



HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERNS IN CRIMEA: APRIL 2023 UPDATE

Since Amnesty International last presented to UNESCO its overview of human rights concerns in Crimea, the situation with regard to issues and cases that fall either within the scope of UNESCO's competence or have direct implications for matters that lie within several fields of UNESCO's work, has continued to deteriorate. For more details, please refer to Amnesty International's past submissions.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, in addition to being catastrophic for the enjoyment of human rights of people in Ukraine, continues to adversely impact Amnesty International's work in and on the country, as well as the work of human rights activists and others in Crimea whose work is essential for our own documentation and advocacy. All such activities have been directly or indirectly affected by ongoing fighting, related restrictions on freedom of movement, and foremost by the further draconian regulations and arbitrary restrictions introduced by the de facto authorities in Crimea. One of the most recent of numerous examples of the occupation authorities' blocking the work of human rights organizations exposing the human rights violations in Crimea is the declaration of the Ukrainian human rights NGO "Crimea SOS" as "undesirable" by the Office of the Prosecutor General of the Russian Federation on 27 March 2023, thereby making any association with it a criminal offence punishable by imprisonment. Crimea SOS was accused of participating in a "campaign" aimed at "discrediting the Russian Armed forces" which is also a newly instituted offence in Russia subject to administrative and criminal penalties.

The human rights situation in Crimea remains highly concerning since its occupation and unlawful annexation in spring 2014 and has further deteriorated since the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Many of the human rights violations Amnesty International has been able to document lie within the scope of UNESCO's expertise or are directly linked with the matters that fall within its mandate, namely the rights to education, to freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of religion, and culture.

It remains extremely difficult to evaluate the full scale and scope of violations of human rights in the occupied peninsula, including those that fall within scope of UNESCO's mandate, due to the absence of independent media, brutal suppression of freedom of expression and constant reprisals against those who dare to report violations from the ground. It is therefore more important than ever to keep highlighting the challenges to exercising basic human rights in Crimea, even as the attention of the international community remains focused on the areas of active fighting in mainland Ukraine.

Freedoms of Expression and Association

The period since Amnesty International's last submission, in September 2022, has been marked by a further unabated crackdown on the work of the few remaining independent bloggers and human rights activists. Independent international media and all media workers from mainland Ukraine remain barred from Crimea.



As highlighted in Amnesty International's previous submission, repressive legislation and practices are used in Crimea to silence any dissent or public expression of opinions that contradict the official rhetoric of Russian government about the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In at least 194 cases, administrative penalties were imposed by de facto courts in Crimea "for discrediting the Russian Armed Forces", in addition to at least one criminal case opened under the same charges and a further two under the charges of "spreading fake information about the Russian Armed Forces". People in Crimea are subjected to work dismissal, fines, so-called administrative detention and arbitrary arrest and prosecution for any expression of support for Ukraine. A common practice is the "offender" being forced to record video "apologies" for their purported offence, which are then circulated on pro-Russian government social media. For example, in October 2022, schoolteacher Said Asanov was sacked and fined after saying to his students that Russia attacked Ukraine, for "discrediting the Russian Armed Forces". In November 2022, Andriy Bilozarov, a teacher at Bilogirsk technical school, was fired and given 14 days of administrative detention for posting a Ukrainian song on social media. According to media reports, during his arrest he was severely beaten by his captors. In February 2023, Veronika Nosova was detained for drawing a trident, the Ukrainian state symbol, in a playground. She was also forced to video record "an apology" for her drawing and words of support for "special military operation in Ukraine". In March 2023, tattoo artist Kseniia Golubenko from Simferopol was forced to video record an "apology" for creating a tattoo "Crimea is Ukraine" and was also accused of "discrediting the Russian Armed Forces." Volodymyr Subotin was given 13 days of administrative detention for displaying the Ukrainian flag in his car.

As before, reprisals continue against the Crimean Tatar community, targeting its representatives, cultural and other initiatives, as well as prominent community members and activists. The Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People remained arbitrarily banned as an "extremist organization" and people associated with it subjected to prosecution and other reprisals. Among them is the prisoner of conscience Nariman Dzhelyal, the most prominent former member of the Mejlis who remained in Crimea and who was convicted under false charges of sabotage in September 2022 and sentenced to 17 years' imprisonment, and who remains in prison.

