

Recent Developments in Crimea and the Crimean Tatars

Recent Developments in Crimea, Ukraine

Following the unrest, that started in Kiev in November 2013 as Ukraine's former president Yanukovich decided not to sign a far-reaching Association Agreement with the EU, and which eventually led to his ousting on 22 February 2014, tensions have seriously escalated in Crimea.

On 26 February 2014, local government buildings in Simferopol were taken over by armed men and Russian flags were raised on the roofs, marking the beginning of a Russian invasion of the Crimean peninsula - an invasion justified by Russia through its 'just cause' of defending minority rights. On 6 March 2014, only a week after the vote for a new pro-Russian government that took place in the presence of armed men, 78 out of 81 present Members of the Crimean Parliament voted to join the Russian Federation - a decision that was sanctioned with a local referendum on 16 March. In spite of numerous international warnings and fervent opposition, the referendum was eventually maintained and welcomed by Russian President Vladimir Putin, leading to the secession of Crimea from Ukraine.



Although international economic sanctions were immediately enacted against Russian officials, with the imposing of travel bans and asset freezes, the Russian Parliament ratified the treaty legalizing the annexation of Crimea on 21 March. The Crimean Tatars, who have remained supportive of the integrity of Ukraine, and repeatedly encouraged the signing of an EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, are now facing an extremely dire situation, forced to either accept being de facto part of Russia or flee from their homeland. Thousands of Tatars have already fled the peninsula, seeking refuge in western parts of Ukraine, Turkey and Poland, due to the continuous repression and discrimination.

Although international economic sanctions were immediately enacted against Russian officials, with the imposing of travel bans and asset freezes, the Russian Parliament ratified the treaty legalizing the annexation of Crimea on 21 March. The Crimean Tatars, who have remained supportive of the integrity of Ukraine, and repeatedly encouraged the signing of an EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, are now facing an extremely dire situation, forced to either accept being de facto part of Russia or flee from their homeland. Thousands of Tatars have already fled the peninsula, seeking refuge in western parts of Ukraine, Turkey and Poland, due to the continuous repression and discrimination.

In addition, several cases of minority rights violations have been reported since the beginning of the crisis, with religious extremism and state security being the most common pretexts used by the authorities. Among them, local authorities have carried out unjustified passport controls in the streets of Crimean cities; pro-Ukrainian activists and journalists from the Crimean Tatar news channel ATR have disappeared or been forced to leave the region; the homes of Crimean Tatars have been marked with crosses on their doors - a similar practice took place under Stalin's rule; and several families have been asked to vacate their land for 'social purposes'. Furthermore, as Russian citizenship was introduced in Crimea on 18 April, it was made clear that those who had declared their wish to remain Ukrainian would be denied the right to vote and hold governmental posts. In this context, Crimean local authorities have even forbidden the Crimean Tatars to hold a series of important and symbolic events such as the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the deportation of the Crimean Tatars on 18



May, the Crimean Tatar Flag day on 26 June and Human Rights Day on 10 December. Worryingly, on the Flag Day there were five different arson attempts aimed at their mosques, for which no responsible has been identified.

Moreover, Crimean schools have started to ban the use of Crimean and Ukrainian languages and instead promote the use of Russian. On an even more worrisome note, this summer, unjustified military raids were carried out not only at a Muslim school allegedly accused of leading extremist activities and hiding weapons, but also at the seat of Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People. On 16 September 2014, the Mejlis was given 24h to completely empty its premises, whereas books, papers and computers were confiscated by the Russian authorities as part of an “investigation”. This followed an incident, which took place on 15 September 2014, whereby masked men ripped of the Ukrainian flag from the Mejlis building. Last but not least, leaders of the Crimean Tatars, Mustafa Jemilev and Refat Chubarov, have been erroneously targeted by the Crimean authorities for carrying out a strictly nonviolent struggle to preserve the rights of the Crimean Tatars: The former has been barred from entering Crimea for a period of five years (until 2019), whereas the latter has been accused of spurring interethnic tensions and unrest.

