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Purges Signal End to Crimea's Special Status Under Russia

By Jennifer Monaghan

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All of the officials dismissed in the last week worked for the previous administration, when Crimea was part of Ukraine.

A recent spate of dismissals and criminal cases against high-ranking Crimean officials can be seen as the inevitable consequence of change as the Black Sea region adjusts to life under the Russian system, analysts told The Moscow Times on Thursday.

In the past week, investigations have been opened against two top officials on the peninsula. Nikolai Kochanov, who heads the federal tax inspectors service for Crimea, was put under house arrest on Thursday after being caught red-handed giving a 300,000 ruble ($5,300) bribe to a police officer three days earlier, the regional branch of the Investigative Committee said in an online statement.

His arrest came after Andrei Skrynnik, the regional minister in charge of industrial policy on the peninsula, was detained Monday on suspicion of helping to misappropriate more than

48 million rubles ($867,000) tied up in a Crimea-owned cooperative, the RIA Novosti news agency cited law enforcement officials as saying.

Sergei Aksyonov, the peninsula's prime minister since its takeover by Russian troops last February, wrote Tuesday on Facebook that the detentions showed his intention to clean up Crimea, which was annexed from Ukraine by Russia last March.

"If an official at any level has violated the law, if their guilt has been proven, then they should be held accountable for their actions. Especially if those actions are connected to corruption, which undermines the credibility of the authorities and the state," Aksyonov wrote on Facebook. "As head of the republic, I am going to lead this fight."

Ekaterina Schulmann, a political scientist and associate professor at the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, said the recent purges show that Crimea no longer enjoys the status of a "sacred" region that it had enjoyed since becoming part of Russia. Now, as elsewhere in the country, it is seen as a fair battleground for interdepartmental factions battling for control over regional resources.

"The Crimean elite has little chance [of winning] in this fight because it was built under a completely different system of government — the Ukrainian system. The question is not whether the Ukrainian government was more or less corrupt than Russia. Its system of corruption was built on different lines, and connections led to different people and structures. Now, [under the Russian system], these connections are no use to anyone and don't offer protection from anything," Schulmann told The Moscow Times.

Setting Examples

Aksyonov, who himself is reported to have been a gangster in the 1990s — allegations he denies — has removed another two ministers from his government in the past month, after dismissing two other ministers in March and April.

One of the recent dismissals came during a visit to the peninsula by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev in June, when Aksyonov removed Nikolai Koryazhkin from his position as economic development minister, the Interfax news agency reported at the time.

Alexander Gordetsky, minister for property and land resources, was suspended pending an investigation last Friday after reportedly selling land below its market value, the Crimean government said in an online statement. The ongoing investigation into his ministry was initiated by Aksyonov, the statement said.

Alexei Makarkin, deputy director of the Moscow-based Center for Political Technologies think tank, said the recent purge of regional officials reflects an acknowledgment from the federal center that it has to be seen as doing something to tackle the problem of corruption on the peninsula.

There was a feeling immediately after the annexation that joining Russia would be a magic solution to Crimea's problems, he said.

"Everyone would be guaranteed a job, a better salary ... and the officials in this country would

also be better ... But suddenly it becomes clear that the officials are exactly the same," Makarkin told The Moscow Times.

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No Change at the Top

A report by the RBC news agency on Tuesday had suggested that personnel changes at the regional level could soon be followed by structural and personnel changes at a federal level.

The report cited unidentified sources in and close to the government as saying that the Ministry for Crimean Affairs established in March last year could soon be liquidated and its head, Oleg Savyolov, put out to grass.

The possible changes are linked to a power struggle between circles of influence around the presidential envoy to Crimea, Oleg Belaventsev, and the government's representative for Crimea, Dmitry Kozak, the report cited the sources as saying.

But Makarkin, who said he could not comment on competition between rival institutions, does not think there will be any structural changes on the ground in Crimea and that any changes in personnel will be changes in name only.

Aksyonov, who was confirmed as head of the region by President Vladimir Putin after Crimea's annexation, will also be safe in his position for the time being because the Kremlin does not have anyone else it could put in his place right now, he says.

"He knows the rules of the game, and he has not shown any personal ambition," Makarkin said.

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