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## Banning the Majlis: Another Manifestation of Russian Repression of the Crimean Tatars

Piotr Kościński

*On 26 April, the Supreme Court of Crimea banned the Majlis, the representation of Crimean Tatars, recognising it as an extremist organisation. Thus, Russia has eliminated opposition activity by the Crimean Tatars, replacing the Majlis with Russian-created structures that present the façade of representing the Tatar community. The growing Russian repression means that an entire ethnic group, which was persecuted in the days of the Soviet Union, is threatened. This implies the need for support from the international community by, among other things, monitoring the actions of the Russian authorities and condemning repression.*

**The Tatar Representation Is Threatened.** The *Majlis* is elected by the *Kurultay*, an assembly of delegates representing local Tatar structures (*majlises*). These structures started to operate in 1991, two years after the first returns of Tatars to Crimea (the authorities of the USSR expelled them in 1944, for alleged collaboration with Nazi Germany; the anniversary of these events is marked on 18 May). However, despite talks with the government in Kyiv, there was no formal acceptance of the Crimean Tatar self-government, which would have been a test case for other minorities, and the *Majlis* has been recognised by the Ukrainian authorities only since the Russian occupation of Crimea.

The Crimean Tatars numbered some 300,000 (approximately 12% of the population of the Crimean Peninsula) at the time of the occupation. For historical reasons they presented anti-Russian and pro-Ukrainian attitudes, both before and after the occupation. The leaders of the *Majlis* supported the Dignity Revolution in Ukraine, the Crimean Tatar self-government did not recognise the validity of the referendum that made Crimea part of Russia, and several thousand Tatars left the peninsula after the annexation. In response, the Russian authorities banned Mustafa Djemilev, the informal leader of the Tatars, and Refat Chubarov, head of the *Majlis*, from travelling to Crimea. Djemilev, who lives in Kyiv, is a veteran of the Tatar veteran movement, and a member of Ukraine's Supreme Council (*Verkhovna Rada*), and under President Petro Poroshenko was plenipotentiary for the affairs of the Crimean Tatars. Chubarov, as well as leading the *Majlis*, is also a member of the *Verkhovna Rada*.

At the same time, the Russian authorities have tried to prevent the activities of potential successors of the Crimean Tatar leaders. Akhtem Chingoz, deputy head of the *Majlis* and leader of the Tatars of Bakhchisarai, was arrested more than a year ago. Allegations against him relate to the organisation of a demonstration outside the offices of the Crimea's Supreme Council in February 2014. At that time, parliamentarians were planning to adopt a resolution that would allow Russia to annex the peninsula. In addition, the attitude of the Russian authorities towards Tatars changed in the autumn of 2015, when leaders of the community in Ukraine called for a blockade of Crimea and initiated the destruction of power lines providing electricity to the peninsula. From this point, Russia has been taking steps to eliminate the *Majlis*.

Within two years of the annexation of Crimea, activists and international human rights organisations have noted more than 230 cases of action against the Tatars. At present, 13 people are in jail on political grounds, although the formal reasons for their detention are that they are suspected extremist activity. Moreover, the homes of seven journalists were searched in recent weeks. The reporters are suspected by the Russian authorities of disseminating "extremist" information, and questioning Russia's claim to Crimea. The Russian authorities on the peninsula also hindered the publication of the Crimean Tatar magazine *Avdet*, limiting the number of copies that may be produced to no more

than 1,000. The prosecution claims that *Avdet* published extremist materials, and could therefore be closed down. At the same time, while relations with Turkey deteriorate, Russia is eliminating Turkish institutions, such as a high school in Bakhchisarai, that help the Crimean Tatars.

Russia is building a parallel structure to the *Majlis*. In the middle of 2014, an organisation called *Kyrym Birligi* (Crimean Unity) was founded as an alternative to the Crimean Tatars' established representation. Seytujer Nimetullayev, former head of the district administration of Genicheski and activist with the Party of Regions, became chairman of this organisation. However, despite *Kyrym Birligi's* intended aim of reflecting the diversity of political attitudes of Tatars, it is respected by neither the Russian authorities nor the majority of Crimean Tatars. Contrary to the expectations of its activists, several representatives of the organisation were not included on the electoral lists of United Russia, and nor were they elected to the "state council," the Russian-established legislative body of the Republic of Crimea.

