



Crimea Referendum: 34 Percent, Not 97 Percent, Says Former Russian Government Adviser

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March 25, 2014

Crimea's near-unanimous referendum to join the Russian Federation was a "grossly rigged" falsification of a "cynically distorted" populace whose vote was closer to 34 percent, according to former economic policy adviser to the Russia Government Andrey Illarionov.

Illarionov, who is currently a senior fellow at the Cato Institute's Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity in Washington, DC, recently published on his blog a study of polling done in Crimea over the past three years, in which Illarionov shows support for joining Russia has varied between 23 and 41 percent since 2011, and concludes that "[a]t a minimum, two-thirds of the Crimea did not vote for the joining of Crimea to Putin's Russia."

This opinion is shared by Yulia Tymoshenko, former prime minister of Ukraine, who Illarionov quotes and who met last week with leaders of Crimea's ethnic Tatar people—at least one of whom has been declared persona non grata in Crimea by Russian authorities since their occupation. Tymoshenko stated on Ukrainian television program Shuster Live, "According to the leaders of the Crimean Tatar people, only 34 percent of Crimeans voted to join Russia. And this is very close to the truth."

Illarionov's study referenced several opinion polls conducted by the United Nations, Democratic Initiatives' Ilka Kucheriv, the Kiev International Institute of Sociology, Research & Branding Group, International Republic Institute, and Gallup.

According to Nezavsimaya Gazeta's Tatyana Ivzhenko in Moscow, who analyzed poll results nine months ago, Russia had been "losing influence on Crimean residents." This is a result, Paul Goble, American analyst and former adviser to Secretary of State James Baker on Soviet nationality issues and Baltic affairs, thinks might have influenced Putin's decision to move into Crimea quickly.

Illarionov also spoke earlier this month about Russian special forces "whose mission it is to open fire on and kill Russian citizens and Russian soldiers in Ukraine" in order to justify Russia's initiation of a war. In the same interview, Illarionov said that for Putin the benefits of invading Ukraine outweigh the risks of economic sanctions. "He will have done what nobody else could

do,” he said, referring to a Crimea Illarionov characterized as a sunny peninsula and a traditional playground for the Russian elite. “Putin will be in power forever.”

The Crimean referendum took place March 16, 10 days after a vote by the Crimean parliament to cede from Ukraine, whose territory Crimea has been since 1954, and join the Russian Federation, which many Crimeans felt an affinity and kinship for, since nearly 60 percent of Crimeans self-identify as ethnic Russians. Additional Russian forces—Crimea was already host to around 12,000 Russian soldiers allowed by a Ukraine-Russia treaty and stationed on four Russian bases—entered the Crimean peninsula Feb. 28, shortly after the Ukrainian parliament cancelled a 2012 bill that had made minority languages—such as Russian—officially recognized in Ukrainian regions that voted to make them so.

The results of the referendum were announced to be 97 percent in favor of joining Russia, a landslide victory for the “pro-Russian forces” who had been campaigning for this result. However, the vote was considered illegal by the Ukrainian government and all other nations except Russia and a couple supporting nations, such as Syria and Venezuela.