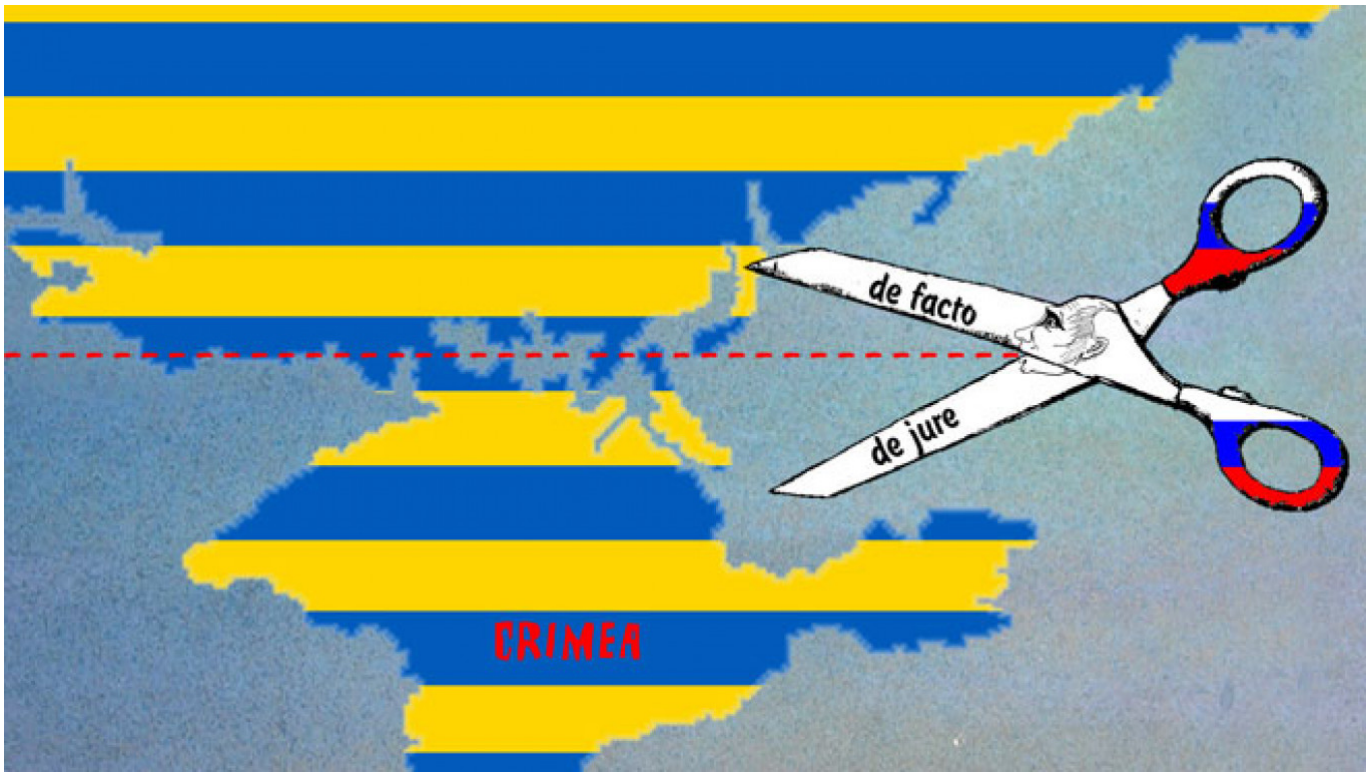
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Save Ukraine!

By Nicolai N. Petro

March 18, 2014



It is all too easy to interpret the results of the Crimean referendum as a rejection of Ukraine. Given the large voter turnout, it appears that the vast majority of ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, and even Crimean Tatars voted for secession. But it is probably more appropriate to view it as a rejection of the current government in Kiev, which Crimeans of all stripes view as having been imposed illegitimately by the Maidan protesters.

Their response is the product of fear and anger. They are fearful of the ultimate intentions of those whom they deem usurpers and what they might do with the unchecked power they now wield. They are angry at the betrayal by the previous government, led by Viktor Yanukovych and the Party of Regions, which has left them at the mercy of these people.

The new government in Kiev needs to accept the fact that Crimea is lost, however painful and difficult that will be.

This fear has become so outsized throughout the east and south of the country that crowds in major cities have even gone so far as to storm government buildings and raise the Russian flag over them. For them, this flag has become a symbol of a cultural and emotional allegiance they will not relinquish. For now, at least, most of these people are not asking to leave Ukraine, but they are demanding that their voices be heard.

The most urgent task of the government in Kiev is therefore to calm their fears and take steps to promote national unity. Here are a few of the most obvious:

• It should publicly embrace the idea of federalism. It needs to get ahead of this rising issue so that it can be guided into a productive and civil discussion.

• It should build credibility with people in the east and south and invite some of the more popular and competent governors, which it removed simply because they were holdovers from the last administration, to join the national government. It should also stop saying that it intends to replace 90 percent of local officials, which simply breeds chaos.

• It should take the important symbolic step of making the Russian language Ukraine's second official language. No other single gesture will do more to calm tensions in the east and south. Acting President Oleksandr Turchynov coyly sidestepped the issue by refusing to sign the inflammatory repeal of the 2012 language law. This only puts the issue in abeyance until a parliamentary commission comes up with new proposals. This legal limbo has only heightened people's anxiety. It is time to accept the reality that Ukraine is bilingual.

• It should create a "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" whose objective should be providing a comprehensive assessment of how the peaceful protests on the Maidan degenerated into lawlessness and violence. There are two vastly different narratives about how and why this happened, and both sides must be heard. If composed of individuals seen as truly independent, the process could do much to promote the healing that Ukraine so badly needs.

• Finally, the new government in Kiev needs to accept de facto, if not de jure, that Crimea is effectively lost. This is the most difficult and painful step of all, On Sunday's referendum, 97 percent of Crimeans showed they no longer feels comfortable within Ukraine. Russian troops enabled this decision, but its roots go back years, if not decades. The current government in Kiev can waste precious resources trying to reverse this decision, but as Harvard professor Graham Allison has suggested, it would be better advised to focus on nation-building at home.

It is conceivable that the more radical elements in the current government in Kiev would rather fight for a more ideologically compact Ukraine than compromise on the principles of the revolution. That is where international mediation can still play an important role.

Western governments clearly have enormous influence over the decisions made by the current Ukrainian government. This influence should be used to encourage more meaningful steps toward national unity. On the other side, Russian influence is just as vital for bringing the east and the south into a national dialogue.

The main obstacle to the obvious need for a partnership with Russia seems to be

the widespread Western perception of Ukraine as, above all, a geostrategic asset in some sort of ongoing struggle against Russian imperialism. When shorn of rhetorical hyperbole, however, the truth is that Russia and the West share a common interest in a strong, prosperous and united Ukraine, albeit for different reasons. The West wants an ally that can exert pressure on Russia, which does not want a failed state on its doorstep.

Both sides in Ukraine's domestic conflict therefore need their respective international supporters to agree on a common framework for resolving the crisis so that they can begrudgingly, but with great relief, begin to implement it.

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/03/18/save-ukraine-a33110