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Annexation of Crimea: Causes, Analysis & Global Implications

By: Sergey Salushev

ABSTRACT

In the wake of Russia's annexation of the Crimean Autonomous Republic, some scholars and analysts of international relations rushed to proclaim the inauguration of the new world order. In this paper, I argue that such claims are mistaken and groundless. Further, Russia's actions in the peninsula do not represent a stratagem of geopolitical expansion and pose no implications for the global balance of power. Of course, Russia's annexation of Crimea was in severe violation of international law. Nevertheless, only careful and informed analysis of the political coup that ousted the government of Yanukovich and familiarity with Crimea's history can illuminate one's understanding of the causes of the territory's decision to secede from Ukraine's authority and reunite with Russia.

Keywords: Crimea, Ukraine, Euromaidan, Russia, the world order.

INTRODUCTION

The recent publication in *The Economist* magazine, titled "Diplomacy and Security after Crimea: The New World Order," purported the advent of the new world order signified by Crimea's secession from Ukraine.¹ In this new world order, according to the magazine, Putin's Russia shall become the source of "instability and strife."² Unfortunately, the article reflects a trite, one-dimensional, and ahistorical perception of the Western interpretation of the shifting power balance in the world. Of course, Russia's official annexation of Crimea on March 18, 2014, clearly violated territorial integrity of Ukraine and undermined international norms and practices with regard to the principles of national self-determination and transfer of jurisdiction over a territory between states.³ Russia's actions deserve condemnation of international community. Nevertheless, the annexation does not represent super-power politics of a resurgent and hostile Russia and poses few global implications for international affairs.

It is important to note that the crisis in Crimea was predicted a long time ago and surely could have been averted had the Ukrainian policy makers been more cognizant of Crimea's

history and demographics. In short, the misguided attempts at ‘Ukrainization’ of the ethnic Russian community in the country, impatience of the Ukrainian opposition, and the inept support of the United States and the European Union (EU) of the protests that gripped the country’s capital precipitated Crimea’s secession.

CRIMEA IN THE RUSSIAN NATIONAL IMAGINATION

Aside from the obvious geographic and military strategic values, it is hard to explain the significance of Crimea for Russian imagination and national self-awareness to one unfamiliar with the intricate details of the peninsula’s history. A short historic introduction, therefore, seems necessary to grasp the meaning of Crimea for Russia.

“It was on the peninsula that the Byzantine [Empire] passed the mantle of Orthodox Christianity to Russia... when in the ancient Greek colonial city of Chersonesos, the Byzantine emperor baptized the Kyivan Rus Prince Vladimir” – hence, in 867 Russia became a Christian nation.⁴ The Crimean peninsula officially became part of the Russian Empire in 1783 on the orders of the Catherine the Great (1762-1796), when the Russian imperial army finally defeated dwindling forces of the Crimean Khanate – a state that was nominally under control of the Ottoman Empire. Since then, Crimea’s sea ports became the home of the Russian Black Sea fleet and the peninsula was immediately regarded as the strategically important outpost of Russian Navy. The peninsula was also the site of 1853 Crimean War in which the Russian Empire fought against Britain, France and the Ottoman Empire. The author of the famous *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy, also fought in the Crimean War and later published several accounts of his experience in the battles. A world-renowned Russian novelist Anton Chekhov, author of *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*, also lived and composed his brilliant books and plays in Crimea. Chekhov’s house became “a magnet for other Russian writers of his day - Ivan Bunin, Maksim Gorky, Alexander Kuprin - and for musicians such as Sergei Rachmaninov and the great singer Fyodor Chaliapin.”⁵ Furthermore, Sevastopol, the chief port of the Russian Black Sea Navy, entered into the Russian imagination as the legendary “City of Heroes” after withstanding the German Nazi army’s relentless siege and the city’s heroic defense by the Soviet soldiers during the World War II. In short, the site of Russia’s Christian origins and identity, the land of Russian military glories and tragedies, a hub of cultural rejuvenation - Crimea has a special place in the Russian heart and enigmatic soul.

Crimea, or the Crimean Autonomous Republic, became part of Ukraine in the second half of the twentieth century. The jurisdiction and authority over the territory was transferred to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1954 at the initiative of Nikita Khrushchev who was then serving as the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. At that time, it was an insignificant event as even a thought of the Soviet Union’s eventual implosion was unthinkable. Khrushchev, who was himself a Ukrainian, never explained his decision to attach the peninsula to Ukraine’s territory; neither did the official memoranda of the Communist Party. Today, many theories exist of why Khrushchev considered it necessary to transfer control over Crimea to Ukraine.

His son Sergei Khrushchev, who now lives in the United States, argues that the fateful decision was spurred by economic considerations: “as the Dnieper [river] and the hydro-electric dam [is] on Ukrainian territory, let’s transfer the rest of the territory of Crimea under the Ukrainian supervision so they will be responsible for everything,” contends Sergei.⁶ However, some Russian historians give credence to another theory. The Ukrainian Communist Party was the second biggest and therefore a powerful political entity in the Soviet Union. Its support was a crucial prerequisite for a secure chairmanship of the Communist Party. It is believed that Khrushchev decided to transfer Crimea to Ukraine in order to placate members of the Ukrainian Communist Party and secure their loyalty.

Crimea became the epitome of the disenchantment and alienation felt by many ethnic Russians. In fact, when Ukraine held its national referendum on the country’s independence in December 1991, Crimea registered the lowest rates of approval in the entire country.⁷ Misguided attempts at ‘Ukrainization’ of Crimea and threats to expel the Russian Black Sea fleet from the peninsula shattered any sense of the republic’s belonging to Ukraine and further estranged ethnic Russians. Albeit illegal, the decision of the Crimean authorities to secede from Ukraine and become part of the Russian Federation is not at all surprising.

