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Resilience against counterterrorism? The repression and response of Crimean Muslim activism against Russian counterterrorism and counter-extremism

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Abstract

This article examines how repression is being wielded by the Russian Federation in Crimea against Muslim Tatar communities under the guise of countering terrorism and violent extremism, and how non-violent resistance and grassroots resilience is being fostered as a means of countering securitisation. The case demonstrates how language developed within a Western security context are co-opted by authoritarian actors, how Islamic activist groups engage in activities that can be framed as ‘resilience-building’ through the language of human rights, freedom of press and democracy, and the issues raised by applying the term ‘resilience’ within a counterterrorism context—both in illiberal and liberal settings. The article finds that techniques comparable to concepts of resilience-building are being conducted in an illiberal setting by communities in response to, and as a counter against highly repressive articulations of counterterrorism. It also suggests that the term ‘resilience’ is problematic in this context, failing to adequately account for—and often actively obscuring—organisational activism of communities and their interaction with the political context. This offers an understanding of community-led responses against counterterrorism and counter-extremism as a tool of repression as well as examining the credibility of terms such as ‘resilience’ within CVE in Crimea and elsewhere.

Keywords: Counter-extremism, counterterrorism, resilience, repression, Crimea, Islamic activism, Russia

1 Introduction

This article examines the interaction between Russian authorities and Crimean Tatar communities since the annexation of the peninsula by the Russian Federation. It focuses on how counterterrorism and counter-extremism has been utilised by an illiberal regime, how activists have sought to respond, and the implications this has for understanding changes in the on-going ‘War on Terror’. As Coynash and Charron explain, Russia has engaged in acts which mimic those of the United States, ‘evok[ing] threats of terrorism and extremism to justify the annexation and its exceptional use of violence in occupied Crimea’ (Coynash & Charron, 2019, p. 33).

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 gave way to repression of perceived political opponents and religious minorities in the peninsula, with counterterrorism and counter-extremism used as 'a convenient tool of repression' (HRW, 2019a). This has largely been achieved by charging suspects with membership of or affiliation to *Hizb ut-Tahrir* ('the Party of Liberation,' or HT), an international Islamic activist party (cf. Taji-Farouki, 1996; Sinclair, 2010; Hanif, 2014, for excellent overviews of the party). With the annexation of Crimea, Hizb ut-Tahrir—which had maintained a small but active presence in the peninsula—was reclassified from a legally-operating group under Ukrainian law to an organisation not only illegal but within the scope of punitive counterterrorism measures.

Since January 2015, scores of arrests have been carried out in Crimea under the guise of countering 'religious extremism,' with arrests growing in number and frequency (Coynash, 2020c). In 2015, four individuals were imprisoned on the charge of alleged HT membership, rising to 15 in 2016 and to 35 in 2019 (CrimeaSOS, 2021). The two days of 27 and 28 March 2019 saw the largest mass arrest of Crimean activists on counterterror charges, with 23 people charged as alleged HT members in one operation (HRW, 2019b). As of March 2021, there were at least 103 persons imprisoned on political grounds in Crimea, including 74 over supposed involvement in Hizb ut-Tahrir (CrimeaSOS, 2021). All detainees deny HT membership or affiliation, and official HT sources refuse to confirm or deny detainees' membership, stating that all official party activity has ceased in Crimea since annexation (Interview L, Hizb ut-Tahrir representative).

This article uses empirical research from 12 anonymised interviews conducted with leading Crimean activists, human rights groups, legal practitioners and official spokespersons of Hizb ut-Tahrir Ukraine. Interviewees were chosen due to their work in Crimea as defence lawyers of those charged with HT membership, as high-profile community activists, as representatives of leading international human rights bodies or as Hizb ut-Tahrir Ukraine members authorised to speak on behalf of their work. Interviews took place in 2021 in English, Russian, and Ukrainian, and interviewee names were anonymised to guarantee research subject safety.¹ The article explores how the language of counterterrorism and countering violent extremism (CVE) has been appropriated by an illiberal regime against political opponents, how activists use practices broadly contingent with 'resilience-building' against state repression and the problems of applying concepts such as resilience beyond a liberal-democratic context.

2 Resilience

This work enhances existing discussions on resilience-building as part of this special issue on resilience and resistance in illiberal regimes. In recent years, the concept of resilience has emerged within policy and research to respond to concerns over violent extremism and polarisation in Western Europe (Pospisil & Gruber, 2016; Cavelty, Kaufmann & Kristensen, 2015; McNeil-Willson et al., 2019).

¹ An anonymised breakdown of the 12 interviews can be found in the article's Annex.

Resilience-based approaches attempt to reframe counter-extremism through a focus on what is keeping people resistant to violence, rather than what is making them engage in it (Grossman et al., 2020). Traditionally associated with individual psychological responses, some scholars have reframed resilience as a socio-ecological phenomenon (Mukherjee & Kumar, 2017; Ungar, 2013), enhanced or diminished by the allocation and negotiation of factors and resources (Hunter & Warren, 2013; Sippel et al., 2015). This conception of resilience assesses communities' adaptability and transformative capacity to respond to changes, challenges, and adversities (Grossman et al., 2020; McNeil-Willson et al., 2019).

