

Ukraine's amputation

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THE outcome of the “referendum” in Crimea was never in doubt. With Russian troops occupying the peninsula and anyone who does not want to join Russia staying away from the bogus procedure, the 97% vote in favour of becoming part of Russia is not a surprise. Crimean Tatars, the native Turkic Muslims of Crimea, who account for 13% of the total population, and many of the ethnic Ukrainians, who make up another 25%, boycotted the referendum. The 83% official turnout was boosted by Russian passport holders and by multiple voting.

Neither Ukraine, nor the rest of the world, recognize this referendum as legitimate.

Under the Ukrainian constitution it could only be called by the Rada, the parliament. Had it done so there is a strong chance most people in Crimea would still favour a secession from Ukraine. The post-referendum jubilation in Crimea among those who want to rejoin Russia was genuine. People cheered Russia’s military presence in Crimea as a liberation rather than occupation. This was largely the result of the rabid anti-Ukrainian propaganda which portrayed the government in Kiev which came to power after the revolutionary protests last month as a bunch of crazed fascists hell-bent on exterminating the Russian-speaking population of Crimea. But it was also the result of the neglect which Ukrainians displayed towards Crimea over the years, leaving it to its own devices and failing to integrate it deeper into Ukraine.

Still, the purpose of the vote was not to establish the wishes of the Crimean population, but to create a pretext for the full annexation of Crimea by Russia. Having declared Crimea as an independent state, its puppet government has already asked the Kremlin to fold Crimea into Russia—a request which the Russian parliament will discuss on March 21st. By the end of the month Crimea could adopt Russian currency and change the clock to the Moscow time zone. Coincidentally, also on March 21st, the European Union could sign a political part of the association agreement with Kiev.

Russia's annexation of Crimea has pushed its relationship with the West to a new nadir. The threat of sanctions by America and the EU only made the Kremlin more belligerent. In a recent television wrap-up, the Kremlin's chief propagandist, Dmitry Kiselev, said Russia was the only country "capable of reducing America into a nuclear dust".

The Kremlin's original plan, it seems, was to recognize Crimea as an "independent" state and establish its protectorate over it—just as it did with South Ossetia and Abkhazia, two separatist Georgian regions occupied by Russia after the 2008 war. In a news conference held on March 4th, Mr. Putin said he was "not contemplating" rolling Crimea into Russia. Initially, the referendum was supposed to be held on March 30th and to have different questions. Two days later, however, the plan was altered. The referendum was moved forward and questions were changed.

The Moscow-backed putsch and the subsequent referendum creates a threat for anyone supporting the Ukrainian flag, including the Ukrainian military in Crimea which has been effectively under siege by the local militia protected by the Russian military with no insignia. Crimea's puppet government, led by Sergei Aksenov (better known as "Goblin"), said that Ukrainian units will be declared "illegal bandit formations"—a threat that could induce violence. They were given until March 31st to switch sides or disband. Mr. Aksenov also pledged to "nationalize" Ukrainian property.

Russia tried to justify its annexation of Crimea by citing various historical precedents, ranging from Kosovo to the Falkland Islands. It had argued that Crimea, which was transferred to Ukraine in 1954 by Nikita Khrushchev, historically belonged to Russia (despite the fact that it had spent far longer as part of the Ottoman Empire).

Worryingly, Russia may not stop at Crimea. The Kremlin has been stirring separatist movements in the east of Ukraine, in particular in the Donetsk and Kharkiv regions, which have traditionally leaned towards Russia. It has stoked old divisions and orchestrated rallies demanding referendums. To demonstrate its resolve Russia also staged military exercises on Ukraine's eastern border. While Russia would have little problem invading Ukraine, it would be much harder for it to hold the ground where it lacks local strongmen—at least so far. Fearing Russia's invasion into its mainland, Ukraine has called for military mobilization. Sunday's referendum in Crimea is by no means the end of the crisis.
