

Crimea: the Bad Conscience of Russia

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*You who wronged a simple man
Bursting into laughter at the crime,
And kept a pack of fools around you
To mix good and evil, to blur the line,*

*Though everyone bowed down before you,
Saying virtue and wisdom lit your way,
Striking gold medals in your honour,
Glad to have survived another day,*

*Do not feel safe. The poet remembers.
You can kill one, but another is born.
The words are written down, the deed, the date.*

(Czesław Miłosz, *You who wronged*) translated by Richard Lourie

The occupation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 created one of the most authoritarian quasi-regimes in the world. Unfortunately, four years after the annexation, massive violations of human rights capture almost exclusively the interest of watchdogs. However, the persecution of the Crimean Tatar community will constitute in years to come the most blatant example of Putin's hypocrisy and the 'Potemkin'¹ character of his politics of memory and identity.

A few months ago, Russia hosted the World Cup. Hundred million people watched this most popular sport event on the globe. Russia was visited by many European politicians from countries whose teams took part in the tournament, including Emanuel Macron the president of World Cup winner France. One month before the beginning of the World Cup, Oleg Sentsov, a Ukrainian filmmaker from Crimea imprisoned by Russians in 2014, began a hunger strike. He demanded that Putin frees the Ukrainian prisoners of conscience held in Russia. Today Sentsov is on the verge of death, while Putin ruthlessly rejects international appeals to release him. On the first day of the World Cup, the European Parliament supported Sentsov and adopted a resolution demanding from Russia to free the Ukrainian prisoners of conscience. The European political leaders, however, avoided the topic while cheering for their teams in the Russian stadiums. Almost three months after the World Cup final, the sad conclusion is that the EP resolution did not change the situation substantially and the European political leaders continue to sidestep the issue of Crimea.

Sentsov's fate personifies the almost forgotten, terrible fate of his *Heimat* (Crimea). There are right now more than 200 prisoners of conscience in Russia. Above one third of them are Ukrainian citizens, especially from Crimea, among them the absolute majority (around 20% of all prisoners) are Crimean Tatars, a community accounting for... 0,15% of Russia's population. But the prisoners of conscience in Crimea are only the tip of the iceberg. In recent years around 30 persons disappeared or were killed by the occupying Russian authorities or 'unknown

¹ Grigory Potemkin, a minister and lover of the Russian Empress Catherine II organised in 1787 her visit to Crimea. Its purpose was to celebrate the conquest of Crimean Khanate as the final victory of Russia in the fight for the supremacy in the Great Steppe started after the dissolution of Pax Mongolica. Catherine II literally took into possession the Crimean Khanate by sleeping in the khan's bed in his palace. Potemkin erected 'fake' portable villages along the banks of the Dnieper in order to fool Catherine II. The villages were disassembled after she passed, and reassembled farther along her route to be viewed again as if they were new.

perpetrators'. Hundreds were detained and tortured. Some 20.000 IDPs (internally displaced persons) from Crimea have been registered in Ukraine, but as the Ukrainian authorities admit this is only a fraction of the total number of persons who escaped from the peninsula. The border services report a net outflow from Crimea that is three times higher. Most of the IDPs are Crimean Tatars whose population before the occupation exceeded 250 thousand (more than 10% of Crimea's population). It is not by accident that, after the occupation, Crimea 'achieved' one of the worst scores in the report 'Freedom in the World' issued every year by Freedom House. In the most recent report, only in ten countries including North Korea, Equatorial Guinea, Syria and Eritrea the human rights situation was worse than in Crimea. Moreover, taking into account positive developments in certain authoritarian regimes (for instance, Uzbekistan) Crimea may soon surpass several countries, 'advancing' to the category of the top ten most repressive regimes in the world. It is worth recalling that Crimea is located just 225 km in a direct line from the EU and such a repressive regime has not existed in Europe for decades.

