

Vote rigging, intimidation: How separatists delivered Crimea to Moscow

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Within a week of its building being taken over by armed gunmen last month, the regional parliament in Crimea was voting in favor of the Ukrainian region becoming part of Russia.

How that was achieved under the leadership of Sergei Aksyonov, 41, a Russian separatist whose political party won 4 percent of the vote at the parliamentary election in 2010, was a master class in vote rigging and intimidation, according to several opposition lawmakers.

“It was all a great spectacle, a tragic spectacle,” said Leonid Pilunsky, one of a number of regional lawmakers who say a vote behind closed doors to install Aksyonov was fixed and key decisions were taken before anyone could respond.

Moscow says Crimea is in the grip of a home-spun uprising, a popular response to the revolt in Kiev which ousted Ukraine’s Russian-backed President Viktor Yanukovich.

But for the authorities in Kiev and local politicians still loyal to Ukraine, the rapid pace of events were evidence of a carefully orchestrated campaign from Moscow.

Moscow denies any role in installing Aksyonov, who is known from his business days by the nickname “The Goblin”. But even those close to the Kremlin say Russia picked him.

“Moscow always bet on Yanukovich. But after the coup in Kiev on February 22 ... Moscow decided it needed to back the secession of Crimea from Ukraine. Then they looked for who could be its leader,” said Sergei Markov, a political analyst sympathetic to the Kremlin who often explains its workings abroad.

“They chose Aksyonov.”

ENTER THE GOBLIN

The day before the takeover of Crimea began, on February 26, the region’s parliament met to debate holding a referendum on loosening ties with Kiev. The atmosphere was volatile.

In the four days since Yanukovich had fled Kiev, pro-Russian groups had been signing up volunteers to self-defense militias, spurred by Russian television reports that armed Ukrainian nationalists would descend from the capital.

While Crimea's parliamentarians met, thousands of pro-Russian demonstrators clashed outside the building with protesters supporting unity with Kiev.

The vote on the referendum was not held that day: there were not enough lawmakers to reach a quorum after Pilunsky and another opposition lawmaker refused to register as present. "They begged, appealed and threatened us," he said.

The next morning before dawn, armed men seized the building, and from then on, journalists were excluded and it was not possible to verify whether a quorum was reached. Lawmakers had their phones confiscated at the door.

Among those not allowed in was Anatoly Mogilyov, Crimea's regional prime minister, appointed by Yanukovich. Mogilyov had spoken out against breaking away from Kiev, and the ruling party he represented - Yanukovich's Party of the Regions which controlled 80 seats in the 100 seat legislature - was publicly committed to autonomy within Ukraine.

Nevertheless, that night parliament's website said 53 lawmakers had voted to replace Mogilyov with Aksyonov, and 61 had voted to hold a referendum on "sovereignty".

Crimea's Information Minister Dmitry Polonsky, asked whether installing the new leaders in parliament was rigged, said: "There is one supreme power in Crimea which is its parliament and with a majority of votes it is legitimate and legal.

"It is impossible to rig a vote in the Supreme Soviet (parliament). There are deputies who push buttons or raise their hands and if the majority have voted for, then the issue is resolved. There are no ways for influencing the vote or falsifying the vote."

Aksyonov did not immediately return calls.

The Kremlin also says the vote to install Aksyonov followed all legal procedures in Crimea, but no independent journalists were permitted inside to witness it. At least one Party of Regions deputy told Reuters his vote was recorded as cast for Aksyonov though he was not in the city, much less the building.

"I wasn't even in Simferopol but my vote was counted," said the lawmaker, who spoke on condition he not be identified, saying he had received threatening calls and text messages.

The lawmaker said duplicate voting cards were taken from parliament's safe to allow votes to be cast in the name of people who were not present. He was aware of at least

10 votes that were cast for people who were not in the chamber. They have not come forward for fear of reprisals, he added.

“Let me tell you how they scared people: After the first vote was fabricated, they told us that they would open criminal cases against anyone who spoke out,” he said. “Those in power are not really politicians but businessmen. It’s very easy to put pressure on them. They have a lot to lose.”

SAVE THEIR SKINS

Crimea is the only part of Ukraine with an ethnic Russian majority, and the 1990s saw frequent agitation for independence there, especially when relations between Kiev and Moscow were tense. Washington and Kiev blamed Moscow for stirring it up.

