

Third Kurultai held in Simferopol

Vol. 5, No. 143, October 11, 1999

On October 1, 1999, the third session of the third Crimean Tatar people's congress, Kurultai, gathered 134 representatives, elected as delegates in the Crimea and former Soviet Republics to address the issue of introducing changes and amendments to regulations stipulating the procedure of the National Congress and its Auditing Commission. Another issue addressed by the Kurultai was the selection of a presidential candidate and an agenda that Crimean Tatars wished to support. The session was also expected to confirm the authority of their current chairman of the Crimean Tatar Medjlis, Mustafa Dzhemilev.

In addition to Crimean Tatars and the media, the Kurultai attracted attention of the executive branch, represented at the congress by chairman of the State Committee for Nationalities and Migration of Ukraine Mykola Rudko. Speaking to the congress of Crimean Tatar representatives, the high-ranking state official admitted that notwithstanding certain achievements in solving the issues of repatriation and accommodation of Crimean tatars who arrive to Ukraine, still "there are people in the parliament, [and] executive structures of power, who underestimate the importance of the Crimean Tatar issue". The session of the congress symbolically started with the Crimean Tatar anthem, "Ant Enkenmen", and the national anthem of Ukraine. However, general Ukrainian issues were mentioned at the congress mainly in the context of the forthcoming presidential election due on October 31, 1999. During this election campaign, described by Mr. Rudko as the period when a ballot becomes "a man's weapon", Crimean Tatars have paid more attention to the issue than in the year of the previous presidential election, 1994. While in the 1994 election campaign the decision to support then incumbent president Leonid Kravchuk in the run-off was approved by a session of the Crimean Tatar Medjlis, this time a broader debate was brought to the Kurultai delegates. According to Medjlis chairman Mustafa Dzhemilev, even before the vote it was clear that Crimean Tatars would not support a left-wing candidate. Instead, the question was whether Crimean Tatars wanted to support the incumbent president, Leonid Kuchma who, according to Dzhemilev, "lately has done much for our people", or another presidential candidate, representative of the Ukrainian People's Movement Rukh Hennady Udoenko, "whose vision of the future of Ukraine and the Crimea, of the way to solve Crimean Tatar issues approximately correlates with our vision". As to Crimean Tatars' vision of the future of the Crimea, said Dzhemilev, it remained unchanged: the Crimean Tatar national autonomy within Ukraine. A significant institutional development in the Kurultai was the new approach to election of delegates for the forthcoming events. The session established a commission for drafting a new election system. According to the Kurultai activists, it is possible that the forthcoming election of the Kurultai delegates will be direct and will take place on the Ukrainian territory only, contrary to the current practice of electing representatives to the Kurultai from all places in the former Soviet Union populated by Crimean Tatars. Should the changes occur, they would signify Crimean Tatars' conscious choice for discussing predominantly their Ukrainian issues and focus their efforts and interests on this state. The previous, extraordinary session of the Crimean Tatar Kurultai took place in December 1997, and ended up in a split-up of the Medjlis that finalized the crisis of that Crimean Tatar organization. Then, 16 members of the Medjlis accused the Medjlis chairman Mustafa Dzhemilev of "using his authority and direct actions to create conditions for stealth of budget funds". The charges were not officially proven, and the majority of the Kurultai voted in December 1997 to expel the 16 Medjlis members from the organization. This time all of the formerly expelled members Medjlis, now the opposition to the organization's leadership, have attended the congress as rank-and-file delegates of the Kurultai. If the opposition did intend to use the Kurultai to improve its status, the efforts were rather vague and weak. Both the final vote and votes on individual issues suggested that the majority of the Kurultai delegates supported Mustafa Dzhemilev as the chairman of the Medjlis personally, and his agenda for the Crimean Tatar people in particular. Meanwhile, speeches of opposition delegates presented more questions than answers to current topical issues. The congress approved a new version of the Regulations of the Crimean tatar Kurultai. Significant changes included the description of the Medjlis as a "representative-executive body of the Crimean Tatar people", and the withdrawal of the article on the need to confirm the status of authority of the Medjlis chairman at every congress (every 2.5 years). Hence, the term of Mustafa Dzhemilev's leadership of the Medjlis has become practically unlimited.

The new version of the regulation, particularly the abolition of delegates' role in confirming the authority of the Medjlis chairman, caused strong criticism on the part of the opposition. Commenting on the amendment, an opposition leader Zia Khalikov argued that it had made the Medjlis leadership "single-person and eternal", while Remsi Ablayev stressed that "the Medjlis makes its own laws and lives according to them". Mustafa Dzhemilev stated he was disappointed to hear accusations that the amendment was adopted solely to ensure he remained the Medjlis chairman for the next term. He gave reasons for introducing the amendments and argued the adoption of the amendment had not been his personal initiative. However, the stipulation was introduced to the regulation by the vote of the majority of the Kurultai delegates.

