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By Mykyta KASIANENKO

SIMFEROPOL — The First World Congress of the Crimean Tatars (WCCT) ended after the delegates from 162 ethnic organizations in 12 countries adopted a declaration establishing the congress’ status as an international organization and elected Refat Chubarov (ubarov) President of the Congress. Mustafa Jemilev, Ukrainian MP, Chairman of the Majlis of the Crimean Tatar People, was nominated for the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize. The WCCT adopted communications to the president of Ukraine, the Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine’s Cabinet of Ministers, the Council of Europe, European Union, OSCE, and other international organizations, and formed its working bodies.

TWENTY YEARS LATER: WHAT HAS BEEN ACCOMPLISHED?

The Crimean Tatars have been returning to the peninsular for more than 20 years, long enough to build homes, schools, hospitals, mosques, and roads. Twenty years is almost long enough for another generation to come. There is a younger Crimean Tatar generation, people who have not experienced exile. In 1991, after the Soviet Union’s collapse, the Kurultai (Qoriltay in Tatar) was convened again after 74 years of forced recess and the Majlis was formed. There seemed to be every opportunity for the Crimean Tatars to finally return to their native land and settle there. If all events had taken the desired course, today all major problems would be solved and only some minor ones remained.

After two decades the Crimean community is still getting around to resolving many problems in restoring the rights of an innocent people that fell prey to the political system. Previously we heard that most of the deportees had returned home, while today we hear that tens of thousands of Crimean Tatars, mostly in Uzbekistan, are still waiting to return to their historical homeland. We have heard about 50,000, then 100,000, and it’s about 150,000 people. Some 260,00 to 280,000 returnees currently make up 13.54 percent of the Crimean population, while a total 300,000 of them settled across Ukraine. They have formed some 300 settlements and compact ethnic communities, which are now the territories with unsolved economic, social, and humanitarian problems.

Remzi Ilyasov, chairman of the Crimean Supreme Council’s standing commission on interethnic relation, addressed the congress, saying only 98 percent of these settlements have electricity; 75 percent, running water; 15 percent, gas stoves; 12 percent, hard-surface roads, while sewers are out of the question. Only five percent of the returnees were able to settle on
the southern coast, compared to 25 percent before the deportation. There are only 14 schools with Crimean Tatar as the language of instruction, the Crimean Education and Engineering University, and other institutions of higher learning that produce qualified personnel from among the former deportees.

Ilyasov believes that nearly 20 more compact settlements have to be set up in the Crimea for the newly arrived returnees. The Ukrainian government has allocated some 1.2 billion hryvnias for these purposes under the national returnee settlement program. However, Kyiv-based Hiprohrad Institute’s estimates, point to some $2.5 billion needed for the settlement program.

These problems appear to cause concern not only in the Crimea. Turkey received the bulk of the immigration influx after the liquidation of the Crimean Khanate and the annexation of the Crimea by the Russian empire in 1783. According to various estimates, it is now home to one to four million Crimean Tatars, which explains why the Turkish delegates — people holding important posts in their country — were the second largest delegation at the congress.

TIKA, the Turkish government-run International Cooperation and Development Agency, is carrying out a repatriate relief program in the Crimea. A number of socioeconomic projects, including the construction of schools, hospital, and water supply systems have been implemented in line with the UNDP, involving government resources of the Netherlands, Germany, the United States, and other countries. Turkey is believed to have helped build at least 1,000 homes of the Crimean Tatar repatriates — and this considering that Ukraine is the only CIS country to have shouldered the repatriation burden, with the others completely ignoring the Bishkek Agreement under which Russia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and other signatory states (where the Crimean Tatar deportees have tangibly contributed to the economy) undertook to assist the returnees. Now we are told that the repatriation of Crimean Tatars is Ukraine’s domestic problem.

