Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 30.09.2015 www.osw.waw.pl

The blockade of Crimea

Rafał Sadowski

On 20 September, at the initiative of the Mejlis, the Crimean Tatars' self-government organisation, a blockade of checkpoints allowing passage to Crimea began on the continental side of Ukraine. This is a civic action in which other various Ukrainian organisations are participating (including the Automaidan, Maidan Self-Defence, Right Sector, representatives of Crimea's Ukrainian-speaking inhabitants and territorial defence battalions). As a result, truck transport to the peninsula has been halted (only passenger vehicles and pedestrians are being admitted). On 28 September, one of the two railways linking Ukraine with Crimea, running to the Crimean Titan plant owned by Ukrainian oligarch Dmytro Firtash, was also blocked. Ukrainian Railways had already suspended goods deliveries, although these can be carried out by other carriers. Kyiv has announced that it will tighten its policy towards the peninsula, by declaring that it will annul the Law on the Crimean free economic zone, among other steps. The Russian side has downplayed the significance of the action for Crimea, claiming that currently only 5% of the goods on the local market are imported from Ukraine.

Commentary

- This action is aimed at demonstrating opposition to the repressive policy of the Russian authorities in Crimea, which has targeted local members of the Crimean Tatar and Ukrainian minorities. The protesters are demanding first of all that political prisoners be released, repression halted and freedom ensured for the Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar media, and then the return of the peninsula to Ukraine. The protesters are also trying to exert pressure on the Ukrainian government and get it to change its policy towards Crimea, to undertake active measures to regain control of the peninsula, and to safeguard the rights of refugees from Crimea in Ukraine.
- The blockade has the informal support of the authorities in Kyiv, who are trying to use it to strengthen their political position vis-à-vis Russia. This especially concerns the issue of implementing the Minsk agreements on resolving the Donbas conflict (the separatists there have announced local elections in October and November, a move which Kyiv opposes). Indirectly, the blockade can also be used in economic negotiations with Moscow (including electricity supplies, gas negotiations, and Ukraine's US$3 billion debt to Russia). At the same time, Ukraine is trying to use the issue of Crimea to publicise the problem of Russian aggression internationally, in a situation where it is losing its importance to other international events (negotiations between the West and Russia on

Syria, the refugee problem in the EU, etc.).

- In the absence of reliable data, it is difficult to assess the blockade's economic importance for Crimea and for Ukrainian exporters. Data from the Ukrainian statistics office show that in the first half of 2015, the value of exports from Ukraine to Crimea amounted to US$472 million, and imports only US$18 million (the main item was oil products, with food products coming a distant second place); these figures do not include revenue from smuggling. The law on the Crimean free economic zone, adopted in September 2014, allows Ukrainian companies to export goods to the peninsula without incurring taxes or customs duties (including VAT). As a result, some Ukrainian goods are exported to Russia via Crimea, thus avoiding the Russian embargo.