

Putin Lays Out Strategic Import of Crimea Annexation

by Susan Welsh

March 22—We publish in this section the full text of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s March 18 speech to the two chambers of the Russian parliament and other dignitaries, including leaders of Crimea who the week before, had announced their intention to declare independence from Ukraine, pending the results of a referendum. After Putin’s speech, they signed a treaty incorporating Crimea into the Russian Federation.

On March 16, the populations of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the administratively distinct City of Sevastopol had voted overwhelmingly to apply to join the Russian Federation. The returns in those referenda were, respectively, 96.77% with a turnout of 83.1%, and 95.60% with a turnout of 89.5%.

Our principal reason for publishing the full speech is that Americans, in particular, are utterly in the dark about what the man actually says and said. U.S. mainstream press coverage has been overwhelmingly along the lines of “Is Putin Like Hitler?” or “Putin Threatens New Cold War.” This speech was a well-reasoned and statesman-like overview of Russian foreign and strategic policy, yet American readers are given only snippets, embedded in overwhelmingly negative spin.

There are few exceptions to what Henry Kissinger described, in a *Washington Post* op-ed on March 5, as “the demonization of Vladimir Putin.” Although this magazine does not usually find itself in agreement with Kissinger, we concur that for the West, “this is not a policy; it is an alibi for the absence of one.” And Ste-

phen F. Cohen, a highly respected historian of Russia and the Soviet Union who comes more from the left of the political spectrum, summed it up in a Jan. 30 interview with DemocracyNow.org: “I think that the vilification of Putin in this country, demonization, is the worst press coverage by the American media of Russia that I’ve seen in my 40 years of studying Russia and contributing to the media.”

Historical Ties

Let’s analyze a few of Putin’s key points.

First, he emphasizes the historical importance of Crimea as a part of Russia, which is indisputably the case. (He notes the peculiar historical circumstances under which the two were separated, first in 1954 by Nikita Khrushchov while the USSR still existed as one country, and then when the borders of the post-Soviet countries were drawn up after 1991.)

What about Ukraine? Also indisputably, that country has been torn by opposing views toward Russia since before Ukraine ever existed as a nation-state. Divisions along linguistic and religious lines led to hideous bloodletting in previous centuries, in which no one party was exclusively to blame. Putin was at pains to thank Ukrainian soldiers in Crimea for the fact that they behaved very responsibly, that no blood was shed.

But he also castigated the “Maidan” leaders of the Feb. 22 coup in Ukraine for the country’s current polarization. “Do not believe those who want you to fear



Russian Presidential Press and Information Service

Russian President Vladimir Putin speaks in the Kremlin on March 18. His message came across loud and clear, but Washington is not listening.

Russia,” he said, addressing Ukrainians, “shouting that other regions will follow Crimea. We do not want to divide Ukraine; we do not need that. As for Crimea, it was and remains a Russian, Ukrainian, and Crimean-Tatar land.” It will continue to be a home to all the peoples living there, he said, but, “What it will never be and do is follow in Bandera’s footsteps!”—a reference to Stepan Bandera, the ultra-nationalist Ukrainian Nazi collaborator whose forces waged partisan war against the Soviet Union, from Hitler’s invasion in 1941 until as late as 1956.

While these accusations against the Banderites are routinely dismissed as “Russian propaganda” by U.S. pundits who know nothing about history, the evidence is there for anyone who bothers to look into it. Bandera’s heirs are still alive and well in Ukraine today, in the Svoboda party (with its several Cabinet positions), the Right Sector paramilitaries, and others. Their anti-Semitic and anti-Russian ravings are there for all to see, as *EIR* has documented over the last months.

Yet despite the Banderite legacy, Russia and Ukraine have been linked by geography, history, and culture for centuries.

Many outstanding Ukrainian thinkers, such as Academician Vladimir Vernadsky (1863-1945) and Prof. Taras Muranivsky (1935-2000, leader of the Schiller Institute in Moscow), coupled their passion for Ukraine’s identity as a nation-state, with a profound commitment to Ukrainian-Russian collaboration on

ideas of importance for both nations and all mankind.

NATO’s Eastward Expansion

Putin’s second main point was NATO’s eastward expansion since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1990-91, and Russia’s keen sense that it was betrayed by those Western leaders who had promised, again and again, that this would not happen. This, too, is pooh-poohed (if mentioned at all) by our talking heads. Is what Putin says true?

