



PERSECUTIONS IN CRIMEA IN THE CONTEXT OF A FULL-SCALE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

INTRODUCTION

The harsh reality of the eight years of Russian occupation in Crimea including politically motivated persecutions, criminal charges and administrative penalties have worsened significantly since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of the mainland Ukraine on February 24, 2022. In the period covered in this report:

- 19 political prisoners were sentenced;
- At least 6 people were detained on charges of alleged terrorism;
- 6 people were detained on charges of alleged involvement in the Noman Chelibidzhikhan volunteer battalion;
- 69 cases of administrative charges brought against Crimeans for alleged “discreditation of the Russian army”;
- Several detentions and subsequent administrative arrests of activists and human rights defenders;
- New cases of enforced disappearances have been recorded;
- Citizens are being detained for expressing disagreement with Russia’s military invasion of Ukraine.

This study evaluates the recent trends in detentions, arrests, and convictions in Crimea over the past three months to determine the scale and the impact of changes in Russia’s punitive policies in Crimea.

CRIMINAL PROSECUTIONS

Criminal prosecutions in Crimea today can be classified into two categories: pre and post February 24.

1. Pre-February 24 punitive actions included:

Criminal and political trials and verdicts issued in Crimea against the following:

- Three Crimean Tatar men (Nariman Dzhelial, Aziz and Asan Akhtemov) on charges of alleged involvement in sabotage on a gas pipeline
- Crimean Tatar minority:
 - on charges of alleged involvement in Hizb ut-Tahrir;¹
 - on charges of alleged involvement in the Noman Chelebidzhikhan volunteer battalion;²
- Jehovah’s Witnesses on charges of alleged extremist activity;³
- Individuals on charges of alleged treason, defamation, etc.

Ukrainian human rights activists recognize the victims of these persecutions as persons deprived of liberty for political reasons.

1 Hizb ut-Tahrir, a non-violent international Islamic organization founded in the early 1950s in the Middle East advocating for the creation of a worldwide Islamic Caliphate. It became widespread in the former Soviet republics of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Russia, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan. On February 14, 2003, the Supreme Court of Russian Federation recognized Hizb ut-Tahrir as a terrorist organization and banned its activities on the territory of the Russian Federation and, by extension, on the territory of the occupied Crimea.

2 The battalion named after Noman Chelebidzhikhan was created by the members of the “Civil blockade of Crimea” campaign, which rallied for the closure of trade routes to and from Crimea by blocking the checkpoints in September 2015.

3 In Russia and, by extension, on the territory of the occupied Crimea, a campaign of persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses grew larger after the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation ruled to recognize the Administrative Center of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia as an extremist organization on April 20, 2017. The persecution campaign against Jehovah’s Witnesses in Crimea is being carried out as an extension of Russia’s legislation to the occupied peninsula in violation of international humanitarian law.

Since February 24, the following members of the Crimean Tatar minority have been sentenced for their alleged involvement in Hizb ut-Tahrir:

March 10 — **Remzi Bekirov, Riza Izetov, Shaban Umerov, Raim Aivazov, Farhod Bazarov** were sentenced to terms of imprisonment from 15 to 19 years.

March 18 — **Akim Bekirov, Seitveli Seitabdiev, Rustem Seitkhalilov, Eskender Suleimanov** and **Asan Yanikov** were sentenced to terms of imprisonment from 14 to 15 years.

March 22 — **Timur Yalkabov** and **Lenur Seydametov**, 17 and 13 years of imprisonment, respectively.

April 19 — **Emil Ziyadinov**: 17 years of imprisonment.

May 12 — **Medzhit Abdurakhmanov, Bilyal Adilov, Vladlen Abdulkadyrov, Izzet Abdullayev** and **Tofik Abdulgaziev** were sentenced to terms of imprisonment from to 12 to 14 years.

April 27 — additional sentencing of one of the defendants in the “Crimean saboteur’s case” Sevastopol resident **Dmitro Shtyblikov**. The court issued 19.5 years of imprisonment to be counted from 09.11.2016 meaning another 14 years in prison for Dmitro Shtyblikov.

Trials have begun against previously detained Jehovah’s Witnesses: **Taras Kuzio, Daria Kuzio, Petr Zhiltsov, Sergey Lyulin, Alexander Dubovenko and Alexander Litvinyuk**.

Some of the new searches, detentions and criminal investigations are taking place under similar pretences as in the previous eight years of occupation.

Ernes Ametov, a former defendant in the 2nd Bakhchisaray “Hizb ut-Tahrir case”, who had previously been found not guilty, was arrested again on May 12 on the same grounds.

The accusation of alleged purchase, storage, and transportation of explosives was brought against civic journalist **Irina Danilovich**.

As it stands, the mechanism of repression that was launched by Russian occupying authorities in Crimea in 2014 continues to operate.