A variety of resilience approaches have sprung up across Europe in recent years, developed as a means of responding to new patterns of societal polarisation and address criticism of more 'securitised' counter-extremism measures (Stephens & Sieckelink, 2019; McNeil-Willson et al., 2019). Research in this area lags behind practice, but several significant projects have been conducted in Melbourne (Grossman, Tahiri & Stephenson, 2014), Minnesota (Weine & Ahmed, 2012), and Canada (Joose, Bucerius & Thompson, 2015), to identify protective resources that can help mitigate the risk factors for involvement in violent extremism, resulting in—amongst others—the BRAVE-14 measures (Grossman et al., 2020). The BRAVE-14 measures identify five main factors that are required by communities to be resilient: (1) cultural identity and connectedness, (2) bridging capital, (3) linking capital, (4) violence related behaviours, and (5) violence related beliefs.

Concepts of resilience have, however, been challenged as carrying certain problematic assumptions, including the axiom that violence is inherently negative, irrespective of its cause or justification. Its application seems to assume a neo-liberal, individualising approach that stresses the importance of localised or individual responses to potentially wide, structural problems (Joseph, 2013). Ultimately, ways in which resilience concepts are used in a liberal-democratic context tend to replicate problems that have dogged the long 'War on Terror': an unwillingness or inability to conceptualise the state as a potential perpetrator of violence, or adequately to account for the political context of polarisation and extremism. It furthermore tends to generalise political contention as only a negative marker of 'extremism,' ignoring its potential as a positive marker of democratic engagement or structural revolution.

Using the case study of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Crimea, this article explores the application of resilience within the context of an illiberal regime. It details how the evolving language of the War on Terror has been integrated into policies by an illiberal power, and the implications this has for utilising concepts of 'resilience.' The article finds that resilience-building is problematic in this context because it depoliticises authorities as benign or neutral actors, struggling to conceptually account for polarisation and violence perpetrated *through* counterterrorism. This obscures the interplay between political movements and authorities by imagining resilience as always in support of counter-extremism, rather than as a tactic against it. This case study draws attention to problems caused by counterterrorism and counter-extremism in illiberal regimes and wider implications for liberal applications of resilience.

3 Case Study: Hizb ut-Tahrir in Crimea

Within the annexed peninsula of Crimea, much repression against activists involves accusations of membership in Hizb ut-Tahrir, banned in Russia since 2003 as a terrorist organisation. Hizb ut-Tahrir was founded in 1952 by Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani in East Jerusalem with

the aim of replacing the ‘colonialist regime’ in Jordan with a Caliphate (al-Khilafah, 2013; Taji-Farouki, 1994). Rejecting European and Arab nationalisms, al-Nabhani’s ideology envisaged the unification of the *ummah* [global Muslim communities] in traditionally Islamic lands as a means of tackling injustices of capitalist and socialist regimes (an-Nabhani, 1999; Sinclair, 2010, p. 23; Yilmaz, 2010). Initially comprised of the Levantine-Palestinian diaspora, HT has since expanded throughout the world, with operative branches in at least 45 countries (Orofino, 2021). Whilst it maintains work throughout the Middle East, its operational capacity has become increasingly constrained and it is banned in most Muslim-majority countries (Karagiannis, 2005, p. 318).

The party has also established significant bases throughout the post-Soviet space, exploiting the ideological and political vacuum following the fall of the USSR, along with widespread socioeconomic poverty and disparity (Yilmaz, 2010, p. 502). HT activism in Ukraine began in the early 1990s, with official party statements suggesting established activity by 1994 (Hizb-ut-Tahrir, 2014). HT branches are semi-clandestine organisations, Janus-like in their operations, with both a relatively visible presence—public activism, media presence, and press releases to spread their core ideological tenets—and a closed, cell-based membership (McNeil-Willson, 2019). Whilst their ideological texts state a firm non-integrationist, anti-democratic stance, they are avowedly non-violent—a view confirmed by even their most ardent of critics—and tentative engagement with state democracy, policy-makers, and lobbying has been recorded (Frances, 2015; McNeil-Willson, 2019). Activism by HT in Ukraine and Crimea has included conferences, rallies, and protests, as well as the publication of a newspaper, ‘Revival’ [*Vozrojdenie*] (Muratova, 2019).

Estimates on the size of HT in Crimea vary. In 2015, a year after Crimea annexation, Vladimir Makarov, deputy director of the Russian Interior Ministry’s central department for counter-extremism, stated, ‘thanks to the preventive measures taken by us, the number of supporters of the Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami outlawed terrorist organisation [...] has seen a significant decrease—from 10,000 to 2,500 people [in Crimea]’ (Khalifah, 2015). Such an estimation seems wildly inflated. HT membership requires years of commitment and learning, generally between three to five years of training and engagement with the organisation, which has tended to keep membership limited even in more favourable contexts (McNeil-Willson, 2019). Understanding the size and prevalence of Hizb ut-Tahrir is made particularly difficult by the party’s aversion to keeping membership lists and its tendency to publicly overstate its own influence.

