

POLICY PAPER

**CRIMEAN TATARS IN RUSSIA:
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
AND SECURITY**

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ABSTRACT

This policy paper aims to address the problem of the violation of religious freedom of Crimean Tatars. Ever since the annexation of Crimea, Crimean Tatars have suffered through repression and discrimination. Their religious freedom has been limited. Crimean Tatars are typically professing various kinds of Islam. Some of them have suffered through repression of a particular kind of Islam that currently is illegal and prohibited in Russia as a terrorist organisation (Hizb ut-Tahrir) and is allowed in Ukraine as well as in other European countries. Thus, after the annexation of Crimea, particular mosques began to be seized and the persecution of Tatars for the possession of specific Muslim religious literature has started. The author argues that despite the Western countries imposing economic sanctions, international community has failed to protect the ethnic minority of Crimean Tatars from the persecution and repression of their faith. Policy paper proposes some steps to change the situation and protect the ethnic and religious minorities in Crimea from the violation of the right on religious freedom. Author's emphasis is on the necessity of both external monitoring and internal change of legislation to ensure the basic rights of the ethnic minority of Crimean Tatars.

INTRODUCTION

The socio-economic circumstances are key in the illustration of the overall repression suffered by the ethnic minority since the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation (RF). The main aspects of the social problem of religious oppression suffered by Crimean Tatars are due to unwillingness of the Russian state to legally recognize their religions. Additionally, the cause of persecution being that of Crimean Tatars not becoming Russian citizens, which results not only in their inability to attain health care and job opportunities, but also limits potential recognition of their religious commitments.¹

Hence, the paper will propose a viable solution to legalize religious practices of Crimean Tatars by the Russian state. Despite the lack of social research and data addressing the issue, the paper will present sufficient evidence of the discrimination of Crimean Tatars based on their religious adherence. In addition, this discrimination is possibly depending on political attitudes of Crimean Tatars to the Russian state since the majority of this ethnic group does not support the integration of Crimea into Russia. Therefore, the religious discrimination suffered by the ethnic minority after Crimea's annexation, shall be studied along with other socio-economic and political issues suffered by the population of the peninsula.

Current policies are deemed ineffective. The international policy being of only humanitarian kind and the Russian policy focusing on sole economic integration of Crimea into Russia. Thus, the paper will present two alternative policies and argue for the latter. The conclusions will highlight the importance of attempting to solve the social problem, by referring to the potential consequence of inaction.

The paper is divided into three sections. First, the background of the problem and current policies will be presented in the upcoming section. Then policy options will be discussed. Conclusions and recommendations will be made in the final section.

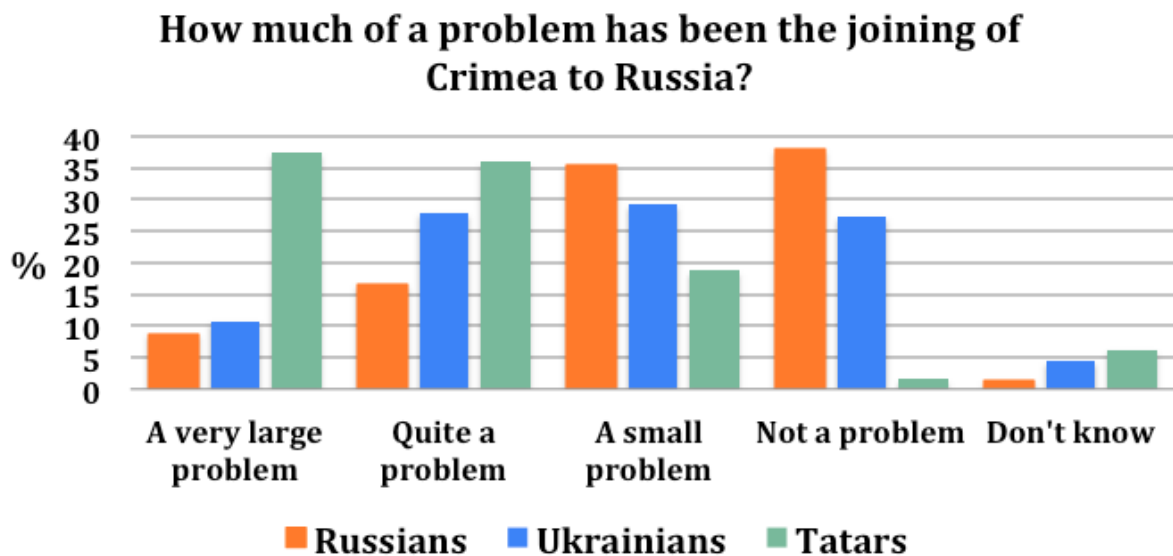
¹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/05/03/crimea-not-our-home-anymore>

