

STABILITY IN CRIMEA: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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Dear Mr. Chairman, Members of the European Parliament! Ladies and gentlemen!

First of all, let me express my deep gratitude for inviting me and giving me the opportunity to speak in this, I reckon, most respected parliamentary council of the world, where leading 27 democratic states of Europe are represented altogether. It is a great privilege and a significant responsibility for me to represent here the Crimean Tatar people – a small indigenous people of Eastern Europe which was sentenced to death by the soviet regime 66 years ago.

I also appreciate your decision to devote a special session to discuss the current problems existing in Ukraine and Crimea. The situation in Ukraine and particularly in Crimea is quite complicated and disturbing, and, according to forecasts, the prospects of the regional developments in terms of stability are gloom. This is why your attention to our problems is highly valuable.

Obviously, it is impossible to cover the whole set of problems in my speech within the time limit, but I hope that this can be addressed by the time allocated for Questions and Answers session.

THREATS TO THE TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY OF UKRAINE

Crimea constitutes 4% of the area and 5% of the population of Ukraine, but the media of Ukraine and especially of its closest neighbour Russia cover the events occurring on the peninsula more extensively than most of other regions in Ukraine taken together. This is explained by the number of peculiarities and respective problems, which, if unresolved, might lead to open conflicts both within the Ukrainian society and in the relations between Ukraine and Russia.

The situation became more complicated and disturbing after the war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008, when the Russian troops occupied a significant part of sovereign Georgia deploying its military bases and declaring recognition of independence of Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia, which was a flagrant violation of territorial integrity of Georgia.

The anxiety rose even more when last year Russia adopted a new military doctrine. It implies that Russia feels entitled to use the military force beyond its borders, if it assumes that Russian citizens living abroad are threatened. A quick note: among the arguments used by Russia to justify the invasion in Georgia was reference to violation of rights of Osetians and Abkhazians who were given Russian passports beforehand. And there are at least several tens of thousands of citizens in Crimea holding Russian passports or citizens with dual nationality.

The danger of the Russian-Georgian War for Ukraine and Crimea, specifically, also stemmed from the use of warships of the Russian Black Sea Fleet based in Sevastopol in the War to bombard Georgian cities. According to the rules of warfare, Georgia, if able and willing, could have utilized the right to fire back not only these ships but also their military bases, which would mean firing the territory of Crimea. Therefore, further presence of Russian Black Sea Fleet on the territory of Ukraine, especially in the light of the new Military Doctrine, will be an ongoing obstacle for the establishment of normal relations between Russia and Ukraine, and a threat to territorial integrity of Ukraine. Such presence is likely to serve as a contributor to the interethnic tension in Crimea, inasmuch as pro-Russian separatist forces in Crimea consider the Fleet as a support of their own.

INTERETHNIC AND INTERCONFESSIONAL RELATIONS; DISCRIMINATION OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF CRIMEA

The roots of the problems now present in Crimea go back into history. Many of them are consequences of the barbarous policies towards the indigenous people of Crimea – the Crimean Tatars, conducted, first, by the monarchic Russia and then by the Bolsheviks' regime. Culmination point of this criminal policy peaked on May 18, 1944, at the deportation and the genocide of the indigenous people and, later on, the Bulgarians, Greeks and Armenians. In August 1941, in the beginning of the war with Germany started, ethnic Germans were also evicted.

I assume that the audience present here is well aware of mass deportations of entire nations committed by the Soviet regime. I will, therefore, only mention that during first years after the exile, the hunger, cold temperatures and lawlessness in special regime settlements of detention, where human life was totally dependent on fancies of commandants governed by special legal provisions, physically destroyed over 40% of the indigenous people of Crimea – the Crimean Tatars. Most of them were children, elderly and women, because adult males were fighting on the war battlegrounds.

These crimes, no doubt, classified as genocide, since their ultimate goal was complete extermination of the Crimean Tatar people as a unique ethnical group. The catastrophically devastating consequences of the genocide still cannot be overcome in full today.

The soviet propaganda tried hard to make new settlers from Russia, who were relocated to empty houses of deported people in Crimea, think that the exiled people were the enemies of the soviet system and of everything Russian, thus, creating the enemy image. It is worth noting that these ideas were planted in a fertile ground, as they gave the new owners a sort of psychological comfort morally justifying to some extent the fact that they now owned possessions taken away from people doomed by the soviet government for sufferings and death. Several generations were bred with such propaganda and, naturally, hostility towards the indigenous people of Crimea to large extent remains today. It is also worth adding that around 90% of the present Russian-speaking population of the peninsula constitute post-war settlers and their descendants. There are many political forces both in Ukraine and Crimea interested in maintaining this tension.

