



BULLETIN

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The Radicalisation of Separatists in Crimea

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Russian politicians in Crimea have expressed dissatisfaction with the Ukrainian government's response to the EuroMaidan protests. They believe that this response has been too weak, and have put pressure on the government in Kyiv in order to coerce it into using violent measures against the opposition. This would end the government's ability to continue dialogue with the European Union. At the same time, the Crimean politicians' support for President Viktor Yanukovich is conditional. They do not exclude separatist activity in the event of a compromise between the government and the opposition. The European Union should oppose such processes, increase its activity on the peninsula, and build a more positive image.

After the government of Mykola Azarov halted preparations for the signing by Ukraine Association Agreement with the EU, the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (ARC) passed a resolution in support of the decision. On 2 December 2013, after the start of mass anti-government protests in Kyiv and other cities in Ukraine, deputies of the Crimean Supreme Council called on President Viktor Yanukovich to declare a state of emergency and end "lawlessness and anarchy" in the capital. The paramilitary organisation "Sobol", representing the Crimean Russians, announced the launch of patrols at the entrance to the peninsula and at Crimean railway and bus stations, in order to stop the "fascist elements" (as they call the supporters of EuroMaidan). Andrei Klichnikov, deputy of the ARC parliament, asked the police to pay particular attention to people not speaking Russian, which was an allusion to the alleged influx into the peninsula of Ukrainian speaking opposition activists.

The next stage of the radicalisation of politics in the ARC occurred on the Day of Unity, 22 January, which is a national holiday commemorating the reunification of eastern and western Ukraine in 1919. The Crimean deputies released a statement in which they put responsibility for the escalation of violence during the protests in Kyiv on the opposition and their supposed European and American principals. They declared that, if the government in Kyiv accepted the call for early elections, it would be ignored by the Crimean authorities.

In the response to a resolution to ban the ruling Party of Regions by the boards of several oblasts of western Ukraine, the Crimean parliament attempted to outlaw the nationalist Svoboda Party in ARC. In the discourse of Crimean politicians and local media, the whole opposition is often identified with Svoboda. This is because it fits better than other opposition groups (Batkivshchyna, UDAR) as the stereotypical anti-Russian party. Svoboda's hero worship of Stepan Bandera enables the Crimean politicians to accuse not just this party, but the entire opposition, of fascist ideology.

After the withdrawal of parts of the restrictive laws of 16 January, and the resignation of Prime Minister Mykola Azarov, on 30 January, several Russian organisations from Sevastopol issued a statement of plans to create a federal state of "Little Russia" (*Malorossiya*) composed of Crimea and south-eastern Ukraine. Activists from Sevastopol's organisations also claimed the city's right to secede in the event that the opposition "seized power by force" in Kyiv. Anatoly Mogilev, prime minister of the Crimean Autonomous Republic, expressed support for the creation of "people's squads" that would not allow "extremists" who may cause ethnic conflict to enter ARC territory. It was, therefore, a de facto attempt to legalise the actions of the so-called Crimean Cossacks targeting supporters of EuroMaidan.

On 4 February the parliament of ARC established a working group, aimed at developing amendments to the Constitution of Crimea and preparing a petition to the Russian government asking for guarantees of the "defence" of Crimean autonomy. In response to these actions (after an application by Batkivshchyna's deputy), the Security Service of Ukraine initiated an investigation into "preparation for the violation of the territorial integrity" of the state. Opposition politicians advocated

a dissolution of the ARC parliament (Batkivshchyna) and follow-up legal action against its MPs—the authors of the petition (Svoboda).

The Likelihood of Crimean Secession. ARC's authorities intend to use a moment of weakness of the government in Kyiv to increase their autonomy. For now, however, they remain loyal to the ruling Party of Regions, and the radical rhetoric of deputies of the ARC does not necessarily mean real separatist actions. It is difficult to assess how much the Crimean politicians' actions are coordinated with the Russian authorities, and the degree to which they are spontaneous.

