

Crimean Tatars after Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula

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After Russia's annexation of Crimea, Crimean Tatars face the necessity of working out a *modus vivendi* to cope with the difficult situation which now confronts them. On the one hand, the desire to remain in their homeland, which they regained after exile in Soviet times, is an imperative encouraging them to accept the *status quo*, while on the other, the fear of Russia and the strong relations of Crimean Tatar elites with Kyiv would favour opposing the present state of affairs. Another fact pointing in favour of an agreement with Moscow is that Kyiv has not attempted to defend Crimea and has not been active in demanding its return to Ukraine, which has undermined Kyiv's authority in the eyes of the Tatars. Therefore, the leaders of the Mejlis of Crimean Tatars (the national self-government) act carefully, trying to avoid actions which could be seen as provocative and thus liable to incite retribution. It could be expected that this course of action will continue, although it faces ever greater difficulties in the context of the Russian authorities' adoption of a strongly anti-Tatar policy, which is likely to evoke more radical attitudes among the Crimean Tatars.

Exile and return

Crimean Tatars (referred to in the local language as Qirimlar, Qirimtatarlar) are a separate ethnic community using their own language, which makes them distinct from Kazan Tatars, for example. By the 1860s, following the conquest of Crimea by the Russian Empire in the late 18th century, Crimean Tatars had become a minority group in Crimea. In 1897 they accounted for 36% of the population, and in 1939 – 29%. In May 1944 Soviet authorities exiled the entire non-Slavic population from Crimea. Nearly 190,000 Crimean Tatars were deported to Central Asia, mainly to Uzbekistan. Around 40% of the exiled population died during the transport and in the first years of exile. Unlike the other “deported nations” they were not covered by the 1956 “rehabilitation”. They began to return to Crimea only in the late 1980's, and their right to return was officially recognized in 1989.

Shortly afterwards, some 200,000 Crimean Tatars returned to Crimea and the 2001 census revealed the total number of Crimean Tatars to be 243,000 (12% of the population of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea), however in five raions (Bakhchysaray, Simferopol, Bilohirsk, Kirovske and Lenine raions, i.e. the Kerch Peninsula) the percentage of the Tatar population lay between 21% and 29%. Today, the number of Tatars in Crimea is higher, which is due to further repatriations and population growth. The probable number is around 300,000, although credible data are missing¹. According to estimates, around 100,000 Tatars still live in Central Asia, and the Crimean Tatar diaspora in Russia (Moscow in particular) is estimated to include between 50,000-100,000 individuals. A large group (at least one million individuals, although there

¹ According to Mustafa Jemilev, Crimean Tatars currently account for 14% of the peninsula's population (interview given to *Rzeczpospolita* daily, 23 March 2014).

are no detailed calculations) of Crimean Tatars and people of Crimean Tatar origin live in Turkey, where numerous organizations supporting the Tatar presence in Crimea have been active. Compared with the rest of the population inhabiting Crimea, Crimean Tatars are characterised by younger age and a higher birth rate. It can be expected therefore that the proportion of this group in Crimea's society will grow in the coming decades, even without further immigration.

The system of the bodies of the Crimean Tatar national self-government is in fact and in its assumptions the nucleus of nothing less than an autonomous Tatar territory in Crimea.

Before the exiles, Tatars lived mainly in the southern part of Crimea, forming a majority group in some raions. After 1989, local authorities tried to prevent Tatar families from returning to their former places of abode, especially by banning them from settling along the south coast. Tatars were forced to accept these restrictions and settled mainly in the strip of land stretching from Bakhchysaray through Staryi Krym to Kerch. This is why the 2001 census showed that the Tatar population accounted for 21% of the inhabitants in the Simferopol raion (including the former Bakhchysaray raion) and only 1.5% of the population of Greater Yalta (before the exile the share was 29%). Sevastopol was practically closed to Tatars: in 1939 Tatars accounted for 4% of the city's population and 55% of the inhabitants of the areas incorporated into Sevastopol after the war, whereas in 2001 – only 0.5%.

It was only around 2005 that the Tatars began to settle in larger numbers in the coastal areas, in most cases illegally occupying plots of land excluded from building development (as well as nature reserves). This movement quickly lost its

spontaneous nature and the so called "glades of protest" began to be used as a form of pressure put on local authorities to force them to transfer attractive plots of land to private owners, with some of the plots becoming the property of non-Tatar investors shortly afterwards. The allocation of a sufficient number of plots of land to Crimean Tatars and legal recognition of illegally occupied plots have been among the most significant points of dispute between the Crimean Tatar population and Crimean authorities since the 1990's.

