

Putin Speaks on Ukraine, Crimea with Constituents

In the annual “Direct Line with Vladimir Putin” TV town meeting on April 17, a four-hour call-in question-and-answer session, the Russian President laid out his position on the situation in Ukraine and Crimea, among many other topics. We excerpt highlights. The full transcript is available in English at <http://eng.news.kremlin.ru/news/7034>.

Asked about developments in eastern Ukraine, Putin replied:

Before I answer your question, I’d like to go back a little to review recent events in Ukraine. As you know, President Yanukovich refused to sign the Association Agreement with the EU. No, he did not refuse to sign it, but said that he could not sign it on the EU conditions, because it would dramatically worsen the socio-economic situation in Ukraine and affect Ukrainians. Yanukovich said that he needed more time to analyze the document and to discuss it with the Europeans. This provoked public unrest that eventually culminated in an unconstitutional coup, an armed seizure of power. Some liked it, and some did not. People in eastern and southeastern regions of Ukraine were worried about their future and the future of their children, because they saw a rapid growth of nationalist sentiments, heard threats, and saw that [the new authorities] wanted to

invalidate some of the ethnic minorities' rights, including the rights of the Russian minority. On the other hand, this description is relative, because Russians are native persons in Ukraine. But an attempt was made to invalidate all decisions regarding the use of the native language. This alarmed people, of course. What happened next?

Instead of starting a dialogue with these people, Kiev appointed new governors—oligarchs and billionaires—to these regions. People are suspicious of oligarchs as it is. They believe that they earned their riches by exploiting people and embezzling public property, and these oligarchs have been appointed to head their regions. This only added to the public discontent. People chose their own leaders, but what did the new government do to them? They were thrown into prison. Meanwhile, nationalist groups did not surrender their weapons, but threatened to use force in the eastern regions. In response, people in the east started arming themselves. Refusing to see that something was badly wrong in the Ukrainian state and to start a dialogue, the government threatened to use military force and even sent tanks and aircraft against civilians. It was one more serious crime committed by the current Kiev rulers.

I hope that they will see that they are moving into a deep hole, and that they are pulling their country along. In this sense, the talks that will start today in Geneva are very important, because I believe that we should get together to think about ways out of this crisis and to offer people a real, not sham, dialogue. The current Kiev authorities have travelled to the eastern regions, but who do they talk to there? They talk to their appointees. There's no need to go to Donbass for this, because they can summon them to Kiev for a meeting. They should talk with the people and with their real representatives, with those whom people trust. They should release the arrested [opponents], help people to express their opinion in an organized manner, suggest new leaders and start a dialogue.

People in the eastern regions are talking about federalization, and Kiev has at long last started talking about decentralization. But what do they mean? To be able to understand what they mean, they should sit down at the negotiating table and search for an acceptable solution. Order in the country can only be restored through dialogue and democratic procedures, rather than with the use of armed force, tanks, and aircraft. . . .



Russian Presidential Press and Information Office

President Putin during his four-hour discussion with citizens on April 17.

Coup d'État in Kiev

Yury Abisov, commander of Crimea's Berkut riot police: . . . Our squad was in Kiev when the Maidan took power from [President Viktor] Yanukovych. They burned us, threw stones, and opened fire at us. Dozens of fighters were killed, hundreds were wounded, but we had an order not to shed blood. After that we were betrayed.

You have known Mr. Yanukovych for a long time. Has he always been such a wimp and a turncoat?

Putin: You know, there is a Russian saying: "Heavy lies the crown of Monomakh." The burden of responsibility on the shoulders of a head of state, whether large or small, is great. In critical moments, one relies on his or her own personal experience and moral values.

As for Mr. Yanukovych, he fulfilled his duty in the way he considered possible and appropriate. Certainly, I spoke with him many times during the crisis and after he arrived in the Russian Federation. We talked about the possibility of using force, among other things. There can be different attitudes to this, but the essence of his answer was that he thought of using force many times but he said that he did not have the heart to sign the order to use force against his citizens. . . .

Another caller asked why Yanukovych fled the country.