In March 2023, Russian law enforcement agencies conducted eight searches in homes of the delegates of the Qurultay of the Crimean Tatar People, (the supreme representative body of the Crimean Tatar community which elected members of the Mejlis) and the homes of their close relatives.

Members of the Crimean Tatar community continue to face prosecution and imprisonment in connection with their religious beliefs and practices, including under the arbitrary charges of being members of a "terrorist" organization, in which case they are unlawfully deported to Russia for trial and imprisonment, in violation of international humanitarian law. Crimean Tatars in custody reportedly are often targeted for harsher treatment by the prison authorities; their treatment and detention conditions often violates the prohibition of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment and punishment. Amnesty has received new reports of Tatar detainees



being denied the medical care they require. Reportedly, as a result, in February 2023 Crimean Tatar Dzhemil Gafarov died in detention. So did Konstantin Shyring, another prisoner from Crimea who was imprisoned in Russia following unfair trial on charges of espionage.

With the restrictions on free exercise of the rights in Crimea tightening, the de facto authorities continue to target the few lawyers who have been providing legal representation to members of Crimean Tatar community and other victims of politically motivated prosecution. In late March, Zheleznodorozhnyi district court of Simferopol ruled in favour of the Bar Association of Crimea, which had first arbitrarily declined the request of Crimean lawyers Lilia Hemedzhy (Lilya Gemedzhi) and Rustem Kamiliev (Rustem Kyamilev) to transfer their membership from the Bar Association of the Chechen Republic to that of Crimea, and then proceeded to disbar them. This was a manifest retaliation against these lawyers for their principled professional work, and a warning message to others.

Public activists with pro-Ukrainian views have continued to face persecution, and ill-treatment in detention. Activist, blogger and nurse Irina Danilovich has been wrongfully imprisoned in Crimea in retribution for her criticism of the healthcare system and exposing corruption. She went on hunger strike on 20 March in protest the denial of healthcare she requires. According to Irina Danilovich, during her abduction-style arrest, she was subjected to torture or other ill-treatment by her captors to force her to “confess” to state treason. Failing to achieve this, they, according to Irina Danilovich, tampered with her personal belongings where they planted explosives, which were used to prosecute and convict her under Article 222.1(1) of the Russian Criminal Code. She was sentenced to seven years’ imprisonment on 28 September 2022. During her trial, the court manifestly ignored her allegations of secret detention, torture, and other ill-treatment, and admitted evidence acquired by unlawful means. For months, Irina Danilovich has been complaining of severe, worsening ear pain, but has been denied the healthcare she requires.

Freedom of religion

Reprisals against religious minorities have also continued unabated, beyond the arbitrary prosecution and imprisonment of Muslim members of the Crimean Tatar community. As reported by the freedom of religion watchdog, Forum 18, the de facto authorities have repeatedly issued warnings, conducted searches or “inspections” of the places of worship and fined individuals and groups for minor or non-existing infringements of Russian legislation, for merely exercising their religion as Muslims, Catholics, and other religious communities. Other reprisals include forced closure of places of worship, and continuing imprisonment under false charges of Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Nine religious communities have been penalized in Russian-occupied Crimea since 2021 for failing to use their full legal name on their websites, in social media or online videos, at places of worship, or in religious literature. Six of them were fined and three received a formal warning. For example, a Catholic priest in Yalta, Fr Tomasz Wyrwal, was fined on 5 August 2022 for his parish's failure to use its full official name on material it had



produced. Simferopol's Orthodox Jewish community was fined and received a formal warning for the same violation on 19 May 2022.

On 6 October, three more Jehovah's Witnesses were convicted of "extremism" and imprisoned for six years, followed by a seven-year ban on specific activities, for practicing their faith.

Education

The occupying Russian authorities have pursued the policy of militarization of school education in Crimea, including via the introduction of compulsory military training and “patriotic” classes conducted by military servicepeople for schoolchildren. Besides, all members of the school community, including staff, students and parents are regularly required to organize or attend “informational sessions” or “history classes” which justify and promote the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine. Differences of opinion are not tolerated and anyone disagreeing is at risk of persecution.