An assessment of the actual scale of the needs of Crimean Tatar families is even more difficult, considering the fact that local government institutions have not established any advisory bodies composed of the representatives of ethnic minority groups, as required by the law of Ukraine. Also, there exists no single register of repatriates which could help determine who has already received benefits as part of state-funded assistance programmes etc. Similarly, there are no registers which would make it possible to determine what portion of property allocated to the repatriates remains in their hands and what part has been sold.

The large majority of Crimean Tatar repatriates are Russian-speaking. They only have a basic command of their native language or do not know it at all. Despite a very strong "symbolic" identification of the community with their language (in 2001 92% of Crimean Tatars considered the Crimean Tatar language their mother tongue), the process of returning to using this language has been difficult mainly due to the weak education system. In 2009 in Crimea (Sevastopol excluded) there were around 650 general schools. In just 15 of them, attended by only around 8% of children from Crimean Tatar families, were classes taught in the Crimean Tatar language². The unavailability of education delivered in the Tatar language, which *de facto*

² Volodymyr Prytula, *Krymski Tatary. I cherez 65 ro-kiv deportaciya tryvaie?*, <http://maidanua.org/static/mai/1242582815.html>, access: 9.06.2014.

accelerates the progress of Russification of the Tatars, is one of the most important problems, if not the most important problem, faced by this community.

The religious element of Crimean Tatars are followers of Sunni Islam. They form religious communities led by the Spiritual Board of Crimean Muslims (the Muftiat of Crimea), connected with the Mejlis of Crimean Tatars. However, from among around 380 registered Muslim communities in Crimea, several dozen do not recognize the supremacy of the Muftiat; it is also not recognized by the non-registered communities whose number is difficult to estimate. These independent communities belong to various currents of the Muslim revival, and include Salafi communities and groups associated with the international Islamic organization Hizb ut-Tahrir. The latter, supported by external funding, are gaining control over more and more mosques, and consequently, over the preaching. The Muftiat has accused the Crimean authorities, and even the Russian Federation, of supporting these communities and movements in order to create a schism, although the main inspirations and sources of funding seem to be located in the states of the Middle East involved in the propagation of Islam. The radicalization of Crimean Islam is facilitated by the fact that some Crimean Tatar imams complete their education in Arab states (most of them, however, study in Turkey), and by the participation of Crimean Tatar volunteers in the civil wars in Syria.

Kurultai and Mejlis

In 1991 Crimean Tatars established their national self-government composed of the Kurultai, the Mejlis and local bodies subject to it, also called mejlises. The Kurultai of the Crimean Tatar Nation is an assembly of 250 delegates elected by local Tatar communities in Ukraine for a 5 year term. It is referred to as “the national assembly – the highest plenipotentiary representative body of the Crimean Tatar Na-

tion”. From among its members it elects the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar Nation consisting of 33 representatives and serving as the “only highest plenipotentiary representative body of the Crimean Tatar Nation” in the period in between the sessions of the Kurultai.

On 29 March the extraordinary session of the Kurultai rejected the annexation of Crimea by Russia and announced the launch of actions aimed at “enforcing the right to self-determination on one’s own historical territory”, not indicating in which state.

The Mejlis is commonly referred to as the “parliament” (although only a state, not an ethnic community, can have a parliament), however, its powers are mostly executive. The most important of them is the creation of Crimean Tatars’ national self-government bodies and managing their operation. It is not clear whether these bodies function only in the territory of Ukraine or also cover Tatars living in Uzbekistan and Russia. The system of the bodies of the Crimean Tatar national self-government is in fact and in its assumptions the nucleus of nothing less than an autonomous Tatar territory in Crimea.

In recent years the influence of the Mejlis on the social life and political attitudes of Crimean Tatars has weakened, due mainly due to its nature, akin to a *sui generis* “national corporation”, hindering the natural political pluralism of the Crimean Tatar community. When an increasingly larger part of the community began to achieve financial and social stability, people’s interest in protest actions weakened, all the more so, because they have not engendered any significant improvement in the situation of individual families. On the other hand, the torpid nature of the Mejlis and the fact that its members have been accused of profiteering

in building plots encourages the more radical elements of the Tatar community to seek a place for themselves outside the structures of the “national self-government”. It seems that the annexation of Crimea and the anti-Tatar policy of the new authorities have led to re-consolidation of Crimean Tatars around the Mejlis. Since its establishment the Mejlis was headed by Mustafa Jemilev, the unquestioned political and spiritual leader of Crimean Tatars. On 28 October 2013 he was succeeded by his long-term collaborator Refat Chubarov, which gave the more radically oriented “political” faction an advantage in the Mejlis over the “economic” faction (led by Remzi Ilyasov), which is more prone to seeking compromise with the local authorities. Jemilev however remains the highest authority for the nation.