Putin: First, I don't agree that Yanukovych fled. He had to leave, but he did not flee from Kiev; he was on a regional trip while the presidential administration and government buildings were taken over in Kiev in breach of a signed agreement.

When Yanukovych signed the agreement on Feb. 21, which was guaranteed by three European foreign

ministers, from Poland, France, and Germany, he believed that this agreement would be honored. Under it, Yanukovych pledged not to use the Army or other armed force against protesters, and to pull the Interior Ministry units, including the Berkut, out of Kiev, while the opposition was to withdraw from the occupied administrative buildings, dismantle the barricades, and disarm its fighters. Yanukovych agreed to hold early parliamentary elections, to return to the 2004 Constitution, and to hold presidential elections in December 2014. Had they wanted it, he would have agreed to hold presidential elections in a month or a month and a half, because he was ready to agree to anything.

But as soon as he left Kiev and pulled the Interior Ministry units out of the city, the opposition renewed its attacks, seizing the presidential administration building, among other government buildings, and accomplishing a coup d'état in the full and classical meaning of the word....

What Will Happen in Eastern Ukraine?

Irina Khakamada, a Russian politician who ran against Putin in the 2004 elections, asked whether a compromise between the U.S. and Russia could prevent war over Ukraine.

Putin: Is there a possibility of Russia reaching a compromise with the U.S. on Ukraine? A compromise should be reached by the various political forces *in Ukraine*, not third parties. This is actually the key issue here. We can only support and accompany this process.

Regarding the question of what should come first: a constitutional referendum followed by elections, or elections first to stabilize the situation and then a referendum: The essential issue is how to ensure the legitimate rights and interests of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in the southeast of Ukraine....

I would like to remind you that what was called Novorossiia (New Russia) back in the tsarist days—Kharkov, Lugansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Nikolayev, and Odessa—were not part of Ukraine back then.... Russia lost these territories for various reasons, but the people remained.

Today, they live in Ukraine, and they should be full citizens of their country. That's what this is all about. The issue is not whether the referendum on decentralization or federalization is followed by elections or the elections come before the architecture of the state is changed. The key issue is providing *guarantees* to these people. Our role is to facilitate a solution in Ukraine, to

ensure that there are guarantees. People from southeast Ukraine will ask you, will ask us, and the current authorities in Kiev: Fine, the elections will be held on May 25, but do you want us to recognize their outcome? You will forget your promises the very next day and send new oligarchs to Donetsk, Kharkov, Lugansk, and so on. What about guarantees? We need answers. I hope that an answer will be found....

A caller from the Irkutsk Region asked whether Putin plans "to send a limited contingent of troops to southeastern Ukraine to protect its Russian-speaking population."

Putin: Despite the events in Crimea, we should not lose our heads, but should proceed from realities. First, we must admit that the ethnic composition of Crimea differs from that of southeastern Ukraine....

The ethnic composition of the population there is approximately 50-50. I have already mentioned that the final decision to return Crimea to the Russian Federation was only based on the results of the referendum. When I saw these results, and saw for myself that almost all residents voted for joining Russia, I repeat, we had no other choice and there could have been no other decision.

As for what is happening in southeastern Ukraine, we don't know for sure. But we believe that we ought to do everything we can to help these people defend their rights and determine their fate on their own. This is what we will fight for. Let me remind you that the Federation Council of Russia gave the President the right to use the Armed Forces in Ukraine. I very much hope that I will not have to exercise this right and that, through political and diplomatic means, we will be able to resolve all the pressing, if not to say burning, issues in Ukraine....

From Lisbon to Vladivostok

In reply to a question from German analyst Alexander Rahr, from Berlin, about shared values between East and West:

Putin: Russia's values do not differ dramatically from European values. We belong to the same civilization. We are different, and we have some features that are unique to us, but we have the same ingrained values. I believe that we must certainly strive to create a greater Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok, as I have said more than once, including today. If we accomplish this task, we will be able to take our rightful place in the future world. But if we choose a different path, if we divide

Europe, European values and people, if we promote separatism in the broad meaning of the word, this will make us all insignificant and mediocre players who will have no influence over their own development, let alone global development....