

EU Visits to Crimea Reflect Democracy, Not Divisions Over Russia, Say Analysts

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As Ukraine launched a criminal investigation into a visit last week by 10 French lawmakers to Crimea, the current trend for delegations of European lawmakers visiting the peninsula that Russia annexed from Ukraine last year shows that opinion on Russia policy within the EU is far from unanimous, analysts told The Moscow Times on Thursday.

Following the French parliamentarians' visit last week, lawmakers from Italy and Hungary announced their plans to visit the peninsula, as well as members of the EU parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

On Wednesday, Ukraine's Prosecutor General opened a criminal investigation into what it said was the illegal crossing of Ukraine's border by nine deputies of the French National Assembly and one member of the Senate, who flew to Crimea on a direct flight from Moscow.

Ukraine considers Crimea to remain part of its sovereign territory, and argues that all visitors should pass through Ukrainian customs and passport control.

“Crimea is Ukraine. Anybody who encroaches on the freedom, sovereignty or integrity of our state and supports the annexation will be punished by law, irrespective of their rank, citizenship or diplomatic status,” Georgiy Logvinsky, the Ukrainian parliamentary deputy who initiated the investigation, wrote on his Facebook account Thursday.

Ukraine sees Crimea as part of its territory that is temporarily occupied by Russia, while most Western countries regard Crimea as having been annexed by Russia in violation of international law. Russia says that Crimea came under Moscow’s control after local people expressed their desire to become part of Russia in a hastily organized referendum last year.

French Trendsetters

Led by Thierry Mariani, a member of the center-right Republicans party, a delegation of French lawmakers traveled to Crimea last Thursday, visiting the cities of Yalta, Simferopol and Sevastopol. The visit was criticized by the French Foreign Ministry, whose spokesman called it “a violation of international law.”

The delegation was invited by State Duma deputy Leonid Slutsky in conjunction with the Franco-Russian Dialogue association, which is co-chaired by Mariani and Vladimir Yakunin, head of state rail monopoly Russian Railways.

The trip proved to be a major media success for the Kremlin, with state-run television channels proudly trumpeting it as proof that anti-Russian unity in Europe is crumbling, while other media served up the sound bites handed to them by the impressed politicians.

“This is a peaceful region, the only members of the military I saw there were members of a military orchestra, while on the streets we spoke to a lot of local residents, and nobody told us that they regret what happened,” Yves Pozzo di Borgo, deputy chairman of the French Senate’s European Affairs Committee, told the Kommersant newspaper upon the delegation’s return to Moscow over the weekend.

Borgo made headlines during his visit after purchasing and wearing a T-shirt with a picture of President Vladimir Putin looking at U.S. President Barack Obama with the caption: “Obama, You Suck” written in Russian underneath. In an interview with the Gazeta.ru news website, Borgo said he did not speak Russian and did not know what the phrase said.

“I can say that there is no occupation there, people live freely. Even the Tatars [many of whom opposed the annexation] whom we met told us that they feel freer and more secure now,” fellow lawmaker Jerome Lambert, a member of the finance commission of the French National Assembly, was quoted by Kommersant as saying.

Policy vs. Populism

“Of course these visits are very painful for the Ukrainian leadership, because Crimea cannot be recognized as Russian territory,” said Konstantin Bondarenko, head of the Ukrainian Politics Foundation, a think tank in Kiev.

“There is a group of politicians in Europe who exploit the topic of rebuilding ties with Russia, especially in the context of the economic advantages this could bring,” Bondarenko said in a

phone interview.

The fact that the French delegation comprised members of the party of the country's former president Nicolas Sarkozy means that a change of policy may be coming, according to Fyodor Lukyanov, chairman of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, a think tank with close links to Russia's Foreign Ministry,

"This could be interpreted as an attempt to diversify risks [by not burning bridges with Russia] and also a way to attack the very unsuccessful foreign policies of Francois Hollande — France has been losing its influence on international affairs lately," said Lukyanov in a phone interview.

He said that a planned visit by Italian lawmakers announced by Manlio di Stefano, a member of the fringe Five Star Movement populist party led by a comedian, has other motivations, however.

"These people want to use any chance to demonstrate their populist, anti-establishment stance," Lukyanov said.

Di Stefano wrote on his Facebook page Wednesday that the Italian delegation will visit Crimea in October. It will comprise eight to 10 deputies, Kommersant reported.

Marton Gyongyosi, one of the leaders of Hungary's nationalist Jobbik party, told Kommersant that a delegation from Hungary would also visit in the fall.

Jobbik is the third-largest political party in the Hungarian parliament.

In addition, Nadine Morano, a French member of the EU parliament who formed the group "For a New Dialogue With Russia" that lobbies for Europe's re-engagement with Moscow, told Kommersant that its members might visit Crimea too.

Divisions or Democracy?

"On the one hand, such visits are damaging the attempts of the EU to clearly communicate to Russia that it doesn't accept the annexation of Crimea and the Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine," said Ulrich Speck, a visiting scholar at Carnegie Europe, a think tank in Brussels.

"But on the other hand, one should not overreact to visits of MPs of several EU countries in Crimea. They do not represent the mainstream of opinion in the EU. It is a small number, and most of them belong to the political fringe," he said in written comments.

"Furthermore, those travels demonstrate that governments in the EU don't control the political system, unlike in Russia. A wide spectrum of opinion on Russia exists in the EU and MPs are free to express them — although they may have violated international law, as the French Foreign Ministry argues," he said.

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