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Unexpected Freedom for two Crimean Tatar Dissidents



In late October, President Vladimir Putin pardoned and released Ilmi Umerov and Akhtem Chiygoz, two Crimean Tatar dissidents. Both were members of the Mejlis, a legislative body for the Crimean Tatar people that has been dissolved since Russia's capture of Crimea. Both were persecuted for their views: They openly stated that the Russian Federation is guilty illegally annexing Crimea, and called for the return of Ukrainian sovereignty.

It seemed at the end of September that the fate of these two political prisoners had finally been resolved: Umerov had been given [two years in prison](#), Chiyhoz - [8 years in a strict penal colony](#). However, later, without explaining the reasons, they were taken to the airport of Simferopol, brought to Anapa, and from there to Ankara, where they spent one day. The next evening they arrived in Kiev. According to Umerov, he could communicate with Chiygoz only in Turkey, after they were handed over to the Turkish special services. This complicated process increasingly resembled the movie "[Bridge of Spies](#)": at first it seemed that, unlike the film, that the FSB only passed the released, not receiving anyone in exchange. But on November 29, it became known that an exchange did indeed take place and the Turkish authorities gave Moscow two Russian citizens suspected of espionage, Alexander Smirnov and Yuri Anisimov.

The Kremlin, most likely, went to this concession with respect to two Crimean Tatars with the condition of a subsequent ban on entry into the territory of the Crimea. Despite this, Umerov and Chiygoz declared their

determination to return. Legally speaking, this is an extremely interesting moment; if they were pardoned by the president himself, then all the charges against them are lifted and now they should not be persecuted under Russian law. How will it look in practice? That remains to be seen. Most likely, they will not be allowed into the Crimea directly at the border, possibly under some pretext associated with the fight against subversive groups that allegedly infiltrate the Crimea under the guise of tourists.

Was the release of dissidents logically thought out with an understanding of the subsequent consequences, or is it the result of ad-hoc agreements between Erdogan and Putin? Was everything really as it was announced by the officials? If so, what is the role of Ukraine's president, Petro Poroshenko, who openly declared his own participation in the negotiation process? It is interesting that during his visit to Kiev in November, Erdogan [stated the following](#): "We are now trying to take all measures for our Crimean Tatar brothers who are in prison, and I think that eventually we will get the result of these efforts." This indicates that the negotiations were underway already at that time.

One can agree that each side received a number of important advantages from the release of these particular dissidents. First, before the election, Putin clears the Crimean political landscape from possible provocations. As recent events have highlighted, Crimean Tatars — even in the face of huge restrictions from the Russian authorities — proved to be the only organized opposition force in the annexed Crimea, despite the limits of their activity geographically, and the weakness of the Russian opposition political forces when it came to supporting them. Secondly, a presidential pardon weakens the image of the Crimean Tatars as a dissident people, because the remaining criminal cases in Crimea in one way or another are related to the case of Hizb ut-Tahrir, which in many ways makes it possible to tie the Islamic extremist threat to the Crimean Tatars.

Crimean Tatars on a diplomatic level have inflicted significant damage to Russian attempts to cool the post-Crimean heat. The Mejlis, with its international activity (hundreds of speeches and visits over the past three years) keeps the topic of the Crimea afloat and does not allow it to disappear from the information space and the international agenda, an outcome the Kremlin has been pressing for. So it is advantageous for the Russian authorities to strike a "retaliatory" blow directly on the Crimean Tatars in the Crimea; especially via attempts to destroy the image of the "dissident people". For this, the Crimean Tatars remaining on the peninsula are equated with "Islamists". As part of this interpretation, the FSB takes measures not to oppose the indigenous people specifically, but against various Islamist groups. Considering the growth of Islamophobia in Europe and the United States, this tactic could be effective; support of the Crimean Tatars in the West may decrease to some extent as a result.

It cannot be ruled out that, perhaps, these dissidents were part of a more global game played out by Erdogan and Putin: were they a friendly gesture to a "strategic partner"? If this is the case, what does Putin get in return? Erdogan's benefit is obvious: For him it is an opportunity to improve relations with the Crimean Tatar diaspora, which is extremely unhappy with the geopolitical turn of Erdogan towards Russia.

At the same time, Umerov and Chiygoz will strengthen the positions of the Mejlis in the international arena, becoming an important and badly needed reinforcement. Over the course of the last three years, many have already lost their "Crimean-ness" (many political and civic activists have not been in Crimea for quite clear reasons since the annexation). Now, the Crimean Tatars on the mainland have two new international spokesmen who directly experienced Russian repressions. Undoubtedly, they will be vocal at many international venues, not allowing the theme of the Crimea to go into oblivion. One of the first actions of Umerov and Chiygoz in Kiev was a meeting with [Kurt Volker](#), the US State Department's special representative for Ukraine, although before that he had avoided the topic of the Crimea in his activity.

In addition to increasing international activity, there will likely be more effective organization of Crimean Tatars on mainland Ukraine. This will become an inconvenient situation for the Kremlin, since the appearance of Umerov and Chiygoz will provide additional personnel and moral support for the Crimean Tatar national movement, and its ability to lobby Kiev.

The liberation of Crimean Tatar dissidents has become an important international event in the context of the Crimean problem in general and the Crimean Tatars in particular. This became possible only with the direct participation of the leaders of the three states and under extremely complicated circumstances, which demonstrates the complexity of the Crimean problem. Russia does not want to raise the topic of the Crimea in

relations with the West - even in the case of these liberated dissidents, Russia acted through Turkey, a country that did not join Western sanctions against Russia. Turkey's official sites declares that it does not recognize the annexation of the Crimea and leaves it there. However, despite the complexities, this is not the end of the Crimean drama by any stretch.

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