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Ukraine/Russia

# The Suffering of Crimea's Tatars

- Debate - Ukraine -

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**Crimean Tatars, the indigenous Muslims of Ukraine and the country's largest ethnic minority, have joined the fight against Russia's invasion. Tatars serve throughout Ukraine's military ranks and as civilian volunteers offering humanitarian help.**

Tatars are Turkic-speaking Muslims who have lived in Crimea since the 13th century. Russian rulers have persecuted them for almost 300 years. One of the greatest tragedies in Tatar history was their genocidal expulsion from Crimea by Josef Stalin in 1944. About 200,000 Tatars are said to have been forcibly deported to Central Asia by the notorious Soviet secret police, the NKVD, in cattle cars. According to estimates, half died before they even reached the inhumane labor camps where the Soviets forced them to work and dwell.

Tatars were allowed to return to Crimea in the late 1980s, but most did not go back to their homeland until the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. In 2014, Tatars faced Russian aggression once again, when Russian President Vladimir Putin's army annexed Crimea.

In 2022, many Tatars have helped Ukraine defy its invaders. This is the latest Tatar struggle for freedom from Russian imperialism. The memory of pain and a history of repression form the basis of Tatar support for Ukraine's defense, though Muslim neighbors with similar historical experiences like some Chechens have openly joined their oppressor's side.

*New Lines* spoke with Mustafa Dzhemilev, a venerated leader of the long-persecuted Crimean Tatars. Dzhemilev is also a member of the Ukrainian Parliament and a celebrated human rights activist. He has been nominated several times for the Nobel Peace Prize, including this year. Dzhemilev spent 15 years in prison camps in the Soviet Union, and he once went on a 303-day hunger strike.

Despite experiencing imprisonment and systematic political persecution throughout his life, Dzhemilev continues to raise awareness about human rights violations and the oppression of his people. He resisted Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and has staunchly opposed its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The Russian authorities have illegally denied him entry to Crimea, his homeland, until 2034.

Dzhemilev was in Kyiv on May 6 at the time of this interview. He spoke by video about the horrors of violence and the war crimes Russia is perpetrating across the country. He also addressed the situation of Crimean Tatars, and he shared his views about Ukraine's immediate and future needs, including military support and sanctions.

**New Lines: How are you doing these days, considering the difficult circumstances that Ukraine is in currently?**

Mustafa Dzhemilev: Thank goodness I'm fine, now I'm at home. There are occasional alarms, the bombardment continues, but they are dropping bombs on the whole of Ukraine. Now the weakest part for Ukraine is that we don't have air [defense systems]. Our soldiers are brave, they are fighting, they inflict a lot of damage to the enemy. According to Russia's plans, they were going to take Kyiv in three days. Now, on the 71st day of the war, they are expelled from Kyiv, but there are ferocious fights in the Donetsk region, serious battles on the Kherson side. Our losses are quite substantial of course not as much as the Russians', but still a lot. The saddest part is that there are a lot of dead civilians. According to today's figures, at least 247 children have been killed. I went to Bucha, the place where they killed the most, and they showed me pictures of children. [Setting aside] the ones who died at the time of

that bombardment, they shot with guns in the chests of the little children and killed them. What kind of people are these people, actually these creatures, we can't understand.

**NL: A Russian-controlled court set up in occupied Crimea has recently declared you guilty of several charges: illegal storage of ammunition, improper storage of weapons and illegal border crossing. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine protested the decision against you, describing Russian accusations as "unjustified." The MFA reminded that this is not the first attempt by the Russian occupation administration to restrict your freedom, further explaining, "The so-called courts are pursuing a purposeful policy of Russia to persecute the Crimean Tatar people and its leaders in order to expel the Indigenous people from Crimea." What is your comment on this development, and what are the consequences of this decision?**

MD: I am really sad. They give 15, 17, 19 years of imprisonment to normal people there to those who say a few words opposing Russian occupiers. To me, they gave three years, and a conditional sentence on top of it, like I did almost nothing. I was a bit sad of course.

In fact, this is my eighth time in court. This is a ridiculous court. The main accusation is that I broke the law for illegal crossing of the Russian Federation border. I was going to my house in Ba çasaray. Actually I couldn't pass those borders I didn't. I couldn't get to the checkpoint, because there were tanks there. They greeted us like that, as if they had come to a war.