In the meantime, the extraordinary European Union Foreign Affairs Council on Ukraine, convened on 3 March 2014, condemned the “clear violation of Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity by an act of aggression of the Russian armed forces”, and the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution on 27 March that invalidated the Crimean referendum.

In May 2014, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) released a report on the situation in Ukraine, highlighting in particular the violations against minorities, among which the Crimean Tatars were identified as ‘disproportionally affected’, in an ‘increasingly precarious situation’ and surrounded by a climate of ‘fear and uncertainty’. Nils Muiznieks, Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe (CoE), speaking about the Ukrainian crisis and the annexation of Crimea to Russia, recently stated that the situation of the Tatars in Crimea is his biggest concern. In September 2014, also the European Parliament, in a Resolution on the situation in Ukraine and the relations of the EU with Russia, condemned the persecution of the Crimean Tatars.

Yet, the critical situation in Crimea requires swift action, rather than mere rhetoric, to ensure an adequate level of protection of national minorities, and above all, to avoid the repetition of the tragic scenario whereby Crimean Tatars were deported *en masse* 70 years ago under Stalin’s regime. Once again, only 25 years after their return, the Crimean Tatars live in fear of having to leave behind their ancestral land, traditions and rich history.

Who are the Crimean Tatars?

The Crimean Tatars are indigenous to the Crimean Peninsula, located on the northern coast of the Black Sea. The Crimean Tatar ethnicity was synthesized by Turkic and non-Turkic tribes that inhabited the peninsula centuries ago, thus creating a rich culture unique to Crimea. Originally, Crimea was predominantly inhabited by the Tatars, but according to the latest Ukrainian census (2001) they now make up only 12% of the population. Until the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia, the peninsula enjoyed a great deal of political autonomy despite being under the rule of Ukraine. The administrative seat of Crimea's government is Simferopol, which is located in the centre of the peninsula.

Historical Background

The Crimean Tatars emerged as a nation for the first time in 1441. Haci Giray Khan, a direct descendent of Genghis Khan, established the independent Crimean Khanate as part of the Ottoman Empire. This Turkic Muslim state was among the strongest powers in Eastern Europe until the beginning of the 18th century. In 1783, Russia officially annexed Crimea, and the Crimean Tatars became subject to political oppression and exploitation.

Consequently, thousands left their homes in waves of mass emigration. The Tatar population, which was estimated to be as large as 5 million during the Crimean Khanate, dwindled to less than 300,000, thus becoming a minority in their homeland.

Fast forward to 1921, the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Crimean ASSR) was established. With the support of Vladimir Lenin, the Crimean Tatars lived the 'golden age' under Veli Ibrahim. Between 1923 and 1927, a renaissance of culture and education for the Crimean Tatars occurred. However, Ibrahim and his colleagues - the champions of this age of prosperity - were arrested and executed in 1927 under charges of bourgeois nationalism'. Hardship grew and peaked in 1944, when Stalin deported nearly the entire Crimean Tatar population (approximately 200,000 at the time) from the Crimean Peninsula to Central Asia, predominantly Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The deportations were based on Stalin's suspicions of Crimean Tatars aiding the Nazis during their occupation of Crimea. Nearly 45% of the total Tatar population died in the long, arduous process of deportation. Only in 1956 were many released from the settlement camps that they were sent to. However, when thousands of Crimean Tatars attempted to return to Crimea in 1967, following an official decree that exonerated them from any wrongdoing during World War II, many found that they were unwelcome in their ancestral homeland. It was not until Ukraine gained independence in 1989 that the Crimean Tatars returned to Crimea in large numbers. Many problems awaited their return, however.

