The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Tatar Activists Block Roads Into Russia-Annexed Crimea

September 20, 2015



An activist stops a lorry near the village of Chongar, in the Kherson region adjacent to Crimea, Sept. 20.

KIEV — Tatar activists set up roadblocks on the two main roads leading from the Ukrainian mainland into Russia-annexed Crimea on Sunday at the start of what they said was an economic blockade aimed at dramatizing the plight of Tatars living on the peninsula.

The majority of the Crimean Tatars, a Muslim people who are indigenous to the Black Sea territory and number about 300,000 in the peninsula's population of two million, opposed the Russian annexation in March 2014, which followed the overthrow of a Moscow-backed president in Kiev.

Tatar solidarity groups on the Ukrainian mainland say many of their kin in Crimea face discrimination and hardship as they come under pressure to align themselves with the Russia-backed authorities.

On Sunday, Ukrainian interior ministry officials and media on the spot said that Tatar activists, backed in some cases by pro-Ukrainian militia groups, set up roadblocks to stop

goods traffic moving onto the peninsula from the two main highways from the northwest and northeast.

"At Chongar, Chaplinka and Kalanchak a blockade has started of trucks leading onto the peninsula," said interior ministry adviser Zoryan Shkiryak, naming towns on the two highways.

Media at the scene on both roads said activists were blocking the way to trucks, with concrete blocks in some cases. A tailback of traffic was forming.

A few hundred people had turned out in response to social media appeals for support and some activists were clearly preparing for a long stay, pitching tents, setting up makeshift kitchens and installing temporary toilet facilities.

They were backed in some places by activists from the far-right nationalist group Right Sector and from pro-Ukraine militia battalions, media said.

"Some lively discussion are taking place with drivers. But not a single wagon is going to get by. Some drivers are waiting wondering what to do. Some are already turning back," said Crimean Tatar leader Refat Chubarov, quoted by the Interfax news agency.

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