Negotiations took place in a neutral place. They spoke with the Turkish ambassador, they said, [Turkish President Recep] Tayyip Erdo an and [Turkish Prime Minister at the time Ahmet] Davuto lu are watching the events there, because they were broadcasting it to the whole world. They said, please go from there. A new front might open against Ukraine, but we would try to solve your entrance to Crimea with diplomatic ways. At that time, our citizens, up to 1,000-2,000, who crossed those borders, had passed. I stated my conditions and said, "You will put them back in Crimea. You will not punish them, then I will withdraw." That's how we did it. But, the Russians, of course, were deceitful, as they always are. They punished the people there a lot, gave fines, put three people in jail, and then they filed a lawsuit. In fact, they opened that case in 2016. They appealed to Interpol, but since then I have been to many countries. I did not surrender. Interpol doesn't listen to them.

They filed a lawsuit again in 2019, and the reason for that is that we were going to march toward Crimea, so [they wanted] to scare us. It was along the lines of, "If you cross the border, we will catch you, you will go to prison." They said that to me and Refat Chubarov, the head of the Majlis of the Crimean Tatar people.

We did not do that march, but not due to fear of their punishment. With the COVID pandemic, it was not possible to gather that many men. We delayed it. For two years, they continued this trial. My lawyer is a renowned, very good lawyer, Nikolai Polozov. He had to leave Russia because of some threatening signals that they would imprison him. He is in Turkey now. So, they recently announced the verdict in absentia. Three years in prison conditionally. But the prosecutor protested my supposedly soft sentence, so there will be another trial, yet again.

**NL: Russia's military invasion of Ukraine has been going on since Feb. 24. Russian troops have carried out airstrikes on important military and civilian infrastructure, destroying military units, airports, oil depots, schools, churches and hospitals. In your interview with the Crimean News Agency on April 27, you made some statements after visiting Bucha. You said, "Things that are unbelievable for the 21st century have happened here."**

**Despite this nightmare, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy stated that Ukraine has entered a new phase in the war against Russia, with Ukrainian troops stopping the advance of the invaders. Zelenskyy said**

**that Ukraine must first do everything to stop the war and then move on to diplomacy. What do you think about these statements?**

MD: Actually, I didn't think highly of Zelenskyy before. We didn't vote for him. I didn't take him seriously. The comedian man, in such a difficult situation, became president. I did not vote for him. I supported [former President Petro] Poroshenko. But I see that after this war started, he behaved very well. He was very determined, very brave. I said to his face too: "I am proud of my president."

The negotiations with the Russian delegation started a month and a half ago. First there were talks at the Belarus border, and then in Istanbul. In Istanbul, I was there too. These negotiations make no sense, because of Russia's ridiculous demands: You will recognize the Crimean Peninsula as Russian territory. You will recognize those self-proclaimed, lawless republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. You will give up your intention to join the EU and NATO. You will return your weapons taken from abroad. So, we would completely surrender there.

Now, we said, "Look, let's talk about the cease-fire now, because it is necessary not only for us, but also for you. Collect your own dead here." There are hundreds of dead bodies that they do not take. There are trains full of corpses, the refrigerators are full of mortal remains, and they do not accept it. "No, our demands are like that," they say. [The only thing that was] agreed is to make human corridors from the few besieged places under Russian control, but those agreements did not work either. Because you start to let the people in the corridors upon which we agreed, and they pass, but [the Russians] also open fire. So the people are forced to go back.

Currently, the most difficult situation is on the Mariupol side. The commander of Mariupol sent me a clear video request a couple of days ago, actually not on my behalf, but asking for help from Tayyip Erdo an. We delivered it to Mr. Tayyip and sent it to Hürriyet, CNN Türk, Sabah [Turkish media]. This is what we can do.

Yesterday [May 5], there was a Crimean Tatar medic at Azovstal steel plant in Mariupol who also appealed for help. He expects something from Mr. Tayyip ... because in Ukraine, Turkey's reputation is very high, they love Mr. Tayyip very much, they trust him very much. But unfortunately, Mr. Tayyip could do nothing.

[Turkish presidential spokesperson] Ibrahim Kalin paid a visit here recently and spoke with [Sergei] Shoigu, the Russian defense minister, on this Mariupol issue. Shoigu said, "We will allow the wounded and civilians to pass but let the soldiers surrender. Let Zelenskyy order them to surrender." Mr. Ibrahim responded to him: "Look, no commander has the right to say 'surrender' to his own citizens. Therefore, we offer you, the people there, your captives."

We have more than a thousand Russian captives. [Quoting Ibrahim:] "Let's exchange them. One of Turkey's ships is waiting in Istanbul, it can take more than a thousand men. When you [Russians and Ukrainians] make a decision, we will come by ship to the port of Berdyansk. We will take the men out with buses that are under our control, we will take them to Turkey by ship, and we give you our word that they will stay in Turkey until the end of the war. We will host them there."

But no, they did not agree.

