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By Mike Eckel

Crimeans find their new lives in Russia harder than expected

A month after voting to join Russia, Crimeans are struggling with currency woes, a logjammed legal system, and a moribund tourist industry.

Кримчани знаходять своє нове життя в Росії складнішим, ніж очікувалося

Через місяць після голосування, щоб увійти до складу Росії, кримчани борються з валютною кризою, проблемами правової системи, і вмираючої індустрії туризму.

Життя на півострові Чорного моря, для більшості, якщо не для всіх його жителів, було поставлено з ніг на голову, принаймні в короткостроковій перспективі. Власники магазинів пишуть ціни в російських рублях і українській гривні, і доводиться вдаватися до ручної калькуляції. Адвокати і судді скаржаться, що правова система, паралізована. І головний економічний двигун Криму, туризм, знаходиться в небезпеці, так як нові візові вимоги можуть зробити відпочинок для туристів більш проблемним.

<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2014/0415/Crimeans-find-their-new-lives-in-Russia-harder-than-expected-video>

Simferopol, Crimea

A month on from their referendum to join Russia, Crimeans ought to be looking north to the mainland with some satisfaction. Pro-Russia demonstrators in eastern Ukraine occupy government buildings across the region, making demands for Russian protection. Kiev is mobilizing troops to oust them, raising the possibility that Russia will respond with military intervention. But for Crimeans, now safely ensconced in Russia's embrace, all is now good. Right?

Well, maybe not.

Life on the Black Sea peninsula, for most if not all its residents, has been turned upside down, at least in the short term. Shopkeepers post prices in both Russian rubles and Ukrainian hryvnia, and have to resort to hand calculators to make change. Lawyers and judges complain that the legal system is all but paralyzed. And Crimea's main economic engine, tourism, is in danger, as the turmoil spooks tour operators and new visa requirements make vacations more of a headache.

"The situation seems to be in suspended animation: not to one side, not to another side," says Anton Zavalii, a doctor at a city hospital who is also studying for his doctoral degree. "Everyone is just waiting for something to happen and no one knows what it will be."

With the business of the referendum out of the way, Moscow and its allies in the unrecognized government now running Crimea quickly turned toward bringing the peninsula into sync with the rest of Russia. They have been sanguine about the transition, insisting that by January 2015 the region will be fully integrated into Russia's bureaucracies.

"Crimea has moved away from politics and is all focused on work now," Vladimir Konstantinov, speaker of Crimea's parliament, was quoted by the ITAR-Tass news agency as saying. "We are getting substantial financial aid and all financial questions are being solved."

The realities, however, are proving challenging for the average Crimean. Long lines are appearing outside migration offices, as people rush to get Russian passports. Prices for goods such as meat, gasoline, and sugar have crept up by as much as 30 percent in some places.

The transition has also created questions for students and teachers: Will their Ukrainian diplomas be recognized under Russia's higher educational system? Will teachers need to be re-certified under Russian teaching requirements? At one Simferopol university, political science students joked that they might have to become migrant laborers in Russia or work in a McDonald's restaurant.

Legal limbo

More critically, Crimea's legal system has ground to a halt. "There is no law in Crimea right now," says Yan Akhramovich, a Simferopol lawyer and member of the equivalent of the Ukrainian bar association.

"Ukrainian law doesn't work because we're now supposed to be part of Russia. Russian law doesn't work because there are no Ukrainian lawyers here who know Russian law," he says. "The courts don't work. The judges can't work."

The legal limbo afflicting Crimea now is also highlighted by the question of citizenship. Many, if not most, local residents are seeking Russian citizenship; local authorities have opened special departments to handle the crush of demand.

For those who want to keep their Ukrainian citizenship, however, authorities have set up a byzantine process and a strict deadline of Apr. 18 to do so. Those who don't meet the deadline automatically become Russian citizens.

Elizaveta Bogutskaya, a Simferopol interior designer who is an ethnic Russian, says that over the past few weeks she's gone nearly every day to passport and migration offices, trying to clarify the process of how she can retain her Ukrainian passport and citizenship.

At one point, Ms. Bogutskaya, who has chronicled her bureaucratic adventures on her Facebook page, submitted an affidavit stating she was refusing Russian citizenship. In return, she received a receipt – absent any signs of authority – asking for her signature to acknowledge she was aware of the "potential legal consequences" of forgoing a Russian passport.

"I was born here, I was brought up here, I've lived here all my life, and now I'm a foreigner?" she says. "It's like Alice in the looking glass around here."

Which currency?

Even the simplest of daily tasks, handling money, had been thrown into disarray.

When Dr. Zavalii's first university stipend following annexation finally arrived, several days late, he received it not in Ukrainian hryvnia on a debit card as he used to, but by lining up at the university bookkeeper's office to get a thick stack of crisp, new Russian rubles, untouched by human hands.

He started trying to use the rubles around Simferopol. Taxi drivers looked baffled. Grocery store clerks were exasperated. No one knew exactly what to do with a currency that seemed to appear overnight.

Bank ATMs around Simferopol work sporadically these days, with many bearing paper signs apologizing for “temporary inconvenience connected with implementing new regulations of the Russian Federation.” At many small shops, prices remain in hryvnia, despite the ruble's official introduction on March 24. At bigger supermarkets, goods display prices in both rubles and hryvnia, but cashiers only make change in hryvnia.

And the local economy is further troubled by the lack of a crucial import: tourists. Cruise ship operators are reportedly shunning the historic tourist cities of Yalta and Sevastopol. Russia's notoriously problematic visa process is also making it harder for tourists. And tourists are less likely to visit a region seized by a country now purported to be instigating insurrections in another part of Ukraine.

“There's no local industry or production here in Crimea. Tourism is overwhelmingly Crimea's business. And this year it's totally ruined,” said Said Seitumerov, who runs a restaurant in the historic district of Bakhchisaray, a town located about 20 miles south of Simferopol.

Even for those who boycotted the referendum or outwardly oppose it, there's a grim reality that the annexation isn't going to be reversed, and that the task now lies in finding a way to deal with the new system – warts and all.

“The best thing you can say right now is at least there hasn't been a war,” says Alim Azapov, a university student. “It all would be funny if it hadn't been so sad.”