An unbiased analysis shows that the failure to accomplish repatriation and settlement [of the Crimean Tatars] within 20 years means that the national movement, which has led the process, and its relationships with Ukraine have to undergo deep-reaching reforms. The Crimean Tatar national movement has been rather effective politically: it has reached its main goal of bringing people back to their homeland. This movement was active even under the Soviets, as a member of the USSR-wide human rights campaign. In fact, it arranged for the return of Crimean Tatars en masse in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. It set up ethnic self-government bodies that remain to be legitimized in Ukraine but have been instrumental in coordinating the efforts of the people and authorities aimed at solving the returnees’ settlement problems in the Crimea.

Jemilev says the Ukrainian government should recognize the Crimean Tatars as a people, not an ethnic minority, as is the case now. This would mean more rights but also more responsibilities as compared to what an ethnic minority has. This recognition would compel the Ukrainian government to consider the status of the official language (as a rule, only on the territory of the Crimean Autonomy), membership quotas within the bodies of state authority, ways and means of participating in state administration, and the revival of national culture, education, and religion.

As it is, Ukraine’s central authorities, social formations, bodies of local self-government, not even scholars and theoreticians in the state-building realm are not prepared to handle this
issue in practice. There is no single theoretical or legal concept that can deal with it on this plane. Previous Ukrainian governments and members of parliament seem to have believed that this problem would somehow get resolved, with events following their natural course. In actuality, problems of such scope and caliber will not disappear on their own.

The congress raised the issue to the international level, placing it on the agenda of international organizations. This issue is sure to gain momentum, with an increasing number of debates on an international scope. Under the circumstances, Ukraine must demonstrate its ability to solve an ethnic problem. Otherwise, it will follow in Russia’s footsteps and end up being dubbed another 21st-century prison of nations. The old adage, tertium non datur, seems to hold true.

A number of congress delegates believe that the reason behind the political and legal problems facing the Crimean Tatars is the liquidation of the Crimean Tatar status as a polity in 1783. This status has not been restored in any form. The Crimean Tatars did not take part in the 1991 referendum on the restoration of the Autonomous Republic of the Crimea (ARC) because most of them were still in exile. The Crimean Tatar language does not have an official status in the ARC today, unlike the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1991 or the Republic of the Crimea in 1994.

Likewise, the Crimean Tatars do not have any ethnic quota for the Crimean Parliament, the Autonomy’s Supreme Council. The quota was scrapped in 1998, when the Constitution was being adopted, on the excuse that the repatriation campaign had been completed and the issue of the Crimean Tatar representation in local authorities had been solved. Today, the Crimean Tatars make up between 10 and 13 percent of local MPs on all level, and constitute an average of 4-5 percent in the executive branch.

All these facts justify the claims made by the leaders of the national movement that the current Autonomous Republic of the Crimea is not a Crimean Tatar autonomy and that it does not protect their rights and liberties. And so they say that the movement’s objective is to restore national statehood. This is nothing new. Radical chauvinists accuse the Crimean Tatars of an intention to either separate the Crimea from Ukraine to turn it into an independent Tatar polity or annex the Crimea to Turkey — this despite the fact that neither the state of Turkey nor its politicians, unlike their Russian counterparts, have ever mentioned this possibility.

Addressing the congress, Jemilev partly disavowed the Declaration of National Sovereignty of the Crimean Tatar People. He said that it was adopted in August 1991, when the Soviet Union still existed, and that it met the needs of that period. If such a declaration were to be adopted today, the national movement’s objective would be stated differently — forming the Crimean Tatar Ethnic and Territorial Autonomy within the boundaries of the Ukrainian state.

**CADRE ISSUE: WRONG FORECASTS?**

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First, a group identifying itself as the Milliy Firqa Party, which has focused exclusively on criticizing Jemilev and the idea of convening the congress over the past several months, has proven wrong on all counts, including assessment of Jemilev’s prospects and the WCCT’s role (the congress has turned out to be a viable body, supported by the majority of the Crimean Tatars across the world).

Second, it is highly significant that the WCCT was held in a markedly unfriendly political environment. A number of mass media tried to present the idea of the Crimean Tatar unity as a threat to other nations, but the Crimean Tatars have only followed into the footsteps of Ukrainians, Kazan Tatars, and other nations that already have their world congresses and are actively using them to revive their national culture and economy. It is no secret that an intensive anti-WCCT propaganda campaign that was staged among the Crimean Tatar ethnic communities abroad, mainly in Turkey. This campaign focused on Jemilev saying that he is a dictator who would not tolerate dissenting ideas or individuals in the national movement.