**Muftiat Recognises the Annexation.** The Spiritual Board of Muslims of Crimea (SBMC) is the main religious organisation of the Crimean Tatars. This organisation worked closely with the *Majlis*, and so found itself in a very difficult situation from the beginning of the Russian occupation. Religious organisations in Crimea had to apply for re-registration, and applications can be submitted only by citizens of Russia, which forced the authorities of the SBMC to adopt Russian citizenship. The Spiritual Board of Muslims of Crimea, as well as local mosques, came under special observation, and Russian police searched mosques in search of "extremist literature." From the beginning, Emir Ali Ablayev (mufti since 1999) tried to avoid political issues, but to conduct religious activity he was forced to recognise the Russian annexation of Crimea. His attitude was also influenced by the founding in 2014 of the *Tauride Muftiat*, associated with the Lebanese Sufi *al-Ahbash* sect and built with the support of the Central Spiritual Board of Muslims of Russia (a competitor to the SBMC). There was a dispute about the historically and symbolically important Juma-Jami mosque in Evpatoria, the imam of which became associated with the *Tauride Muftiat*. However, in July 2015, the Supreme Court of the Republic of Crimea ordered the return of the mosque to the organisation headed by Emir Ali Ablayev, which may have influenced its pro-Russian attitude. The creation of a competitive structure also forced the SBMC to cooperate with Russia. Emir Ali Ablayev began to meet publicly with Sergei Aksyonov, head of the Crimean government, and criticised the power line attacks initiated by Crimean Tatar leaders in exile.

**International Activity of the Tatar Community Leaders.** The leaders of the Crimean Tatars are trying to prevent Russia from dismantling their national structures, by undertaking activity outside the peninsula. At the end of 2015, Mustafa Djemilev announced the formation of a "Muslim battalion" named after Noman Chelebidhikhan (prime minister of the independent Crimean People's Republic in 1917–1918), which would be stationed in the neighbouring Crimea Kherson region as part of the Ukrainian National Guard. The battalion is to be a symbol of Muslim support for the defence of Ukraine against Russia. However, Emir Mufti Ali Ablayev has already appealed to his countrymen not to join it, saying that it could contribute to Muslim blood being shed.

Crimean Tatar leaders are also leading an international diplomatic campaign. In April, the Office of the World Congress of Crimean Tatars spoke at the Lithuanian parliament, and the authorities in Vilnius confirmed their support for the Tatars. During the Istanbul summit of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, Crimean Tatar leaders also met with the President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan and President Recep Erdoğan of Turkey. In his speech, Erdoğan called for solidarity with Tatars, living in occupied Crimea. Thus, due to the deterioration of relations between Turkey and Russia, we can expect more Turkish activity in support of the Crimean Tatars.

Interest in the situation in the Crimea Tatars can also be promoted by the success of Jamala in the European Eurovision Song Contest, as the Ukrainian singer sang about the deportation of Tatars from Crimea in 1944.

**The Desired Reaction of the International Community.** The diplomatic activity of Crimean Tatar leaders, although it increases interest in the situation, has a negative effect on their situation on the peninsula. The severity of repressive measures by the Russian prosecutor's office in Crimea, and the acceleration of the process outlawing the *Majlis*, may in fact be a response both to the meeting in Vilnius and the activity of Tatars at the summit in Istanbul.

Thus, as there is a threat to the entire nation of Crimean Tatars, *Majlis* leaders need political support from the EU, including Poland. It is necessary for human rights violations committed in Crimea by Russia to be monitored and condemned resolutely. These issues should be raised in international organisations (for example, the UN), and sanctions should be imposed on Russian officials who are engaged in activities against the Crimean Tatars.

Poland's symbolic support for the *Majlis* is essential, and may take the form, for example, of regular annual meetings between high-level Polish representatives and *Majlis* leaders. Scholarships for students and financial support for organisations in exile could be considered, as forms of direct aid. Institutional contact between the Polish Tatar community and Crimean Tatars would be desirable, as it could foster better understanding of the needs and situation of Crimean Tatars, both the students living in Poland and others who were forced to emigrate.