On the other hand, the current persecution of the Crimean Tatar community seems to be some sort of cruel normality in their modern history. Jamala, an excellent Ukrainian singer of Crimean Tatar origin who won the Eurovision contest in 2016 with her song '1944', reminded – even though just for a moment - the whole of Europe of the terrible experience of deportation of their co-nationals to Uzbekistan conducted by the Soviets. The Crimean Tatars were placed under the regime of special settlements which were similar to the German concentration camps. Many of them performed forced labour. Horrible conditions of deportation (overcrowded stock cars), malnutrition, labour exploitation, diseases, lack of medical care, fatal living conditions and exposure to the harsh desert climate of Uzbekistan resulted in a very high mortality rate. Most probably around 25% of Crimean Tatars perished in a few years. In difference to other deported nations they were not allowed to return to their homeland after the death of Stalin. The return happened only after 1989. According to Jonathan Otto Pohl, an American historian, the deportation of Crimean Tatars 'qualifies as one of the worst cases of ethnically motivated mass murder in the 20th century'. Certainly, it should be recognised as genocide, however only Ukraine decided to do that in 2015. The Soviet regime justified the deportation by an allegedly massive Tatar collaboration with Nazi Germany. This argument is often corroborated by the Crimean occupying authorities and even certain members of the Russian elite in Moscow. However, as Pohl, underlines: 'In the face of lethal material conditions in German POW camps, racist attacks by Soviet partisan units against Crimean Tatar villages, and generally better treatment of the Crimean Tatar population by the Germans than they had endured under Stalin it is surprising that the number of collaborators was not much greater.' In fact, during the Second World War, substantially more Crimean Tatars fought in the ranks of the Red Army against the Nazis than in the self-defense battalions established by the Germans.

What is more important, the historical experience of suffering in the case of Crimean Tatars under Russian and especially Soviet rule does not limit itself to deportation. Before the conquest of Crimean Khanate by Russia in 1783, the Tatars made up the absolute majority of the population on the peninsula. At the beginning of the 20th century, due to the Russian policy of colonisation and immigration, often under the pressure of Tsarist authorities, the Tatars became the minority in their own homeland, though still the largest ethnic community. They lost that position in the interwar period. The massive inflow of Russians continued after the Second World War. Indeed, around one-third of the Crimean Russians was born in Russia and in Latvia or Estonia, the new EU Member States where Russians had to fulfil certain criteria in order to get the citizenship.

The Soviet period was a real nightmare for Crimean Tatars. Between 1917 and 1941, around 160,000 of the Crimean Tatars were either killed, died of starvation or were forced to leave the Crimea as a consequence of the Soviet policy. By comparison their population in 1926 stood at 180 thousand. Two conquests of the Crimea by Soviets in 1918 and 1920 respectively, resulted in massive executions. In the second case, according to Paul Robert Magocsi, a Canadian historian, between 50.000 to 100,000 persons perished, mostly Tatars. In 1941, after the German aggression, the NKVD 'solved' the problem of what to do with the large number of prisoners - again mainly Tatars- by executing them all before they left. The great famines caused by Soviet policy hit the peninsula two times in 1921-22 and 1931-33. In 1928–1929, at least 35,000 'bourgeois elements and kulaks' were ruthlessly removed from Crimea. They either 'disappeared' or were sent to labour camps and special settlements in Siberia. The 30's brought a brutal Russification. Most of the native intelligentsia was exterminated. At the same time, most of Tatar literature was declared to be politically unacceptable and banned. The number of journals and newspapers published in the Tatar language dropped radically. In 1938, the Latin alphabet was replaced with the Cyrillic.

These 'deeds and dates' recalling Miłosz's poem will be remembered paradoxically also thanks to Putin because his 'words' about Crimea and its Tatar community are so hypocritical that they evoke immediately the metaphor of Potemkin village. It symbolises any idea created solely to deceive others that a situation is better than it really is. In his infamous address to the nation in March 2014 announcing the annexation of Crimea, Putin presented a rosy picture of the Crimean and Tatar history stating that 'Crimea is a unique blend of different peoples' cultures and traditions. This makes it similar to Russia as a whole, where not a single ethnic group has been lost over the centuries. Russians and Ukrainians, Crimean Tatars and people of other ethnic groups have lived side by side in Crimea, retaining their own identity, traditions, languages and faith.[..] True, there was a time when Crimean Tatars were treated unfairly, just as a number of other peoples in the USSR. There is only one thing I can say here: millions of people of various ethnicities suffered during those repressions, and primarily Russians.' Certainly, Russians suffered a lot in the 20th century but have never experienced such a terrible fate as Crimean Tatars have. Of course, Russia may be proud of historical examples of successful integration of minorities. For instance, at the verge of the First World War there were 10 Muslim generals and almost 190 Muslim colonels in the Russian Tsarist Army. Their number increased substantially during the conflict. It was a unique case in Europe. However, Putin and most Russians, other than the former European colonial powers do not want to recognise the dark side of Russian rule: conquest, colonisation, discrimination and even genocide. Without such a sincere confrontation with its past it seems that Russia will never be able to transform itself into a democratic state.