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Poland Defies Russia by Honoring Crimean Tatar Leader

By The Moscow Times

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Former chairman of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatars Mustafa Dzhemilev walks near a checkpoint in Kherson region as he attempts to get to the territory of Crimea.

Poland has awarded a human rights prize to Mustafa Dzhemilev, leader of the Tatar community in Ukraine's Crimea peninsula, in a gesture that is likely to irk Russia.

"He is a defender of Ukraine's integrity," said Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski, as he announced Dzhemilev had been awarded the prize for championing democracy and human rights. "He is someone who, together with his people, has demonstrated that democracy is possible."

The Tatars are a Turkic-speaking Muslim community who make up about 12 percent of Crimea's two million-strong population. Many Tatars were uneasy about coming back under Moscow's control when the peninsula was annexed by Russia in March, especially as they were persecuted during Soviet rule.

Dzhemilev, who until last year led the body that represents Crimean Tatars, publicly opposed Russia's annexation of Crimea. He said Crimea's new Moscow-backed authorities last month banned him from entering the peninsula for five years.

Dzhemilev will visit Poland next month to receive his prize, Sikorski said.

The Polish prize, in its first year, is intended to recognize people who embody the same democratic values as Lech Walesa, the leader of Poland's Solidarity trade union movement who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in overthrowing Communist rule in Poland in the 1980s.

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