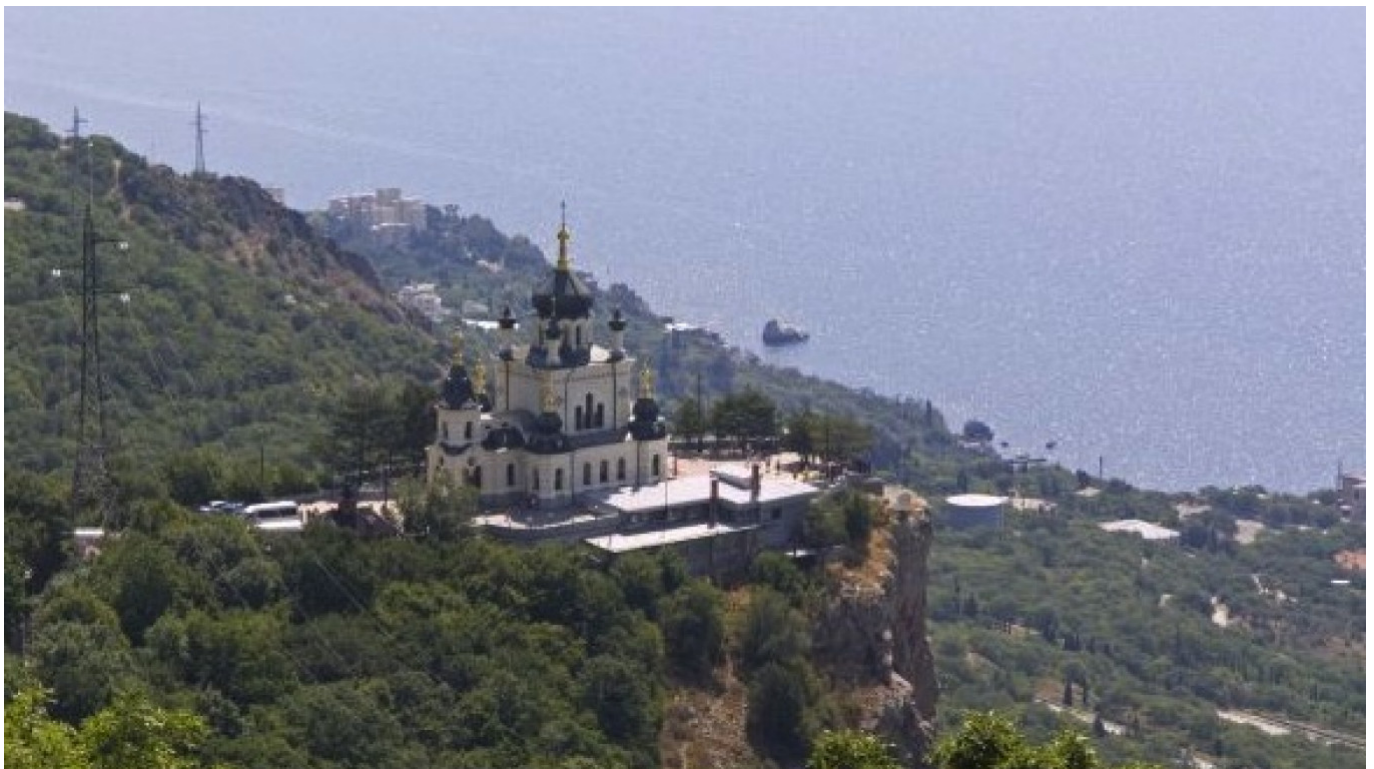


Russia Pledges to Fight for Crimea if Ukraine Splits

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Russia has warned the West that it is willing to fight a war over Crimea. **Alexostrov**

Russia has warned the West that it is willing to fight a war over Crimea, a Ukrainian region where 60 percent of the population is ethnically Russian and where Russia's Black Sea fleet is stationed.

"If Ukraine breaks apart, it will trigger a war," a senior government official told the Financial Times on Thursday. "They will lose Crimea first [because] we will go in and protect [it], just as we did in Georgia."

In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia after the Georgian army attacked the breakaway region of South Ossetia. Later, Russia became the only major nation to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia — another breakaway region — as sovereign nations.

The incident has been a major source of tension between Russia and the West ever since.

In Ukraine, the threat of another standoff between Russia and the West over a breakaway

region appears increasingly real. The speaker of the Crimean parliament said on Thursday that Crimea might attempt to split from Kiev if the country begins to break up as a result of the current crisis that has enveloped the country.

Many officials believe that Ukraine is within Russia's sphere of influence and enjoys a privileged relationship with Moscow, a relationship they are keen to preserve.

"We will not allow Europe and the US to take Ukraine from us," a foreign policy official said. The states of the former Soviet Union, we are one family. They think Russia is still as weak as in the early 1990s but we are not."

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46