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Nadir Bekirov, president of the Research and Support Foundation for the Indigenous Peoples of the Crimea, also attended. This man has close contacts with the UN structures dealing with ethnic minority issues. Bekirov is reported to have delivered a speech entitled “On the Lawless Status of the Crimean Tatar People in Ukraine Where This People Is Still Not Recognized by the Government as a People.” For the most part, he lashed out at the Ukrainian government, Jemilev, and the present-day Kurultai and Majlis.

Under the circumstances the Crimean Tatars obviously opted for a face-saving move. Also, they played a subtler political game, with an eye to international public opinion. Jemilev said that, by nominating Chubarov as WCCT President, he presented the congress with his “special condition”: Chubarov should not withdraw from the majlis chairman election at the next Kurultai session because the previous session adopted a decision to this effect.

In this way Jemilev mothballed the situation: Chubarov will definitely be elected chairman of the Majlis and will have to resign from the WCCT. As to who will be at the head of the WCCT, Jemilev remains the number one candidate, but it’s best not to jump the gun. Jemilev’s political weight and experience allow him to remain a major authority as the leader of the worldwide Crimean Tatar movement, even without an official position with the WCCT. Right now, as the leader of the Kurultai and Majlis, he has more leverage than the WCCT.
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WHAT’S NEXT?

Personnel reshuffling was a long-awaited event that never happened, yet such changes are bound to slow down reforms in the national movement. The WCCT will play its role, something that has been expected for over a decade. “The Ukrainian political community will now have to determine its stand, and quickly at that, on the Crimean Tatar people,” Chubarov said after being elected president of all Crimean Tatars. He added: “We don’t have to change our attitude to Ukraine; we have always supported Ukraine’s territorial integrity and its subsequent European and Euro-Atlantic integration, so we expect the Ukrainian politicians to frankly demonstrate their stand. We have nowhere to go, we are in our homeland and are part of the Ukrainian state, but if this state continues with its ambiguous stance with regard to the Crimean Tatars, these people will keep asking themselves, ‘What kind of state is it that treats us so inadequately? What should our attitude be to this state?’”

The WCCT has not changed the Crimean Tatars’ political, economic, and humanitarian demands. All of them have long been made public knowledge. The only difference is that the congress has reaffirmed them on an international level, and that it will eventually have them monitored by international organizations. The Crimean Tatars have thus increased external pressure on the Ukrainian authorities tasked with repatriation, proper accommodation, and facilities in order integrate into a new social environment.

The leaders of the Crimean Tatar people believe that solving their problems must not turn into a revolutionary process. There are numerous problems, mainly in the humanitarian realm, that do require urgent budget appropriations. However, if solved, these problems would tangibly enhance this people’s stability within the social community.

Take, for example, the language clauses that have become sheer formalities, considering that the Crimean Tatar language is being used by a number of governmental institutions and agencies on the peninsula. Quite a few documents are issued in three languages. In fact, the facade of the Supreme Council and that of the Government of the Crimea have plaques in Crimean Tatar. However, the absence of the official status holds back progress in terms of education, publication of textbooks, circulation of documents, archives, etc. The unregulated issues of language and toponymy lead to a situation when the Supreme Council passed a resolution to install road signs in Russian, while Majlis, in Crimean Tatar. You can imagine the chaos on international highways if these resolutions are implemented.

No one expects the WCCT to solve all of the problems facing this people. However, if we discard sci-fi projects like Svitlana Chervonna’s theory about a Crimean Tatar state in the Crimea with Jemilev as president (it was voiced at one of the Kurultai sessions), the resolutions passed by the congress seem quite realistic. Chubarov says they will generate greater awareness in the Ukrainian government of the tasks on the way to building a nation-state and defining the status of the Crimean Tatars in it.

