

Putin Urged to Repatriate Up to 40,000 Jews in Crimea

By [Ivan Nechepurenko](#)

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Up to 40,000 Jews could resettle in Crimea, encouraged by the peninsula's return to Moscow's control.

President Vladimir Putin should allow 40,000 Jews living abroad and other migrants who left Crimea before it was annexed from Ukraine by Russia in 2014 to return home and obtain Russian citizenship, the head of the Crimean branch of the Russian Communist Party told The Moscow Times on Wednesday.

Leonid Grach said in a phone interview that he has sent a formal request to the president asking him to ease the complex procedure repatriates have to go through in order to obtain Russian citizenship and settle permanently in the country.

Up to 40,000 Jews could resettle in Crimea, encouraged by the peninsula's return to Moscow's control, Grach said, citing a figure he said he had been given by Alexander Redko, leader of the pro-Russian Progressive Liberal-Democratic party of Israel.

Speaking to The Moscow Times, Redko confirmed the figure, saying that at least 500 people had contacted him asking him to help them resettle in Crimea.

"About 40,000 Crimean Jews left the peninsula, along with other nationals, during Soviet times, and also after it became part of the independent Ukrainian state," said Redko in a phone interview.

"Many people left Crimea after they lost what they felt was their motherland. Today we ask Putin to grant them easy access to Russian citizenship," he said.

According to Redko, his party was registered in 2002, but has never been successful in winning seats in Israel's legislature, the Knesset.

The popular Russian-language Israel-based news website Newsru.co.il put Redko's claim in doubt, reporting on Wednesday that no surge of Russian Jews wishing to repatriate to Crimea had been observed.

Grach, a veteran pro-Russian politician who served in the Ukrainian parliament in 2002-2012, said Crimea needs competent people who would help it revive its economy.

"Today we see that criminals have come to power in Crimea, so we have a deficit of good state managers who have lived in a lawful state," said Grach.

"In Israel, there are people who own their own business, who are successful and who can come and develop Crimea," he said.

Crimea has been plagued by a series of corruption scandals in the last week, with several high-ranking officials arrested on suspicion of economic crime. Sergei Aksyonov, the peninsula's prime minister since its takeover by Russian troops last February, has been named as a former gangster in some news reports.

The Crimean peninsula, including the city of Sevastopol, were annexed by Russia in March 2014 after a shotgun referendum that was not recognized by the Ukrainian government in Kiev or by most countries around the world. Western countries have imposed sanctions against Russia over the move.

In Russia, however, the annexation was met with widespread jubilation at both a political and public level. Putin's approval rating soared following the move, and continues to remain at a record high.

Contact the author at i.nechepurenko@imedia.ru

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