Prior to annexation, HT was able to operate legally, with Ukrainian authorities taking a generally tolerant stance towards the party. Attitudes towards HT within Crimea before 2014 were mixed, with *Mejlis* (the representative body of Crimean Tatars) attempting to combat the influence of such ‘non-traditional’ Islamic groups (Muratova, 2019, p. 51). However, since annexation, the repression of HT has enabled a coalition between formerly critical bodies such as the *Mejlis*, HT, and Crimean and international human rights groups.

Russian authorities have used the language of counterterrorism and counter-extremism against Crimean Tatar activists, framing them as HT members. Local communities have responded through measures which suggest a resilience-building approach. This raises issues about the deployment of the language of resilience in the context of an illiberal regime, as well as having several implications for use of the term elsewhere.

4 Russian authorities' counter-terrorism language

Since annexation in 2014, Russian authorities have sought to clamp down on activism challenging its legitimacy in Crimea (Gorbunova, 2020), which has increasingly taken the guise of counterterrorism and counter-extremism (Savchuk, 2019; Kyzy, 2019; Coynash & Charron, 2019). This has been criticised by human rights groups as discriminatory and opaque, prosecuting individuals on statements made prior to annexation or evidence overwhelmingly challenged as falsified or planted. As a representative from a human rights organisation stated:

Russia is using counterterror legislation to prosecute individuals who are simply expressing their dissent with authorities. They are clearly targeting groups like Crimean Solidarity and Crimean Tatars in general, by attempting to present them as dangerous 'terrorists' and 'extremists'. (Interview F, Human rights organisation representative)

Four charges have recurred against Crimean Muslim activists: (1) membership of a terrorist group, (2) establishment of a terrorist group, (3) justification of terrorism, and (4) engaging in acts seeking the overthrow of the Russian state—carried out under Article 205.5 of the Russian Federation's Criminal Code of 13 June 1996. Russian law currently legislates for a term of imprisonment between 15 and 20 years for those engaging in acts of terrorism; participation in organisations such as Hizb ut-Tahrir is punishable by 10 to 20 years (Уголовный кодекс Российской Федерации, 1996). Russian arrests of Crimean activists have been accompanied by large-scale operations of the 'Russian Centre for Combating Extremism,' sometimes referred to as 'Centre E' (Muratova, 2019, p. 57), whilst a rehabilitation centre for 'those who fell under the influence of extremists' has also recently opened in Crimea to reform accused HT members (В Крыму откроют центр реабилитации попавших под влияние экстремистов, 2019).

Crimean Tatars have faced further counterterror-linked repression through 'Administrative Prosecution' and a series of enforced disappearances. Individuals are detained on Administrative Prosecution for minor charges—such as attending illegal gatherings or 'solo demonstrations'—without formally being charged. Detentions generally last between one and two weeks, often in dilapidated prison complexes, as a means of dissuading activists from further, more committed activism. In some instances, interviewees cited the use of torture, such as the case of Renat Paralamov (Ukraine Crisis Media Centre, 2017). Crimean Muslims have also been victims of several enforced disappearances linked to Russian authorities (Amnesty, 2016, p. 5). As of March 2021, 44 people have been victims of these disappearances, 15 of whom are still missing. Those who have disappeared disproportionately come from Crimean Tatar communities, with 10 of the 15 still missing being Crimean Tatar; six of those still missing have been linked by Russian authorities to terrorism, dubiously claiming they left for Syria to join Islamic State (Coynash, 2015; Interview B, 2021).

As Crimean activists face crackdowns from counterterrorism laws, concern has been raised about the spurious nature of evidence used in prosecution which openly links Islam to terrorism (HRW, 2019a). Evidence has been strongly disputed as suspect, and charges of HT membership 'either appear manifestly unfounded or there are serious doubts regarding the probity of the respective charges' (Amnesty, 2016, p. 6). Such prosecutions conflict with

Convention IV Article 64 of the 1949 Geneva Convention, determining that ‘penal laws of the occupied territory shall remain in force,’ preventing occupying state laws from superseding pre-existing ones (ICRC).²

Lawyers highlight three forms evidence used against Crimean Muslim activists in counterterror trials: (1) planted literature, (2) secret witnesses, and (3) testimonies by religious and linguistic experts. Consistent concerns were brought up in interviews that evidence was fabricated—planted by security personnel during house searches (HRW, 2019a). As one human rights lawyer stated:

The literature that they find is really ridiculous, they don’t even try to make it look used. It’s books that are completely new and unbroken. They find it in places like behind closets with shoes, in attics—places where strong believers would never keep religious literature. (Interview C, human rights lawyer)

Such planted evidence has included HT literature—often freely available online or within local communities—or Islamic texts and commentary, determined by officials as promoting ‘extremism’ (Федеральной службы безопасности Российской Федерации, 2019; Edem, 2020). House searches often involve Russian Security Service (FSB), counterterrorism and military personnel and are carried out in a means which prevents residents from observing the searches (Savchuk, 2019).

