

Resist or Cooperate? Crimean Tatars Split Over Russian Rule

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Russian troops blocking Crimean Tatars from crossing a checkpoint connecting Crimea and the Kherson region.

Seventy years after their families' mass deportation under Stalin, the Crimean Tatars are in a quandary: should they cooperate with their homeland's new Russian authorities or resist them?

Some Tatars — Sunni Muslims of Turkic origin — fear a return to Stalinist repression despite official promises to respect their rights and freedoms; others say dealing with Russia is the best way of ensuring their people can flourish.

Less than two months into Moscow rule, tensions are running high before Sunday's anniversary of the deportations in cattle wagons which began on May 18, 1944.

"It is either war or compromise. That is the essence of the problem we face. If we do not adopt

a unified approach, we risk splitting ourselves up and being marginalized," said Nariman Dzhelyalov, deputy chairman of the Mejlis, the Crimean Tatars' main representative body.

The Tatars, who make up more than 12 percent of Crimea's largely ethnic Russian population of about 2 million, are among the most vociferous critics of Moscow's annexation in March of the peninsula previously governed by Ukraine.

Russia views the annexation as righting an historical injustice, describing it as "reunification" of a region which Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev handed to Ukraine only in 1954.

But the Tatars, whose historical capital of Bakhchysarai lies a short distance from the modern day regional centre of Simferopol, remind Moscow they ruled large parts of Crimea for centuries before Russian Empress Catherine the Great conquered the Black Sea peninsula in the late 18th century.

Stalin accused the Tatars of sympathising with Nazi Germany, and many of the estimated 200,000 deportees died on their way into exile in Central Asia and eastern Russia. Only in the last years of the Soviet Union were members of the community able to start returning to Crimea in the 1980s.

Many Tatars boycotted a referendum on March 16 in which local authorities said 97 percent of those who voted opted to join Russia. Kiev and the West derided the exercise as illegitimate.

The Tatars have continued to fly the Ukrainian flag at the Mejlis since the vote, despite a visit by armed pro-Russian "self-defense" units and threats to close their organization by the region's chief prosecutor. "We are used to constant struggle. We do not trust the Russian authorities, and why should we? They have always opposed the Crimean Tatars," Dzhelyalov said.

The Mejlis' former leader, Soviet-era dissident Mustafa Dzhemilev, says he is banned from setting foot on Crimean soil.

"Good Riddance Kiev"

While the Mejlis is the largest Crimean Tatar organization, some smaller groups are happy Russia has taken the region under its wing. One such group, Milli Firka, says Kiev had done little to rehabilitate the Crimean Tatars in the 23 years since the Soviet Union collapsed.

"In less than two months Russia has done far more for the Crimean Tatars than Ukraine ever did. Only after Crimea became part of Russia did Kiev even remember that we exist," said Milli Firka's chairman, Vasvi Abduraimov.

President Vladimir Putin recently awarded Abduraimov the order "For services before the Fatherland," second-class, for backing the annexation.

Among the reasons Abduraimov cited for his support of Russian control were the security of knowing that Crimea will be protected by a "strong, respected power" and a presidential decree making Crimean Tatar one of three state languages on the peninsula alongside Russian and Ukrainian.

Milli Firka says the Mejlis is a Western project whose aim is to integrate the Crimean Tatars into Europe rather than Putin's planned Eurasian Union of former Soviet states.

"We believe it is better for us to look east to Eurasia, especially as the centre of world economic development is gradually shifting to countries like China and India," Abduraimov said.

Dzhelyalov said the Mejlis and Milli Firka have the same aims — the revival of the Crimean Tatar people and respect for their right to free speech, education in their own language, property rights and real representation in government — but that the two group's methods are different.

Flying The Flag

Rustam Temirgaliyev, Crimea's deputy prime minister, told Reuters that Russia now treated the Tatars in an "absolutely open and democratic manner" and that they had been given ministerial posts in the latest government.

"Russia guarantees that all rights and freedoms of the Crimean Tatars will be respected," he said.

The Mejlis says it hopes to receive official permission soon for a march through central Simferopol to mark Sunday's anniversary, but that the government is insisting the Tatars do not fly the Ukrainian flag or criticize the annexation.

After the annual march, the Mejlis typically adopts a resolution on its demands to the local authorities.

"What are we to say this year? Some want a peacekeeping force brought in to protect us, while others are more worried about solving everyday problems like housing," Dzhelyalov said.

On a recent visit to Bakhchysarai, many were reluctant to give their views, saying they feared persecution for speaking their minds.

A middle-aged man, who would give only his first name, Edem, said: "There is no understanding of democracy in Russia, whereas in Ukraine we could defend our interests. The Russians refuse to recognize that we are the native people here, not them."

Edem said the new authorities were deliberately trying to split the Tatar community from within: "Now people have started asking me whether I am for Dzhemilev, the current leader of the Mejlis or some other group."

Standing outside a mosque in Simferopol, pensioner Akim said the uncertainty of not knowing how life would be under their new rulers was tormenting Tatars most.

Akim said life was hardly easy under Ukraine. "For 20 years they failed to build a school or install drainage systems in our district. It is because this is known as a Tatar district," he said, also asking that his last name not be published.

"But our relations with the Russians are worse. We know perfectly well who deported our

families in cattle wagons and do not know how it will turn out this time."

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