

## Russia: Strelkov's nationalist movement is reactivated

Katarzyna Chawryło, Witold Rodkiewicz

Novorossiia, a social movement led by Igor Girkin, also known as Strelkov, one of the former commanders of the separatist forces in Ukraine and a retired FSB officer, held a conference on 24 January in Moscow. The conference was attended by activists from Russian nationalist and Orthodox organisations who want the south-eastern regions of Ukraine (which they call Novorossiia) to be separated from Ukraine. The conference passed a manifesto which calls for any kind of support to be provided to the separatists and offers the Russian government assistance in combating external and internal threats posed by the USA and the liberal 'fifth column'. One of the participants admitted in public that the movement had supplied weapons to the separatists.

Furthermore, Strelkov, who participated in the events in Crimea last year, revealed in a TV show on 23 January that the Crimean parliament had decided to hold the independence referendum under pressure from the Russian army, and the deputies voted under duress. He also expressed the opinion that had the Russian army been present in other south-eastern oblasts in Ukraine from the beginning of the conflict, the bloodless annexation scenario could have been successfully repeated.

### Commentary

- The Novorossiia movement was formed on 30 October 2014 but, besides minor events, has been out of the public eye since then and it is no accident that its reactivation has coincided with an escalation of clashes in Ukraine. This movement has created a logistics network offering supplies to the separatists, and is thus a useful tool for the Kremlin in the context of its policy of intervention in Ukraine. By using this structure, the Russian government is able to claim that Russia is not offering any direct support to the separatists, with the exception of humanitarian aid.
- In activating this movement the Kremlin has decided to use the authentic mobilisation of some Russian nationalist circles who sympathise with the separatists in Ukraine. The Russian government has thus gained an additional instrument to develop support for a tougher policy on Ukraine among a Russian public which is showing signs of fatigue with the prolonged conflict. The government also wants to channel the activity of nationalists into a structure under its own control because it fears any forms of spontaneous and independent public activity, including those whose goals partly overlap with its own.
- Strelkov's revelations concerning the conditions in which the Crimean referendum was held contradict the official Russian line, which emphasised that the annexation of the

peninsula to Russia was a result of a spontaneous and voluntary process. By contradicting this, Strelkov implied that if Russian policy is geared towards separating the south-eastern regions from Ukraine then it will need to send regular troops there openly. His statement can also be treated as a symptom of growing support for a more radical military intervention in Ukraine seen among a section of the Russian political establishment. To influence the top decision-makers the supporters of this solution are most likely exploiting Strelkov, who has earned hero status in nationalist circles as a result of his engagement in the Russian diversionary actions in Crimea and Donbas.