According to the sociological researches almost annually held in Crimea by the NGOs on the eve of the commemoration day of deportation on 18 May, 1944, roughly 70% of Russian-speaking population justifies this crime. Moreover, a considerable part of these respondents maintain that the Crimean Tatars should be expelled from Crimea once again.

These researches also suggest that approximately same number of Russian speaking population in Crimea would like to see Crimea a part of Russian Federation. Since the Crimean Tatars are overwhelmingly opposed to such a perspective, they are regarded as major political opponents by the proponents of Russia in Crimea.

The level of chauvinism within Crimean government as well as in the law-enforcement and judicial systems is no way lower than on a mundane level. Consequently, the Crimean Tatars are impelled to face ruthless discrimination and flagrant violation of their basic rights everywhere at all levels. Numerous crimes against the Crimean Tatars including acts of vandalism, desecration of graves and mosques, arson attacks, offensive writing on walls and fences pouring dirt on the Crimean Tatars usually remain undetected and unpunished.

The overwhelming majority of Crimean religious believers are Orthodox Christians who refer themselves to the Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. The Crimean Tatars are Sunni Muslims.

The restoration of the religious life of the Crimean Tatars, despite the liberalist Ukrainian legislature, is obscured by high degree of xenophobia and islamophobia among the local authorities. They often lobby interests of the single most numerous group of believers and create obstacles in exercise of religious rights by other religious groups, including Muslims.

To illustrate, I would like to mention Simferopol (the capital city of Crimea), where for over six years a land plot for Great Mosque has not been allocated. Within the same time frame, over 5 land plots were allocated for construction of Orthodox churches.

Nevertheless, thanks to wisdom of people, we have managed to avoid serious clashes on religious grounds, though, unfortunately, the efforts to stir things up are applied regularly.

For example, a few years ago there was an attempt to erect Orthodox crosses near entries and exits to settlements throughout the Crimea and even on the places of pre-war graveyards of Muslims. It was planned to establish more than 2000 crosses throughout Crimea. Notably, these crosses were manufactured and delivered from Russia. Of course, this was not about Christian radicalism, moreover, as the campaign was led by Mr. Leonid Grach – a former Speaker of the Crimean Parliament and the leader of the Communist Party of Crimea – the very political force that once actively destroyed churches, mosques, and synagogues. Naturally, this initiative caused indignation and almost led to bloodshed. Namely, there are forces which from time to time can effectively create situations which can seriously undermine fragile stability in Crimea.

Significant contribution to the interethnic and interreligious tension is added by media resources controlled by local political and oligarchic circles.

Russian-language newspapers and especially web-sites are full of publications and postings that proliferate discord and hatred not only towards the Crimean Tatars but also the Ukrainians. Quite often such publications initially appear in the Russian media and afterwards get reprinted in the Russian-language media in Ukraine. As experience has proven, it is useless to sue the media resources or authors of publications.

THE PROBLEMS OF RESETTLEMENT OF THE CRIMEAN TATARS

The return of the Crimean Tatars to their homeland started with the beginning of the soviet Perestroika in the mid 80th. Since then around 300 settlements of compact residence of the returnees has been established. The settlements vary in size from 500 to 6000 people. The level of communication and utilities infrastructure in the majority of settlements does not meet basic needs: absence of roads, gas- and water-supply systems, medical posts, schools, and day-care facilities. Herewith, if we account for the fact that many Crimean Tatar families are not able to finish constructing their houses, it becomes clear that the Crimean Tatars in the settlements have to bid for their survival on day to day basis.

According to the Ukrainian Center for Economic and Political Studies named after Olexander Razumkov, the level of unemployment among the Crimean Tatars is about two fold of the average in Crimea.

To the need to overcome xenophobic treatment of many company managers and public servants, nowadays the Crimean Tatars also face problems related to the current economic crisis and contraction of production, which leads to mass redundancies. The job cuts apply first of all to those who joined most recently. In this case, it is about the Crimean Tatars.

Although the Crimean Tatars now make up about 13% of the Crimean population, their representation in executive authorities and law-enforcement bodies does not exceed 3-4%. In the judicial organs it almost equals to zero.

According to some sources, from 100 to 150 thousand of the Crimean Tatars are still in the places of exile, mostly in Uzbekistan. The vast majority of them are seeking to come back to their homeland, but are unable to relocate because of economic obstacles and difficulties related to various migration laws.