In a 2006 cable released by WikiLeaks, the U.S. embassy reported back to Washington that Moscow’s agents were active again, after the 2004-2005 “Orange Revolution” that brought anti-Russian politicians to power in Kiev.

Of all the Russian-backed groups in Crimea, the cable identified the Russian Society of Crimea as the one “with the most overt contacts with Moscow”. The man identified in the cable as its leader, Sergei Tsekov, is now deputy speaker of the Crimean parliament and one of Aksyonov’s main lieutenants.

In 2010, Aksyonov led the political wing of Tsekov’s Russian Society, a party called Russian Unity, into parliamentary elections. The party won just 4 percent of the vote, or 3 seats.

“In spite of all the financing and help he got from Moscow, his party was not able to do better in elections because these currents in Crimean society are not that strong,” said Andrei Senchenko, an opposition member of Kiev’s parliament who hails from Crimea.

On their website, Russian Unity and the Russian Society are clear about their aim to reunite the province with Moscow, saying: “the future of Crimea and Ukraine is union with Russia”.

The last time Crimeans were asked about Moscow’s rule, in 1991, they voted narrowly for independence along with the rest of Ukraine. Despite the tensions of the 1990s, open support for secession or reunion with Russia had become a fringe view as long as the sympathetic Yanukovich held power in Kiev.

But as Yanukovich’s grip looked less solid, there were already signs the Kremlin was seeking more influence in Crimea.

In early February, Crimean media reported that one of Putin’s closest aides, Vladislav Surkov, had visited Crimea.

Once Yanukovich fell, lawmakers in Kiev from the ousted president's Party of Regions backed the new government that replaced him. But in Crimea, some party members swung behind Aksyonov. Crucially, he won the support of the Crimean parliament speaker Vladimir Konstantinov.

That allowed control over votes being held behind closed doors inside the assembly building under guard of armed men.

Pilunsky, the Crimean opposition lawmaker, said ruling party figures in Crimea had switched allegiance to Moscow to protect themselves from the prospect of investigation by the new authorities in Kiev over their years in power in the province.

Party of Regions figures blame the new government in Kiev for failing to negotiate quickly enough to head off secession.

"The breakup of Ukraine began in Kiev," said Vadim Kolesnichenko, a Party of Regions lawmaker from Crimea in Ukraine's parliament.

"At first, the question was only about enlarging Crimea's autonomy within Ukraine," he said. "When instead of talks, Kiev launched criminal investigations (against Crimea's new leaders) ... That is when it became clear: how long can we live in isolation?"

Then, as Aksyonov seized control, Russian lawmakers were flown into Crimea, promising Moscow's financial backing and support.

REFERENDUM

Only a week after gunmen planted the Russian flag on the local parliament, Aksyonov and his allies held another vote and declared parliament was appealing to Putin to annex Crimea. The referendum would be moved forward to March 16 and voters would now be asked if they wanted to join Russia, it said.

Again, a number of lawmakers say they were not present. Nor were reporters. Those deputies who did attend were not told in advance what the vote would be about.

In a video provided by the regional government press service, speaker Konstantinov is shown addressing some 10 deputies sitting in two mostly empty front rows.

"We will vote on a resolution on joining the Russian Federation and they must decide before the referendum if they will accept us so people don't look stupid voting for Russia."

The decision was announced outside parliament to a roaring a crowd, chanting "Rossiya! Rossiya!" and waving the Russian tricolor. Parliament said 78 deputies had backed it.

That day, Russia's parliament also adopted legislation making it easier to annex territory.

The outcome of the referendum is in little doubt. Billboards tell Crimeans they have a choice between a map of Crimea painted with a Russian flag or one emblazoned with a Swastika.

Voters have been given a choice between joining Crimea to Russia or restoring an earlier constitution which would declare it a sovereign part of Ukraine. The regional assembly has voted that if sovereign, Crimea would join Russia anyway.

Those who favor continued ties with Kiev are widely expected to abstain, including the 250,000 Crimean Tatars, the most solid supporters of ties with Kiev, who fear rule by Russia which deported them en masse to Uzbekistan under Stalin.