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No Room for 'Nyet' in Ukraine's Crimea Vote to Join Russia

By The Moscow Times

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KIEV — Sunday's vote in Ukraine's Crimea is being officially billed as a chance for the peninsula's peoples to decide fairly and freely their future — but in fact there is no room on the ballot paper for voting "Nyet" to control by Russia.

The Crimean voter will have the right to choose only one of two options in the March 16 referendum which the region's pro-Russian leadership, protected by Russian forces, announced earlier this month.

According to a format of the ballot paper published on the parliament's website, the first question will ask: "Are you in favor of the reunification of Crimea with Russia as a part of the Russian Federation?"

The second asks: "Are you in favor of restoring the 1992 Constitution and the status of Crimea as a part of Ukraine?"

At first glance, the second option seems to offer the prospects of the peninsula remaining within Ukraine.

But the 1992 national blueprint — which was adopted soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union and then quickly abolished by the young post-Soviet Ukrainian state — is far from doing that.

This foresees giving Crimea all the qualities of an independent entity within Ukraine — but with the broad right to determine its own path and choose relations with whom it wants — including Russia.

With the pro-Russian assembly already saying it wants to return Crimea to Russia, this second option only offers a slightly longer route to shifting the peninsula back under Russian control, analysts say.

The option of asking people if they wish to stick with the status quo — in which Crimea enjoys autonomy but remains part of Ukraine — is not on offer.

Any mark in one of the boxes is regarded as a "Da" vote. Ballot papers will be regarded as spoiled if a voter fills in both boxes or indeed does not fill in either.

Those who stay away will also not influence the outcome, since the result will simply be based on the option preferred by a majority of those voting.

No Option

"Even if it [the referendum] were legitimate, the two choices presented to Crimean voters offer them no option for leaving Russian control," wrote Keir Giles of the London-based Chatham House.

"The restoration of this [1992] constitution would be a step toward notional independence under Russian control ... Those citizens who were content with Crimea remaining part of Ukraine on the same basis as it has been for the last 20 years do not have a voice in this referendum. There is no third option available."

The Black Sea territory, which was under Russian rule for centuries and gifted to Ukraine by then-Kremlin leader Nikita Khrushchev in 1954 when Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union, has an ethnic Russian majority population which appears to ensure the vote will be valid on Sunday.

The vote will take place against the backdrop of a pro-Russia billboard campaign showing two maps and visions of Crimea — one covered in a Russian flag, the other with a giant black swastika emblazoned across it.

In Sevastopol, a Soviet World War II "hero city" where part of the Russian Black Sea fleet is based, another placard urges people to vote to stop fascism, suggesting the vote was a way of stopping Ukraine's far-right radicals coming to power.

Election officials sought to project the impression of Crimea's peoples — who include the indigenous Tatars as well as Ukrainians — being offered a real choice. The ballot paper

on the website was in Ukrainian and Tatar as well as Russian.

Valery Medvedev, the Russian-born chairman of Sevastopol's electoral commission, used a news conference to announce how he would vote.

"We are living through historic times. Sevastopol would love to fulfil its dream of joining Russia. I want to be part of Russia and I am not embarrassed to say that," he told reporters.

Medvedev said the vote would be fair, however. People only had to answer one question in the referendum, he added, before correcting himself to say there were in fact two questions. "Either to be with Russia or to be with Ukraine," he said.

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