THE LAND MATTER

For many years there has been an acute problem of restoration of justice in the land matter. If the authorities had provided the returning to homeland repatriates with land, many of them would have been able to build houses. On the contrary, the authorities quickly started allocating the land to Russian-speaking population for personal gardening. At the same time they refused to provide the Crimean Tatars land plots to build houses. Their aim was to bring to a halt or, at least, to hamper or impede the process of repatriation.

An unfair and discriminative against repatriates' principle of land privatization was laid in the Land Code of Ukraine adopted in 2001, where article 25 says that public lands and lands of utility agricultural enterprises,

i.e. lands of former collective and state farms, can be owned only by workers of these enterprises. Because the vast majority of the Crimean Tatars and other repatriates who had returned to Crimea from the places of exile, due to well-known circumstances, could not be members of collective and state farms on the territory of Ukraine, they could not participate in privatization. Taking into account that 75% of the Crimean Tatars who returned to the homeland settled in countryside, most of them turned to be landless and, thus, without the source of income. Thus, the repatriates were not only deprived the land, houses and property, which were taken away illegally during the deportation, but they were also deprived of equal rights within the process of land privatization. The owners of the large territories both in the countryside and in the cities mostly appeared to be officials of local governments, high-ranking officials from Kyiv and Russia, as well as various private companies which usually bribe officials responsible for land allotment.

Under such circumstances the Crimean Tatars have to resort to squatter settlement on idle land for houses construction. This fact serves a ground for authorities to accuse of breach of law and leads to conflict with authorities. The most severe and numerous collisions took place at the end of 2007 in Simferopol and on the Ai-Petri plateau (mountain on South Coast of Crimea). At the first incident thousands of people were involved in the conflict on both sides – the Crimean Tatars, who squatted the land lawlessly privatized by a company through bribes to local authorities, and militia with armoured equipment enforced by young non-Crimean Tatars hired by this company.

The fiercest and bloodiest assault on the Crimean Tatars took place in 2007 on the Ai-Petri plateau, when a small group of the Crimean Tatars was encountered by more than one thousand militias headed by a far-right chauvinist general A.Mogilev, and a few armoured carriers. The authorities did not make a secret of the fact that the campaign aimed to frighten the Crimean Tatars. The operation was ruthless. The unarmed people were shot from firearms, a few people were injured. In fact, later on as a result of mass-strikes of the Crimean Tatars who demanded to prosecute the organizers of the assault with a criminal case, the general Mogilev was dismissed from the internal affairs structures as a result of the shift of the government and Y.Tymoshenko's coming into the Prime-Minister's office.

Within the last years Kyiv has organized a few special commissions on the land issue with sufficiently high profile members to check the legality of land allotment in the Crimea. These commissions arrived to right conclusions, found out fragrant facts of legislation violation in the land allotment by Crimean officials. Nevertheless, they have not taken any significant measure to restore the justice in the land matter. From our point of view, one of the reasons for the failure is that many top ranking officials, who already possess illegally acquired land plots, participate in the illegal land allocation.

The problems of education in the native language and the preservation of the national culture and identity

One of the most critical and, probably, key problems of the Crimean Tatar people is a problem of preservation of native language, national culture, and national identity. It is well-known that after the deportation of the Crimean Tatars all traces of the Crimean Tatar material and spiritual culture, including Muslim grave yards, were destroyed. Almost all villages were renamed.

Being in exile, Crimean Tatars were debarred from teaching their children in the native language. A few generations of Crimean Tatars grew up under the ban on schooling in Crimean Tatar, the absence of radio and TV-programmes in the native language. The use of language was totally removed from public sphere into families. All this led to the situation that younger generations of the Crimean Tatars are poorly proficient in native language even in terms of basic skills.

The restoration (to be exact – the reanimation) of the system of school and pre-school education with native language of instruction is impeded by significant difficulties, primarily, by the absence of resources to build a few dozens of schools simultaneously.

Taking into account that over 50 years not a single text book was prepared and published, not a single teacher for instructing in Crimean Tatar was there, you can imagine the scale of dire consequences of the losses of the Crimean Tatars in the linguistic sphere. Currently with great difficulties we managed to open 15 schools with instruction in the native language throughout Crimea. Only around 10% of Crimean Tatars' children of school age can be educated in these schools.

The Crimean Tatars have similar problems in revival of their several centuries' culture and national traditions. Almost everything has to be started from the very beginning - to revive the theatre, establish museums and restore the destroyed historical monuments, establish media in native language and publish literature for children and fiction, arrange researches of historical and cultural inheritance of Crimean Tatars and present it to the publicity.

