

The Crimean Programme

There were several components to the Canadian team's programme in Crimea: official seminar sessions; meetings with local officials and representatives of minority communities; and direct contacts with local communities. Official seminar sessions were held in two locations: Simferopol, the Crimean capital; and Miskhor, near Yalta. It was important for the Canadian team to develop a good understanding of all aspects of the complex inter-ethnic situation in Crimea, and thus the standard seminar format was modified. After a small number of formal presentations the seminar sessions developed into a wide-ranging dialogue which covered the most sensitive issues of concern to the various ethnic communities in Crimea.

For example, it quickly became clear that one of the major problems facing the Crimean Tatars and other ethnic groups returning from internal exile, as well as refugees from conflict areas who have settled in Crimea, is the acquisition of Ukrainian citizenship. Thus in late 1996 the majority of Tatars in Crimea were still not citizens of Ukraine. This is partly the result of problems with Ukraine's legislation, although recent changes in Ukraine's citizenship law have eliminated some of its deficiencies. Another problem, however, is that the countries in which the Crimean Tatars and other returnees once resided have made it very difficult for them to renounce their previous citizenship. Since Ukraine does not allow for dual citizenship, this leaves returnees in a very difficult situation. Useful information on this issue was provided by Vladimir Zubarev, a prominent lawyer who is the director of the "Sodeistvie" (Assistance) Foundation on Naturalisation and Human Rights, based in Simferopol. An ethnic Russian, Mr. Zubarev also spoke about attempts to foster a dialogue between the Crimean Tatar and majority Russian populations in Crimea.

Given the "siege mentality" which is widespread among ethnic communities in Crimea, it is sometimes difficult to get a good grasp of the specific challenges faced by specific subgroups within these communities. Thus the members of the Canadian team made a special effort to encourage all seminar participants to speak out. For example, women have carried an enormous (and often unrecognized) burden during the difficult process of Crimean Tatar resettlement, and are often the greatest victims of petty harassment by local administrative authorities. Thus some of the most valuable insights into community problems were provided by representatives of Crimean Tatar women's organizations.

For example, because of the very high rates of unemployment among the Crimean Tatars women often support their families by preparing baked goods and other foodstuffs and selling them to the many tourists who flock to Crimea during the summer. However, every summer the local administrative authorities, pressured by cafe and restaurant owners who are often linked to organized crime, attempt to restrict this informal trade. The same authorities have placed numerous bureaucratic barriers in the path of Crimean Tatars attempting to set up their own cafes and private businesses, and this has led to tremendous frustration and resentment.