

Crimea Moves to Join Russia

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Pro-Russian supporters taking part in a meeting in Simferopol as parliament voted to join Russia on Thursday.

The Crimean parliament voted in favor of joining Russia on Thursday and its pro-Russian government announced that a referendum would be held on the decision on March 16.

Crimean Prime Minister Sergei Askyonov said all state property would be nationalized, the Russian ruble adopted as the new currency, and all Ukrainian troops forced to either leave Crimea or surrender to the new government once the decision is finalized.

The news of Crimea's potential return to Russia has been well-received in Ukraine's pro-Russian organizations, but Kiev and the international community have begun questioning the referendum's legitimacy.

"Crimea wants to be part of Russia," said Alexander Svistunov, head of the Russian movement of Ukraine, at a press conference in Moscow. "We want to live with our people, and our people are in Russia."

The head of the State Duma Committee for CIS Affairs, Leonid Slutsky, announced that Russia's position on Crimea's independence would depend on the results of the March 16 referendum.

"All factions of the State Duma support the territorial integrity of Ukraine, but we understand why this issue is the cause of a referendum," Slutsky told reporters on Thursday, Itar-Tass reported. "We will determine our position, the position of the State Duma, of the Russian Federation, on the basis of the results of the March 16 referendum."

Sergei Mironov, the Duma deputy who leads the A Just Russia party, said earlier this week that he had introduced a bill to simplify the procedure for Crimea to join the Russian Federation.

Crimea's eagerness to join Russia has raised questions about the legitimacy of the upcoming referendum both in Kiev and abroad.

Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, who was in Brussels on Thursday for talks with EU leaders, said that a referendum in Crimea was illegitimate and that the republic "is, was and will be an integral part of Ukraine."

French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said Crimea's readiness to join Russia after a referendum "violates Ukraine's territorial integrity."

According to the Crimea's Vice-Prime Minister, Rustam Temirgaliev, more than 70 percent of Crimeans would be in favor of their republic becoming part of Russia.

Termigaliev said that Crimea has already begun preparing for its potential return to Russia and would be making its case for adopting the ruble. The Crimean Parliament also announced on Wednesday that the republic was creating its own prosecutors' office, Interior Ministry and security service.

Representatives of other Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine expect Crimea to serve as a model for seeking self-determination.

"We will form a temporary government and then we will call for a referendum on the status of the Donetsk region and the election of legitimate authorities," said Pavel Gubarev, Governor of the Donetsk Region, at a Moscow press conference. "We will not be under Kiev."

The coordinator of Kharkov's Russian Sector, Irina Shkoda, predicts that other regions of Ukraine will reject the new Ukrainian government.

"I think that the Crimea will leave Ukraine, and that other parts of the country — Donetsk, Kharkiv and Luhansk — will want to be free as well," she said.

Crimean authorities said they were open to having international observers monitor the March 16 referendum. The Civic Chamber of Russia announced it would send observers to Crimea, while the OSCE said it would need an invitation from the Ukrainian government to send its own delegation.

The Crimean assembly's vote to join Russia on Thursday was coordinated with the two houses of Russian parliament, a Ukrainian foreign ministry official said on Thursday.

"All that is happening now — the decision by the Crimean Supreme Council and statements by the Federation Council and State Duma — are evidence that this is coordinated action," Yevhen Perebiynis said, Interfax reported.

"Now the masks are off and we can see for what purpose it all began."

Crimea's parliament voted to join Russia on Thursday and its Moscow-backed government set a referendum for March 16.

(Reuters)

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