

22<sup>nd</sup> March 2022

# The Greeks of the Black Sea, an important but highly threatened diaspora

Alexia KEFALAS

On 25 February, 24 hours after the start of the Russian attack in Ukraine, Greece lost two members of its minority. Now, more than forty Greeks from Ukraine have lost their lives, according to unofficial data, as figures are difficult to obtain. Since the beginning of the conflict, despite its historical ties with Russia, the Greek Foreign Ministry has condemned the invasion. Ukraine is the only country in Europe with such a large Greek community. Between 100,000 and 150,000 Greeks are believed to live in Ukraine. Who are they? Where do they live? Let's trace their history.

They are known as the Black Sea Greeks. Most Greeks in Ukraine (85%) live on the shores of the Sea of Azov, in Mariupol, in the southeast of the country, now a besieged and martyred city. *"Their presence in this region dates back to antiquity. In the Crimea, Greek colonies were indeed founded from the 8th to the 10th century BC,"* explains Vassilis Agtzidis, a doctor in modern history. *"The 18th century marked an important turning point in our history,"* adds Nadia Tsapi, president of the Greek community in Mariupol. *"Czarina Catherine II, after the reconquest of this territory, which had been dominated by the Ottoman Empire for 300 years following the fall of Constantinople, granted land and numerous privileges to the Greeks, who had come from the Crimea, in order to Christianise the region. They founded a new town named after the Virgin Mary, Mariupol, as well as some twenty villages in the surrounding area."*

By the decrees of Catherine II in 1779 and 1790, Mariupol became the capital of Azov.

The cultural influence of the Greeks spread: thirty-nine primary schools and six secondary schools were established, run by 159 teachers; newspapers and books were published; theatres, both professional and amateur, were established. *"It is thanks to the school in Mariupol, which has existed since 1824, that we still speak Greek. But also thanks to the Hellenic cultural centre, located on Ellinon Street (Greek Street),"* stresses Nadia Tsapi, who claims her *"two homelands: Ukraine and Greece"*.

This community weakened after the Bolshevik revolution, when the wealthiest Greeks returned home. In the Odessa region alone, an estimated 10,000 to 12,000 people fled in 1920. *"December 1937, a page was turned,"* says historian Vassilis Agtzidis, *"when the Greek minority was targeted by a decision of the Stalinist leadership - along with several other minority groups in the population. Greek education was banned, Greek schools closed, printing houses destroyed, and the autonomous Soviet Greek territories abolished. Hundreds lost their lives in mock trials and thousands were sent to concentration camps in Siberia. After the end of the Second World War, the Greeks of Crimea were displaced to Central Asia."*

With the onset of Perestroika, the national revival effort of the many Ukrainian Greeks began. According to the 2001 census, the Greeks - now Russian-speaking and Russified - number 93,000. Some say their real number is as high as 150,000. The current Greek government of Kyriakos Mitsotakis is multiplying diplomatic initiatives to evacuate this diaspora in the best possible conditions. The Greek Prime Minister has

## The Greeks of the Black Sea, an important but highly threatened diaspora

---

even offered to finance the reconstruction of the Mariupol theatre, which was bombed on 16 March last year while it was being used as a shelter by hundreds of Ukrainian and possibly Greek-Ukrainian families.

---

### Alexia Kefalas

Journalist, Member of the Robert Schuman  
Foundation's Scientific Council

You can read all of our publications on our site :  
[www.robert-schuman.eu](http://www.robert-schuman.eu)

Publishing Director : Pascale JOANNIN

---

THE FONDATION ROBERT SCHUMAN, created in 1991 and acknowledged by State decree in 1992, is the main French research centre on Europe. It develops research on the European Union and its policies and promotes the content of these in France , Europe and abroad. It encourages, enriches and stimulates European debate thanks to its research, publications and the organisation of conferences. The Foundation is presided over by Mr. Jean-Dominique Giuliani.