TIME FOR A ROUNDTABLE?
Apart from the bill once vetoed by Leonid Kuchma (still shelved in Kyiv), the Majlis did not come up with any comprehensive vehicles to restore the Crimean Tatar rights. What steps should the Ukrainian government take to restore their right to take part in state administration, in determining the status of the language, restoring place names, and providing education? So far, sporadic, uncoordinated measures have been taken in all these spheres on the initiative of the Crimean Tatars and the local and central authorities. These measures are not adequate to current realities. In order to solve all these problems, it is necessary to work out a system that will provide for understanding and coordination. What kind of government body can cope with this task? None in present-day Ukraine, save for a large-scale roundtable, something like a scholarly conference involving the Crimean Tatar leaders, scholars, and politicians who are broad-minded and have thorough knowledge of these problems and the international experience in this domain.

The Majlis (or the Council of Crimean Tatar Representatives attached to the President of Ukraine, if you will) should initiate an all-Ukrainian, WCCT-supported roundtable on the revival and integration of the Crimean Tatar people into Ukraine’s social community. The main task of this roundtable would be to find answers to some questions that have not been raised as yet, working out mechanisms for reforming the autonomous republic, and solve the rest of the problems addressing interethnic relationships.

However, is it possible to solve the most pressing problems of interethnic relationships in Ukraine, even via a nationwide roundtable, in the current political situation and under the current president and cabinet? The answer is negative, I’m afraid. We all know that these top-level politicians are too busy with their election campaigns, while solving interethnic problems in Ukraine will require very unpopular decisions, something never practiced during an election campaign.

That was probably why Jemilev readily agreed to the “cadre recess” and promptly handed WCCT presidency to Chubarov: now is not the right time to raise the matter of reforms in Ukraine’s interethnic relationships. Perhaps the right moment will come one year from now: after the replacement of Ukraine’s ruling elite, when unpopular decisions will be possible, after Chubarov is elected head of the Majlis, and after the second WCCT appoints Jemilev as head of all the Crimean Tatars and adopts a resolution on urgent reforms.

Obviously, today the top agenda item in the Crimean Tatars’ strategy regarding the Crimea and the most effective way of sorting out the existing problems are the calm, systematic, and specific preparatory measures leading to the roundtable, which will be held with the new president, parliament, and cabinet of Ukraine. After that no procrastination on the part of the Crimean Tatars and Ukrainian government will be forgiven.

COMMENTARY

**Mykola Zhulynsky**, academician of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, director of the Taras Shevchenko Institute of Literature, chairman of the Taras Shevchenko National Prize Committee:

“Mustafa Jemilev is an outstanding political figure for the Crimean Tatars and in the history of the world human rights movement. This man has proved with his life that the rights and freedoms of the deported Crimean Tatars are his life’s mission.”
“Jemilev started fighting the communist regime as a young fellow. I know his life story. I have copies of foreign publications concerning the Crimean Tatars’ struggle for returning to their historical homeland.

“I remember visiting Turkey as a member of a Crimean Tatar delegation. I was impressed as I watched the residents of some villages greet Jemilev as though he were a national hero. Most surprisingly, the populace recognized him; they knew him. He is regarded as the leader of all Turkic peoples, and because of this we were given a highest-level reception: we met with the president of Turkey and had meetings in a number of ministries.

“There is no denying Jemilev’s high international profile. I believe that there is every reason to expect that he will win the Nobel Prize as a human rights champion of the 20th and 21st centuries. I am convinced that Ukrainian intellectuals will be happy to support his nomination. Conferring this prestigious prize on Jemilev would be a tribute to the Crimean Tatars’ struggle against the communist regime.”

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Take, for example, the language clauses that have become sheer formalities, considering that the Crimean Tatar language is being used by a number of governmental institutions and agencies on the peninsula. Quite a few documents are issued in three languages. In fact, the facade of the Supreme Council and that of the Government of the Crimea have plaques in
Crimean Tatar. However, the absence of the official status holds back progress in terms of education, publication of textbooks, circulation of documents, archives, etc. The unregulated issues of language and toponymy lead to a situation when the Supreme Council passed a resolution to install road signs in Russian, while Majlis, in Crimean Tatar. You can imagine the chaos on international highways if these resolutions are implemented.

