



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
High Commissioner on National Minorities

ONLY BY REMEMBERING PAST INJUSTICES
CAN NEW ONES BE PREVENTED

remarks by
Astrid Thors

OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

on the occasion of
the commemoration of the 71st anniversary of
the deportation of the Crimean Tatar people

[Check against delivery]

Kyiv, Ukraine – 18 May 2015

Mr. President,
Mr. Prime Minister,
Mr. Chairperson,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I can hardly believe it has only been one year since we met here in the National Opera for the commemoration [of the 70th anniversary of the deportation of the Crimean Tatar people]. So much has happened in that one year. So much grief and loss has befallen Ukraine and the Crimean Tatar people.

Today we commemorate a tragedy that occurred 71 years ago and that we should never forget. We owe that to the victims of the deportations, to their children and their grandchildren. It is essential to honour them, to recognize their suffering and to prevent manipulations of history that attempt to justify a crime that can never be justified.

We cannot change atrocities that happened in the past. We can only remember them, learn from them and try to heal the wounds they caused. The wounds can only heal if they are discussed; if new generations are involved in those discussions and freedom of speech is upheld. Unfortunately, too few nations have followed the German example of discussing history.

But we must try to prevent such injustices from happening again. Unfortunately, new rights violations are occurring in Crimea with worrying regularity. They should not go unnoticed and they should be stopped.

Crimea is an absolute priority for me as the High Commissioner on National minorities, just as it has been for my predecessors. I have nearly run out of words to express my concern about the many disturbing events that took place over the course of the last year – too many to mention here today. An example of twisted history is the fact that those who tried to protect the Crimean Parliament in February 2014 are now investigated and indicted for these events.

The Crimean Tatars have paid a high price for their unwavering support for Ukraine's territorial integrity. Much of their leadership has been expelled, jailed or intimidated. Their media outlets are being closed. Education in their native language is under pressure. 71 years after the tragedy of Sürgün we are witness to new violations of international law, of human rights and of a community's right to maintain its identity.

For the Crimean Tatars as a people, it is of vital importance that we seek to repair the painful legacy of the deportations that continues to cast its shadow up to this day. Only by supporting the development of the Crimean Tatar language, culture and heritage, and the right to freely participate in building their society, can we make sure that the effects of the ethnic cleansing of 1944 are fully reversed. This requires urgent action and real support in Crimea and in the rest of Ukraine.

Your Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Let there be no doubt. Crimea is an integral part of Ukraine. The OSCE does not recognize the referendum held last year, nor the annexation by the Russian Federation. At the same time, while Russia exercises *de facto* control over the peninsula, it is bound by international law to ensure full respect for the human and minority rights of all communities living there. In my public statements, I have repeatedly called on the Russian authorities to fully guarantee the human and minority rights of all persons and groups living in Crimea. My concerns are compounded by the absence of acceptance by the Russian authorities to allow independent international actors access to the peninsula to monitor the situation. I hope this will change in the nearest future so I can once again visit Crimea, in line with my mandate.

While there are limits to what the Ukrainian authorities can do on the peninsula itself, they have already taken steps to support Crimean Tatars in Crimea, and there is more they can do. I welcome the recognition of the Crimean Tatars as an indigenous people by the Verkhovna Rada last year. President Poroshenko, I also welcome your personal engagement. I now encourage Ukraine to take the next steps and adopt the necessary legal framework to enshrine the rights of the Crimean Tatars in law. My Institution has long pushed for the adoption of a Law “on the Restoration of the Rights of Formerly Deported People”. I have also advised you on a law stipulating the rights of indigenous people of Crimea and their representative bodies, which I hope can be adopted soon. Such a law would include effective participatory rights for the Crimean Tatars and pave the way for ratification of International Labour Organization Convention 169 by your country.

Other important measures include supporting Crimean Tatars who, like Ukrainians and others, have had to leave Crimea to ensure their own safety. These communities need urgent support for their economic survival, for the education of their children and for the survival of their culture.

Dear Refat,

I last set foot in Simferopol in March last year and I will never forget your parting words: “I do not know in what conditions I will see you again.” I am glad that we can be together here today. But at the same time, just as I told Mustafa Dzhemilev last year, I am very sad that we are not together in Crimea. While I fear more difficult times are ahead of your people, I nonetheless hope that we can have future commemorations again in Crimea, where you and your people belong.

Thank you.