The Crimean Tatars: Overview and Issues
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Historical Overview

The Crimean Tatars are the indigenous people of Crimea whose history dates back many centuries. The power and prestige of the Crimean Tatar nation reached its peak as the independent Crimean Khanate, which emerged in the first half of the 15th century and continued up to 1783. For over 300 years it was a major power and played a key role in international, political and military relations across Eurasia.

In 1783 Crimea was annexed by the Russian Empire, and the Crimean Khanate ceased to exist. It was at this point that the Crimean Tatars were deprived of statehood.

A further chain of dramatic events occurred under the rule of Russian imperial colonial administration in Crimea. As a result of intentional and systematic oppression, the Crimean Tatar population decreased dramatically, and villagers from remote Russian regions were moved to the lands previously owned by the Crimean Tatars.

The Crimean Tatars under the Soviets

A certain renaissance in the political and cultural life of the Crimean Tatars took place between 1921 and 1926 when recently established authorities sought support of indigenous Crimean Tatars to legitimate their rule. However, between 1921 and 1923 an artificial famine caused 100 000 deaths, 70 000 of whom were Crimean Tatar.

The 1930s formed a decade punctuated by authority-led repression and systematic extermination of the most active Crimean Tatars. During those ten years, 20 000 people were expelled out of Crimea to Siberia and the Urals. Virtually all Islamic clergymen and national intellectuals were placed into concentration camps. Many were shot.

Two acts\(^1\) adopted in 1934 officially declared the Crimean Tatars a threat to the Soviet regime, a shocking example of the lengths to which the Soviet authorities went to generate legal justification of their policies of systematic oppression.

On May 18 1944, the Soviet regime expelled the indigenous population of Crimea to remote areas of Central Asia, Siberia and the Urals. Those deported during the first years underwent unbelievable hardship, enduring famine and suffering violence. Forty percent of the entire Crimean Tatar population died, of whom the overwhelming majority were children or elderly people since the adult Crimean Tatar population had been mobilized in the Soviet army to combat fascist Germany. In 1956 many were released from the “Special Settlement Camps”, but the ban on returning to Crimea was only lifted in 1988.

Crimean Tatars who dared to break the ban and resettle in Crimea were expelled, prosecuted and punished. USSR authorities implemented assimilation policies, which included a ban on schools using Crimean Tatar as a language of instruction and prohibition of cultural or historical research that focused on Crimean Tatars. Moreover, in all spheres of social life, the self-naming of the nation was banned.

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\(^1\) Decree of CC C.P.S.U.(B.) #1245/2 and special instruction of People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs #132/64
Repatriation of the Crimean Tatars

Mass repatriation of the Crimean Tatars to their homeland started in the late 1980s on the eve of USSR collapse, and continues to this day.

According to data from December 2007, 264,000 Crimean Tatars live in Crimea, constituting 13% of the peninsula’s population.

The Ukrainian government has undertaken some measures to provide necessary housing for returning Crimean Tatars. However, over the course of fifteen years of Ukrainian independence no law has passed to rehabilitate the collective rights of a nation that repatriated itself after an exile of half a century. Little has been done to guarantee the individual rights of the Crimean Tatars, nor to fix the status of the Crimean Tatar people in Ukraine. As a result, authorities have been able to commit further acts of discrimination against the Crimean Tatars that include unfair allocation of land, “glass ceilings” that obstruct promotion of Crimean Tatar individuals within state institutions and funding shortfalls for the protection of the Crimean Tatar language.

Key Issues

1. Politics and Legislation

Legislation should be passed to restore collective and individual rights of the Crimean Tatars as violated by mass deportation committed in May 1944 and the subsequent decades of exile.

The Ukrainian Parliament should pass the draft law of Ukraine “On rehabilitation of rights of individuals, deported for national features” which was previously adopted on June 24, 2004. This law was vetoed by ex-President Leonid Kuchma and is still suspended. This law would not only provide a framework with which to address socio-economic disparities between Crimean Tatars and other residents, but also fill the legal vacuum that could allow for the exoneration of those with some level of responsibility for the mass deportation.

