

HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERNS IN CRIMEA: MARCH 2025 UPDATE

Since Amnesty International last presented its overview, the human rights situation in Russian-occupied Crimea has continued to deteriorate.

Many of these violations lie within the scope of UNESCO's expertise or are directly linked to the matters that fall within its mandate, namely the rights to education, freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of religion, and culture.

Russia's practice and policy in these areas amount to a serious violation of international human rights law and international humanitarian law. Russia also has been violating international humanitarian law, in numerous ways, from 2014 onwards, including by unlawfully imposing wholesale its legislation on the occupied peninsula, deploying Russian criminal justice system to prosecute and imprison dissenting voices, and seeking to change the peninsula's demographics.

Since the beginning of occupation of Crimea in 2014, Russia's policies have systematically aimed at suppressing Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar languages, culture and identities. This has been achieved through widespread violations of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights.

RIGHT TO EDUCATION

A key mechanism through which Russia has sought to suppress Ukrainian, Crimean Tatar and other non-Russian identities in Crimea is the imposition of restrictions on or denial of education in their native languages. Since the beginning of Russian occupation in 2014, we have seen a drastic decline in the number of children instructed in these languages.

According to the latest figures for the 2024/2025 academic year provided by the de facto authorities in Crimea, just 164 school children receive education in Ukrainian as the language of instruction, and 1,249 study Ukrainian as an optional school subject.¹ By contrast, according to the OHCHR, nearly 13,000 children were learning in Ukrainian in Crimea in 2013/2014,² while the Ukrainian language was a compulsory school subject in all schools.

According to the de facto authorities in Crimea, 7,600 children receive education in the Crimean Tatar language, while 30,729 study it as an optional subject in schools.³ However, based on Amnesty International's research, it is highly likely that these figures do not reflect the reality on the ground. Our sources among schoolteachers in Crimea, interviewed remotely and on condition of confidentiality because of the personal risks they face for sharing this information, even in classes where instruction is officially supposed to be in the Crimean Tatar language, Russian is predominantly used in practice. There is shortage of educational materials in Crimean Tatar, incomplete curricula and shortage of competent staff. More worryingly, there appears to be peer pressure which discourages the use of the language in the Russian-language environment. Moreover, according to our sources, the parents who have requested that their children receive

¹ <https://monm.rk.gov.ru/structure/3748b454-d262-48b3-b605-85cf93fadbbc>

² OHCHR, *Ten Years of Occupation by the Russian Federation in Crimea: Human Rights in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, Ukraine*, 28 February 2024, para 35, available at:

<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/ukraine/2024-02-28-OHCHR-Ten-Years-Occupation-Crimea.pdf>

³ <https://monm.rk.gov.ru/structure/3748b454-d262-48b3-b605-85cf93fadbbc>.

tuition in the Crimean Tatar language faced pressure from school administrations, in the form of informal warnings that their children would be treated differently should they pursue this option.

As Amnesty International has previously reported, school children in Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories and in Russia itself are subjected to indoctrination through curriculum and are thereby denied their right to quality education.⁴ This fully applies to all children in Crimea today.

FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND BELIEF

Amnesty International has previously highlighted violations of the right to freedom of religion and belief in Crimea and persecution of religious minorities under Russian occupation, including closure and seizure of places of worship and targeting of religious leaders. Details can be found in our previous submissions.

In the appalling catalogue of religious persecution, the imprisonment of Jehovah's Witnesses solely for practicing their faith, and the unfounded prosecution and imprisonment of practicing Muslims under terrorism charges, for their alleged (and typically unproven) membership of Hizb-ut Tahrir (itself arbitrarily designated "terrorist"), deserve a special mention.

Since our last submission, there have been new instances of house searches and arbitrary detention of Jehovah's Witnesses, and new convictions and prison terms handed down by de facto courts in Crimea. According to the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses, the number of convicted Jehovah's Witnesses in Crimea has exceeded 30. Of them, as of February 2025, 14 were serving their prison terms in Russian prison colonies, often in extremely remote locations.