The Crimean peninsula is strategically important for Russia because of the Black Sea Fleet base of the Russian Federation in Sevastopol. Crimea has a symbolic importance because of its role in the history of the Russian and Soviet empires. The Crimean question is, however, primarily a tool that can be used by the authorities in the Kremlin to put pressure on Kyiv. Russia's goal is not the secession of Crimea or others, but to keep the whole of Ukraine in the orbit of its influence. Stoking fears of secession may, however, affect the actions of President Viktor Yanukovich, and prevent him from making concessions to the opposition, a situation that would be beneficial from the point of view of the Kremlin. This would mean choosing a violent solution to the conflict with the opposition and EuroMaidan, and would, ultimately, block the Ukrainian authorities' dialogue with the European Union.

However, further government concessions to the opposition cannot be ruled out, which would lead to the return of the Ukrainian government to talks with the EU about the Association Agreement. With such developments, the Russian authorities may support further loosening of Crimea's ties with Ukraine, as well as initiatives to support separatism in other regions (for example, in Kharkiv). Russia may support a change in the status of the Crimean autonomy to increase its independence. This would be a signal "disciplining" the government in Kyiv and motivating it to abandon the process of reconciliation with the opposition and EuroMaidan.

A less likely, but still possible scenario is the secession of Sevastopol, Crimea or some oblasts of eastern Ukraine, which would be supported by the Russian authorities. Russia's recognition of the independence of the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the Russian–Georgian war in 2008 could set a precedent here. In Georgia's case, the loss of territories did not lead to the collapse of the then pro-Western government of the United National Movement and President Mikheil Saakashvili. In the Ukrainian case, an announcement of secession by the Crimea could, however, allow a change of power in Kyiv. However, Crimean separatists, supported by Russia, are only likely to attempt such a move if the Ukrainian government chooses to integrate with the European Union and reject the possibility of entering a Eurasian Union built by Russia.

Crimean Tatars' Reaction to the Separatist Activities. "Deepening" autonomy of Crimea will mean increasing conflict between the authorities of the ARC and the Crimean Tatars. This indigenous nation of Crimea represents only 12 per cent of the inhabitants of the peninsula, but plays an important political role. The organisation representing the Crimean Tatars is the Mejlis. Its politicians are clearly in favour of Crimea staying within the borders of Ukraine. The political aims of the Mejlis include compensation for the Crimean Tatars in the form of plots of land for the lost property, which the Crimean Tatar population lost as a result of the Stalinist deportation in 1944.

Due to the conflicting relationship with the Russian majority and local government in the ARC, which rejects the concept of compensation for the Tatars, the Crimean Tatar leaders are always looking for support for their demands from the government in Kyiv. At the same time they have, since 1991, emphasised their loyalty to the Ukrainian state. Strengthening of the ARC's autonomy would limit still further their abilities to influence the situation on the peninsula.

Conclusions and Recommendations. Crimea is one of the potential "hot spots" in the former Soviet Union. Although the likelihood of secession of the region is not large, it is a scenario that cannot be ruled out. The European Union should react strongly to any Russian attempts to stir up separatist activities of the Crimean politicians.

In the longer term, the EU should increase its activities in the Crimea. It is crucial to create a positive perception of the Union among the inhabitants of the peninsula, although this is difficult in the case of the older generation nostalgic towards the times of the Soviet Union. Among the younger generations in the Crimea, however, a pragmatic attitude prevails. Seeing the benefits of the integration of Ukraine into the EU, for example, in the economic sphere, they will be willing to support this process. Therefore, it is extremely important to support the Crimea using different EU aid programmes. It is also essential to increase the number of students from the Crimea studying at universities in EU countries, and economic contacts between the ARC and the EU should be fostered. In the event of the entry of Ukraine into the free trade zone with the European Union, the peninsula could become an attractive area for investments by EU businesses.

The EU should stress (also in dialogue with the Crimean political forces) that the recognition of minority rights is one of its core values. Ukraine's integration with the EU would therefore favour the preservation of the peninsula's multicultural character, including safeguarding the rights of Russians and Crimean Tatars.