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Crimea Vote Galvanizes Separatists in Russia

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Ukrainian soldiers talking to armed men in Perevalnoye on Thursday.

For separatist groups in Dagestan, Tatarstan and other regions of Russia, the Kremlin's support of a referendum on independence in Ukraine's Crimea peninsula would seem to provide an opportunity for their own movements, which have long been repressed by Russian authorities.

The Kremlin, evidently, does not agree. President Vladimir Putin has long been a vocal opponent of regional separatist movements in Russia, having risen to power by waging a bloody war against rebels in Chechnya, and last year he signed into law a bill that stipulates prison time for those who make separatist appeals.

Ruling party lawmakers hold a similar position, arguing that the situation in Crimea is fundamentally different from that in the North Caucasus and in multiethnic republics of Russia that have active separatist movements.

But some observers believe that in the long term, the Kremlin will not be able to restrain the activity of separatist movements across Russia if it supports measures like the Crimea referendum.

"Russia must never support any referendums [on independence]," opposition leader and anti-corruption campaigner Alexei Navalny wrote Wednesday on his popular LiveJournal blog. "The economy will become weak and we will not be able to give wagons of money to [Chechen leader Ramzan] Kadyrov anymore. This will happen sooner or later."

"No one doubts that he will immediately organize a referendum on independence. There are no Russians there anymore, the result is clear," Navalny warned.

Chechnya and Dagestan are seen as the main centers of separatism in Russia, but there are also separatist movements in regions including Tatarstan, Tuva, Bashkortostan, Sakha, and even regions where the majority of the population is Russian, such as exclave Kaliningrad and the Primorsky region in the Far East.

In recent years, the Kremlin has initiated a policy of settling Russians from former Soviet republics in these regions, giving them Russian citizenship immediately and a place to live. Less than a decade ago, an ethnic Russian moving from a former Soviet country was required to live for five years in Russia to qualify for citizenship.

At the same time, Russia adheres to a tough policy of suppressing separatist movements. In Chechnya, Putin installed Kadyrov, the son of a former rebel who is now fiercely loyal to the Kremlin, and annually allocates millions of dollars to the republic partly in exchange for Kadyrov's efforts to quash separatist violence there.

Russia conducted two wars against Chechen separatists following the Soviet collapse. In 1991, Chechnya was declared an independent state by a leader of one of its nationalist movements, Dzhokhar Dudayev, who later became its president. It remained de facto independent until Russian troops invaded in 1994.

Troops were withdrawn in 1996 after thousands of casualties on each side, and a decision about Chechnya's status was postponed until 2001. The second war, which officially was a counter-terrorist operation, was held from 1999 until 2009, with combat operations lasting until 2001. According to official statistics, up to 160,000 people died during the two wars.

Putin typically reacts aggressively to any calls for self-determination in regions of Russia, even when such appeals appear to represent no real threat.

In October, when university professor Sergei Medvedev said he believed the Arctic should be under international control in order to prevent damage to the environment, Putin called him a "fool" and said his position was "anti-national and unpatriotic."

And late last year, Putin signed into law a measure that stipulates prison time for those who call for independence from the Kremlin. The authorities said the law would prevent the rise of possible separatist tendencies and actions that may lead to Russian regions becoming parts of other countries.

Given Putin's position on the issue, groups in Russia seeking independence for their regions

see the Kremlin's support of Crimea splitting from Ukraine as highly hypocritical.

"[We] condemn Russia's ongoing double-standard policy in international and home affairs," separatist group the All-Tatar Civic Center said in a statement posted online earlier this month. "It supports any pro-Moscow national movements in former Soviet republics with all [possible] means ... while on its own territory conducts a policy of brutal Christianization and Russification of enslaved peoples, with those who oppose such policy being unjustly prosecuted."

In 1992, Tatarstan held a referendum on independence and 61 percent voted for Tatarstan to be an independent country, but Russia refused to acknowledge the results of the vote.

Kremlin-loyal lawmakers and observers argued that Russia's support of the Crimea referendum was not hypocritical due to crucial differences between the Ukrainian region and Russian republics.

Robert Shlegel, a State Duma deputy from the ruling United Russia party, said the referendum in Crimea would be different from separatist initiatives in Russia because Ukraine was "in a state of anarchy."

"Moreover, Crimea is not a Russian region right now, so separatism movements in Russian regions will not take it as a sign that they can also have a referendum on independence," he said by phone. "That is why in this particular political situation holding a referendum in Crimea is a logical decision."

Another United Russia deputy, Dagestan native Gadzhimet Sarafaliyev, said he believed the Crimea referendum was legal because the peninsula was historically Russian and it was a mistake to have given it to Ukraine in the first place.

"We are talking about helping Crimea here," he said by phone. "We do not have any geopolitical interests — Crimea has always been Russian and it must be Russian again."

He said he was not concerned that the referendum might trigger an escalation of separatist movements in the turbulent Dagestan republic. "How can we talk about an escalation of something that does not exist? Dagestan is the most adapted to Russian society of all regions — there has never been any talk about it becoming a separate country."

The majority of Dagestan's population is ethnically non-Russian, with some 26 different nationalities living there, and an Islamic separatist movement is active in the republic, although the movement's adherents typically call for the creation of an independent state that would include territories from other North Caucasus republics.

Meanwhile, Russia's state-controlled media compares the Crimean referendum with upcoming referendums in Britain's Scotland and Spain's Catalonia and refers to Western support of Kosovo's separation from Serbia in 2008.

Alexei Makarkin, a deputy head of the Center for Political Technologies, a Moscow-based think tank, said that Russia has a clear division into "us and them," allowing everything for "us" and nothing for "them."

Makarkin's point was demonstrated by Safaraliyev, who insisted that Turkey must have only cultural and humanitarian cooperation with Tatars in Crimea and must not interfere in Ukraine's affairs, since it was a NATO member.

According to pro-Kremlin pundit Alexei Mukhin, who heads the Center for Political Information think tank, the Kremlin decided to support the Crimea referendum because it realized it would not inspire separatist sentiments in Russia, since all separatist movements in Russia are under the tight control of regional authorities.

But he argued that the Kremlin's support of the referendum was no more than a bluff in order to "bring to life Ukraine's political system that is stuck in mess and mayhem."

"When the Federation Council approved the president's decision to send troops to Ukraine, everyone thought war had already begun, which was not true. The same thing holds here — support of the referendum does not mean that the Crimea is already a part of Russia," Mukhin said, adding that Russia would act within the confines of international law in any case.

But Makarkin said he believed there is no logic in the Kremlin's move and that in the long term it could motivate independence movements in certain Russian regions.

"Now separatist movements fear the central authorities, who can easily destroy them, but many of them will definitely think, 'Why can't we have such a referendum?'" he said. "The Kremlin has no other answer besides, 'You cannot because it is prohibited.'"

Makarkin said that the process of fanning separatist sentiments was closely tied with the country's economic situation. "When the economy is weak, separatist movements get an additional argument for their activity," he said.

All those interviewed by The Moscow Times agreed that Russia would need to allocate significant funds to Crimea if it became part of Russia, making Russia's policy similar to that in Chechnya.

"The difference is that even though Chechnya was in an extremely disastrous state after two wars, Russia allocated money there at a time when there was economic growth in the county," Makarkin said.

"But now it would be difficult for the Kremlin both to give money to Crimea and to keep all its social promises, especially if sanctions against Russia come into effect."

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