The pro-Russian Milli Firka party

Milli Firka (the National Party), active since 2006, has been the only significant Crimean Tatar political formation after the Mejlis. Opposing the Mejlis, it has been a valuable tool in undermining the position of the Mejlis (both during the presidency of Viktor Yanukovych and presently).

It seems that Simferopol and Moscow have moved on to persecute Crimean Tatars in order to intimidate them and eliminate opposition-oriented sentiment.

The party’s leader is Vasvi Abduraimov and the number of party members is estimated at several hundred. Milli Firka has been criticising the policy of the Mejlis and Jemilev himself for a long time, accusing them of inefficiency, authoritarian tendencies and corruption. At the same time, it has formulated national demands of the Tatar community adopting a similarly abrasive attitude, if not more so, than the one adopted by the Mejlis. The party leadership has

repeatedly appealed to Moscow for support and sustains political relations with Tatarstan, launched most probably thanks to the Kazan Tatar Crimean diaspora (according to the 2001 census – 12,000 strong). It has also recognized the autonomous status of this republic as a model for the future status of Crimea. The National Party organized support actions for the mock-referenda in the Donetsk and Lugansk oblasts, and in May it openly supported the annexation of Crimea.

Kyiv and Crimean Tatars

Independent Ukraine has not followed any consistent policy towards Crimean Tatars. Although Kyiv originally declared support for them, this was mainly due to the fact that in Crimea this anti-Russian community was the main force espousing Ukraine’s independence and territorial integrity. When the separatist ambitions of Simferopol evident in the early 1990’s gradually extinguished, Crimean Tatars’ interests disappeared from Kyiv’s political agenda. Ukraine treated the problems faced by this community just like it treated other ethnic minorities: as issues of tertiary importance.

In particular, Kyiv did not want to open talks on regulating the legal status of the Mejlis. It never presented any proposal that would be competitive towards the Crimean Tatars’ demands for recognition of their self-government as a form of non-territorial national autonomy. The authorities of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and of Ukraine, however, *de facto* recognized the existence of the Mejlis and carried out talks with it, which was relatively easy considering the fact that its top leaders were also members of the parliament of Ukraine (elected from the lists of the People’s Movement of Ukraine, Our Ukraine and *Batkivshchyna*).

During president Kuchma’s term in office, and later during Yanukovych’s presidency, it was difficult to reach an agreement because of the consistent support offered by the Mejlis to the

opposition forces, and the fact that Ukrainian nationalists supported the demand to consider Crimean Tatars an “indigenous nation” (the nationalists claim that there are only two indigenous nations in Ukraine: Ukrainians and Tatars, and treat Russians as “invaders”, “conquerors” etc.). Yushchenko too did little to improve the status of Crimean Tatars or regulate the legal status of their self-government. It was only in the resolution “on guarantees of rights of the Crimean Tatar nation within the Ukrainian State” adopted on 20 March 2014 (i.e. after the annexation of Crimea by Russia), that the Kurultai and Mejlis were recognized (the Kurultai as “the highest representative body of the Crimean Tatar nation”). This resolution, however, failed to regulate their legal status or their place in the state’s legal order in any way. In the current situation the resolution is completely extraneous, similar to the act of 17 April 2014 on the “legal rehabilitation of individuals deported due to their nationality”, clearly limited to Crimean Tatars.

Crimean Tatars’ attitude towards the annexation of Crimea

The new leadership of the Mejlis supported the protests in Kyiv in 2013 and 2014, and both Jemilev and Chubarov spoke to the protesters from the stage in the Maidan. When in late February 2014 the separatist actions were launched in Crimea, Crimean Tatars tried to stop it, e.g. by organizing demonstrations in Simferopol on 26 February and then announcing the organization of their own referendum (concerning the establishment of a Crimean Tatar national autonomy in Crimea). When it became clear that the new prime minister of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, Sergey Aksyonov, was directly supported by Russia, and Russian soldiers began to arrive in Simferopol and other locations, the Mejlis gave up its objections. The illegal referendum on incorporating Crimea into the Russian Federation was boycotted by Crimean Tatars.

Two weeks after the referendum, on 29 March, the Kurultai held an extraordinary session. In the session hall there were no flags of Ukraine or Russia, just the flags of Crimean Tatars. The session was attended by representatives of the Russian Federation: the President of Tatarstan Rustam Minnikhanov and the head of the Russian Muftis Council Ravil Haynutdin. After heated disputes, the Kurultai considered the referendum illegal, rejected the annexation and announced the launch of actions aimed at “enforcing the right to self-determination on their own historical territory” (the resolution can also be interpreted as a declaration of actions leading towards independence). At the same time, the offer involving the presentation of Crimean Tatar candidates to posts in the new Crimean administration was accepted. A few days later, Lenur Islamov (one of the leaders of the “economic” faction) was appointed deputy prime minister, and Zaur Smirnov became head of the committee for ethnic minorities. At this time, Russia attempted to win the support of Crimean Tatars and its success seemed increasingly feasible in the context of the futile attempts made by the Tatars in recent years to receive support from Kyiv and of the chaos which engulfed Ukraine after the fall of Yanukovich, together with Ukraine’s surrender of Crimea without even token resistance. The popular feeling was that “nobody defended us and nobody ever will” and the Crimean Tatar community must survive also in the conditions of occupation.