INVOLVEMENT OF THE STATE IN THE RESOLUTION OF PROBLEMS OF THE CRIMEAN TATARS

Soon after the independence, the Ukrainian state recognized (in the form of separate statements, not laws) the criminal character of the deportation of the Crimean Tatars and of some other nationalities. It also has undertaken some measures to resolve the social problems of the returnees. Five-year programs to tackle the problems are developed and every year for this purpose a certain amount is officially budgeted. However, the capacity of this financial resource is too limited to meet needs and cannot compensate the losses that people incurred during the deportation. For example, in 2009 on the resolution of the problems of deported people there was only 53 million hryvnias allocated, which makes around 7 million dollars (to illustrate, construction of one school for 500 pupils costs approximately 40 million hryvnias).

Though the process of the Crimean Tatars' return to their land has lasted for over 20 years, the process of repatriation of the Crimean Tatar people moves on under absence of special laws called to fully and fairly resolve problems related to the return, provision of necessary facilities and rehabilitation of the rights of the Crimean Tatars.

Our numerous attempts to get the highest authoritative bodies of the state of Ukraine to take measures to settle the Crimean Tatars' problem, at least gradually but on basis of laws, were fruitless.

Adopted in 2004, the law of Ukraine "On the rehabilitation of rights of persons deported on the ethnicity grounds" was passed by vote of 384 members of Ukrainian parliament, but vetoed by then President of Ukraine Leonid Kuchma. Afterwards the parliament of Ukraine, as a result of partisanship, when a few parties pulled back, did not manage to reconsider it.

The Crimean situation and the necessity of the special laws of Ukraine, which would restore the Crimean Tatars' rights, in 2009 only were addressed by the representatives of various international organizations, including the High Commissioner on National Minorities, sir Knut Vollebek and the President of European Union Committee of the Regions, sir Luck van den Brand - for what we are so grateful to them. Their recommendations remained unheard by Ukrainian government and politicians.

In fact, the problem of creation of solid legal grounding for the whole process of return, provision of social infrastructure and rehabilitation of the Crimean Tatar rights, which is a must and a guarantee for preservation and further development of the indigenous people of Crimea, is seen by us as a cornerstone problem. If unresolved, it is hard to expect a favourable resolution of other issues pertinent to the development of Crimea.

In this regard, we breed our greatest hopes on the expansion of cooperation among EU member-states and Ukraine within the frame of "Eastern Partnership" program, called to assist democracy, good governance establishment, the rise of stability, and the expansion of cross-cultural dialogue.

THE SITUATION AFTER THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

The electoral preferences of the Crimean Tatars usually differ from preferences of the majority of Russian-speaking constituents in Crimea, which is why the level of distrust among the ethnic groups surges during the election campaign. Especially it applies to local authorities' election. A lot of candidates emerge to convince constituents that they will protect "Russian interests" in Crimea most effectively and that they will not allow "the tatarization of Crimea" etc. During the last presidential election Russian-speaking population of Crimea overwhelmingly voted for V. Yanukovych, who is considered a pro-Russian and anti-western politician. The national assembly of the Crimean Tatars called on its fellow-Crimean Tatars to vote in the first round for a candidate from national-democratic camp, and in the second round the vast majority of

them voted for Y.Timoschenko, who openly supports the ideas of European integration of Ukraine and becoming of it the EU member. Among 17% of votes given for Y.Timoschenko in the second tour, around 10-12% were of the Crimean Tatars. Fortunately, there was very little interethnic unease during the last election, if not considering a few deceitful publications in the press and distribution of dirty papers against the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People.

After a new President comes into office, he usually makes remarkable personnel shifts and within the scope of his mandate tries to appoint everywhere people who are devoted to him and to his party. In Crimea even before the elections the power used to belong to the "Party of Regions", namely, the party of the elected President, V.Yanukovitsch, and the allies of this party – a few pro-Russian organizations. Only few comparatively high positions which were appointed by the president with the approval of the Council of Ministers, such as heads of district authorities, President Representative in Crimea etc., were members of other parties or did not have any political affiliation. Apparently, now the power in Crimea will be concentrated in the hands of the "Regions' Party" and its allies even more extensively. This goes in line with lay-offs of more or less moderate officials – members of this very party. For example, during the session of Verkhovna Rada of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea taking place today, on 17th of March in Simferopol, voting down the speaker of the autonomy parliament, A.Gryzenko is expected. His fault is being not active enough during the presidential election. To his position an entrepreneur from the same party is expected to be elected. According to the press, among the runner for the office of the autonomy's prime-ministers was also the mentioned above general A.Mogilev, who was the head of V.Yanukovitsch's election campaign in Crimea. In private talks, this general promises to "clean" all the authoritative bodies from the Crimean Tatars.