There is this dark joke amongst lawyers who protect these people that usually the FSB officers arrive with the same things they leave with. They bring the evidence with them, then they ‘find’ it, and then they arrest people and go away. (Interview B, Crimean activist)

The second form of evidence used to convict individuals of HT membership is secret witnesses, persons who provide unverifiable testimony for the prosecution and whose identities are often unknown to the court. Cases are built on witnesses recalling run-of-the-mill conversations engaged in by the defendants, on issues such as the current political situation, the place of Islam in society, or religious norms (Savchuk, 2018). Secret witnesses are admissible in Russian law, with interviewees suggesting that different criminal cases would sometimes recycle the same witnesses several times over (Interview J, Crimean activist).

Crimean Tatars may gather at mosques and discuss some political and religious topics. They may discuss developments in Turkey or Syria. But based on this, so-called experts claim that they are talking about extremism, seizure of power or attempts to seize power and that they are members of Hizb ut-Tahrir. (Interview I, human rights organisation representative)

Thirdly, Russian authorities use religious and linguistic experts to analyse language by defendants in wiretapped recordings, social media posts, or literature cited found at the defendant’s property (Coynash, 2018). Counterterror charges of attempting to overthrow

² [H]earings into cases concerning “terrorism” charges are reserved only for military courts in Russia. The nearest such court is the North Caucasus Military District Court in Rostov-on-Don in Russia. Putting defendants from Crimea on trial in a military court outside Crimea is a direct violation of the international humanitarian law governing occupation’ (Amnesty, 2016, p. 6).

Russian authorities are largely based on evidence by these linguistic experts, who offer a de-contextualised and essentialist analysis of HT texts to conclude that their goal of establishing a caliphate in Muslim-majority countries is incompatible with Russian governance (Coynash, 2020a; 2020b). Again, the quality of this evidence and expertise was challenged by interviewees:

Most of it is being carried out by the same experts; you see them over and over in the [HT] cases. They copy-paste parts of their expertise from different cases. One time, there was a typo and instead of HT it mentioned Islamic State, and they didn't bother to redo it. These experts don't have a religious education and have no idea what they are talking about. (Interview A, Crimean activist)

Such practices are seen regularly in prosecution of supposed HT activists. For example, Emir-Usein Kuku faced a house raid based on supposed extremist activities, along with threats to 'put [him] in gaol for Hizb ut-Tahrir' (Amnesty, 2016). His later arrest and pre-trial detention were based on evidence from a wiretapped conversation on the political situation in Crimea. Server Mustafayev, a founder of activist group 'Crimean Solidarity,' was arrested following a public lecture at a mosque attended by about 60 people:

There was a lecture about interpretation of love and hate in the Quran, and the question that Mustafayev asked during this lecture was an innocent question about how you should treat different people based on an interpretation of the Quran. This public lecture is treated by Russian authorities as a terrorist cell. But for some reason only eight people have been charged and sentenced. Why would a terrorist cell conduct an open meeting that was advertised publicly in advance for anyone to attend? These are the sorts of things we are seeing with the convictions (Interview G, human rights lawyer)

Lawyers also report being unable to access defendants or vital case information (Crimean Solidarity, 2021b; Coynash, 2021). Some detainees have been denied family visits and removed from the peninsula without due process (Savchuk, 2019). Notably, those linked to HT have been placed in worse detention conditions because they were labelled 'terrorists,' and some placed in solitary confinement due to being 'susceptible to terrorism and extremism' (CrimeaSOS, 2019).

One possible reason why HT is framed as a 'terrorist' threat is its international links (Hanif, 2014). Whilst HT branches—*waliyat* in party parlance—largely operate independently from one another (Sinclair 2010), the party maintains loose transnational links (McNeil-Willson, 2019; Hanif, 2014). HT is the most prominent Islamic activist organisation repressed in the peninsula by Russia, but other groups have been proscribed and subject to arrest, such as 'Tablighi Jamaat' and the 'Jehovah's Witnesses,' as well as followers of Said Nursi (Reuters, 2021). Ultimately, groups like HT are not being targeted because of their religious beliefs but because authorities are 'afraid of groups becoming united against Russia through an independent ideology that the state can't control' (Interview J, Crimean activist). This results in the state attempting to 'repress any sites of opposition—religious, human rights, national, even Christian religious opposition' (Interview L, Hizb ut-Tahrir representative).

Whilst Russian authorities have prosecuted supposed HT members, one lawyer suggested that Ukrainian authorities had been instrumental in their arrest, finding evidence that the Ukrainian government had monitored the party's activities closely, filmed meetings and created personal files on individuals connected to or attending HT events. Upon annexa-

tion, these files at the Crimean offices of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) were lost to Russian authorities. As one human rights lawyer active in several cases detailed:

These folders were piled up in a building—the SBU had these folders in their offices in Crimea. When Russia annexed Crimea and took hold of this building, they didn't even have to do anything—they just opened these profiles of each individual HT member and started prosecuting and gaoling those people whose profiles the Ukrainian authorities had already collected. (Interview H, human rights lawyer)

These files included details on 'those who just participated once in a public meeting, went to a rally, picked up some HT materials'—and with existing files on HT members running thin, authorities are increasingly pursuing members of their families (Interview H, human rights lawyer).

