Crimeans Celebrate Vote to Join Russia as Ukraine Tensions Rise

By Stepan Kravchenko and Helena Bedwell - Mar 16, 2014

Their home the focus of a standoff between world powers and their votes pitting global leaders against each other, most Crimeans are celebrating their peninsula’s return to Russia after 60 years of Ukrainian rule.

“Today, we got hope for a better future,” said Yana Sever, a 19-year-old hairdresser, as she celebrated with a crowd in central Simferopol, the separatist region’s capital. “We lack big opportunities here and being in Russia gives us an outlook. A perspective for education and a career.”

About 96 percent of Crimeans voted in yesterday’s disputed referendum in favor of leaving Ukraine and becoming part of Russia, partial results show. The government in Kiev, the European Union and the U.S. don’t recognize the vote, which Russia said complied with international standards.

While governments around the world issued statements about the vote, people gathered under the statue of former Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin in Simferopol. Some of them carried white-blue-red Russian flags, singing and dancing down Kirov street.

Fireworks illuminated the main government building, to be replaced by a projection of the words “We are in Russia.” On a stage near the statue, the Russian band Lyube was playing -- a favorite of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

“Welcome back, all of you!” singer Nikolay Rastorguyev tells the crowd, before launching into a song with the words “Russia, my Russia, from Crimea to the Yenisey river.”

Russian Majority

For ethnic Russians, who make up the majority of Crimea’s population of more than 2 million, it is indeed a homecoming of sorts. The peninsula has been home to Russia’s Black Sea Fleet since its founding by Catherine the Great in 1783 and became part of Ukraine only in 1954 -- a gift of then-Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev.

“People have very strong patriotic feelings -- they all want this accession,” Crimean Prime Minister Sergei Aksenov, appointed last month after pro-Russian gunmen took over the parliament in Simferopol, said March 12. “They support us and we feel this support.”

The uprising that overthrew Kremlin-backed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych last month
sent shockwaves through the region, the only one in the country with a Russian majority, according to the 2001 census.

‘Trust Putin’

Many Crimeans see the new government in Kiev as beholden to nationalists who fought on the barricades against riot police, a sentiment underscored by lawmakers seeking to downgrade the status of Russian as an official language on Feb. 23, in the immediate aftermath of Yanukovych’s departure.

“The new leadership in Kiev scares me to death,” Zarina Pogrebtsava, 59, who works in a kids’ clothing store, said before the referendum. “I do trust Putin. He’s smart.”

The plan to change Ukrainian legislation on language drew the ire of the Kremlin, which said that the rights of ethnic Russians were under threat -- a claim that Ukraine’s new leaders deny. Tensions flared in Simferopol three days later as demonstrators pushing for the referendum clashed with members of the Tatar ethnic minority, which accounts for about 12 percent of the region’s population.

Within a week, pro-Russian forces took control of Crimea, seizing airports and other facilities even though interim President Oleksandr Turchynov eventually blocked the new language law. Today, the peninsula is effectively cut off from the Ukrainian mainland.

The referendum offered the choice of joining Russia or renegotiating the autonomous region’s status within Ukraine. Keeping the previous arrangement wasn’t an option.

Sanction Threat

As the West threatens to ratchet up sanctions if Russia doesn’t back down from taking over the peninsula, Putin has deployed about 60,000 troops along the Ukrainian border, according to the government in Kiev.

Russia on March 15 vetoed in the United Nations Security Council a resolution proposed by the U.S. that declared the referendum illegal and stressed the need for political dialogue to resolve the crisis. In New York, 13 members of the Security Council backed the resolution and China abstained.

“Putin has moved rapidly and aggressively throughout the crisis, and there is no sign he will shift tactics,” Mujtaba Rahman, an analyst at Eurasia Group, said in an e-mail. “He’ll be crossing a U.S.-EU red line; the West is willing to live with the vote if Putin refrains from annexation. By annexing Crimea, Putin will trigger harsher sanctions.”

Joining Russia

In Crimea itself, as many as 20,000 Russian troops are complemented by at least 15,000 local pro-Kremlin militias. Ukrainian forces have been confined to their bases.
Aksenov has told reporters that the peninsula may become part of Russia within a week, though full integration may take a year. Crimea will switch to the Russian ruble from Ukraine’s hryvnia April 1, RIA Novosti cited Crimean Deputy Prime Minister Rustam Temirgaliev as saying yesterday.

Russian lawmakers are scheduled to consider legislation March 21 that would allow Russia to incorporate parts of countries where the central authority isn’t functioning and local residents want to secede, Sergei Markov, a Kremlin adviser and vice rector of the Plekhanov Russian University of Economics in Moscow, said in a telephone interview from Sevastopol, the base of the Russian fleet.

“Crimea will become healthy finally under Russian rule,” said Nikolay Aponov, a business owner who came to celebrate with his wife. “Looking around, people made quite a self-determined decision. I’m not afraid of anything.”

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