Now they have their holiday, "Russia's Victory Day," on May 9. On that holiday, they want to hold a rally, [celebrating that they] took Mariupol, took captives, and things like that. But our people won't surrender, so people most likely will die. Our friend who sent his message yesterday from Azovstal is actually a doctor. He says there is no material, no medicine, that people die in doctors' hands. But we unfortunately get nothing.

**NL: Yes. Yesterday, media around the world shared a video that an unnamed man who described himself as a Crimean Tatar, a Muslim medic, posted late night on Thursday, May 5, to Instagram, as a direct appeal to Erdoğan. He called for help to save the lives of civilians who were still trapped in the Azovstal steel plant in Mariupol. So, is it true that the Russian invaders brought at least 13 mobile crematoriums to Mariupol to hide the traces of their crimes? Journalists and officials in Mariupol also reported that at least three mass graves were found.**

MD: They use mobile crematoriums not only in Mariupol, but also in Donetsk. They send a few bodies, but they burn most of the dead there to reduce their number. According to our Interior Ministry's writings, 12,000 parents from over there [Russia] made phone calls or went to our websites to ask about their children. These are parents of children [we are] 99% [certain are] dead. But they don't ask the Russian authorities, because they are afraid. According to their laws, they give some money for the dead soldiers. So they say [to parents] that if you report this information, we will not pay you, and we will say that your child is missing, or we will say that he was lost during a drill. We will not mention war. To get the money, parents don't tell anyone about their dead children. That is what's happening.

**NL: In an interview with the Associated Press on May 5, even Russia's close ally, Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko, admitted that he felt the "Russian special operation" was not going as planned. Considering this situation, what can we expect from Putin? Of course, he probably will not take a step back, but will he use more violence?**

MD: If this president of Russia was a normal person, then it would be possible to make predictions. But he does not think about Russia or the Russian people. If he had really thought about Russia's future, he would not have come to Crimea in 2014. He would have thought a little about his fate. Now he has entered the territory of another independent country with a total of 190,000 soldiers. What would the world's reaction be to that? And what are you going to do after you enter the country? In 2014, [then-German Chancellor Angela] Merkel said to him, directly to his face: "You probably live in the 15th or 16th century, that is your logic." Indeed, he is like that.

At the moment, all sorts of analyses are being made, with guesses as to what he might do. But it's a little hard to say for sure. ... There are other issues, but it is not about just pressing a red button, there are seven or eight stages before that. They say it is very difficult to use a nuclear weapon, that it is 99% impossible, but even if there is a 1% chance, it is a danger to the world.

In the first days of the war, our people fought really bravely. The enemies thought they would take Kyiv in three days, according to their plans, and that they would hold a parade on the fourth day. They were going to hold a celebratory concert. But half of them were destroyed, half of them escaped to Bucha. They started to torture civilians around Kyiv, and they killed a lot of people. Now they have left the Kyiv region. According to their plan, they want to take Donetsk, Luhansk the Donbas region. They want to take Kherson and pass to Moldova, to Russian-controlled Transnistria. They also want to make Donetsk a corridor to the Crimean Peninsula. They want to besiege Ukraine, to close the exits to the seas. They intend to make the country helpless.

I am sure that they will not carry out these plans, because thanks to them, the Western countries have given a lot of weapons. We expect the situation on the fronts to change a lot soon.

**NL: You warned in the past that Russia would use occupied Crimea to attack the rest of Ukraine. Today, the whole world admires the high motivation of the Ukrainian army and the Ukrainian people in defending their homeland. You said it's hard to make predictions, but what are Ukraine's most pressing needs? I think the European Union's oil embargo against Russia is essential to limit Putin's financing of war against Ukraine. Do you agree?**

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MD: The most urgent need is to close the air space. We need planes, we need air defense systems. They are firing S-300 rockets, and we can't do anything. They are deploying Iskanders on ships from the Black Sea, and we cannot respond. Our rockets cannot reach that distance. These howitzer weapons, which will be given from America, give the opportunity to hit a 35-40 km (22-25 mile) area, but to reach Sevastopol from the territory of Ukraine that is under our control, we need rockets with a range of at least 400 kilometers (250 miles). Unfortunately, we do not have those rockets. This is our weak side. But our advantage here is that people have great motivation, they fight very bravely. The Russians' main motivation is to make raids in the occupied lands. They allow women to be raped. They have no other motivations.

People call me from Crimea and say there are trucks filled with used phones, washing machines for sale, things raided here and sold in occupied lands. And people buy because of the low prices.

