

A number of leading figures in the Karaite and Krymchak communities devoted a great deal of time and effort to fully informing the Canadian team about the challenges faced by these small ethnic groups. In particular, we were taken on a detailed tour of Chufut-kale, an ancient Karaite fortress located in the mountains near Bakhchisarai. The leaders of the Karaite community in Ukraine hope that by establishing an open-air museum in this picturesque location they can preserve important elements of their historical and cultural legacy, and also provide employment opportunities to young members of the community.

On the last day of the formal programme in Crimea several members of the Canadian team had an opportunity to meet with the local media during a press conference in Simferopol. Approximately 20 journalists attended the press conference, which resulted in several articles and radio commentaries in the local and national media.

Following the formal programme some members of the Canadian team remained in Crimea for several days and lived with a Crimean Tatar family in the village of Veseloe, near the town of Sudak. This provided us with an excellent opportunity to observe, at first hand, the day-to-day life and problems of the local population. In addition, we were invited to attend a village meeting during which local Crimean Tatars voiced their grievances to village officials. Our observations and numerous conversations with village residents played a crucial role in supplementing the information gained from the seminars and meetings described above. Since Veseloe is typical of many other villages in Crimea, the situation there is briefly summarized below.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s a number of Crimean Tatar families managed, with difficulty, to re-establish themselves in Veseloe, where they were once the dominant population. After the local Crimean Tatars were deported to Central Asia in 1944 ethnic Russians and Ukrainians were resettled in the village, and took over the dwellings and property of the deportees. Thus these new settlers and their descendants were understandably concerned about the return of the Crimean Tatars to Veseloe. However, their worst fears were not realized, since the returnees did not demand the return of their old property (or that of their parents and grandparents). Rather, they attempted to build new dwellings on the outskirts of the village. Over time mutual suspicions began to fade away, and the Crimean Tatars started to reintroduce traditional agricultural techniques which are more suited to local circumstances than Soviet-style collective farming.

However, the Tatars returned to Veseloe at a time of great economic disruption in the entire post-Soviet region. Very high inflation rates quickly devalued their savings, and Crimea suffered a dramatic economic downturn that is even more marked than in the rest of Ukraine. Most Crimean Tatar families cannot afford to finish building the new houses they began when they first arrived in the village, and thus Veseloe is full of half-completed dwellings. Their residents live in cramped, poorly heated, and unsanitary conditions that have led to widespread health problems. As a result, in many cases the reunification of extended families has been put off until the economic situation in Crimea improves.