On 3 October 2024, Jehovah's Witnesses Yuriy Gerashchenko and Sergey Parfenovich were sentenced to six years in a penal colony each. This was an appeal hearing, initiated by the prosecution which insisted that their earlier, non-custodial sentences, were too lenient. Six days later, on 9 October 2024, Russian law enforcement agencies conducted house searches of at least 10 households of Jehovah's Witnesses in the city of Kerch alone, and made new arbitrary arrests. They arrested Vitaly Burik accusing him of organizing "an extremist organization". The Russian criminal investigation authorities reported that he was apprehended by members of the Federal Security Service and Ministry of the Interior, supported by the Special Riot Police Forces (OMON).⁵ He was held in a detention centre before being transferred under house arrest pending trial. Notably, he protested that he had stopped being a member of the local congregation in 2017 (when Russian arbitrarily banned Jehovah's Witnesses) and only continued practicing his faith which is not expressly banned in Russia. On 14 January 2025, a de facto court in Sevastopol sentenced Jehovah's Witnesses Viktor Kudinov and Sergei Zhigalov to six years' imprisonment each.

Jehovah's Witnesses' treatment in Russian prison colonies also speaks miles. For instance, the above-mentioned Sergey Parfenovich is serving his prison sentence in a prison colony in Astrakhan Region, over 1,000 kilometres away from his home and family. During his time there, he was given a letter he had received from home only once, and he was not allowed to bring with him his personal Bible.

⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/09/ukraine-russia-new-history-textbook-is-a-blatant-attempt-to-unlawfully-indoctrinate-school-children-in-russia-and-russian-occupied-ukrainian-territories/>.

⁵ Investigative Committee of Crimea and Sevastopol, official Telegram channel, 14 October 2024, <https://t.me/sledcomcrimea/3382>.

Amnesty International has made it clear that any Jehovah's Witness imprisoned solely for practicing their faith is a prisoner of conscience who must be immediately and unconditionally released. Every aspect of their prosecution and imprisonment is a litany of human rights violations and violations of international humanitarian law. The practice of sending Crimean prisoners to Russian prisons to serve their sentences is in itself a further violation of the law of occupation.

The same must be said about other religious minorities in Crimea. The number of prisoners from among Crimea's Muslims, the overwhelming majority of whom are ethnic Crimean Tatars, who have been unfairly prosecuted and deprived of their liberty on the basis of unfounded and politically motivated charges, has also continued to grow. Please refer to our previous submissions for some prominent personal stories.

Ukrainian watchdog Crimea SOS recorded a total of 45 house searches in Crimea in 2024, mostly targeting religious minorities and dissenting voices, including 15 searches targeting Jehovah's Witnesses, followed by 10 searches targeting Muslims and resulting in arrests and prosecution of 10 individuals for alleged membership of Hizb-ut Tahrir.⁶ Crimean Tatar Resource Centre registered even more, a total of 61, in the same period, of which over half, 35, targeted Crimean Tatar homes, followed by arrests and criminal prosecution.⁷

Crimean Muslim prisoners face harsh treatment in Russian penitentiary institutions. Those who are prosecuted for alleged membership of Hizb-ut Tahrir (which many deny, though it is not illegal under Ukrainian law) face terrorism-related charges. This means they stand trial in a military court, in Russia, and post-conviction serve their sentences in even more remote prison colonies, thousands of kilometres away from Crimea and their families. The geography of their imprisonment includes Russia's far north, Siberia, and even Russia's easternmost region Kamchatka. As Muslims, they face additional hardships in Russian prisons, including food that contravenes their religious requirements, and food regime which prevents them from fasting during Ramadan even after they buy their own food but are given access to it only during certain, religiously unsuitable, hours.

MEDIA FREEDOM

We have previously reported in detail on the suppression of media freedom in Crimea, including arbitrary closure of prominent Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar language media outlets, blocking of online access to those outlets that relocated into government-controlled Ukraine, detention and prosecution of independent media workers and bloggers under politically motivated charges, and harassment of the very few independent media outlets that remain.

