

Uncaptive Minds



Seminar Papers

25 Years After 1989:
What Is the Unfinished Business?

The Crisis of Crimea

by Mustafa Dzhemilev

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Time for Reflection on Unfinished Business
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IDEE Seminar Papers

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The Author

Mustafa Dzhemilev is the acknowledged leader of the Crimean Tatar people, the historic ethnic community of the Crimea dating from the 14th century. As a leader of the Soviet human rights and Crimean Tatar national movement, he was arrested six times between 1966 and 1986, spending a total of 18 years in the GULAG. Beginning in 1988, he led the repatriation of 300,000 Crimean Tatars, exiled en masse in 1944 to Central Asia, back to their homeland. He was the elected chairman of the Mejlis, the self-organized parliament of the Crimean Tatars, for more than 20 years until 2013 and has been an elected member of the parliament of Ukraine since 1998. He is currently banned from the Crimean peninsula by the Soviet occupation authorities and works from Kiev to defend the Crimean Tatar nation and to return the Crimean peninsula to Ukrainian sovereignty.

Theme 4

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To tell you the truth, I am not really ready to participate in this aca-demic seminar. I asked Irena what I should speak about and she said the topic should really be “How to liberate Crimea.” Of course, if I knew how to liberate Crimea, I wouldn’t be participating in conferences, I would be liberating Crimea. So if we are not liberating Crimea yet, let me talk about the situation as it is.

Firstly, what are the consequences of the Russian occupation for the Crimean Tatars, the indigenous nation of the Crimean peninsula? They are dramatic.

As you know very well, the Crimean Tatars survived the mass depor-tation from Crimea in 1944 and the partial genocide perpetrated by Stalin. We survived over decades and worked in a democratic and peaceful way to return to our historic homeland, the Crimean Tatars’ motherland. From the moment of the declaration of independence of Ukraine, the Crimean Tatars were a well-organized group within Crimea that could counteract the Russian separatist movement supported by Moscow. In Ukraine, there was a saying that the most Ukrainian group in Ukraine was the Crimean Tatars. And if you followed the propaganda coming out of Russia starting in 1991, the Crimean Tatars were portrayed as a disgusting group and a destabilizing threat likely to

create the next Chechnya or Kosovo. It was said that Ukraine was carrying out the wrong policy by attempting to forcibly change the demographics of the population in Crimea and discriminating against the Russian majority. The Russian population was the majority in Crimea, constituting 58 percent of the peninsula, and the Ukrainian population, which was fairly Russified, speaking and writing in Russian, was about 23 percent. Yet, the Crimean Tatars, constituting less than 20 percent of the population, posed a threat.

Now, since March 2014, there is annexation and occupation. From the outset, we heard about the possibility of a second deportation of Crimean Tatars. The idea appeared on official web sites. There has not been a second deportation yet, but there have been all the preparations for it.

At first the occupation forces tried to negotiate with us. Before the actual annexation, the Verkhovna Rada, or parliament, of the autonomous republic adopted a resolution stating that special rights will be offered to Crimean Tatars, including that they would have representation in the government. The Crimean Tatar language would be officially recognized and even the historic names of Crimean Tatar sites and streets that had been Russified following the original deportation would be re-adopted. It seemed that there would be a state of eternal happiness. A few days later, on March 12, I held a conversation with Vladimir Putin and he made the same promises. I insisted, however, that Crimea should remain part of Ukraine. Of course, I do not refuse Russian support. When the Crimean Tatars were deported, Crimea was a part of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and if Russia wants to make reparations, it can negotiate with Crimean Tatar leaders. But the territorial issue cannot be negotiated by us.

Putin stated that he had to wait for the referendum to be held to make a decision. I made clear that the Crimean Tatars would not participate in the referendum because to conduct a referendum on de facto occupied territory contradicts both international and Ukrainian law and the results would be illegitimate. The referendum was held on March 16 nevertheless. The official results stated that 85 percent of residents of the Crimean peninsula voted and 97 percent voted for annexation. In previous elections, turnout had never been that high, and we can say definitely that only about 900 out of 180,000 Crimean Tatars voted and, since there was the option to vote for remaining in Ukraine with special autonomous rights, we are not sure even if these 900 voted for annexation. The real results were revealed in the report of the Federal Security Service (FSB) in Crimea: according to this classified document, only 34 percent of eligible voters took part in the referendum.

Immediately, new regulations were adopted. As of April 18, 2014, those who did not declare their intention to retain Ukrainian citizenship would automatically be considered Russian citizens. To retain Ukrainian citizenship, however, one had to submit a special application that stated formally one's acceptance of Crimea as part of the Russian Federation even when declaring one's intent to remain a Ukrainian citizen. Any person claiming Ukrainian citizenship on the territory of Crimea is considered a foreign alien. What happens if one does not accept Russian citizenship? The person has no right to work in state institutions, to buy land, to be elected or to vote in elections, to use medical services, to receive an exit visa, or even to hold a funeral. People who worked in state institutions were ordered to submit their resignations and to re-apply for their positions as Russian citizens. Our people asked us what they should do in this situation. We said that adoption of a Russian passport did not negate claims of Ukrainian citizenship. Moreover, the Ukrainian government made clear that those who accepted Russian citizenship would still hold Ukrainian citizenship and be treated as Ukrainian citizens on Ukrainian territory.

