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The Hon. James P. McGovern  
Co-Chair  
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission  
House Committee on Foreign Affairs  
5100 O'Neill House Office Building  
200 C Street SW Washington, D.C.  
20515

The Hon. Christopher H. Smith  
Co-Chair  
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission  
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**Testimony of Daniel Balson Advocacy Director, Europe and Central Asia Amnesty  
International USA**

**Submitted to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

**For a hearing on “Human Rights in Russia on the 5th Anniversary of the Nemtsov  
Assassination”**

Chairman McGovern, Chairman Smith and members of the Commission. On behalf of Amnesty International USA, I thank the Commission for the opportunity to submit this testimony. In 1988, my family and I fled religious persecution in the Soviet Union and came to the United States as political refugees. And so, the opportunity to speak before you today is a great honor – both professional and personal in nature. I will focus my remarks on the Russian government’s human rights abuses in Crimea, a territory of Ukraine [occupied and illegally annexed](#) by the government of the Russian Federation since early 2014.

Since the annexation, the human rights situation in Crimea has deteriorated rapidly. [Russian authorities in Crimea have](#) shuttered independent media, curtailed the right to freedom of expression, and launched a campaign of persecution and harassment

against their critics. The full force of that campaign has disproportionately landed on the ethnic Crimean Tatar community.

The Crimean Tatars have long suffered from the Kremlin's policies. In 1944, the government of the Soviet Union deported the entire Crimean Tatar population to remote parts of the USSR. In the late 1980s, approximately [250,000 Crimean Tatars](#) returned to Crimea, constituting 12% of the population. Many members of the community are publicly critical of Russia's occupation and annexation of Crimea and are viewed with distrust by Russian authorities.

Since the start of the occupation, the Kremlin has applied Russian legislation to the Crimean Peninsula wholesale. This measure was taken in direct violation of the [Fourth Geneva Convention](#). And so, Crimeans have been accused of violating Russian laws, arrested by Russian security services, transferred to Russian territory, tried in Russian military courts and sentenced by Russian judges to serve time in Russian prisons. Human rights defender [Emir-Usein Kuku](#) is one such activist. The Russian government sentenced him to 12 years in a penal colony for investigating cases of enforced disappearance.

In 2016, the de facto authorities arbitrarily banned the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People, a self-governing body that promoted the community's cultural heritage and organized educational events. One year prior, Russian authorities [forced the closure](#) of all but one of the peninsula's independent Crimean Tatar-language media outlets.

The community responded by organizing an informal association known as "Crimean Solidarity." The association consists of family members of the detained and strives to fill the gap through acts of courage both monumental and mundane. Members of Crimean Solidarity attend court proceedings against loved ones and document their arrests. They post evidence of their community's mistreatment on social media. They organize cultural programs and drive their neighbors' children to daycare. The group's members have reported surveillance and harassment by the authorities. Their meetings are disrupted, and their website has been blocked in Crimea. In May 2018, their

founder [Server Mustafayev](#) was arrested under fabricated charges, simply for asking a question about love and hate in a mosque. He is faces up to 25 years in jail.

In 2017, Crimean Tatar campaigners sought to get around restrictions on their ability to protest by [setting up individual demonstrations](#), known as “single person pickets”. These demonstrations are perfectly legal under Russian law, yet authorities swept up the participants anyway. Seventy activists were charged, and those convicted were slapped with a fine equivalent to almost half the average monthly salary in Crimea.

At times, the Russian government’s policies in Crimea are best described as wanton cruelty: in August 2017, [authorities](#) jailed a 76-year-old man with Parkinson's disease. His crime was holding a placard. At other times, they border on the absurd. Taras Ibrahimov, a journalist for the Congressionally-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty service was [banned from entering](#) Russia and Russian-occupied Crimea through 2054. Yet what binds them together is the Russian authorities’ belief in the impunity of their actions and the notion that might makes right, the very same ideas that motivated Boris Nemtsov’s killers. Here is what Congress can do to shake the Kremlin’s faith in these propositions:

Recommendations:

- **Support the Crimean Tatar Community and Language in Ukraine:** Many Crimean Tatars currently live in Ukraine but outside the Crimean Peninsula. Congress should call on the State Department and USAID to make additional funding and international exchange opportunities available to Crimean Tatar leaders in media, civil society, business, and in other vital sectors.
- **Recognize Crimean Human Rights on May 18<sup>th</sup>:** The Soviet deportations of Crimean Tatars began on May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1944 and they remain a pivotal event for the community. Now, as Crimea fades from international headlines, Crimean Tatars feel that their plight has been forgotten. Legislatures around the world, including the parliaments of Ukraine, Canada, Latvia, and Lithuania, have

marked May 18<sup>th</sup> as a day to recognize the deportations. Congress should too consider commemorating human rights violations against Crimean Tatars on this day.

- **Demand full, unimpeded, and unconditional access for International Monitors:**

International human rights monitors, including the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, are locked out of Crimea. Congress should urge the Trump Administration to ensure that diplomats assigned to all relevant multilateral organizations routinely press the government of Russia to allow these independent monitors into Crimea.

- **Ensure that U.S. Diplomats Attend Politically Motivated Trials:** Russian authorities often move Crimean Tatar activists and other victims of politically motivated prosecution to Russia for trial, a practice that is in violation of international humanitarian law. Congress should call on State Department diplomats to monitor all trials and appeals of activists from Crimea.