Reporting about the progress made by the organization since December 1997, Mustafa Dzhemilev gave "bright example of anti-Crimean Tatar policy": the new Crimean constitution that contains no reference to the status of the Crimean Tatar people and provides them with no quota in the autonomy's power bodies. According to the Medjlis leader, the objective currently on the Crimean Tatar agenda is to press for the adoption of the law on the status of the Crimean Tatar people by the parliament of Ukraine. According to Dzhemilev, the adoption of that law would "contribute to the reduction of inter-ethnic tension in the Crimea" as the law would regard Crimean Tatars as one of the indigenous peoples of Ukraine, grant guaranteed representation of Crimean Tatars in the Ukrainian parliament, introduce the use of the Crimean Tatar language alongside with the national language, and define the status of the Kurultai and the Medjlis. However, the Medjlis leader doubts that the law will be adopted by this parliament, primarily because of the "excess of left-wingers". For the same reason he expressed certain doubts about the success of the forthcoming parliamentary hearings on the Crimean Tatar issue that is on the parliament's agenda. Commenting on the issue of citizenship of the Crimean Tatars and the agreement between presidents of Ukraine and Uzbekistan on the simplified procedure that allowed Crimean Tatars to change their Uzbek citizenship for the Ukrainian one, Mustafa Dzhemilev reported that over 21,000 Crimean Tatar repatriants from Uzbekistan had received Ukrainian citizenship by September 1, 1999, and over 27,000 had submitted formal citizenship applications. Together the figures amount to 62% of Crimean Tatars who have arrived to the peninsula from Uzbekistan. Commenting on the issue of financing the return and accommodation process, Mr. Dzhemilev argued that the funds allocated for that purpose from the national budget are "so insignificant that they do not solve the one-hundredth part of the problem." He stated that the 1998 budget earmarked 6.5 million UAH (at the average exchange rate of US1 = 2.5 UAH), and only 2.2 million UAH were actually received by Crimean Tatars. Since January 1999, only 7 million UAH of the allocated total of 20 million UAH has been received.

Issues of culture, language and education are critical for preserving the national identity and the ethnic group's development. The issues of cultural development and education in the Crimean Tatar language were raised at the Kurultai by Beye Ilyasova, head of the Medjlis Department of National Education. According to Mrs. Ilyasova, currently there are eight Crimean Tatar schools in the peninsula, and 13 bilingual schools with Crimean Tatar as one of the languages of study. She argues that current problems in the field are linked not to the state's policy, but to the attitudes of some individuals. One of the keynote speakers at the Kurultai was Hennady Udovenko, MP, head of the Parliamentary Committee for Human Rights, National Minorities and Inter-ethnic Relations, chairman of the Ukrainian People's Movement Rukh and a presidential candidate whose bid for election was likely to be supported by the Medjlis leader Mustafa Dzhemilev. Mr. Udovenko announced that his party has been a long-standing ally of the Crimean Tatar democratic movement, but spoke mainly about difficulties encountered in organizing the parliamentary hearing on the Crimean Tatar issue, about rather aggressive attitude, the lack of understanding and tolerance displayed by left-wingers in his parliamentary committee, and the need "to change mentality". Though, he gave no recommendations on how the "mentality" could be changed. He argued it was necessary to "insist and achieve" the representation of Crimean Tatars in the Crimean parliament, and outlined his own vision of the issues of the Crimean constitution stressing that it did not take into account the interests of Crimean Tatars in full. Mr. Udovenko also announced that 50 Ukrainian MPs signed a petition to the Constitutional Court because they thought a number of provisions of the Crimean constitution did not correspond with the Constitution of Ukraine. He also spoke about the status of the Crimean Tatar people and problems of the Crimean Tatar language arguing that the issues could be solved if there were "good will of all parties".

The Rukh chairman was not the only one representative of the major national democratic public movement known as the Ukrainian People's Movement Rukh. On the other day, the Kurultai delegates received Yuri Kostenko, an MP and a presidential candidate, and Mr. Udovenko's rival for the Rukh "brand name". Mr. Kostenko also spoke to the delegates and displayed his knowledge of the way to attract attention by bringing a large number of his campaign leaflets in the Crimean Tatar language -

the trick none of the candidates thought to use. Meanwhile, the Kurultai delegates, aware of the split-up of the Rukh and the two candidates' rivalry, finally decided to offer their support to Hennady Udovenko. The decision was approved after a long series of debates. While the majority supported Udovenko, the nominee of Medjlis leader Mustafa Dzhemilev who insisted on preserving the political alliance of the Crimean Tatar national movement and the Ukrainian People's Movement Rukh. The Milet party, established and chaired by the opposition leader, former Vice Prime Minister of the Crimea Lenur Arifov, proposed to support the incumbent president, Leonid Kuchma, in the first round, for his contribution to the pursuit of viable solutions to the Crimean Tatars' social and political issues. Meanwhile, materials of the opposition Milet that were freely disseminated among the delegates, argued it would be erroneous to personify the presidential candidate to be supported by Crimean Tatars. Instead, it was proposed to support all right and center-right politicians, or to use the method of "ranking vote" among the Kurultai delegates to choose one of fifteen presidential candidates to support at the election. It was suggested to disseminate the "ranking vote" results so that to assist Crimean Tatars in making their choice. Some of the delegates suggested to support Yevhen Marchuk, but the idea was dropped when Mr. Dzhemilev's opinion and moral authority proved to be stronger. Meanwhile, Hennady Udovenko has very little chance to pass to the run-off, and the votes for him are in fact votes for Leonid Kuchma. The Kurultai gave the Medjlis the chance to decide for themselves which of the candidates they want to support in the run-off. Most likely, the candidate will be the incumbent president, Leonid Kuchma.

On October 3, delegates of the Kurultai left Simferopol, but the general Crimean Tatar issues remained. The national congress of Crimean Tatars, the Kurultai, set the goal for the Medjlis: to achieve the restoration of Crimean Tatar people's rights "in accordance to its natural-historic status". The self-governance bodies were ordered to continue their efforts aiming at creation of legal conditions for effective representation of Crimean Tatars in all power bodies of the Crimean autonomy. Successful implementation of these needs depends, among other things, on relations between the Crimean Tatars and the authorities, i.e., on the "goodwill of all parties", to which so many policy-makers in the former Soviet Union like to appeal so much.