



State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2015 - Case study: Deteriorating rights for Crimean Tatars under Russian rule

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by Nataliya Novakova

At the beginning of 2014, following the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, the government of Ukraine lost control over the peninsula. The subsequent transition to the legislation of the Russian Federation and the continued presence of unregulated paramilitary groups, known as *samooborona*, posed considerable threats to the local population, particularly for ethnic and religious minorities.

The concerns were especially acute among many of Crimea's indigenous Tatar population, given their history of repression under Soviet rule. This culminated in their eventual mass deportation by Stalin to Siberia in 1944. Though many have returned to Crimea following the collapse of communism, the community continued to struggle with unemployment, lack of access to basic services and ongoing barriers to the restoration of their former lands. Ukraine itself never resolved the issue of providing land or other housing opportunities to returnees. The temporary solution was so-called 'fields of protest' – places where illegal settlements of Tatars were built. The authorities did not legalize the settlements, but also did not prevent them from being set up.

However, although following the annexation the Russian government initially wooed the Tatar population with promises to address housing and other pressing concerns, since then the behaviour of the authorities towards the community has become increasingly draconian. On 15 November, for instance, around 60 people were arrested *en masse* in a market in Simferopol and taken to the police station to be questioned about their migration status. Several days later, a crackdown in another of the city's markets led to the detention of around 15 people of 'non-Slavic' appearance, all of whom were reportedly Crimean Tatars.

Political bodies and civil society organizations representing Tatars also face constant intimidation, with two leading Tatar representatives, Mustafa Dzhemylov and Refat Chubarov, denied re-entry to Crimea in the wake of the annexation. Meanwhile members of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People, an executive committee that has served as a representative body to the Ukrainian government and international community, has reported increased harassment in the form of

constant checks and ad hoc requests to provide immediate reports on their activities to authorities. Since the organization was forced to register in the Russian Federation as an ordinary non-profit organization, its status as an elected representative body of the Crimean Tatars no longer applies.

There have also been a number of cases of forced disappearances of Crimean Tatar activists, with at least eight documented cases between March and early December. Little progress has taken place in the investigation of these incidents. Several Tatar activists have also been brutally killed, and others detained, tortured or threatened, including many who have advocated on issues such as land rights for their community. This is part of a general crackdown on freedom of expression that has particularly affected minorities, as evidenced by the attack on Nadir Bekirov, a Crimean Tatar activist, in September ahead of his planned attendance at the UN World Conference on Indigenous Peoples in New York, leaving him unable to travel to the event. Tatar media has also been targeted, with the forced closure of ATR, Crimea's only Tatar television channel, after it was repeatedly refused registration as a Russian channel by regulators in Moscow.

Tatars, most of whom are Muslim, have also found themselves affected by a climate of increasing nationalism and religious chauvinism in Crimea. Muslim communities have been attacked, religious literature burned and members of the remaining Tatar population have been pressured to renounce their Ukrainian citizenship. Other communities, such as members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, have also faced persecution. In this climate, the possibility of Crimea's Tatars finally achieving a resolution to decades of injustice seems slimmer than ever.

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