

Crimea referendum – our experts react

Yesterday Crimean voters backed a proposal to secede from Ukraine and join the Russian Federation. We asked a number of experts for their reactions to the referendum and their views on what might happen next.

- **Putin has allowed us a vision of what Europe could become if his ambitions are not stymied and the question now is whether Europe has the nerve to react appropriately** – Chris Brown – LSE International Relations
- **Decentralisation or federalisation could potentially strengthen the Ukrainian state internally and provide a safeguard against Russian pressure in the future** – Gwendolyn Sasse – University of Oxford
- **The EU's response will provide good evidence of whether the EU can be seen as a credible international actor in its own neighbourhood and beyond** – Spyros Economides – LSE European Institute / International Relations
- **Russia's irredentism in Ukraine is bound to have implications for the political stability and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation itself** – Tomila Lankina – LSE International Relations
- **If you poke a bear for too long eventually you will get bitten** – Jim Hughes – LSE Government
- **Crimea has changed rapidly from the peninsula where I conducted fieldwork nine months ago** – Ellie Knott – PhD candidate at the LSE's Department of Government

Putin has allowed us a vision of what Europe could become if his ambitions are not stymied and the question now is whether Europe has the nerve to react appropriately



Chris Brown is Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics.

There is nothing the world in general or the West in particular can do to stop Russia from annexing Crimea, deliberately breaking the guarantees it gave to Ukraine when the latter surrendered the nuclear weapons on its territory in 1994 – nor, for that matter, will there be anything that can be done to prevent the invasion of Eastern Ukraine which will take place in the next few days or few weeks.

What can be done is to make ready for the next time President Putin decides he has to ‘protect’ a Russian minority in, for example, the Baltic States or Poland. This involves two steps; first, the EU must reduce its energy dependence on Russia, in the short term by releasing reserves, in the medium to long term by developing local oil and gas reserves. The aim must be that economic sanctions hurt Russia by orders of magnitude more than they hurt the West.

Second, just as in the Cold War British, American and French troops were stationed in West Germany and West Berlin as a tripwire, to make it clear that an invasion of that country would involve NATO as a whole from the outset, so there need to be a similar tripwire on the relevant frontiers of NATO members with Russia – the US move of F16s to Poland and F15s to Lithuania is a step in the right direction, but there need to be bodies on the ground not just planes.

These steps will be hard for Europe to accept because to do so would be to acknowledge that we are entering a new, rather frightening era, but President Putin has allowed us a vision of what Europe could become if his ambitions are not stymied and the question now is whether Europe has the nerve to react appropriately.

Decentralisation or federalisation could potentially strengthen the Ukrainian state internally and provide a safeguard against Russian pressure in the future



Gwendolyn Sasse is University Reader in the Comparative Politics of Central and Eastern Europe, Professorial Fellow, Nuffield College, University of Oxford.

The Crimean referendum cannot be described as ‘free and fair’ and we have no way of verifying the result or the turnout figure (over 80%). But there is also little reason to doubt that the vast majority of the Crimeans who participated said ‘yes’ to joining Russia.

The status of Crimea is now unclear. The Ukrainian government and Western powers do not recognise the referendum, and the Crimean assembly – officially already dissolved by Kyiv – has declared Crimea independent and asked Russia to start the process of incorporating the region. Crimean Tatar mobilisation against the incorporation into the Russian Federation could cause regional instability.

The attention now turns to the south-east of Ukraine where a variety of pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian actors have mobilised and clashed amidst calls for further referenda. The current crisis could provide a momentum for Ukraine to embark on a more fundamental reform of the state in order to manage regional diversity. Such reforms contain political risks, but it may be a risk the current government in Kyiv has to embrace. Decentralisation or federalisation could potentially strengthen the Ukrainian state internally and provide a safeguard against Russian pressure in the future.

The EU’s response will provide good evidence of whether the EU can be seen as a credible international actor in its own neighbourhood and beyond



Spyros Economides is Associate Professor of International Relations and European Politics at the London School of Economics.

‘Predictable but a minimum condition’; this is a useful characterisation of the EU’s expected response to Crimean secession. The EU will impose a series of mild, targeted sanctions against state officials and other individuals – perhaps even Vladimir Putin at some point – as a form of protest and punishment for the actions Russia has undertaken in Crimea and to signal that further undermining the sovereignty of Ukraine will lead to further action.

In reality the EU is hamstrung by conflicting internal divisions among the EU-28 on the extent of actions to be taken, as well as accepting the reality of having limited ‘instruments’ to deploy against Russia with immense and destabilising escalation. The EU will do as much as it can in the face of a geopolitical challenge that, whilst not a direct physical threat to the Union, questions the EU’s influence in its immediate neighbourhood.

Russia's realpolitik puts to task elements of idealism embedded in EU foreign policy and necessitates a strong but pragmatic response which shows intent towards curbing Russian ambitions, meets the needs of internal EU harmony on foreign policy, and finds common cause and action with its main strategic partner, the US. This is a tall order and one which will provide good evidence of whether the EU can be seen as a credible international actor in its own neighbourhood and beyond.