In general, in Crimea, we deal with a Soviet-type regime and in some respects one that is even worse. Democratic freedoms like the right to free speech, association, assembly, and others are denied. If three persons are found congregating, they are treated as holding an unauthorized meeting and fined from 10,000 to 40,000 roubles [between 200 and 800 USD]. It is a ruinous fine for people. People are afraid of facing such a fine. On May 3 of this year, three thousand people came to greet me at the border of Crimea. I have been banned from the territory and was not allowed to enter. All people who came were photographed, reported, and followed, and all of them have been fined. If the fine is not paid within a month, it is automatically doubled. If it is not paid after that, a person's property can be seized.

Mass searches are taking place. Over the last two weeks, forty searches took place. They are looking for "banned literature," just as they did in the Soviet Union. Now, there is a list 200 pages long containing many thousands of titles and it is being enlarged constantly. They search libraries, book stores, and homes and even seize titles that aren't on the list. If there are books with portraits of people banned by the authorities, like myself, they are seized. The searches are carried out illegally by masked men threatening violence against women and children in the homes. They seize computers and whatever else they find. If they find hryvna, the Ukrainian currency, they interrogate the residents.

The authorities also started to conscript Crimean Tatars into the Russian army—even those who do not hold Russian passports or citizenship.

Once conscripted in the army, they are taken to different regions of Russia. They expect that the Crimean Tatars will desert and not return to Crimea. They do everything possible to make sure that Crimean Tatars leave the territory.

There have been abductions: more than fifteen people have disappeared. Only one person has been found. He was brutally tortured and did not survive. He had protested the occupation by wearing a Ukrainian flag on his shoulders. Videotape showed that men in police uniforms had taken him away but no one has been charged with the crime.

In Crimea, there is also a huge concentration of Russian troops—about 40,000 soldiers with heavy armaments. There are different interpretations of this sizeable force. Some consider it likely that these forces will be used to occupy territory with electrical and water supplies and to create a land corridor to Russia. This would mean new losses in human life.

What also worries us? With the military actions in Ukraine, there will be the justification for destroying the “fifth column” in Crimea, namely those who do not support or accept the annexation of Crimea, and firstly the Crimean Tatar people. We know they have lists of people who would be targeted for liquidation and we cannot exclude mass actions against Crimean Tatars. A week ago, Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, said there were no plans for a second deportation. But how can one treat such words? Before the annexation, Putin declared he had no intention of annexing Crimea.

The situation is dire. We are concerned that the topic of Crimea has disappeared from view and people will stop talking about the annexation. No Western nation now recognizes the annexation, but we fear that nothing will be done, and our fate will be similar to the situation of Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia. We also fear that, as in 1938, some Western nations might be willing to negotiate over the issue. Not many openly talk about it but some EU MPs and even the Czech Prime Minister speaks of it.

What then can be done? What are we asking for? First, we want the issue of the annexation of Crimea not to disappear from the headlines, from the world media. We must speak about what is happening in Crimea and we must speak about how Crimea should be liberated and returned to the sovereign control of Ukraine. It is difficult to say when this could happen, but most analysts relate it to the length of time the current Russian leader is in power. So it depends on Putin.

The annexation of Crimea is also against the interests of the Russian Federation. It offers no advantages to Russia. To the contrary, it will be a

burden to the Russian economy. The annexation has isolated Russia from the community of civilized nations. Paradoxically, a large majority of Russians are pleased with this situation. If you steal someone else's territory, this is a matter of pride. It is difficult to know how long these attitudes will persist. Right now, there is no possibility for a new referendum. People have been congratulated that they are part of Russia and warned that there is no going back. Article 229 of the Penal Code states that advocating a new referendum is tantamount to treason. The liberation of Crimea will not depend on the moods of the Crimean people, even if those running around with Russian flags have put them away and are disappointed at the results.

As regards the economic situation, the Russian government raised the salaries for state workers but prices have doubled. And the tourism industry, on which 60 percent of the population depends, has been destroyed; it does not exist anymore. Ukraine still supplies Crimea with water and electricity and even foodstuffs. There are kilometers-long queues of trucks supplying food. There appear to be business circles in Ukraine involved in this activity, since it offers opportunities for price gouging. Gas prices are manipulated. Of course, if water and energy supplies are in doubt, Russian forces can act.

There is no independent media. All Ukrainian channels are blocked. You can only watch Russian TV, which presents totally biased news. People become zombie-like watching it. Maybe we can do something in this area by setting up a satellite television channel, but then people need satellite receivers.

It is extremely important to document the human rights violations of Russians, Ukrainians, and Crimean Tatars in Crimea. We established a unit within the Ukrainian government to monitor human rights violations and also document the officials who carry out those violations. All of this information will be filed in cases submitted to the European Court of Human Rights. The fines being levied for border crossing, for example, are illegitimate. There is no recognized foreign border of Crimea and so it cannot be a violation of law to illegally cross the border. Trillions of hryvna have been confiscated and a decision of an internationally recognized court could seize Russian property in response.

Also, Ukraine's capability of defense must be strengthened. In the first days of the occupation, the Verkhovna Rada held a closed meeting and the minister of defense reported on Ukraine's military capability. Can you imagine that at the time of the aggression, Ukraine had only 40,000 soldiers of which only 6,000 had arms? It was a situation ripe for military aggression. The situation improved, but still it remains difficult.