

## Who has seized power in Crimea?

Eurocrisis in the Press

By *Ellie Knott*

According to recent statements by Russian President Vladimir [Putin](#) and his Foreign Minister, Sergei [Lavrov](#), Russia has claimed to be acting to protect the rights not just of citizens and military personnel, but also compatriots and Russian speakers in Crimea. But how far do Crimeans feel discriminated? Ellie Knott, a PhD student at the London School of Economics, draws on her research to answer this question.

In a [previous article for Vostok Cable](#), I argued that there needed to be a more nuanced understanding of Russian identity in Crimea. Hence I differentiated between ethnic Russians who accept or enjoy living in a Ukrainian state, and *Discriminated Russians*, who identify not just as ethnically Russian but also as the victims of Ukrainisation.

It is the latter who have been heavily involved with pro-Russia movements, such as *Rusaskaia Obschina Kryma* (Russian Community of Crimea), and the pro-Russia minority party, *Russkoe Edinstvo* (Russian Unity). There has been a long-standing cynical attitude to these organisation in Crimea: that they are [professional Russians](#). As one respondent described these individuals want “to get money from this” by using their Russian identification as an occupation to profit from the funding for these organisations which comes from Russia.

It is these same Russian cultural and political organisations who have led the renewed separatist movement in Crimea. As soon as Sergei Aksenov, the leader of *Russkoe Edinstvo*, seized power, he claimed to be representing the interests of all Crimeans. However *Russkoe Edinstvo* were elected by just 4% of the electorate in the 2010 Crimean parliamentary elections.

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Aksenov was able to seize power as the Prime Minister of Crimea after a forced vote in the Crimean parliament. The identity and origin of the armed group who stormed the Crimean parliament on 27 February, forcing the voter later in the day, remain unknown. However the links between *Russkoe Edinstvo* and the Russian administration run deep, both at the local level with personal links to the Russian consulate in the peninsula, through the organizational structure of the Compatriot policy, and several individuals from these groups have been awarded cultural and social medals by the Russian Federation for their work.

In the election materials of *Russkoe Edinstvo*, the idea of discrimination against Russians in Crimea is a major motivation. Hence their electoral platform in 2010 focused primarily on protecting the “humanitarian rights of Russians and Russian-cultural Crimeans”. In the leaflets of [Molodie](#), the youth wing of *Russkoe Edinstvo*, they claimed also that they needed to defend themselves against “enemies of the Russian world” who were trying to “oppress and kill Russian language and culture”. This discourse of discrimination, and its link to the minority Russian separatists, existed in Crimea well before the world’s attention shifted there. The difference now is that the pro-Russian authorities, with the help of the Russian government, and likely the military, have made this discourse go viral, with Russia mirroring the mantra of *Russkoe Edinstvo* by claiming that it is legitimate to act to protect the “humanitarian rights” of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in Crimea.

Perceptions of discrimination were common among just a minority of ethnic Russians that I interviewed in Crimea in 2012-2013. They were angered by what they saw as Ukraine’s “forced” Ukrainisation policies which had infringed on the “rights of Russians” because “priority” was now given to Ukrainian language in society and



Sergey Aksyonov is the de facto Prime Minister of the Crimea who lead the country towards annexation to Russia.

education. They were angered because of the decline of Russian language in schools. But also because even in Russian language schools, they were required to teach what they perceived to be a “totally Ukrainian” version of history which required them to teach the “history of collaborators” in the second world war, such as Stepan Bandera and Roman Shukhevych.

While Stepan Bandera is lauded as a Ukrainian national hero in western Ukraine, in the east and south, and in Crimea, he is depicted as a fascist collaborator, working against the Soviet Union. This idea of Ukrainian nationalism and nationalisation of the state is depicted as analogous to fascism, by this very small pro-Russian group who in the first few days of protests in Crimea mobilised under the slogan of “down with fascism”. In recent days, posters have also appeared in Sevastopol indicating that the referendum is a choice between Russia and fascism.

It is easy to dismiss claims of discrimination as ridiculous given the advantages currently enjoyed by those with a pro-Russian stance, but it is interesting also to reflect on how far feelings of discrimination resonate more broadly in Crimean society. Few I interviewed, outside of those who were pro-Russia, described feeling discriminated in terms of Russian language and culture in peninsula. In large part because they felt Russian was majority culture and language in the peninsula and protected by the local government. Russian culture and language were not perceived as under threat because the Russian “question” was rarely seen as an “acute issue”.

The only example that was often cited by respondents was their dissatisfaction with an all-Ukrainian law that required foreign films in cinemas to be dubbed in Ukrainian, rather than Russian. But as one respondent described it, this was not a “strangulation of Russian culture” but “just a bad law”. In all other aspects of life, respondents felt comfortable in the ability to perform their daily functions in Russian language.

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The pro-Russia organisations involved in the seizure of power in Crimea are acting again as “[professional Russians](#)”. Discrimination was a convenient rhetoric for these professionals because these feelings already resonated with a minority of the population, embedded by economic peripheralisation in post-Soviet Crimea. This discrimination discourse was convenient to legitimise their newly seized authority and disguise the other motivations behind the power grab, such as protecting Russia’s military assets in the peninsula.

It is unclear what *Professional Russians* would [gain](#) from being part of the Russian Federation or a frozen conflict between Russia and Ukraine. But at least in the short term they are able to service their own economic and political interests, while indicating that troops, who remain unmarked but are likely Russian, were needed for the [referendum](#) to act as a “stabilising” influence to ensure “public order”. Reprisals against those investigating and questioning the newly empowered pro-Russian separatists are already on the rise, suggesting that Crimea’s future is not only uncertain but daunting, having empowered militarised elements, such as Cossack groups, to act violently without repercussions towards dissenters, and in particular towards Crimean Tatars and journalists.



Soldiers wearing no identifying insignia have rapidly seized control of Crimea’s military facilities after Yanukovic was overthrown in Kiev.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog, nor of the*

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