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Lavrov Says Crimean Tatars Have More Rights Under Russian Rule

By Peter Spinella

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Days after Russian authorities shut down the only television station run by Crimea's Tatars, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in comments carried by state media that the minority ethnic group enjoys more rights under Russian rule than they did when the region was part of Ukraine.

Lavrov said at a press conference Saturday that Crimean Tatars have rights guarantees concerning language, culture and land use that they lacked under Ukrainian rule, state news agency TASS reported.

Shortly after Russia's annexation of Crimea last year, President Vladimir Putin said at a press conference that plans were under way to rehabilitate Crimea's Tatars, who had been deported en masse during the height of Josef Stalin's purges.

"Crimean Tatars suffered some serious damage during the Stalinist reprisals and were deported from Crimea, which is their traditional place of residence, their home. We certainly

need to do everything we can to rehabilitate and restore the legitimate rights and interests of the Crimean Tatar people at a time when Crimea is joining the Russian Federation," Putin said at the time.

Addressing the matter Saturday, Lavrov said: "A law has been enacted for the rehabilitation of all peoples living in Crimea. ... Such a law was not even under consideration while Crimea was still part of Ukraine."

He added that plans were under way for a "land amnesty." According to the report, deported Crimean Tatars faced residual issues having to do with their return to their native land from the places they were deported to, including never having obtained proper authorization to occupy Crimean land. Russia — unlike Ukraine — plans to resolve these issues, Lavrov said.

"Crimean Tatars are represented in every agency of government in the republic of Crimea. They have the right to speak, to teach their children and to use all services in their own language," Lavrov was quoted as saying.

Last week Russian authorities shut down the only Crimean Tatar television channel, ATR, inciting condemnation by Ukrainian and U.S. officials who accused Russia of trampling on the rights of the ethnic minority.

The station was closed on the purported basis that it had failed to properly register for a Russian broadcasting license. But the channel's director, Elzara Islyamova, was quoted in media reports as saying that the channel had attempted to register at least four times and was denied by Russia's media watchdog, Roskomnadzor.

Russia's human rights ombudsman in Crimea, Lyudmila Lubina, said in an interview with the Interfax news agency that overall rights in the region were below average for Russia.

She said that the number of people regularly visiting her agency for help was significantly higher than the figure across Russia, and added, "the influx of people who need our protection and assistance is not decreasing," she was quoted by Interfax as saying.

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