The German *Spiegel Online*, on Nov. 26, 2009, published an article based on newly declassified German documents, which makes it abundantly clear that such assurances were given to then-Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachov, although they were never put in writing. A few examples

from this and other sources:

U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, Feb. 9, 1990, speech in the Kremlin: There will be “no extension of NATO’s jurisdiction for forces of NATO one inch to the east,” provided Moscow agrees to the NATO membership of a unified Germany.

West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher to Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, Feb. 10, 1990: “We are aware that NATO membership raises complicated questions. For us, however, one thing is certain: NATO will not expand to the east.”

When these promises were broken, in one country after another, would you not perhaps expect that Russia would think it was being encircled? And wouldn’t it be right?

A May 2, 1998 article by *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, provided a useful view, when he reported on the reaction of George Kennan—one of the figures who launched the original Cold War—to the recent Senate vote on the inclusion of Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary in NATO: “I think it is the beginning of a new Cold War,” said the 94-year-old Kennan. “I think the Russians will gradually react quite adversely and it will affect their policies. I think it is a tragic mistake. There was no reason for this whatsoever. No one was threatening anybody else. This expansion would make the Founding Fathers of this country turn over in their graves. We have signed up to protect a whole series

of countries, even though we have neither the resources nor the intention to do so in any serious way.”

Kennan added, after discussing how poorly Russian history is understood in the West, “Of course there is going to be a bad reaction from Russia, and then [the NATO expanders] will say that we always told you that is how the Russians are—but this is just wrong.”

International Law

The third major theme of Putin’s remarks concerns international law. Did Russia “invade” Crimea? Did it violate international law? He says not.

On the question of invasion, no less a personage than CIA Director John Brennan told a senior lawmaker on Feb. 28 that a 1997 treaty between Russia and Ukraine allows up to 25,000 Russia troops in the Crimea region, the *Los Angeles Times* reported on March 3. “The number of Russian troops that have surged into Ukraine in recent days remains well below that threshold, Brennan said, according to U.S. officials who declined to be named. . . .”

In his insistence that Russia did not violate international law, Putin discusses at some length the precedent

of Kosova, quoting from UN documents and an official statement from the U.S. government to the International Court. The point here is that international law does not prohibit declarations of independence, such as that issued by Crimea, even if they violate domestic legislation.

Yet in the *Washington Post*, the daily newspaper read by most of our officials in the nation’s capital, Will Englund had the following to say about Putin’s speech: “In a speech to a joint session of the Russian parliament, he compared the move to the independence declaration of Kosova in 2008 and the reunification of Germany in 1990—but, in reality, this is the first time that one European nation has seized territory from another since the end of World War II.”

At least some European observers understand that Russian actions have not been about “seizing territory.” The stated intention of Western-backed, coup-installed Ukrainian government officials on ending the autonomous status of Crimea (with its heavily Russian-ethnic population and the headquarters of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet) had to remind Moscow of the actions of then-Georgian President Michael Saakashvili in 2008, when he attacked the autonomous region of South Ossetia and Russian peacekeepers who were stationed there. This Georgian attack, as German expert on Russia Alexander Rahr emphasized in his book *Putin nach Putin* (2008), was a kind of wake-up call to the Kremlin leadership, and their response was predictably harsh.

“Russia clearly drew a red line to the West; much like the West did 50 years ago in the Cuba Crisis,” he said in an interview to the *Caucasian Review of International Affairs* (August 2008). “Russia is not going to accept a further expansion of NATO in the heartland of the post-Soviet territories, which are regarded as specific and historic zones of influence of Russia.”

The developments of the past four months around Ukraine and Crimea are of the same coloration.

A ‘Mirror’ of the Broader Crisis

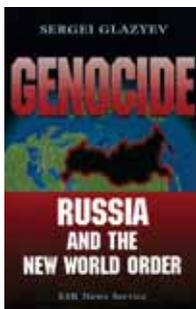
Finally, Putin stressed the broader strategic context of the Ukraine crisis. “Like a mirror, the situation in Ukraine reflects what is going on and what has been happening in the world over the past several decades,” he said. “We understand what is happening; we understand that these actions were aimed against Ukraine and Russia and against Eurasian integration. And all this while Russia strived to engage in dialogue with our colleagues in the West.”

GENOCIDE

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