

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	243
Land:	Ukraine
Kilde:	Human Rights Watch
Titel:	Ukraine: Fear, Repression in Crimea
Udgivet:	18. marts 2016
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	16. august 2016

HUMAN
RIGHTS
WATCH**MARCH 18, 2016**

Ukraine: Fear, Repression in Crimea

Rapid Rights Deterioration in 2 Years of Russian Rule

(Berlin) – Russian authorities have created a pervasive climate of fear and repression in Crimea in the two years since it has occupied the peninsula, Human Rights Watch said today. It is crucial for key international actors to keep Crimea's drastically deteriorating human rights situation high on their agendas.



“Crimea’s isolation has made it very difficult to conduct comprehensive human rights monitoring there,” said Hugh Williamson, Europe and

Central Asia director for Human Rights Watch. “But serious human rights abuses in Crimea should not slip to the bottom of the international agenda.”

Russian navy sailors take part in a festive ceremony marking the first anniversary of the Crimean treaty signing in Sevastopol, Crimea, March 18, 2015.

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Since Russian forces began occupying Crimea in early 2014, the space for free speech, freedom of association, and media in Crimea has shrunk dramatically. In two years, authorities have failed to conduct meaningful investigations into actions of armed paramilitary groups, implicated in torture, extra-judicial killings, enforced disappearances, attacks and beatings of Crimean Tatar and pro-Ukraine activists and journalists.

Authorities have required Crimean residents either to become Russian citizens or, if they refuse, to be

deemed foreigners in Crimea. Two years on, it is evident that residents who chose not to accept Russian citizenship face discrimination in getting jobs and social services.

Under the pretext of combating extremism or terrorism, the authorities have harassed, intimidated, and taken arbitrary legal action against Crimean Tatars, an ethnic minority who openly opposed Russia's occupation.

“For the last two years, many Crimean Tatars have consistently, openly, and peacefully opposed Russian actions in Crimea,” Williamson said. “Russia has been making Crimean Tatars pay a high price for nothing more than their principled stance.”

Local authorities declared two Crimean Tatar leaders personae non gratae and prohibited them from entering Crimea; searched, threatened, or shut down Crimean Tatar media outlets and banned peaceful gatherings to commemorate historic events, such as the anniversary of the deportation of Crimean Tatars.

The authorities also have harassed and intimidated Crimean Tatar activists; conducted intrusive and sometimes unwarranted searches at mosques, Islamic schools, and dozens of homes of Crimean Tatars under the pretext of searching for drugs, weapons, and prohibited literature; and initiated administrative and criminal proceedings against dozens of Crimean Tatars on trumped up charges, which included “rioting” and “terrorism.” Crimean Tatars



Parents holding photograph of Seiran Zinedinov, Crimean Tatar activist, who disappeared on May 30, 2014.

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A man and children look at Russian tanks on freight cars after their arrival in the settlement of Gvardeiskoye near the Crimean city of Simferopol on March 31, 2014.

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who consciously chose not to obtain Russian citizenship are regularly questioned, and police sometimes arbitrarily search their homes.

Crimea's prosecutor petitioned a court to recognize the actions of Mejlis, the Crimean Tatars' elected representative body, as extremist. In February 2016, court proceedings began to determine whether to shut it down.

Russian authorities have also prosecuted people in Russia who spoke their minds on Crimea online. In June 2015, Russian authorities blocked the website of a Moscow-based consumer group that had called Crimea an "occupied territory." The group, Public Control, became the target of a criminal investigation after the prosecutor general alleged that it sought to undermine Russia's territorial integrity, in violation of anti-extremism legislation.

In August, a Russian military court sentenced a Ukrainian filmmaker from Crimea, Oleg Sentsov, to 20 years in jail for supposedly running a "terrorist organization." The case against Sentsov lacked foundation and was politically motivated.

Russia's move to gain control of Ukraine's Crimea region began in late February 2014, when armed personnel increasingly identified as members of the Russian Federation's armed forces began asserting their authority in Crimea.

Russian armed personnel and pro-Russian militias in Crimea prevented Ukrainian armed forces from leaving their bases, took control over strategic facilities and took over Crimea's administrative borders with the rest of Ukraine. On March 16, 2014, Crimea's local authorities held a referendum on whether Crimea should secede from Ukraine to join the Russian Federation. The Ukrainian government opposed the referendum, saying it was illegal.



Russian servicemen take part in a festive procession marking the first anniversary of the Crimean treaty signing in Sevastopol, Crimea, on March 18, 2015.

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After local authorities announced on March 17 that 97 percent of the population had voted to join Russia, Putin signed a decree recognizing Crimea as an independent state. On March 18, Putin and Crimea's leadership signed agreements making Crimea and the city of Sevastopol part of the Russian Federation. Putin asked Russia's parliament to adopt a law accepting the new regions as parts of the

Russian Federation under the pretext that Crimean residents have requested Russia's support in protecting them against Ukrainian authorities and nationalists.

Under international law, the Russian Federation is an occupying power in Crimea as it exercises effective control in Crimea without the consent of the government of Ukraine, and there has been no legally recognized transfer of sovereignty to Russia. The referendum, held without the authorization of the Ukrainian government or any broad-based endorsement by the international community, and Russia's unilateral actions afterward cannot be considered to meet the criteria under international law for a transfer of sovereignty that would end the state of belligerent occupation.

"Russia bears direct responsibility for the surge in rights abuses in Crimea," Williamson said.

"Russia's international partners should sustain constant pressure on Russia to stop human rights abuses on the peninsula."

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- [Europe/Central Asia](#)
- [Russia](#)
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- [1] <https://www.hrw.org/view-mode/modal/287791>
- [2] <https://www.hrw.org/europe/central-asia/russia>
- [3] <https://www.hrw.org/about/people/hugh-williamson>
- [4] <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/03/21/questions-and-answers-russia-ukraine-and-international-humanitarian-and-human-rights>
- [5] <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/03/14/crimea-attacks-disappearances-illegal-forces>
- [6] <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/03/25/ukraine-activists-detained-and-beaten-one-tortured>
- [7] <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/03/18/crimea-disappeared-man-found-killed>
- [8] <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/10/07/crimea-enforced-disappearances>
- [9] <https://www.hrw.org/view-mode/modal/287792>
- [10] <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/11/17/rights-retreat/abuses-crimea>
- [11] <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/04/01/dispatches-crimean-tatar-tv-station-forced-close>
- [12] <https://www.hrw.org/view-mode/modal/287793>
- [13] <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/crimea-is-clamping-down-on-human-rights/515258.html>

- [14] http://cfmission.crimeahr.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Crimean_Field_Mission_Review_June_2015_RU.pdf
- [15] <http://krymsos.com/ru/news/56bda590caa5c/>
- [16] <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/09/18/dispatches-russia-crimea-and-shrinking-space-free-speech>
- [17] <http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/06/23/russia-independent-group-targeted-over-crimea>
- [18] <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/08/25/dispatches-crimea-keep-quiet-or-else>
- [19] <https://www.hrw.org/view-mode/modal/287789>