2. Post-February 24 trends in punitive actions include:

Accusations of alleged «terrorism»

On April 11, the head of the occupying authorities in Crimea issued a «yellow» terrorist threat alert, extending again on May 11. Since then, at least 6 people have been detained on charges of allegedly planning terrorist acts: details [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

Very little information is known about these detentions and the names of the detainees have not been released. However, the following are causes for concern:

- First, Russia has already carried out a series of arrests in Crimea on the same charges. A series of cases in Crimea about alleged sabotage in 2016 and 2017 (the case of the “Crimean saboteurs”, the case of the “Sevastopol saboteurs”) and similar charges of storage and transportation of explosives that were brought against pro-Ukrainian activists (the cases of Oleg Prikhodko, Yunus Masharipov, Vladislav Yesypenko, and Denis Kashuk).
- Second, Russian authorities have already carried out similar terrorist provocations, including the explosions of residential buildings in Buynaksk, Moscow, Volgodonsk, that were allegedly committed by Chechen rebels and later became the grounds and justification for the invasion of Chechnya in 1999.

In this regard there is a reason to believe that these actions are aimed to support Russia’s aggressive propaganda efforts within the context of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, aimed at discrediting Ukraine and de-humanizing Ukrainian people.

Changes in punitive tendencies related to current conditions

Before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, six people were held on charges of their alleged involvement in the Noman Chelebidzhikhan volunteer battalion as political prisoners. After February 24, six additional people were detained on the same charges.

Three Crimean Tatar minority members were detained in Crimea and charged with alleged “involvement in an illegal armed group”: **Nasrulla Seidaliev, Arsen Ibraimov, Rustem Gugurik**.

In the Kherson region, the occupiers kidnapped local residents **Rustem Osmanov, Ruslan Abdurakhmanov** and **Ayder Umerov** and transported them to Crimea.

On June 1, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation recognized the Noman Chelebidzhikhan volunteer battalion as a terrorist organization, banning its activities in the country and, by extension in the occupied Crimea in violation of the norms of international humanitarian law.

The terrorist organization designation for the battalion will mean negative consequences for the detainees, including an increase in prison sentences, the risk of being transferred to the territory of the Russian Federation, as demonstrated by the practice of Hizb ut-Tahrir persecutions.

As with the cases of arrests on charges of alleged terrorism, these actions are aimed to support Russia’s aggressive propaganda efforts within the context of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, aimed at discrediting Ukraine and de-humanizing Ukrainian people.

ADMINISTRATIVE PERSECUTION

As with the criminal prosecutions, the abuses under the administrative laws are increasing to accommodate post full-scale invasion realities.

1. Existing trends

Pressure on Muslim religious communities

Such administrative prosecutions have been carried out in Crimea since 2014 against Muslim communities and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which did not join Russian-controlled religious structures.

Imam **Emir Medzhitov** was fined for the alleged «illegal clerical activity».

Warnings from the prosecutor’s office

In early March, warnings were issued to Crimean activists **Nariman Parmanov** and **Rolan Osmanov**. Nariman received a warning related to the ‘unacceptable antisocial actions’, and Rolan related to the ‘unacceptable criminal actions during wartime’. Another warning was issued to **Zair Smedlya** related to the alleged planning of a mass gathering on February 26 (Day of Crimean Resistance to Russian Occupation).

The prosecutor’s office has been issuing such warnings before. They were often issued on the eve of the state or national holidays. However, in these cases the prosecutor’s office used this approach at the beginning of a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine most likely to intimidate Crimean Tatar activists who would be expected to oppose it.

Administrative arrests of Crimean Tatar activists.

In March, **Zair Smedlya** was arrested and detained for two days, and **Abdureshit Dzhapparov** for 15 days. Both administrative arrests were carried out for the alleged “displaying of Nazi attributes and symbols” in materials published in 2014 and 2019.

2. New trends

Russian authorities began the enforcement of the law of the Russian Federation on March 4 on the administrative and criminal penalties for distributing ‘false information’ about the actions of the Russian army in Ukraine.

The administrative proceedings against Crimean activist **Sergei Akimov** for placing an anti-war poster on his car would be just one example of such enforcement.

A fine of 35,000 roubles was issued to **Valentin Shuman** for the “No to War” poster.

Fines were issued to an unnamed Yalta resident in the amount of 50 thousand roubles; residents of Simferopol — 35 thousand roubles; a resident of Feodosia — 30 thousand roubles.

Civic Initiative «Crimean Idea» recorded 69 cases of charging Crimeans for administrative penalties for allegedly 'discrediting the Russian army' in the period from March 4 to May 24.

3. New trends, potentially tied to the start of the full-scale invasion

The wave of administrative charges and subsequent arrests of Crimean attorneys launched at the end of May, 2022.

