highly probable that almost the entire tourist arrivals in the peninsula will continue to be from Russia, as it is shown in figure 3. On a more positive note, most Europeans have had a positive view on the financial aspects of travelling to Crimea, mostly considering it to be an inexpensive destination. This will certainly ease international marketing it in case the political situation will be settled and shall allow for it. Also, as respondents from Soviet countries were visibly more aware of Crimea's status as a tourist destinations, Europeans were also not completely unaware of the region's tourist potential, only partially confirming the second hypothesis. A majority answered that they knew Crimea was one of Ukraine's top destinations and for the most part, correctly identified the types of tourism suitable for the peninsula.

Limits, weaknesses and advantages of this research. There are a series of weak points which may be enumerated. The first would be that few respondents were located for many of the EU countries mentioned in the methodology section. Considering this, the results may not to reflect an opinion representative for the entire block. Furthermore, the fact that many of the survey's European subjects have had extensive contact with the Russian culture, language and with Russia may have influenced the answers. This however should be considered to be mostly a positive aspect, as they were more informed on the survey's topic. Nonetheless, despite these aspects, this survey can be considered a pilot study

which may be extended, should the possibility arise of locating more respondents. The most obvious advantage was that the data collection was done entirely online, which speeded up the process significantly.

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Appendix 1: answers to Q9.1 and Q9.2 of the survey

Motivations for taking a hypothetical free of charge trip to Crimea

Q9.1: If you are willing to take a trip to Crimea free of charge, what are the main reasons that determine you to think so?

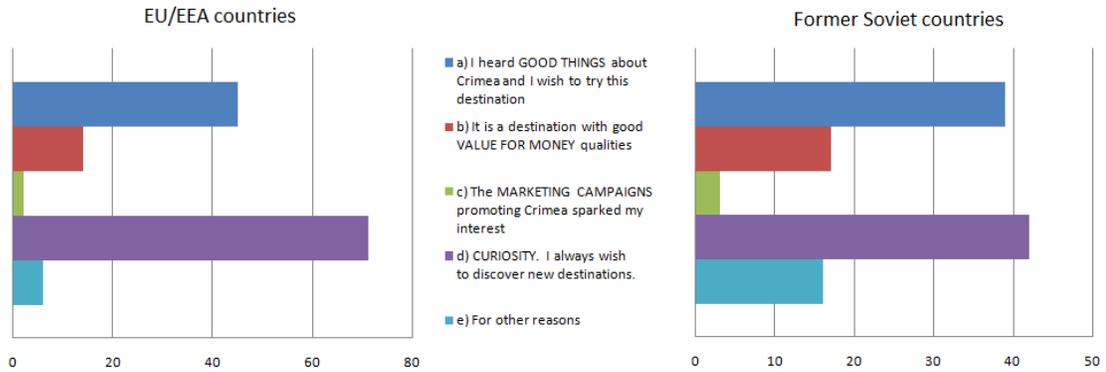


Figure 1 Survey subjects' motivations for taking a hypothetical free of charge trip to Crimea
Source: own work

Motivations for NOT taking a hypothetical free of charge trip to Crimea

Q9.2: If you are NOT willing to take a trip to Crimea free of charge, what are the main reasons that determine you to think so?

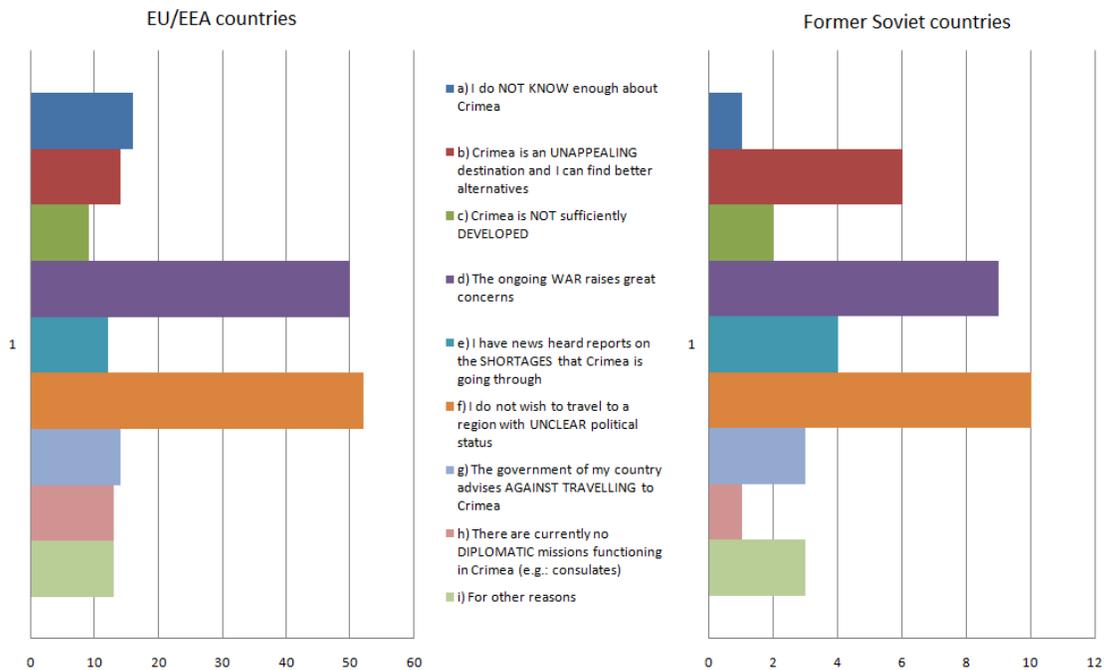


Figure 2 Survey subjects' motivations for not taking a hypothetical free of charge trip to Crimea
Source: own work