

## **Yerevan's Support for Moscow May Backfire**

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In a United Nations vote on Crimea, Armenia found itself in a minority with the likes of North Korea and Cuba.

Officials in Armenia say the decision to back Russia by opposing a United Nations General Assembly motion on Crimea was truly in the national interest. Critics of the move, however, say it shows just how much Yerevan has fallen under Kremlin influence.

In the March 27 vote, 100 states voted for the resolution declaring the Crimean secession from Ukraine invalid. The 11 that opposed it included Russia and just two former Soviet states, Armenia and Belarus, which were joined by Cuba, North Korea, Venezuela, Sudan and a handful of others.

One long-term Moscow ally in the region, Kazakhstan, abstained while two others, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan opted not to vote.

"The decision to vote was made in Armenia's interests. We will never allow the principle of territorial integrity to violate the principle of self-determination," Deputy Foreign Minister Shavarsh Kocharyan told reporters two days after the vote.

In Yerevan, politicians from the government's Republican Party were keen to deny suggestions aired in the newspapers that the decision to back Russia was made under pressure.

Eduard Sharmazanov, party spokesman and deputy speaker of parliament, invited journalists to his office just two hours after the vote to explain the government's reasoning.

"There's nothing to be surprised about. Armenia has often said that it supports the right of nations to self-determination through the free expression of their will," he said. "Besides, Russia is our strategic partner and ally."

Armenia has a longstanding and close relationship with Russia. It hosts a permanent Russian military base, which will remain until 2044 at least, and in January it signed over control of its natural gas distribution network. (See **Russian Energy Giant Captures Armenian Market** ) Last year, like Ukraine, Armenia backtracked on plans to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union and instead announced that it was joining the Moscow-led Customs Union (**Old Alliance Trumps EU Hopes**)

Developments in Crimea resonate particularly with those Armenians who see direct analogies with Nagorny Karabakh.

Run by a separate Armenian administration since the war of the early 1990s, Karabakh and adjoining areas are still considered part of Azerbaijan by the international community. Crimea is seen by many as a precedent for formal recognition, or annexation by Armenia.

Karabakh's foreign ministry hailed the March 16 referendum in Crimea, which led swiftly to annexation by Russia. The vote was an "another example of a people enacting their right to self-determination", it said. (See **Armenians Seem Determined to Misread Crimea** for more on the way the Ukraine situation is viewed.)

Not everyone sees such direct parallels between Karabakh and Crimea.

Vahan Badasyan, an opposition politician in Nagorny Karabakh's parliament, points out that one key difference is the fact that the Crimean vote was a consequence of Russian intervention.

"There was no referendum in Crimea; there was just a vote held under the pressure of Russian military aggression," Badasyan told IWPR.

In Armenia itself, the opposition Dashnaksutyun party backed the government's position on the UN vote, but the second largest party in parliament - Prosperous Armenia - did not do so, and said Moscow had "annexed" Crimea.

"Armenia should have avoided voting on the General Assembly resolution on Ukraine," Prosperous Armenia legislator, Vardan Oskanyan, who was foreign minister from 1998 to 2008, said in a statement. "Armenia should have realised that it might end up on a list of mainly authoritarian, internationally isolated countries."

Prosperous Armenia's leader, Raffi Hovhannisyan told reporters, that the authorities had made the wrong

move, and should instead “behave as befits the government of an independent state”.

Although ties with Moscow have always been close, President Serzh Sargsyan’s surprise announcement last September about joining the Customs Union created suspicions that that he was caving in to Russian pressure. The UN vote has been seen as further proof of Kremlin influence and the erosion of national sovereignty .

“Of course our country could have abstained or just not voted at all, said Alexander Arzumanyan, ambassador at the United Nations before becoming foreign minister in 1996-98, and now an opposition politician. “It isn’t in Armenia’s interests to end up on the list of countries with authoritarian regimes. This development shows that we are continuing to lose our sovereignty.”

Stepan Grigoryan, a former Armenian delegate to the Collective Security Treaty Organisation – a Moscow-led defence pact – warns that backing Russia on the Crimean issue is bound to harm relations with Europe and the United States.

“It’s clear that the pressure now being placed on Russia will extend to Armenia as well. It’s easy to pressure Armenia since we don’t have the resources that Russia has,” he told IWPR. “Although there won’t be a sea-change in US or European attitudes to Armenia, we will see a shift. It’s obvious that Armenia will suffer as a result of this vote.”

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