Russian authorities' use of counterterrorism to target religious minorities and repress political dissent is not unique to the peninsula, with the language of counterterrorism and the proscription of Hizb ut-Tahrir present throughout the Russian Federation. However, in Crimea it offers a particularly convenient language for Russian authorities to carry out political repression, which deflects from international criticism. Interviewees from human rights groups emphasised that European bureaucrats or ambassadors often avoided engagement with the repression of Crimean activism because of this counterterror aspect: 'they are happy to hear about the crushing of protest, but they don't want to hear about actions against Muslims as security measures' (Interview E, human rights organisation representative). Linking Muslims with terrorism 'makes it very difficult for human rights groups and lawyers to defend those against charges of extremism, and even harder for those accused of terrorism' (Ibid.). This was reported as particularly effective against countries such as Germany, due to its ban on HT activism (though not membership) since 2003 (McNeil-Willson, 2019).

I have dealt with representatives of embassies, and they always asked about the prosecution of Crimean Tatars and whether they are members of Hizb ut-Tahrir or not. One country that is particularly susceptible to this sort of rhetoric is Germany, where Hizb ut-Tahrir is banned. Because Germany and other countries already have this cautious attitude towards Hizb ut-Tahrir, hearing that an activist was accused of being a member of Hizb ut-Tahrir already makes them believe less that these people are innocent. And because Germany is a leading member of the EU, it is a heavy blow for our work. (Interview D, human rights lawyer)

Russian authorities have integrated and centralised the language of counterterrorism and counter-extremism within practices of repression against Crimean political activism. In response, local communities have developed patterns of resistance that could fall under definitions of resilience-building.

5 Community resilience

In response to counterterror arrests, Crimean activists have engaged in acts that could be understood through a 'resilience' lens. Grossman and co-authors (2020) identify five key traits as part of the BRAVE-14 measures for communities to build resilience: (1) cultural identity and connectedness, (2) bridging capital, (3) linking capital, (4) violence related behav-

iours, and (5) violence related beliefs. The European Commission's *Building Resilience against Violent Extremism and Polarisation* (BRaVE) Project builds on this framework to identify 20 resilience-building resources that span socio-economic, cultural, political and network-related spheres (McNeil-Willson et al., 2019). Several of the factors identified by scholars as a means of building resilience against political violence or violent extremism seem to describe activities carried out by Crimean Solidarity activists. Exploring this process is useful for breaking down different activisms in response to Russian repression in Crimea, as well as examining resilience in illiberal contexts.

The first BRAVE-14 resilience indicator is 'cultural identity and connectedness,' which relates to familiarity with one's own cultural heritage, practices, beliefs, traditions, values and norms (Grossman, et al. 2020). In this instance, we see Crimean Tatar communities using common concepts of cultural heritage to enhance community strength, responding to counterterrorism and counter-extremism through the cultivation of an oppositional, non-violent identity.

Cultural identity is expanded by stressing common cultural heritage, focussing on shared historical repressions, and by groups like HT expanding their ideological tenets. One such identity formation has been to create comparisons between current repression and the deportation of Crimean Tatars in 1944 (Goble, 2020). Around 200,000 Crimean Tatars were forcibly moved, many dying en route or shortly after their arrival in the Urals, Siberia, and Central Asia (Conant, 2014). The decline of the Soviet Union allowed for the return of Tatars but this has since become a 'chosen trauma' as part of ethnic group identity and maintenance, surfacing in discussions with activists around Crimean identity and solidarity (Ozcelik, 2015). As public defender Sever Cholakchik stated in a monthly meeting of Crimean Solidarity:

Our people have suffered many trials and difficulties. But the worst was the deportation... In 1944, having labelled our people the traitors, they loaded them into wagons and deported them. Our grandfathers hoped that this would not happen to our people again. But today, having hung a new label of terrorists, having replaced animal wagons with auto-servants, our people continue to be deported, only now to Russian prisons. (Muratova, 2019)

Crimean activists have successfully encouraged the narrative that Crimean Muslim communities are facing similar repression now as in the 1940s—this time enacted through counterterror legislation. One interviewee joked: 'my father was repressed by the Tsarist security services, I was repressed by the Communist KGB, and my son is repressed by the FSB' (Interview K, Crimean activist). This framing is made particularly powerful by highlighting similarities between USSR tactics and contemporary events, such as the public trials of Crimean detainees in courts outside of the Crimean Peninsula and the division of prosecutions to complicate their defence (Crimean Solidarity, 2021b). Current events have been termed by activists a 'slow' or 'hybrid deportation' (Goble, 2020) and despite representing a very specific reading of the arrests, it is a narrative that is effective in reframing resistance as a fight for cultural identity.

