

Crimea: A new wave of repressions against Tatars

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On 18 April, the Russian Ministry of Justice placed Mejlis, the council of Crimean Tatars, on their list of extremist organisations. The ministry's decision will lead to the organisation being unable to appear in the media, to hold mass events and demonstrations, and to use bank accounts. The Russian government's decision has been condemned by the Council of Europe, which stated that this is discrimination against an ethnic minority. Kyiv has also protested – Petro Poroshenko called the new wave of repression a return to 'Stalinist times'. The Russian government's move coincided with a four-day (10–13 April) conference of the Coordination Council of the World Congress of Crimean Tatars in Vilnius.

Commentary

- The main purpose of Russia's moves was to accelerate the process of banning the main organisation of the Crimean Tatar minority (the Supreme Court of Crimea has been considering this matter since March). This is an element of the policy of repressions against Tatars which have been intensifying since the beginning of 2016. February alone saw a series of home searches and the arrests of several Tatars, including social activists. Russia is alleging with increasing frequency that the representatives of Crimean Tatars have links with radical Islam. They have also been accused of having connections with Islamic State. Since the beginning of the year, also the families of leaders of the Crimean Tatars, (for example family of Mustafa Dzhemilev), have faced repressions.
- The fact that Mejlis is on the Russian list of extremist organisations will paralyse the official activity of the council of Crimean Tatars in Russia and in the peninsula (which was annexed in March 2014). It is also a manifestation of the more extensive policy of discrimination and persecution of representatives of Crimean Tatars. Because of their pro-Ukrainian sympathies and open loyalty to Kyiv, Tatars have found themselves under strong pressure from the Russian state apparatus since the Crimean Peninsula was first annexed. At the initial stage, Moscow made intensive efforts to encourage them to co-operate, but when these efforts proved unsuccessful, it started by making attempts to sow divisions in the Tatar community, and then launched repressions against them. Since Russia's annexation of Crimea, over a dozen of representatives of the Tatar community have gone missing or been killed. Arrests are made on a regular basis and they suffer from persecution and surveillance. In April 2015, the government did not agree to renew the licence of the main television channel of Crimean Tatars (ATR).

- The Crimean issue is of secondary importance for the Ukrainian government. Kyiv's actions have been limited to using strong rhetoric on the domestic and international arena, while any real action for the benefit of those who have escaped from Crimea has been inefficient (the National Service for Crimea, which was established back in the summer of 2014, is still existing more on paper, than in reality). This makes Tatars more and more disillusioned with Kyiv's policy and has provoked them to take grassroots initiatives, such as attempts to initiate in the Autumn of 2015 a trade and energy blockade of the peninsula.