Social and Economic Issues

According to a **2013 OSCE needs assessment report** on the Crimean Tatars and other formerly deported peoples in Crimea, 265,985 Crimean Tatars have returned to Crimea since 1989. However, the measures employed by the Ukrainian government for facilitating the



integration of the Crimean Tatars have proved insufficient. As a result, the Crimean Tatars are left in a disadvantaged position. For example, only about half of repatriates have a permanent dwelling and a permanent job. Up to 60% of the Crimean Tatars are unemployed. In fact, the unemployment level among Crimean Tatars is nearly three times higher than the average level in Crimea. The Crimean Tatars, who face land disputes and dilapidated housing, also face bad sanitation and overcrowding. Studies show that in more than 300 compact resettlement areas, engineering and social infrastructure is either minimal or does not exist. For the Crimean Tatars, medical services are insufficient both in quantity and in quality. They are at high risk of chronic diseases and also experience high mortality rates relative to the rest of the Crimean population. The level of peripheral nervous system disease is three times higher than the average of Crimea.

In September 2007, the **Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights** published a report following a visit to Ukraine. In this report, calls were made for increased protection of minorities. The Council also stressed that racism and xenophobia are issues that need to be addressed. The same concerns were raised by the **UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights** in 5th periodic report of the Ukraine in November 2007. In the report, concerns were voiced over discrimination and ethnic violence towards ethnic and religious groups, including the Crimean Tatars.

During lobby visits with the EU institutions in Brussels coordinated by UNPO in 2013, the Crimean Tatar delegation raised the serious problems stemming from **cultural assimilation**.

The lack of access to the Ukrainian legal framework as a minority has meant the Crimean Tatars have few linguistic and cultural rights, and thus face cultural assimilation with Crimea's Russian majority. Following the annexation of Crimea to Russia, Crimean Tatar was made an official language on the peninsula. Since, however, a request made by the chairman of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People, Refat Chubarov, to communicate in his native language for official purposes, has been ignored. In the time leading up to the forced deportations in 1944, the Crimean Tatars had more than 300 schools that taught in the Crimean Tatar language. Now, there are less than twenty.

Political Situation

In 1991, when Ukraine became an independent state, the Crimean Tatar leadership founded the Qurultay - the National Assembly. This Assembly, in June 1991, adopted the Crimean Tatar national anthem, the national flag, and the Declaration on National Sovereignty of the Crimean Tatar people in Crimea. Between sessions of the Qurultay, executive responsibility lies with the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People (or Milli Mejlis), a body made up of members appointed from within the Qurultay. Through these bodies the Crimean Tatars can address grievances to the Crimean government, the Ukrainian central government, and international

bodies. Within the Crimean Parliament (the Verkhovna Rada), the 100-member unicameral legislative body of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, there was a quota of 14 Crimean Tatar deputies from 1994-1998. However this quota has since been ignored and the Crimean Tatars are underrepresented in regional governing bodies.

The **International Forum for the Restoration of the Rights of the Crimean Tatar People** and other formerly deported peoples was established by the Milli Mejlis, with support from



the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, to engage in a meaningful dialogue with all actors involved. Unfortunately, despite receiving wide support from EU countries, the USA and Canada, the initiative fell on deaf ears by the former Ukrainian government. On 8 May 2014, Ukraine's acting President Oleksander Turchynov signed a decree on the restoration of rights of deported citizens adopted by the Ukrainian Parliament on 17 April. However, leader of the Crimean Tatars, Mustafa Jemilev, has noted that the decree will have no practical significance for the Crimean Tatar people, unless Crimea is officially reunified with Ukraine.

Over the course of the past six months it has become clear that the precarious situation facing the Crimean Tatars is no longer a matter of culture or representation, but of physical security for the people amidst the presence of Russian troops in the peninsula. With Crimea's much-disputed status as part of Russia following the illegal referendum, the future of the Tatars is a big question mark. In this context, it is now critical that the international community realize the need to lend its full support to the Crimean Tatars.

About UNPO

The UNPO is an international, nonviolent, and democratic membership organization established in 1991. Its members are indigenous peoples, minorities, and territories who have joined to protect and promote their human rights through nonviolent solutions.