This has created an impression within Crimean communities that Russian prosecutions targeting HT are ultimately an attack on Crimean Tatar identity (Sadovskaya & Pfeilschifter, 2020). Prominent imprisoned activists, such as Emil Usein Kuku, have been championed as leaders of Crimean Muslim culture, with Crimean Solidarity linking Tatar

cultural decline with Russian repression (Crimean Solidarity, 2021b). Whilst this has strengthened unity and lessened polarisation in Crimean Muslim communities, it has taken place in response to increasing Russian repression, as a tactic against counterterrorism and counter-extremism in an illiberal context.

Further evidence of cultural identity and connectedness has come from HT itself, with suggestions that their ideological framing has been modified to support Crimean activism. Interviews with representatives of HT Ukraine reveal that the party has aligned itself openly with Ukrainian and Crimean nationalist movements. Despite analysis that suggests there is 'no room for racism, nationalism, or patriotism' in HT's desired Caliphate (Olsson, 2021, p. 8) and that the party believes Muslims must 'reject previously held ideologies [such as] nationalism' to become a member (Baran, 2006, p. 23), HT Ukraine explicitly disputes this, stating that—at least in the Crimean context—'there is no inherent contradiction between national and religious identity' and 'no difference between Crimean or Tatar national identity and Crimean or Tatar religious identity' (Interview L, Hizb ut-Tahrir representative).

The concept of 'bridging capital', another factor of the BRAVE-14 resilience indicators, relates to the building of trust and confidence between groups, and the creation of structures of support across community boundaries (Grossman et al., 2020). Within Crimea, we see community coalition-building taking place in response to Russian repression, strengthening communities by cultivating unitary action across groups. Interviewees suggested that HT had struggled to gain traction within Tatar communities prior to Russian annexation, but repression of supposed HT activists was powerful in generating wider support for party, replacing longstanding community rifts with inter-community engagement.

Much community bridging and resilience-building has been conducted through the creation of the group 'Crimean Solidarity.' In response to Russian prosecution of HT members, activists began a process of horizontal coalition building, resulting in the establishment of Crimean Solidarity in 2016. Representing over 100 community activists, human rights groups, and lawyers, Crimean Solidarity runs its outward-facing activities largely through its Facebook page (Crimean Solidarity [Крымская солидарность]), as well as holding regular monthly meetings tackling legal cases and developing activism (Crimean Solidarity, 2021a).³

Crimean Solidarity conduct actions and allocate resources that both challenge arrests and support communities impacted by them. The group follows a similar logic and mode of action to that used by HT: organising private meetings, community networks, and public political activism to build close ties based on Islamic brotherhood, mutual aid, and reciprocity (Muratova, 2019, p. 61). Such organisational structures are particularly well-designed for working in repressive contexts—HT members state, '[t]he natural state of Hizb ut-Tahrir is to be banned' (McNeil-Willson, 2019, p. 226)—and it is probable that the experience of HT has informed Crimean Solidarity, even though representatives from HT Ukraine stressed in interviews that they have no direct contact with the group (Interview L, Hizb ut-Tahrir representative). Using online platforms, Crimean Solidarity disseminates the latest information

³ These monthly meetings were held in person prior to the international health crisis of COVID-19, and have been via ZOOM meeting software since.

on house searches, arrests, and prosecutions throughout Crimea, offers competing narratives to Russian-controlled broadcasters, and plans public demonstrations and pickets (Kent, p. 2021), drawing on an Islamic activist model:

We see how Muslims, both the adult generation and the youth, respond to pain and repression in Crimea. They are trying to pin labels on us as terrorism and extremism. Therefore, as far as possible, everybody participates in flash mobs, conduct du'a. We, in turn, also responded to this event. We express our protest by all the peoples. (Crimean Solidarity, 2021b)

In response to arrests, Crimean Solidarity mobilise lawyers to provide legal advice for those facing charges, monitor cases and provide community updates (Crimean Solidarity, 2021). The group conducts crowd-funding to pay politically-motivated fines, runs public activism in support of those arrested, and puts together food parcels for those in prison. Children and families directly impacted by arrests are supported by Crimean Solidarity, a specially designated branch office organising educational camps and activities, whilst women whose fathers or husbands have been arrested are provided with financial support and transportation to visit their loved ones in gaol (Smutko, 2020).

The work of Crimean Solidarity ultimately reinforces 'cultural connectedness' through the unification of 'mainly young and middle-aged from HT and older people from the National Movement,' creating a 'feeling of unity, erasing age and organisational boundaries' (Muratova, 2019, p. 61). This bridging capital takes place in interaction with Russian repression, enhanced following arrests or detentions:

When someone is being arrested, it's a way for the community to expand and bring in new members. When someone is arrested, it is a means of bringing in new members because we are representing them, supporting them in prison. (Interview K, Crimean activist)

As such, bridging capital does seem to be present, channelled through the Crimean Solidarity movement, which builds trust and support between and within communities. However, such solidarity is a direct response to interaction with Russian repression. Accounting for bridging capital therefore requires acknowledgement of the political context against which it is positioned.

