

Donbas Residents Increasingly Want to Return to Being Part of Ukraine, Bekeshkina Says

Opinion

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Bekeshkina: "If their land is to be Ukraine, then they will accept Ukraine. If it will be Russia, they will accept Russia. But they already understand now that Russia doesn't want them and therefore they would like to return to their former lives."

By Paul Goble for "Window on Eurasia": September 13 -- Irina Bekeshkina [pictured], director of the Kucherin Foundation, says that those who initially supported the Russian occupation of the Donbas did so because they expected that would lead to an improvement in their lives. It hasn't, and consequently, the sociologist says, ever more of them want again to be part of Ukraine. "Now," the sociologist says, "people are returning to their accustomed life and want everything to be the same as it was: they even in their majority do not want autonomy for their regions." What matters is that they not be shot and that they have good jobs (apostrophe.ua/article/politics/2017-09-13/rossiya-ih-ne-hochet-lyudi-na-Donbase-gotovy-vernutsya-k-prejney-jizni---sotsiolog-irina-bekeshkina/14404). "I wouldn't exaggerate their pro-Ukrainian nature, although identification with Ukraine is growing, especially among the young." She adds that "the more successful the [Ukrainian] economy will be, the more such attitudes will grow as will their pro-Ukrainian dispositions." People are tired. They want a clear definition of who and what they are to be. If their land is to be Ukraine, Bekeshkina says, then they will accept Ukraine. "if it will be Russia, they will accept Russia. But they already understand now that Russia doesn't want them and therefore they would like to return to their former lives." This means that there is a growing practical basis for the recovery of the Donbas, she suggests, although ideologically things may be more difficult because for many in the Russian-occupied regions, their identity is not with Russia but with the USSR. "Look at home the streets are called there: everything remains as it was in the Soviet Union." The situation with regard to Crimea is "much more complicated than with the Donbas," the sociologist says. On that peninsula, there have been significant "demographic changes," with Russia introducing ever more people from the outside and oppressing the pro-Ukrainian population which in the first instance consists of Crimean Tatars. In the course of her 3,000-word interview, Bekeshkina made a number of other unrelated comments worth mentioning:

- One must not exclude the possibility that Ukraine will have another revolution. It has had two already in the 21st century and neither were predicted. The attitudes of the masses are uncertain, and now that many people have arms, small groups may be in a position to play a larger if unfortunate political role.
- Ukraine today now has no political force or leader who has "more or less significant support from the population." Most have only single digit backing or in the low teens.
- "When people say that there was never as much corruption as now, this is not true." What is true is that it has never been the subject of so much media attention.
- Predicting the outcome of the next presidential election is a fool's errand. People should remember that a year ahead of the last presidential elections, "sociologists did not even include in the list of candidates the man who is the current president."
- The Ukrainian government has committed "a great stupidity"

in its handling of Saakashvili. The regime didn't need to expel him: he had no support and no legal right to run for president. But by acting as it has, Kyiv has entered into a situation where each of its steps makes the situation worse. At the same time, however, Saakashvili while a media sensation is no more likely to assemble a coalition now than he did earlier.

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The commentary above is from Paul Goble's "Window on Eurasia" series and appears here with the author's permission. Contact Goble at: paul.goble@gmail.com