**NL: Among the Ukrainians resisting the Russian occupation, there are also the Crimean Tatars. In early April, several Ukrainian media outlets shared your statement that all institutions, businesses and schools have been instructed to regularly post on Facebook in support of Putin, and to support what they call the special operation. At that time, you also shared with the media that kidnapped civilians from the Kherson and Melitopol regions were taken to, and brutally tortured in, Crimea. So what's going on in Crimea right now?**

MD: There is tension there at the moment. Everyone in Crimea has been instructed to be ready for war. I [talk by phone] with our citizens there. I tell them, "Look, we actually had a plan to save Crimea from occupation without a war, but since they occasionally open fire on the Crimean Peninsula, maybe Ukraine will have to reciprocate. Take your precautions, protect your lives."

The peninsula of Crimea is now practically closed. It is not possible to get out of there, nor is it possible to enter. ... We occasionally appeal to our citizens over there to not come here in any way. If you come here, you will either become a corpse or a murderer. Therefore, refuse. Do not go into the Russian army.

[For a failure to enlist], the punishment is up to two years in prison. The best thing is to go to jail. But do not come to war. Yet it is very dangerous for them to surrender, because their relatives are held as hostages in Crimea, and they are in such a difficult situation. So there's a lot of tension. FSB [the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation] men come to the houses of many people, our activists, and threaten them if they write words of support for Ukraine. The punishments would be such and such so there is terror.

**NL: During your recent visit to Antalya during The Diplomacy Forum, you said, "The West does not fully understand that we are fighting not only for ourselves, but also for them."**

MD: It really is like that. Ukraine is now the main war front against this totalitarian fascist regime. If Russia is victorious here, after that it can attack other countries. Firstly, the Baltic countries and Poland and they do not actually hide that they have such intentions. That is why now it is a little immoral to look at this war from the outside and be an impartial spectator, because our war is not only for ourselves, but for all freedom. That's why we always expect support from countries.

Fortunately, the countries in the West are giving enough support now, but if they had given this support in 2014, when the Russians occupied Crimea, if these serious sanctions had been imposed then, maybe we would not have come to this day. Unfortunately, countries in the West were a little late in this regard.

**NL: What are your hopes and expectations for the future of Crimea?**

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MD: The war is actually a bad thing, but as a result of this war, we hope very much that there will be a chance to save Crimea from occupation. That is to say: This war started in Crimea and will end in Crimea as well.

Because until the full territorial integrity of Ukraine is restored, this war will not end. But Russia will certainly not triumph here. How long will the war in question continue? This is the main issue. Ukraine will of course fight to the end, for the whole of its own territory, for freedom.

**NL: You said in an interview a few years ago that Putin cannot be trusted. You stated, "There is no point in believing Putin, because he is a person who can violate any contract he signs." What kind of person do you think Putin is?**

MD: About 99% of the words he says are lies. But it's a very strange thing. At the same time, according to the Russian press, Putin's ratings are rising. It is not possible to believe their statistics, because it is dangerous for someone to [give an answer the authorities] don't like. A Russian journalist said that according to some sociological studies, 87% of the people living in Crimea are very happy about being part of Russia and asked me how I interpret that. I said it is possible, but the problem is this: If people say, "I don't recognize the Russian occupation, Crimea is part of Ukraine," that person stays in prison for five years, but comes out as a dignified person. If you give the death penalty for that [response], then 99% would say they support Russia. That is the situation. It is impossible to believe the statistics there.

The truth is that they have a lot of propaganda. People living in Russia mainly watch their own televisions they can't access many other internet sites, because many have been closed by the Russian government. If Russia's politics continues like this, the Russian state has no future. Gradually, the Russian state is turning into a big North Korea.

Oil embargoes affect the economy of Western countries. But as time passes, the situation will change. Therefore, as much as possible, all sanctions should be applied now. If it is too little, then Putin's regime will stay in place for a few more years. This is very harmful, both for the world and for the Russian people.

**NL: In your message to the Crimean News Agency a few days ago, you congratulated all Muslims on the Eid al-Fitr holiday. Emphasizing that many Crimean Tatars have had to celebrate the holidays away from their homeland for eight years due to the Russian occupation, you said, "We believe that we will mark the next and future holidays in our own lands."**

**I have to be honest and ask you a difficult question: Are you worried about the future of the next generation of Tatars? Is it difficult to keep them attached to the Tatar culture, language and religion as Muslims under constant pressure?**

MD: [The Russians] make moves not against [the Tatars'] religion, but against their identity. They're closing schools. Russification is everywhere that's where the danger lies. There is a lot of propaganda. Our people should not be blind, as they were in Chechnya. But you know, we were under Soviet propaganda for more than 70 years, and a few years after perestroika, people's minds were restored. Now, if there was freedom there, our children, our people would be fine. But it is a pity, of course, that people do not speak in their native language. There is so much discrimination. They are treated like second-class citizens. They are also trying to comply with the laws in order to find a place for themselves, and this causes great harm to the mentality and honor of a people.

The sooner we are saved from the occupation, the better.

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