The Crimean Tatars should receive official status of Indigenous People of Ukraine. The legal basis for ascribing such a status is Article 11 of the Constitution of Ukraine, which stipulates that the state endorses the “development of ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identities of all indigenous peoples and national minorities of Ukraine”. Further justification for ascribing such a status is that the ancestral territory of the Crimean Tatar people is fully within the borders of the Ukrainian state and they have no other ancestral homeland. The Crimean Tatar people also maintain an ethnic identity that is different from that of Ukrainians, the major ethnic group, and continue to uphold their unique language and culture. Traditional ethnic institutions such as the Mejlis, or representative “parliament” for the Crimean Tatars, that promote the collective rights of Crimean Tatars are developed and maintained.

2. Land Rights

Principles of sufficient and fair allocation of land sites, both in terms of land for private construction and for agricultural use must be established for the repatriates.

Upon returning to their motherland, the Crimean Tatars were forced to settle in countryside areas. Today over 70% of the Crimean Tatars (out of 264,000 population) are village dwellers. However, as a result of land privatization only 17% of the Crimean Tatars managed to receive land sites through the state sanctioned process of privatization. The overwhelming majority of the Crimean Tatars who live in the countryside have
no agricultural land, which is their main source of day to day income. In terms of land for construction, the authorities display fierce resistance towards allocating the Crimean Tatars land sites in communities in the South Coast of Crimea and within urban areas including Simferopol, even though these are the lands where the largest concentration of Crimean Tatars lived prior to deportation.

3. Education and Culture:

*Measures for reviving the Crimean Tatar language and culture must be taken to secure the future of a threatened language and culture.*

Intentional suppression of Crimean Tatar language and culture in USSR has led to tragic losses, particularly in terms of language. Crimean Tatar youths are losing the impetus and support to learn their own language. Just fourteen schools use the Crimean Tatar language for instruction, which covers a mere 3,443 pupils, out of a total of 36,103 young Crimean Tatars of school age. Moreover, these schools are provided with manuals and methodical textbooks in Crimean Tatar only at primary school level, but secondary and high school literature is available in Russian only. Few textbooks in any courses are developed in Crimean Tatar.

The construction of new schools with Crimean Tatar as the language of instruction is highly problematic. According to the current prices, $6-7 million is required for the construction and commission of a single school. Financial hardship also restrains the development of Crimean Tatar theatre and arts groups, as well as mass media outlets, including e-media.

4. Religion

*Ensuring equality of all citizens in the Ukraine regardless of their religious views is essential.*

Article 35 of the Constitution of the Ukraine makes provisions for nation-wide “freedom to profess or not to profess any religion, to perform alone or collectively and without constraint religious rites and ceremonial rituals, and to conduct religious activity”. Despite this, Crimean Muslims often experience discrimination at the hands of the authorities. One recent example of religious intolerance is the reconsideration of a decision by the municipal council of Simferopol to allocate land site for construction of Principal Mosque in Simferopol.

5. Representation in local and state authoritative bodies

*Effective representation of Crimean Tatars in local and state authorities must be guaranteed.*

There is a single Crimean Tatar Member of Ukrainian parliament, but aside from that, the Crimean Tatars are underrepresented in both legislative and executive authoritative bodies of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, including within the Supreme Council. The Ukrainian state should develop special measures to guarantee representation of the Crimean Tatars as stipulated in Art. 4, part II of the Framework Agreement on Protection of National Minorities of Council of Europe, ratified by Ukraine in 1998: “Parties shall undertake, if necessary, adequate measures for assisting in all spheres of economics, social, political and cultural life in order to secure full equality of people referred to national minority and majority”.

It is unacceptable that Crimean Tatars should not be considered for significant roles such as within the Security Service of Ukraine since it denotes a lack of trust between the state and its own citizens, and will cause tension.
Conclusion

The situation concerning repatriation, resettlement and rehabilitation of rights of the Crimean Tatar people is complex and requires maximum efforts in order to secure its resolution.

The delay of any legal settlement regarding repatriation, resettlement and rehabilitation of rights of the Crimean Tatar people has been exacerbated by ongoing stereotypes against the Crimean Tatars that are displayed by many Ukrainian politicians from the USSR epoch. Furthermore there is an absence of political will in the current government to resolve the problem inherited by Ukraine from the USSR.

Therefore, more active involvement of international and European institutions in resolving the Crimean Tatar problem may encourage the Ukraine to initiate the process of rehabilitation of the Crimean Tatar people.