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Ukraine crisis: Crimean MPs' vote to join Russian Federation sparks outrage

Simferopol parliament votes for Crimea to leave Ukraine, as poll that could confirm split is brought forward



A police officer and pro-Russian demonstrators tussle with a topless Femen activist outside the Crimean parliament in Simferopol. Photograph: Alexander Nemenov/AFP

Shaun Walker in Simferopol

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Authorities in Crimea voted on Thursday to accelerate secession from Ukraine, unanimously backing a law that declared the territory to be part of the Russian Federation.

In a move that drew howls of outrage from the new leadership in Kiev, MPs voted by 78 votes to nil for the territory to leave Ukraine, further escalating what has become the most serious crisis in Russian relations with the west since the cold war.

At the same time, a referendum on more autonomy for the region due on 30 March was brought forward to 16 March, and the question was changed to give residents the option to unify the Black Sea peninsula with Russia.

Crimea's deputy prime minister, Rustam Temirgaliev, said the referendum was now only to "confirm" parliament's decision, and he considered Crimea to be part of Russia already. He said that all Ukrainian troops on the territory should either leave or be treated as occupiers. Crimea is planning to introduce the rouble and readopt Russian state symbols.

The Russian president Vladimir Putin said on Tuesday that Russia was "not considering" annexing Crimea, but on Thursday, Sergei Mironov, a Russian MP, said the Duma, Russia's parliament, could consider the issue as early as next week. The Duma has already begun work on a bill that would make it easier for Russia to join new territories, clearly penned with one eye on Crimea events.

The bombshell from the Simferopol parliament elicited a terse response from western capitals; senior EU officials denounced the idea as "completely illegal" while British officials said they would take their cue from the interim Ukrainian government, which deems the referendum anti-constitutional.

The acting Ukrainian prime minister, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, roundly dismissed the referendum. "This is an illegitimate decision. This so-called referendum has no legal grounds. Crimea was, is and will be an integral part of Ukraine," he said. "In case of further escalation and military intervention into Ukrainian territory by foreign forces, the Ukrainian government and military will act in accordance with the constitution and laws."

Later in the evening, the acting Ukrainian president Oleksandr Turchynov said the Ukrainian government would start procedures to dismiss Crimea's assembly, and block the referendum. "It is not a referendum, it is a farce, a fake and a crime against the state which is organised by the Russian Federation's military," said Turchynov, during a televised address.

But it is unclear what mechanisms Kiev has to assert control on the territory, which hosts Russia's Black Sea fleet and has been flooded with Russian troops in recent days. The de facto authorities in the region appear already well on the way to splitting from Ukraine, with Temirgaliev saying all Ukrainian state institutions on the peninsula would be "nationalised" and adding that a group of Russian specialists was in the region for consultations on introducing the rouble.

At a press conference in the Crimean capital Simferopol, he said the only legal troops in Crimea are the Russian army. "Any troops of a third country will be treated as illegal band formations, with all the consequences that entails," he said.

Ukraine has a number of military bases in Crimea which have come under siege from armed local volunteers and the Russian army in recent days. Russia has denied its troops are involved in the region despite widespread evidence to the contrary. Ukrainian soldiers in the bases have come under pressure to defect to Russian or Crimean forces, but have mainly refused to do so.

With events moving quickly on the ground, the big question is whether the officer class starts to defect en masse, and whether Russia uses force if they do not.

Tension is high and rumours are flying in Crimea, with the Ukrainian foreign ministry in Kiev claiming that Russia is preparing soldiers with Ukrainian uniforms to carry out "provocations" in the region. There is little international presence in the region, after the UN's special envoy was forced to leave when he was confronted by an angry gang on Wednesday. A bus of 43 unarmed OSCE military observers from 23 countries was denied entry to the peninsula by a checkpoint of armed irregulars on Thursday, and had to turn back.

A source inside the OSCE mission said that the delegation, invited by the Ukrainian authorities, had attempted to cross into Crimea at two different entrance points, and were stopped and turned back at checkpoints both times.

"At the first one there was a mixture of armed irregulars and militia, and at the second one there were Cossacks and troops wearing official Russian military uniforms," said the source. Eventually, the delegation turned back, and is now in the city of Kherson. The observers plan to make another attempt to enter the territory on Friday.

The Kremlin's final goal in Crimea has been murky, with many analysts suggesting Putin would be satisfied with more autonomy or de facto independence for the region, but Thursday's events appear to suggest that the decision has been taken to annex the region.

Vladimir Konstantinov, speaker of the Crimean parliament, said the new authorities in Kiev were a "junta, which came to power and is trying to legalise itself".

He said: "We can beat them only with force. I am convinced there will be no order in the country until adequate force is used to destroy this system."

Crimea has a large pro-Russian population, though many want more autonomy rather than union with Russia. There is, however, a vocal and well-organised group of locals pushing for union. Outside parliament in Simferopol, a group of about 100 people waved Russian flags and chanted as the Russian national anthem was played, as well as a new "Crimean anthem", which begins: "The island of Crimea is fighting for freedom" and continues with scornful words about "fascist bands" in Kiev and their western backers.

The proceedings were interrupted by two protesters from the topless protest group Femen, who charged the stage with "Stop Putin's War" written on their bodies. They were beaten by a crowd of elderly women before being dragged off by Cossack irregulars and taken away in a police van. "This is what the west is about, whores and junkies," yelled one elderly woman who had been beating one of the Femen protesters on the breasts with a plastic bottle. "We don't want them here, we want to be with Russia."

Among the crowd there were many pensioners who were nostalgic for the Soviet era. "I want to live in the Soviet Union," said 72-year-old Valentina. "I hope Putin does not stop here. Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, it's all one country. Splitting up the Slavic lands is a crime."

The voices of approval for joining Russia were far from unanimous, however. The head of the Mejlis, a body representing the Crimean Tatar population of the region, wrote on Facebook that MPs who voted for the referendum were "insane", and "carrying out someone else's will".

Leonid Pilunsky, a pro-Kiev Crimean MP, said the Cossacks surrounding the Crimean parliament had refused to allow him entry in recent days, despite the fact he has an MP's pass to get inside.

"What kind of parliament is it that does not allow access to its own MPs?" he asked. "I don't know why they are hurrying so much with it, but it's clear that this is a Kremlin scenario that the local leaders are enthusiastically playing a role in. They have scared people with so many stories about fascists in Kiev that people are now more scared of these fascists than they are of the corrupt leaders who have been stealing for years."

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