PROBLEM DESCRIPTION

Background of the problem

After the annexation of Crimea, the ethnic minorities, especially those of Crimean Tatars, have suffered religious oppression.² As the native inhabitants of Crimea, the majority of Crimean Tatars who numbered 13% of Crimea's population (2014), have not supported union with Russia ahead of the referendum, 99% of its people boycotting the vote – which can be seen among the main causes of latter persecution, centered on the accusation of extremism based on their religious affiliation to Islam (Figure A).³

Figure A⁴:



The context of the problem is very complicated and repressive (Figure B). Historically, Crimean Tatars have previously been deported from their homeland, during the reign of Stalin, and as a result have established the 18th of May as a day to remember, mourn and assemble in the center of Simferopol.⁵ Hence, the very fact that this assembling, to celebrate the 70th anniversary, was prohibited by authorities, added to violation of their freedom and inability to express cultural values. Prior to the annexation of Crimea, Crimean Tatars formed a political congress, called *Mejlis*. Due to strong opposition to annexation as expressed accurately by the majority of the participants of the congress, its leaders, Mustafa Dzhemilev and Refat Chubarov and others, have been deported from Crimea and barred from entry.⁶ As a result of this, *Mejlis* are not recognized by the Russian state.⁷ Most importantly, the religious oppression is seen by seizure of facilities and literature; the Ministry of Internal Affairs actively examining mosques and religious schools (madrasas), to tackle potential 'extremism', leading to Crimean Tatars living in fear of persecution in their daily lives. Additionally, socio-economically, Crimean Tatars have suffered as seen by

² [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/578003/EXPO_STU\(2016\)578003_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/578003/EXPO_STU(2016)578003_EN.pdf)

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/25/-sp-russia-crimean-tatars-soviet-ukraine>

⁴ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/john-o-loughlin-gerard-toal/crimean-conundrum>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/25/-sp-russia-crimean-tatars-soviet-ukraine>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/25/-sp-russia-crimean-tatars-soviet-ukraine>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/25/-sp-russia-crimean-tatars-soviet-ukraine>

their only independent television station, ATR, coming under heavy pressure from RF, resulting in many activists, journalists and bloggers being forced to leave Crimea; impacting on Crimean Tatar TV industry, and hence hindering freedom of expression.⁸

Figure B⁹:



After the annexation of Crimea, the social problem has gained attention worldwide, involving human rights commissioners. The example of such is the reporting of violations of rights and repression as outlined above, taken from a report written by Nils Muižnieks, the Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights, who himself visited Crimea.¹⁰

Current policies

The policies that have attempted to solve the problem of Crimean Tatars being persecuted for exercising their religion, have not been effective. These policies are rather of humanitarian kind, such as those illustrated by reports of the Council of Europe’s Commissioner of Human Rights.¹¹ Due to publication of these, the Western response has been to continue to pursue economic sanctions, as well as to politically apprehend the general decision of annexing Crimea, rather than responding directly to the problem of violation of religious freedoms of the ethnic minority of Crimean Tatars. Hence, this structurally ineffective international policy, whose outcomes to improve ethnic minority freedoms have not been successful, has illustrated some form of success only in the sense of presenting the issue of ethnic-minority persecution to a worldwide audience.

The current legal, social, economic, and political contexts complicate the discussion of the possibilities to effectively address the problem. Impacts of current attempts have already been unsuccessful. The outcome following from Western socio-economic sanctions has been ineffective and has only given way to further repression, seen by the public act of deeming the *Mejlis*, the

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/25/-sp-russia-crimean-tatars-soviet-ukraine>

⁹ https://en.hromadske.ua/posts/goal_for_Crimea

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/25/-sp-russia-crimean-tatars-soviet-ukraine>

¹¹ [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/578003/EXPO_STU\(2016\)578003_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/578003/EXPO_STU(2016)578003_EN.pdf)

influential organization of the Crimean Tatars, as an extremist organization by the Russian Supreme Court.¹²

The current policy being implemented by the Russian state, has been the act of Moscow promoting its agenda of ‘Crimea’s incorporation’ into Russia, in opposition to directly addressing the problem of integrating *Crimean Tatars* into the Russian community. Thus, as the problem has not been approached directly by the Russian de-facto government, the very premise of the policy making of the Russian state fails in improving the likelihood of religious recognition of Crimean Tatars.

This policy approach has been criticized mainly by Western countries. In response, “on Feb. 4, the European Parliament approved a project on the human rights situation in Crimea, in particular, of the Crimean Tatars”.¹³ Hence, Western focus is rather on the humanitarian implication of the violation of rights leading to the inability of the Crimean Tatars to integrate into RF, than the legal aiding in religious recognition. Yet again, this illustrates that the very nature of the policy should be national, hence initiated by the Russian state.