Russia's irredentism in Ukraine is bound to have implications for the political stability and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation itself



Tomila Lankina is Associate Professor in the Department of International Relations at the London School of Economics.

The referendum endorsing Crimea's accession to the Russian Federation will mean further polarisation of the Russian society and polity. On the one hand, the state-media orchestrated campaign in favour of Crimea joining Russia will have helped consolidate the conservative-patriotic core of Putin's supporters. On the other hand, it will deepen the cleavage between the above constituency and many members of the liberal intelligentsia in Moscow and St. Petersburg, as well as in the other industrialised and comparatively developed and politically open regions. Furthermore, cracks will deepen within the political regime itself as economic sanctions kick in.

These cleavages already exist, but they will be further exacerbated by the divisions that have emerged in Russia among those who staunchly rally behind Putin's adventurism in Ukraine, and those who oppose it. Furthermore, the Crimean events might have repercussions for inter-ethnic and inter-communal relations in Russia's regions.

The leaders of the Crimean Tatar community have voiced their opposition to Crimea's separation from Ukraine and the Crimean Tatars have largely abstained from voting in the referendum. Russia's sovereignty over Crimea may have serious repercussions for relations between the ethnic Tatars and Russians in Crimea; these might in turn have spill-over effects on relations among Russians and minority ethnic and religious groups in Russia's other regions. Russia's irredentism in Ukraine is bound to have implications for the political stability and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation itself.

If you poke a bear for too long eventually you will get bitten



Jim Hughes is Professor of Comparative Politics in the Department of Government, LSE, and is Director of its Conflict Research Group.

Russophobia in the US and EU countries means that Russia is consistently misinterpreted through a Cold War lens. Recent events in Ukraine and Crimea are a product of a fifteen year long process in international politics of the US and EU not just ignoring Russia's legitimate interests in its own region, but arrogantly trampling on them. From breaking an initial promise to Gorbachev not to expand NATO eastwards, to allowing the human rights of Russophones outside Russia (in Latvia, Estonia) to be subordinated to the strategic goal of EU and NATO expansion, to the US-led intervention against Serbia leading to the recognition of the secession of Kosovo from Serbia, through to the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the use of a UN Security Council resolution for humanitarian protection in Libya for the purpose of regime change.

The irony is that Russia initially sought to use multilateralism through the UN and OSCE to compensate for its weakness following the collapse of the USSR. It is no surprise that in the case of Ukraine and Crimea, Russia no longer sees any point in operating multilaterally through the UN or OSCE. Putin has made this clear since at least 2007, if not earlier. If we are to move US/EU relations with Russia toward a more cooperative level then the US and EU should recognise that Russia has legitimate interests in its neighbouring countries, including in the human rights of its compatriots living in those countries.

Recent events in Ukraine were a confirmation of the Western policy of provocatively ignoring Russian interests. Putin's policy is undoubtedly much more aggressively protective of Russia's interests, but we should be conscious of the constraints on US and EU reactions, and the dangers of escalation. The first step to show good faith would be for the US and EU to devote more energies diplomatically to securing minority protections for Russophones in Eastern Ukraine, Estonia and Latvia. Putin's actions should be managed by smart accommodation and recognition of legitimate interests, not unleashing further bouts of Russophobia.

Crimea has changed rapidly from the peninsula where I conducted fieldwork nine months ago



Ellie Knott is a PhD candidate in the Department of Government at LSE researching Romanian kin-state policies in Moldova and Russian kin-state policies in Crimea.

Crimea has changed rapidly from the peninsula where I conducted fieldwork nine months ago. Then it was a relatively stable and peaceful multinational peninsula, with a growing post-Soviet generation who saw themselves as politically affiliated with Ukraine. Today it is an emerging frozen conflict with a referendum declaring high turnout and high support for joining the Russian Federation. Men are able to sign up to self-appointed militia and dissenters are penalised. The week before the referendum, there were reports of kidnappings of those connected to Euromaidan networks, abuse of journalists and the impression that for those not supporting joining Russia, this was their last opportunity to protest.

This is also not South Ossetia, Transnistria or Kosovo. What has occurred in Crimea is unique, involving a much larger population than previous frozen conflicts and a Russian naval base. While I have already seen reports from friends that they would not like to stay in a Russian Crimea long term, the message from Crimean Tatars is that this is their legitimate home and one which they will not leave again, as they were forced to in 1944.

What is equally alarming is that Crimea is not a self-sustaining peninsula, dependent on Ukraine for gas supplies, fresh water and rail and road transportation links to Russia, excluding those via sea. I would be concerned also about a potential struggle that might arise between the Crimean separatist administration and Russian Federation, concerning their ideas about what Crimea's autonomous status might look like in whatever comes next.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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