The third factor of community resilience is that of 'linking capital', which represents trust and confidence in authority and community organisations (Grossman et al., 2020). In this context, we see both horizontal bridge-building between communities and the development of new vertical structures. The Russian annexation of Crimea led to greater trust and engagement between local communities, HT, and Crimean Tatar authorities (particularly the *Mejlis*, who had represented Crimean Tatar interests in Ukrainian prior to annexation), in turn creating engagement with international organisations.

Following 2014, the *Mejlis*⁴ and Islamic activist organisations such as Hizb ut-Tahrir – which previously held an antagonistic relationship – were brought together in opposition to Russian annexation; a move further cemented by the designation of the *Mejlis* in April 2016

⁴ The *Mejlis*, the Crimean Tatar's representative body, is an executive commission made up of 33 members chosen by the Crimean Tatar Kurultai, an elected representative council (Coalson, 2014). Whilst not an official government body, it served as the representative of the Crimean Tatars to the Crimean government, the Government of Ukraine and international organisations.

as an 'extremist organisation' by Russia (Knott, 2016), Such a union, exemplified in Crimean Solidarity, has allowed for the resultant movement to be more flexible than its constituent parts, in both ideology and action (Muratova, 2019, pp. 61, 57). On a local level, the community links of Hizb ut-Tahrir have provided an important means of conducting activism following sudden arrests or trials, creating a highly responsive community network. At an international level, Mejlis have built awareness and support amongst transnational legal and human rights bodies, working with lawyers using the Geneva Convention, European-wide advocacy campaigns and engagement with international platforms on human rights regarding counterterrorism. Thus, this horizontal 'linking capital' and coalition-building has allowed Crimean activism to have greater impact both on the ground in Crimea and internationally:

It's amazing to see the growth of this group internationally, how they keep in touch with international organisations like Amnesty, attending international events in Brussels. And they're also trying to be in touch with human rights defenders in Russia, as well. (Interview D, human rights lawyer)

This approach does seem to be having impact: a UN General Assembly resolution on Crimea on 7 December 2020 recognised the political status of prisoners detained by Russian authorities in the peninsula (UN, 2020); on 18 July 2019, a European Parliament resolution called for Russia to release all Ukrainian political prisoners, including those involved in HT-related criminal cases (Crimean Solidarity, 2021). It has spurred new movements in Russia itself, including the establishment of 'Parents' Solidarity,' which builds on the successes of Crimean Solidarity to support Russian families who face political and religious repression. It has also led to renewed debate in Russia over the 2003 banning of HT, with human rights defenders calling for HT to be reclassified from a terrorist organisation to an extremist organisation, which 'doesn't sound like a big difference, but in terms of prison sentences is huge and will probably save lives' (Interview F, human rights organisation representative). In Crimea, instances of linking capital have materialised, including vertical coalition-building and development of new organisational structures to shield communities from repression.

The fourth and fifth factors of resilience are related to the acceptance of violence, determined as the willingness to speak out against violence and the degree to which violence is normalised or tolerated (Grossman et al., 2020). Both these concepts are evident within Crimean Tatar activism, with groups such as HT and Crimean Solidarity countering accusations of supposed links with violence.

HT in Ukraine and internationally have distanced themselves from violence by challenging the charge of terrorism. They emphasise the religious focus of HT, denouncing accusations of violence and highlighting human rights violations carried out against Muslims in Crimea. Whilst traditional HT literature has tended to eschew human rights discussions as bound up within the liberal framework they are trying to challenge (McNeil-Willson, 2019; Sinclair, 2010), HT responses have centralised arguments in Crimea around the lack of democratic accountability, instances of human rights violations, and demands for free and impartial press (Hizb-ut-Tahrir, 2013). In response to greater Crimean activism, traditional statements on 'the perniciousness of Western influence, failure of democracy, or rejection of nationalism [...] disappeared from the rhetoric of HT members' as representatives begin to speak at different Western human rights platforms (Muratova, 2019, p. 58), demonstrating flexibility and engagement with languages of democracy, the rule of law, and equality.

Whilst Russian authorities have attempted to paint Crimean Tatars as terrorists and extremists, Crimean activists have focussed on non-violent ways to resist, such as demonstrations, support for families of those imprisoned, and distribution of information on human rights violations. There has also been emphasis on women as activists, forming a sizeable contingent of Crimean Solidarity (Sadovskaya & Pfeilschifter, 2020).

The use of non-violent responses has become central to Crimean Solidarity. Drawing on traditions of Crimean non-violent resistance, such approaches have blunted the threat of Russian authorities whilst also legitimising Crimean resistance. As Russian lawyer Nikolai Polozov noted:

[Crimean Tatars] do not enter into active contact with the Russian security forces, do not take up arms. Naturally, this makes the Kremlin very nervous. It is difficult for them to do something with these people, because in fact, if they had taken up arms, everything would have been solved much easier. But it is precisely such a peaceful, non-violent protest, such a dulled defence that makes the Kremlin look for new ways to intimidate these people, to forcibly instil in them some kind of loyalty to the authorities. (Galperovich, 2017; see Coynash, 2017)

The rejection of violence-related beliefs and behaviours similarly suggest that the application of 'resilience' may be relevant in this context. However, it is important to understand this rejection of violence is grounded in localised political traditions and used as an effective tactic against the threat and actualisation of Russian repression.