No one expects the WCCT to solve all of the problems facing this people. However, if we discard sci-fi projects like Svitlana Chervonna’s theory about a Crimean Tatar state in the Crimea with Jemilev as president (it was voiced at one of the Kurultai sessions), the resolutions passed by the congress seem quite realistic. Chubarov says they will generate greater awareness in the Ukrainian government of the tasks on the way to building a nation-state and defining the status of the Crimean Tatars in it.

TIME FOR A ROUNDTABLE?

Apart from the bill once vetoed by Leonid Kuchma (still shelved in Kyiv), the Majlis did not come up with any comprehensive vehicles to restore the Crimean Tatar rights. What steps should the Ukrainian government take to restore their right to take part in state administration, in determining the status of the language, restoring place names, and providing education? So far, sporadic, uncoordinated measures have been taken in all these spheres on the initiative of the Crimean Tatars and the local and central authorities. These measures are not adequate to current realities. In order to solve all these problems, it is necessary to work out a system that will provide for understanding and coordination. What kind of government body can cope with this task? None in present-day Ukraine, save for a large-scale roundtable, something like a scholarly conference involving the Crimean Tatar leaders, scholars, and politicians who are broad-minded and have thorough knowledge of these problems and the international experience in this domain.

The Majlis (or the Council of Crimean Tatar Representatives attached to the President of Ukraine, if you will) should initiate an all-Ukrainian, WCCT-supported roundtable on the revival and integration of the Crimean Tatar people into Ukraine’s social community. The main task of this roundtable would be to find answers to some questions that have not been raised as yet, working out mechanisms for reforming the autonomous republic, and solve the rest of the problems addressing interethnic relationships.

However, is it possible to solve the most pressing problems of interethnic relationships in Ukraine, even via a nationwide roundtable, in the current political situation and under the current president and cabinet? The answer is negative, I’m afraid. We all know that these top-level politicians are too busy with their election campaigns, while solving interethnic problems in Ukraine will require very unpopular decisions, something never practiced during an election campaign.

That was probably why Jemilev readily agreed to the “cadre recess” and promptly handed WCCT presidency to Chubarov: now is not the right time to raise the matter of reforms in Ukraine’s interethnic relationships. Perhaps the right moment will come one year from now: after the replacement of Ukraine’s ruling elite, when unpopular decisions will be possible, after Chubarov is elected head of the Majlis, and after the second WCCT appoints Jemilev as head of all the Crimean Tatars and adopts a resolution on urgent reforms.
Obviously, today the top agenda item in the Crimean Tatars’ strategy regarding the Crimea and the most effective way of sorting out the existing problems are the calm, systematic, and specific preparatory measures leading to the roundtable, which will be held with the new president, parliament, and cabinet of Ukraine. After that no procrastination on the part of the Crimean Tatars and Ukrainian government will be forgiven.

COMMENTARY

Mykola ZHULYNSKY, academician of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, director of the Taras Shevchenko Institute of Literature, chairman of the Taras Shevchenko National Prize Committee:

“Mustafa Jemilev is an outstanding political figure for the Crimean Tatars and in the history of the world human rights movement. This man has proved with his life that the rights and freedoms of the deported Crimean Tatars are his life’s mission.

“Jemilev started fighting the communist regime as a young fellow. I know his life story. I have copies of foreign publications concerning the Crimean Tatars’ struggle for returning to their historical homeland.

“I remember visiting Turkey as a member of a Crimean Tatar delegation. I was impressed as I watched the residents of some villages greet Jemilev as though he were a national hero. Most surprisingly, the populace recognized him; they knew him. He is regarded as the leader of all Turkic peoples, and because of this we were given a highest-level reception: we met with the president of Turkey and had meetings in a number of ministries.

“There is no denying Jemilev’s high international profile. I believe that there is every reason to expect that he will win the Nobel Prize as a human rights champion of the 20th and 21st centuries. I am convinced that Ukrainian intellectuals will be happy to support his nomination. Conferring this prestigious prize on Jemilev would be a tribute to the Crimean Tatars’ struggle against the communist regime.”