Edem Semedlyayev was the first to be detained for allegedly discrediting the Russian army. In fact, he was tried for a post on Facebook that he hasn't authored. On the same day, the court fined him to 75,000 roubles. Immediately after the end of the court hearing, his attorney, **Nazim Sheikhmambetov**, was detained for allegedly «organizing a mass simultaneous gathering of citizens in a public place» and taken under administrative arrest for 8 days. The next day, while defending Nazim Sheikhmambetov, attorneys **Ayder Azamatov and Emine Avamileva** were detained and, on the same grounds, placed under administrative arrest for 8 and 5 days, respectively.

Even though these detentions can't be directly tied to the start of the full-scale hostilities on the mainland of Ukraine, the danger to the human rights defenders in Crimea is increasing with the wave of new arrests. Such actions by Russian authorities are designed to intimidate the attorneys and to deter them from taking on the cases of human rights violations committed by Russian security forces and the courts.

Human rights attorneys have been a high-interest group for the occupying authorities. Until recent arrests of four defence attorneys in just three days, their detentions and arrests have been sporadic.

NEW CASES OF FORCED DISAPPEARANCES

A new case of a forced disappearance was recorded in Crimea where the fate of the detainee remained unknown for a long period of time.

On April 29 Russian security forces kidnapped **Irina Danilovich**. Her whereabouts became known only on May 11. She was kept in the FSB facility and threatened with violence for 8 days before she was charged with an alleged possession of explosives that were planted on her by FSB officers. Similar charges were brought against Oleg Prikhodko, Yunus Masharipov, Vladislav Yesipenko, and Denis Kashuk.

Russian security forces have been engaging in forced disappearances in the past. Prior to the recent events, families and attorneys often did not have information about the whereabouts of the detainees for 24 hours from the disappearance. Recently the time to identify and locate the detainee has increased dramatically.

There were 44 recorded cases of forced disappearances in Crimea in the period between 2014 and 2018. Of these cases, six people were found dead, 19 were released after being detained, one was extradited to Russia, three ended up in prison, and the fate of 15 remains unknown to this day.

CIVIC RESISTANCE AS A BASIS FOR NEW ARRESTS

Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine prompted the intensification of the civic resistance of the Crimeans who disagree with the actions of the Russian Federation.

Earlier reporting covered the following arrests:

- **Bogdan Ziza** for pouring blue and yellow paint and throwing a 'Molotov cocktail' on the Yevpatoria occupying authority's administrative building;
- a 60-year-old woman who vandalised the grave of a Russian soldier killed during the military actions in Ukraine;

- as well as men, who punctured the tires of cars with Russian invader's «Z» symbols.

In these cases, offenses were in fact committed. However, since these offences were aimed at expressing disagreement with Russia's war against Ukraine, they are expected to be given much more severe punishment than in the typical cases of property damage and vandalism. Bogdan Ziza was already charged with an alleged attempted terrorist act, and his whereabouts remain unknown.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Russian occupying authorities continue the politically motivated criminal and administrative prosecutions that began with the illegal occupation of Crimea in 2014.
2. A new wave of arrests began in Crimea on charges of alleged terrorism since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.
3. Russian occupying authorities carried out new arrests on charges of alleged involvement in the Noman Chelebilzhikhan volunteer battalion, after designating it as a terrorist organization. These actions are aimed to support Russia's aggressive propaganda efforts within the context of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, aimed at discrediting Ukraine and de-humanizing Ukrainian people.
4. Russian authorities in Crimea began the enforcement of a new law of the Russian Federation on the administrative and criminal penalties for distributing 'false information' about the actions of the Russian army in Ukraine aimed at suppressing dissent against Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
5. A wave of new arrests of human rights defence attorneys in Crimea aimed at their intimidation against the backdrop of gross violations of human rights committed by Russian authorities.
6. Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine re-ignited the civic resistance in Crimea. Crimeans who are detained for protesting the Russian invasion of Ukraine face harsher punishment as part of the intimidation campaign carried out by the occupying authorities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above reporting, **we call on the government of Ukraine, foreign governments, including the member states of the International Crimean Platform, international organizations, national and international non-governmental organizations:**

1. Continue monitoring and documenting human rights violations, war crimes and crimes against humanity in the occupied Crimea and include them in regular reports on the human rights situation in Ukraine.
2. Provide comprehensive support to victims of political repression, victims of forced disappearances, and their families.
3. Introduce personal sanctions against persons involved in gross violations of human rights in the occupied Crimea.
4. Assist in the investigation of war crimes, crimes against humanity and gross violations of human rights in the occupied Crimea.
5. Regularly keep Crimean issues and the human rights situation on the peninsula on the international agenda.
6. Strengthen diplomatic pressure, sanctions regime, and other points of leverage on the Russian federation to prevent new atrocities in Crimea and the mainland of Ukraine, as well as to accelerate the de-occupation of all territories of Ukraine.

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