Most importantly, there are predictions of a possible radicalization of Islamic elements in Crimean Tatar culture, if the ethnic minority continues to suffer from religious repression.¹⁴ Hence, Russia’s unwillingness to recognize all religious affiliations of Crimean Tatars, hence its attempts at ‘cultural erasure’, may lead to the very thing due to which Russia was trying to oppress the Crimean Tatar’s religious practices i.e. terrorism of radicalized groups.

Overall, the Russian state has not approached the problem by directly focusing on integrating Crimean Tatars into the Russian community (which would enable latter legal religious recognition); rather focusing on diluting the Crimean Tatar culture by way of cultural imperialism of the Russian Orthodox majority culture, and hence focusing on integration of solely *Crimea* as a territory into Russia. Hence, the social problem which arises, of the violation of religious freedom of Crimean Tatars, leads to consideration of responses both on the international scale and the domestic.

POLICY OPTIONS

International Action

The first solution is that of the international community intervening in the affairs of Crimea by a Human Rights Watch organization. It is potentially advantageous as it could enable monitoring of individual cases, ensuring the rights of the minority group. However, the international community does not present a viable solution, as previously stated, due to mainly the following. The West is seen as often engaging in selective moral outrage in the international arena, Crimea being an example of this act. Hence, the issues are regarded as *issues* by Western states only when these affect country’s political agenda; and as Crimean Tatars, constituting only 12% of the Crimean population do not play an immediate role in international affairs – they are not seen as a priority

¹² <http://www.russia-direct.org/analysis/why-kremlin-has-faced-troubles-integrate-crimean-tatars>

¹³ <http://www.russia-direct.org/analysis/why-kremlin-has-faced-troubles-integrate-crimean-tatars>

¹⁴ <http://jordandrussiacenter.org/news/international-community-shouldnt-ignore-crimean-tatars/#.WpVkJGCOcaYU>

by the international community. Additionally, being a Muslim minority coupled with the current U.S. fighting against the Islamic State, illustrates that yet again, the international community cannot always speak in favor of the minority, due to domestic policies shaping the mindset of its citizens as well as the future policy decisions.¹⁵

Domestic Action

The Russian de facto state should instead allow for religious recognition. However, this should be accompanied by the Crimean Tatars exchanging their passports or applying for a Russian citizenship, as the state will not legally recognize Crimean Tatars as a separate ethnicity, due to their ‘illegal’ status in the disputed territory of Russia’s Crimea.¹⁶ Hence, this immediately illustrates the disadvantage of this solution due to its potential impracticality.

Overall, the ineffectiveness of international policies leads the paper to propose that the social problem of Crimean Tatars can be addressed only through direct implementation of domestic policy of RF targeting the issue, as outlined in the following section.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This policy paper argues that the Russian Supreme Court should legitimize, hence recognize all religious affiliations of Crimean Tatars; as it is the direct nature of domestic policy addressed at legitimizing religious practice of Crimean Tatars, which will solve the social problem of their security and integration into the Russian society.

However, it can be seen that the policy proposal shall only be successful if both parties involved take action, hence the *Mejlis* influence the opinion of the Crimean Tatars. However, the *Mejlis* is divided in its attitude towards the Russian state, with some of its representatives having expressed readiness to cooperate with Moscow, as it was revealed during preparation ahead of the Crimean referendum.¹⁷ Thus, if enough representatives of *Mejlis* are successful in demonstrating to the Crimean Tatar population the need to cooperate with RF (via obtaining Russian citizenship) in order to ensure religious freedom, the solution is viable. As, if Crimean Tatars do not hold a Russian citizenship, it will be an argument of us vs. them, Self vs. Other.¹⁸ However, practically speaking, the *Mejlis* representatives which oppose Moscow, are unlikely to persuade others in doing so. Hence, the solution may be ineffective, and alternatives should be sought.

General recommendations

Hence, consideration of the social problem raises a general issue of the violation of religious freedom, as the Russian state should loosen its restrictive policies towards ethnic and religious minorities at large and enhance religious freedom for its citizens.

¹⁵ <http://jordanrussiacenter.org/news/international-community-shouldnt-ignore-crimean-tatars/#.WpVkJGCOcaYU>

¹⁶ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/05/03/crimea-not-our-home-anymore>

¹⁷ <http://www.russia-direct.org/analysis/why-kremlin-has-faced-troubles-integrate-crimean-tatars>

¹⁸ Neumann, I. B. 1998. “Uses of the Other in world politics.” Minn: University of Minnesota Press.

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