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Crimea to Consider Referendum on Expanding Autonomy

By Christopher Brennan

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The presidium of the parliament in Crimea, a semi-autonomous region of Ukraine, has proposed holding a referendum in May on whether to expand its autonomy.

The legislative heads said they were convinced that "only holding an all-Crimea referendum on the question of advancing the autonomous status and expanding authority lets Crimeans themselves — without external pressures and dictates — determine future autonomy," the Crimean Information Agency reported Thursday.

The statement came shortly after deputies were allowed into the region's Simferopol-based parliament building, which was seized early Thursday morning by armed men who hoisted a Russian flag above it.

Parliament Speaker Volodymyr Konstantynov said that the question of holding a referendum on May 25 — the same day that has been earmarked for Ukraine's presidential election — will

be discussed at an emergency session on Thursday.

Crimea has become a hotbed of tension between pro-Russian residents, some of whom support secession from Ukraine, and those who support the government in Kiev that took power after Kremlin ally and former President Viktor Yanukovych fled the Ukrainian capital in the wake of violent clashes between protesters and police.

On Thursday, Interfax cited an unidentified Russian government official as saying that a request from Yanukovych for protection in Russia had been granted. The embattled leader also said in a statement that he still considered himself president of Ukraine and that residents in Crimea and the country's south-east did not accept the "lawlessness" that followed his departure.

The Crimean parliament statement said that Ukraine is slipping into "chaos, anarchy and economic disaster" after the "unconstitutional seizure of power by radical nationalists" and asserted that they would take responsibility for the region.

Newly appointed Prime Minister Arseny Yatsenyuk said "Anyone who tries to split Ukraine acts against the Ukrainian people and the Ukrainian state," and "Ukraine uses all legal, constitutional methods for preserving the territorial integrity of the state.

"Crimea is, was and will be part of Ukraine," he added.

Authorities in Kiev said that the parliament building seizure would be considered a terrorist act.

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