

Crimean Leader Vows to Address Tatars' Concerns, While Also Threatening Deportation

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Crimean leader Sergei Aksyonov has promised to address the concerns of the peninsula's ethnic Tatar minority, while in the same breath threatening to deport them if they "pit people against each other on inter-ethnic grounds."

Aksyonov's comments, published in an interview with Kommersant on Monday, came amid flaring tensions following official raids on Tatar properties in the peninsula last week.

The snap inspections were only the latest in a series of signs of friction between regional authorities and the Tatar population since Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula in March, a move leaders of the Crimean Tatar community have condemned.

Federal bailiffs in Simferopol seized property on Thursday belonging to a charitable organization founded by Mustafa Dzhemilyev, a former Tatar leader who was banned from returning to his homeland in April over what prosecutors saw as "signs of extremism."

The current leader, Refat Chubarov, has also been banned from the peninsula based on similar concerns.

Both Chubarov and Dzhemilyev have repeatedly warned of discrimination against the Crimean Tatar community since their own exiles, frequently referring to the new authorities as "occupiers."

Aksyonov seemed to shrug off concerns of discrimination, however, instead saying the Crimean Tatars themselves had frequently tried to "morally humiliate Russians" during their annual May 18 demonstration. The rally, which had been held regularly for 20 years but was prohibited last May under the new authorities, marks the anniversary of the 1944 deportation of the peninsula's entire Crimean Tatar population.

Aksyonov described the annual rally as "blackmail by the acting authorities with the aim of demonstrating [the Tatars'] strength."

Members of the ethnic minority tended to behave "provocatively" at the rally, Aksyonov said in the interview, "driving around with the Crimean Tatars' flag, really trying to morally humiliate Russians."

Aksyonov also expressed skepticism regarding the legitimacy of the Crimean Tatars' highest executive-representative body, the Mejlis, which was established in 1991 to represent the interests of the peninsula's Tatar community and recognized as legitimate by presidential decree in 1999.

"From a legal standpoint, such an organization does not exist for me. What Mejlis? The organization was never registered properly. There is no organization," he said, before conceding that the Mejlis still retains "relatively minor authority" on the peninsula.

"We will keep our word and resolve all of your issues," Aksyonov reassured members of the Crimean Tatar community. But "all actions aimed at a refusal to recognize Russia's annexation of Crimea, or a refusal to recognize the leaders of the country, will be prosecuted in accordance with the law, and we will take a very strict position."

"Anybody who pits people against each other on inter-ethnic grounds — I will in one way or another deport them from Crimea, or they will face criminal

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