On 21 April the scope of the Russian act of 1991 concerning the rehabilitation of “repressed nations” was extended by a decree of the President of Russia to include Crimean Tatars. Moscow suggested that President Putin could see Jemilev (in the end only a telephone conversation was held, even though Jemilev came to Moscow). On 18 May President Putin met with a group of representatives of the Crimean Tatars. At the meeting the Mejlis was represented by the leader of the “moderate” wing, Remzi

Ilyasov, and Zaur Smirnov. On the other hand, Crimean authorities announced that they would deprive Crimean Tatars of property whose legal status has not been regulated.

The careful policy of the Mejlis has met with criticism from one portion of the Crimean Tatar community. At the same time, the difference between the more radical activists, who at that time were in Kyiv, and the ones focused on compromise for the sake of survival of the nation, who stayed in Crimea, began to grow. The Mejlis criticised the draft of the new constitution of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, as it did not guarantee Crimean Tatars the rights granted to indigenous nations and failed to recognize the Kurultai and Mejlis.

Crimean Tatars, most of whom have a reluctant or even hostile attitude towards the annexation of Crimea by Russia, are not and by a large majority will not be eager to contest their current situation in an active way.

On 19 April Mustafa Jemilev returned to Crimea and was greeted by thousands of Crimean Tatars who waved flags at him, including the Ukrainian flag. However, during his way back to Kyiv, Jemilev was informed that he was banned from entering the territory of the Russian Federation (including Crimea) until 2019. Since early May Crimean Tatar activists have been summoned for interrogations and suspected of engaging in extremist activities (pursuant to the Russian act on this issue); also Chubarov was officially threatened with detention for “extremism”. Finally, on 28 May Islamov was dismissed and replaced by Ruslan Balbek, the leader of a minor organization, “Generation Crimea”, which is openly hostile towards the Mejlis.

The inter-ethnic relations in Crimea began to deteriorate quickly. The number of local xen-

ophobia-motivated incidents grew, especially in neighbour-to-neighbour relations, and local anti-Tatar terror groups have been formed, most probably acting with the silent consent of the authorities. The number of Tatars leaving Crimea also grew (according to the Mejlis activists there were some 7,000 such refugees by mid-May; this number, however, does not seem credible in the light of other reports which estimate the total number of refugees from Crimea, most of whom are families of Ukrainian soldiers, to be 5,000–6,000).³

Simferopol and Moscow feared that a major demonstration planned for 18 May, the 70th anniversary of the launch of the deportations of Crimean Tatars, might take a violent course. Rumours of the possible “provocation” were spread, and it is not unlikely that some provocation was being prepared. The Crimean authorities issued a ban on public gatherings on the days of the anniversary, although later they agreed to a rally on the suburbs of Simferopol. The rally on 18 May gathered over 10,000 thousand people; in general the rallies and gatherings organized on that day were attended by ca. 60,000 Crimean Tatars (around a fourth of the whole population). No incidents were reported.

Summary

Crimean Tatars, most of whom have a reluctant or even hostile attitude towards the annexation of Crimea by Russia, are not and by a large majority will not be eager to contest their current situation in an active way. Individuals most likely to leave Crimea are members of groups of later repatriates (Ukrainians are expected to leave Crimea in much greater numbers), and an intensification of temporary, economically-motivated migrations from Crimea, including to Russia, is anticipated.

³ Viktor Diachenko, *Bezhentsy XXI veka*, www.from-ua.com/adds/print.php?voice/412c1ae39c2d5, access: 28.05.2014.

It seems that after a failed experiment focused on the policy of compromise, Simferopol and Moscow have moved on to persecute Crimean Tatars (e.g. by attempting to split the Mejlis) in order to intimidate them and eliminate opposition-oriented sentiment. It cannot be excluded that attempts will be made to remove them from the plots they have occupied illegally.

This might lead to radicalization of attitudes among Tatars and the emergence of groups remaining beyond the control of the Mejlis and the Muftiat. In the future, these groups might get involved in militant actions (especially after the end of the civil war in Syria, where a group of Crimean Tatar jihadists are taking part in the combat).

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