Thus, since May 2024, the occupying authorities have opened six administrative cases against the Crimean Tatar-language newspaper Qirim, the latest in December 2024, specifically targeting its founder and editor-in-chief Bekir Mamutov. The charges include "*discrediting the Russian armed forces*" for publishing an article which urged the Indigenous Peoples of Crimea not to participate in Russia's aggression against Ukraine, as well as "*abuse of freedom of mass information*" and "*dissemination of unreliable socially significant information*" for publishing the UN Secretary-General's report on human rights violations in occupied Crimea in the Crimean Tatar language. The total fines imposed for these purported "offences" amount to 834,000 Russian Rubles (US\$ 9,500).

⁶ <https://ru.krymr.com/a/news-krym-2024-god-siloviki-rf-45-nezakonnykh-obyskov/33342707.html>

⁷ <https://ctrcenter.org/ru/za-2024-god-by-l-zafiksirovan-61-obysk-v-okkupirovannom-krymu-krcz>

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

While almost all independent media have been banished from Crimea, any dissenting voices face severe penalties, ranging from arbitrary detention under trumped-up charges, to forced “apologies” on camera merely for privately listening to Ukrainian music. You will find details in our previous submissions.

Even the slightest criticism of the Russian military in the context of their war of aggression against Ukraine continued to be penalized, typically by hefty fines, through the Russian legislation that prohibits so-called “discrediting” the Russian armed forces. Repeating this “offence” has been criminalized and is punishable by imprisonment.

According to the Mission of the President of Ukraine in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, the number of legal proceedings against “offenders” under this legislation has reached 1,242 by 10 March 2025.⁸ The Mission has also reported that 220 individuals from Crimea have been criminally prosecuted for dissent and sentenced to prison in politically motivated trials. Although Crimean Tatars – one of the Indigenous Peoples of Crimea – make up around just 12% of peninsula’s population, they account for 133 (over 60%) of those imprisoned.⁹

ONGOING INJUSTICE, LEGAL REMEDIES DENIED

Those in Crimea who face harassment, arbitrary arrests, unfair trials, huge fines and imprisonment have been deprived of all effective legal remedies. We have previously reported how finding oneself in such a precarious situation in Crimea also means difficulty finding a defence lawyer. The few lawyers who have been providing legal representation to those facing politically motivated prosecution in Crimea have themselves faced severe reprisals. The same awaits lawyers from Russia who take up cases of politically motivated prosecution in Crimea. Please refer to our previous submissions and to Amnesty International’s publications on its website, for details about the disbarment of lawyers Alexey Ladin, Lilia Gemedzhi, Rustem Kyamilev and Nazim Sheikhmambetov, arrests of lawyer Emil Kurbedinov and other examples.

CHANGING CRIMEA’S DEMOGRAPHY. OTHER VIOLATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW AND INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW

Russia has continued reshaping the demography of Crimea. In addition to implementing restrictions on education, religion and media, and brutally suppressing any peaceful dissent, the occupying authorities have continued to violate the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and continued to suppress Crimean Tatar, Ukrainian and other non-Russian identities by targeting representative institutions, judicial system, and cultural celebrations. Severe restrictions on the rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly remained in place. The arbitrary ban of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People as “extremist” remained in place, its building confiscated.

Russia must immediately end all violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law, in Crimea and all Ukrainian territories it occupies.

⁸ <https://ppu.gov.ua/press-center/operativna-informatsiia-shchodo-sytuatsii-na-tymchasovo-okupovaniy-terytorii-avtonomnoi-respubliky-krym-ta-mista-sevastopolia-stanom-na-10-bereznia/>

⁹ <https://ppu.gov.ua/press-center/operativna-informatsiia-shchodo-sytuatsii-na-tymchasovo-okupovaniy-terytorii-avtonomnoi-respubliky-krym-ta-mista-sevastopolia-stanom-na-10-bereznia/>