6 Assessing the resilience paradigm

This article has attempted to apply the concept of resilience to the study of Russian repression of Crimean activism. In this instance, it has highlighted certain responses by Crimean activists, including development of discourse patterns, and horizontal and vertical community structures. Whilst this suggests scope for using resilience within an illiberal context, it also raises questions. In this instance, the integral role of repression in necessitating resilience, as a means of mitigating *against* counterterrorism, is in stark contrast to the language of resilience used elsewhere.

The focus of resilience on strengthening communities against 'violent extremism' is particularly problematic in this context because communities conducting the resilience activities are those accused by authorities of violent extremism. It raises questions as to what extent we can consider resilience a response against polarisation or violent extremism within a context where violence is deployed by authorities. Here, we are either forced to align concepts of 'resilience-building' consistently with counter-extremism—an exercise made nonsensical by Russian authorities' use of counter-extremism to repress activism—or we accept that, to use articulations of resilience in illiberal contexts, it can and must be applied to a variety of groups that sit on either side of the extremism/counter-extremism divide.

This hints at a wider problem with the concept of resilience. Actions that can be broadly described as 'resilience-building'—cultivating community identity, developing horizontal and intercommunity links, building support structures or even rejecting violence—can be utilised by groups labelled 'extremist,' as a means of enhancing their activism (McNeil-Willson, 2020). Social movement scholars researching terrorist groups in illiberal contexts have long accounted for such practices in cases where state power has reached limitations

(Gunning, 2007; Davis & Robinson, 2012). Furthermore, several groups labelled as ‘extremist’—including many Hizb ut-Tahrir groups in Western Europe—have actively engaged in, for instance, anti-knife crime initiatives in Copenhagen or community support groups in London (McNeil-Willson, 2019). Ultimately, to respond to this theoretical dilemma, the language of resilience-building has occasionally slipped into discussion of ‘prosocial resilience,’ implying an ‘anti-social resilience’ when deployed by groups labelled as malign. However, this distinction requires a slight of hand, a political act of determining who or what is malign or benign; such terminological slippage leaves us at an impasse within the context of illiberal regimes, where who or what is prosocial or anti-social is perhaps more difficult to determine, requiring advanced knowledge of the political context.

Ultimately, the problem of the language of resilience is, I suggest, reflective of much wider problems that exist with the language of counterterrorism and counter-extremism: it often fails adequately to account for state violence or to overstate the benign nature of the state, even in a liberal-democratic setting. The example of HT in Crimea represents a highly visible example of the problems of using ‘resilience’ in illiberal settings, made nonsensical by the framing of community activists as ‘extremists’ by a repressive state. Yet the use of counterterrorism and counter-extremism measures to repress political activism is certainly not confined to Crimea or Russia, and such accusations have been levied against several European governments (D’Amato, 2019).

This article offers an attempted application of the template of resilience in just one illiberal setting. Further research should explore the specifics of resilience in several non-democratic political regimes—instances where community resilience is built against repressive measures—using alternative theoretical paradigms. This would allow for greater exploration of the structural features required for regimes to affect community conditions and space. It may also be beneficial to conduct a comparative analysis of HT and Crimean activism under Ukrainian control prior to 2014, to better detail the impacts of Russian annexation. This could reveal the likelihood of the current coalitions remaining in place, should there be any changes in Russia’s repressive measures or the political regime within which they operate, or whether this union is situational and reactionary.

To conclude, the language of resilience offers an interesting template for considering community responses by Hizb ut-Tahrir and Crimean Solidarity in Crimea. However, its application has meant that important political interactions involving repression and response have been lost. Without discussing the state’s influential role in creating violence or exacerbating community polarisation, current resilience language risks obscuring why ‘resilience-building’ is perhaps needed in the first place. The further we move from a liberal-democratic context, the more blindingly obvious (though no more important) the need to investigate critically the role of the State in polarisation and community violence becomes. This article highlights these problems, in its own limited way, suggesting that existing conceptualisations of resilience are highly problematic in illiberal settings—and perhaps require much further critical investigation elsewhere.

Annex

Chart 1. *Details of interviews*

Interview	Designation	Interviewee Position	Date
1	Interview A	Crimean activist	March 2021
2	Interview B	Crimean Activist	February 2021
3	Interview C	Human Rights Lawyer	January 2021
4	Interview D	Human Rights Lawyer	February 2021
5	Interview E	Human Rights Organisation Representative	January 2021
6	Interview F	Human Rights Organisation Representative	March 2021
7	Interview G	Human Rights Lawyer	April 2021
8	Interview H	Human Rights Lawyer	March 2021
9	Interview I	Human Rights Organisation Representative	April 2021
10	Interview J	Crimean activist	March 2021
11	Interview K	Crimean activist	February 2021
12	Interview L	Hizb ut-Tahrir Ukraine Representative	August 2021

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