**Russian authorities 'imprisoning Crimean Tatars in psychiatric hospitals'**

March 28, 2017

By: Madeline Roache

The Guardian

https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/28/russian-authorities-imprisoning-crimean-tatars-in-psychiatric-hospitals

Lawyers and human rights activists say Russian authorities in [Crimea](https://www.theguardian.com/world/crimea) are increasingly imprisoning human rights activists in psychiatric hospitals and submitting them to psychological abuse.

Since the [annexation of the region three years ago](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/18/putin-confirms-annexation-crimea-ukrainian-soldier-casualty) many ethnic Tatar activists who oppose the occupation have been arrested and subjected to abuse and imprisonment in outdated mental institutions, said Robert van Voren, a Dutch human rights activist and political scientist.

“The number of cases has increased considerably over the past few years, in particular against Crimean Tatars and Ukrainian activists who oppose Russia’s annexation,” he added.

Emil Kurbedinov, a prominent Crimean lawyer, said that between December and March 10 Crimean activists had been forcefully sent to a psychiatric hospital in Crimea. Four of them remained there, while the other six had been transferred to prison.

According to Kurbedinov, Crimean activists face appalling conditions in psychiatric hospitals. “Some are placed in isolation and are denied their basic needs, such as access to a toilet. Others are housed with multiple people suffering from severe mental health conditions.

“The activists are interrogated about their alleged involvement in ‘extremism’ and their views of the government. They are also deprived of the right to speak with their family, or meet their lawyer on a one-to-one basis without a guard being present. All of this violates international law,” Kurbedinov said.

All the Crimean activists were arrested on suspicion of involvement in the Hizb ut-Tahrir organisation, which [Russia](https://www.theguardian.com/world/russia) has declared a terrorist group.

The Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group (KHPG) asserts that there is [no evidence](http://khpg.org/en/index.php?id=1480944192) to suggest that the organisation is connected to terrorism, nor is there any proof that the men were involved in the group.

According to KHPG, a further 19 Crimean activists are currently in custody, accused of involvement in Hizb ut-Tahrir.

[Memorial](http://memohrc.org/news/memorial-priznal-politzaklyuchennymi-chetveryh-obvinyaemyh-iz-sevastopolya-po-delu-hizb-ut), a Russian human rights organisation, has described all the activists in custody as political prisoners.

A new report presented on by Crimea SOS, a Ukrainian advocacy group, claimed a total of 43 Tatar activists have been abducted since the annexation – allegedly by Russian authorities. Of those, 18 are still missing and six have been found dead.

On 26 January, Kurbedinov, a defence lawyer, was himself detained in Crimea and accused of “circulating extremist material”. [Amnesty International](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur50/5595/2017/en/) said Kurbedinov was targeted because of his human rights work and called for his immediate release.

Kurbedinov said his eventual release was due to the support of ordinary people, activists and colleagues who “showed me that civil society is alive; that people are not indifferent to the violations of human rights”.

Last year, Kurbedinov defended [Ilmi Umerov](https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/08/26/crimean-tatar-activist-confined-psychiatric-hospital), a Crimean Tatar activist who openly opposed the Russian occupation and was forcefully confined in a psychiatric hospital last August. Human Rights Watch criticised the case, calling it “a shameful attempt to use psychiatry to silence him and tarnish his reputation”. Umerov was released 20 days after his confinement.

In the later decades of the Soviet era, psychiatry was used to systematically confine and punish dissidents. Under the current Russian president, Vladimir Putin, various cases of alleged punitive psychiatry have resurfaced, leading many to believe that the Soviet-era practice has returned.

The abuse of psychiatry in Russian criminal trials is not uncommon, according to Yuri Savenko, a psychiatrist and the head of the Independent Psychiatric Association (IPA) in Russia.

“Psychiatry is now part of a frequent procedure in criminal trials where there is no concrete evidence. [Rather than gather evidence] it is more economical in terms of effort and time to acquire a psychiatric evaluation,” he said.