

Event Summary

Russia wants a federal Ukraine

Anastasia Balezdrova

Two days after the call of Russian President Vladimir Putin to the separatists in eastern Ukraine to postpone the referendum, the local Ukrainian administration recognizes that it is not able to prevent them from holding it. The plan of those with pro-Russian disposition is to declare the eastern part of the country autonomous and then to join it to the Russian Federation.

The situation in Ukraine and the aggravation of the crisis in the country, which already seems almost uncontrollable, had provoked a discussion organized by the Institute of Diplomacy and International Affairs in Athens.

"The main line of Russian foreign policy in terms of Ukraine over the past 15 years has been directed towards the establishment of an independent state, but under the influence of Moscow," said Dimitris Floudas, adviser to the Russian government regarding the World Trade Organization. He also added that the West should not be surprised by its reaction after "only six years ago, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that Ukraine's accession to the European Union would be a casus belli for his country."

According to Floudas, Russia does not want to join the eastern regions of Ukraine following the example of the Crimea, "for the simple reason that, in this way, its western part will become more western than the West", which will create problems for Moscow. "Vladimir Putin's call to the separatists to postpone the referendum expresses a real fear precisely because Moscow does not control them," he said.

Floudas stressed that while Western interests in Ukraine are insignificant, those of Russia are vital. In his words, its intervention in Ukraine is not related to economic interests but to real geopolitical goals. "I am talking about Russia's major strategy to restore its position as the second world power which it lost after the fall of the Iron Curtain. We must not forget that, at the conclusion of the treaty for the Unification of East and West Germany, Moscow agreed to sign it only on condition that NATO would not expand eastward. We know very well how, one after the other, the countries of the former socialist bloc joined the North Atlantic Alliance in the following years. In a sense, Russia believes it was deceived by the West and this breeds a feeling of revenge in it," he said, stressing, "The West can live without Ukraine but Russia probably cannot."

For his part, Director of the Institute of Diplomacy Andreas Andrianopoulos said that even in geographic terms, there are no geomorphologic, language or cultural differences between Russia and Ukraine. "But even if we do not take this into

account, the separation of part of Ukraine will mean that Russia will have a direct border with NATO, and this is something it does not want."

At the same time he expressed his concern that such a development of the situation in Ukraine can provoke a wave of similar actions in many regions in the Russian Federation that are populated with ethnic and religious minorities. "Is the West so naive that it does not understand how, by exerting pressure on Ukraine, it will create internal problems in Russia, which easily could spread outside its borders and reach the Balkans?", he said, giving as a potential example the cases of the republics in the Caucasus region. "The case of Transnistria is similar. A quick look at the map can give us the answer as to how close to the Balkans and Greece such a crisis may be caused," was his conclusion.