To illustrate the political views of this general I would like to cite just a few lines from his article "The situation in Crimea is developing after Kosovo script", published in one of the most numerous and pro-Russian Crimea newspapers "Krymskaya Pravda":

«There is a shameful page in the contemporary history of the Crimean Tatar people – the mass betrayal during the Second World War... Probably, at that time, when the war was still on, the leadership of the country did rightly and humanely. Crimea is a bordering territory, a strategically important stronghold, and having an enemy in the rear would be absolutely unwise and incautious... Departing from these assumptions, in summer 1941 two thousands of ethnic Germans were deported from Crimea. Humanity here stems from the understanding that after the war the state would face difficulties in restraining the mass revenge and lynching by the local population against the forces, which voluntarily participated in the killings of the locals.

Further in the text, the general describing the Crimean Tatars writes: "... Oriental cunning always would allow them applying the image of deprived, humiliated, and persecuted victims, and the Quran does not become an obstacle in obtaining handouts from the state of disbelievers..."

Namely, the assault is not only addressed to the nation, it also touches upon the religion of Islam. It is remarkable that the article was published when he was a chief police officer in Crimea.

Being worried that this fascist minded person occupies such a responsible position in Crimea, I communicated my concern to the leaders of his political party V. Yanukovich and N. Azarov. I handed them the texts of Mogilev's articles and warned of potential acute worsening of the situation in the peninsula. They promised they would try to dispatch him to a different region in Ukraine far from Crimea. And now, on March 11th, this general was appointed the Minister for Internal Affairs of Ukraine. Further comments on this issue, I think, are needless.

To our great disappointment, such cases, when people like this Mogilev get to occupy high flying offices in the central government in Kiev and, especially, in Crimea, are not rare.

EXPECTATIONS FROM THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

Let me now say a few words about what we would expect from the European Parliament, the European Union, and the European Commission.

On October 23rd, 2008, the democratic forces of Ukraine with great feeling of satisfaction welcomed the Resolution, which declared the Holodomor, organized by the Soviet regime against the Ukrainian people, a crime against humanity. A similar assessment by the European Parliament of the genocide and deportation of the Crimean Tatar people from its motherland, which was followed by almost half-a-century forceful detention in the exile, will be a significant contribution to the cause of restoration of fairness and justice in regard to this nation. This will also serve as a powerful impetus for improvement of interethnic climate in Crimea.

The Resolution from April 2nd, 2009, adopted by the European Parliament on “European consciousness and totalitarianism” specifically points that “from the outset European integration has been a response to the suffering inflicted by two world wars and the Nazi tyranny that led to the Holocaust and to the expansion of totalitarian and undemocratic Communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as a way of overcoming deep divisions and hostility in Europe through cooperation and integration and of ending war and securing democracy in Europe».

The Crimean Tatar problem implies that mitigation of the destructive consequences of the deportation of the Crimean Tatar people and the decades of its forceful exile requires a special approach of member-countries of EU and the European Union as a whole.

Having said that, we call the European Union to planning and implementation together with the state of Ukraine with involvement of the Crimean Tatars of special programs, which will facilitate rehabilitation and development of one of the European peoples – the Crimean Tatar people, which because of the crimes of the totalitarian communist regime is now on the verge of loss of its linguistic and cultural identity.

To the list of these programs, in addition to current efforts applied by the European Union to support Ukraine in adopting laws on rehabilitation of the rights of the Crimean Tatar, we also refer:

1. Construction of dozens of schools and pre-school facilities in the Crimean Tatar settlements;
2. Assistance in development of material and scientific assets of the Crimean Engineering and Pedagogical University (Simferopol), which is a primary place for upbringing of specialists in humanities aimed at restoration of the Crimean Tatar language, culture and arts;
3. Renovation of unique historical and architectural objects of Crimean Tatar medieval cultural heritage;
4. Assistance in developing digital and print media in the Crimean Tatar language;
5. Assistance in developing initiatives of small and medium enterprises among the repatriates;
6. Assistance in easing of mechanisms of repatriation for over one hundred thousand Crimean Tatars, who are still in exile against their will.

Accordingly, we assume that these and other issues related to the Crimean Tatar problem shall be included in the agenda of Association “Ukraine – EU”.

I once again thank you for the invitation and the opportunity to inform you about our problems. I hope that European structures will make their contribution to the resolution of urgent problems of Crimea. At the same time this will be a contribution to the cause of strengthening of independent democratic Ukraine and strengthening stability in the Black Sea basin of Eastern Europe.

I appreciate your attention and I will now gladly answer all your questions concerning Crimea.