On March 16, 2014 in a hastily organized referendum, the overwhelming majority of Crimea’s residents voted in favor of secession from Ukraine and admission into the Russian Federation. It is important to note, of course, that the referendum and Russia’s annexation of Crimea were declared illegal by the United Nations General Assembly on March 27, 2014.⁸ Moreover, the result of the referendum did not express the views and opinions of all the people living in the peninsula. For instance, the majority of Crimean Tatars chose to boycott the vote and opposed the peninsula’s reunification with Russia.⁹ Nevertheless, the annexation of Crimea by Russia was remarkably bloodless and received a widespread support from the majority of the Russian population in the republic. Following the referendum, approximately “two-thirds of the nearly 19,000 Ukrainian military personnel and their relatives stationed in Crimea, have chosen to remain there; some heading for civilian life, others transferred to the Russian military.”¹⁰ Another significant development was defection of the former chief of Ukraine’s navy, Rear Admiral Denys Berezovsky, to the Crimean government. The admiral’s defection underscored the scale of disenfranchisement and alienation felt by many ethnic Russians living in Crimea from the central government in Kiev.

It is very important to remember the bitter memories of blackmail and intimidation issued by another revolutionary government of Mr. Yushchenko – the country’s former ‘pro-Western’ president who came to power in the aftermath of the so-called Orange Revolution in Kiev in 2004. “Yushchenko repeatedly threatened to expel Russia's Black Sea Fleet from Sevastopol.”¹¹ These irresponsible threats and Yushchenko’s determination to push Ukraine into NATO damaged already frail ties between Kiev and Crimea. Given the aforementioned litany of arguments, it should not be surprising that the people of Crimea took advantage of the coup in Kiev and voted to be reunified with Russia.

EUROMAIDAN

The legitimacy of the demands submitted by the people who came to protest on the Maidan Nezalezhnosti (The Independence Square) cannot be questioned. Ukrainian people have a long and valid list of grievances. The vast majority of Ukrainians have long been frustrated by ubiquitous state corruption, inept governance, tenacious poverty and many other political, social and economic appeals. These frustrations have reached an apogee of despair when now deposed President Yanukovich refused to sign an association agreement with the EU. Although Yanukovich made no formal commitment to join the Russian led Customs Union – an alternative economic community, many people in the country interpreted his rejection of closer economic ties with the EU as a veiled promise of eventual integration into the Russian economic zone. Fearing for the economic future of the country, the people occupied Maidan and declared their resolve to remain in the square for as long as necessary in order to exert pressure until the government signed the association agreement with the EU. Consequently, the protests on the Independence Square in central Kiev were dubbed Euromaidan.

These protests received an outpouring of support both domestically and internationally. According to the poll published by the Pew Research Center - Global Attitudes Project, many people in the Russian speaking regions of the country favored unity and eventual integration into the EU.¹² Irrespective of the linguistic and ethnic differences, Ukrainian citizens understood that in the long term association and free trade with the EU would offer a broad range of economic and political advantages, far more beneficial than forging closer links with the Russian economy. Ukrainians were appropriately wary of reliance on Russia given its economy's structural inefficiency and rampant corruption in the government.

WEST TO THE 'RESCUE'

On the international level, however, clumsy and extremely provocative displays of support shown by the Western governments frequently undermined the established norms of diplomatic decorum and constituted unabashed interference into the internal political matters of a sovereign country. In short, inimical diplomatic overtures created a vivid perception of the instrumental role of the West, and the U.S. in particular, behind the scenes of the anti-government protests in Kiev. For instance, heads of states and foreign ministers from Poland and the Baltic states, traditional Russian antagonists, frequently attended and spoke at the rallies organized on the Independence Square. The EU's top foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, repeatedly met with the leaders of the Ukrainian opposition, promised to support their political endeavors and even visited the sites of the protests at Euromaidan.¹³ Particularly notable was the American diplomats' lack of consideration and understanding of the highly sensitive nature of the situation. First, Senator John McCain, a well-established advocate of Russian containment, made an appearance at the rallies on Euromaidan, where he rebuked Yanukovich's decision not to sign the association agreement with the EU and voiced his strong support for the anti-government protestors. On March 24, 2014, in a statement during a televised interview, Senator McCain urged the Obama's administration to provide Ukraine with both lethal and non-lethal military assistance in order to counteract Russia's actions in Crimea.¹⁴ He also suggested conducting urgent military exercises close to the Russian-Ukrainian border. Certainly, given

Senator McCain's status and influence in the U.S. Congress, his comments did not go unnoticed in Russia.

Furthermore, in a brazen act of diplomatic bias, the Assistant Secretary of the United States Victoria Nuland, who at the time was accompanied by the US Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt, embarked on an ill-conceived and short-sighted mission to deliver cookies and bread to the protesters in Maidan.¹⁵ It is easy to picture the uproar and indignation of the American political establishment if a Russian diplomat of any rank were to join a political rally on the American soil and encouraged continued defiance of contested policies of the US government by the American citizens. In addition, in the days following distribution of cookies to the anti-government protesters, an apparently leaked phone conversation between Ambassador Pyatt and Assistant Secretary Nuland was published in the public domain.¹⁶ The leaked conversation was a big embarrassment for the Obama's administration and for Assistant Secretary Nuland personally. However, the conversation between the American ambassador and the Assistant Secretary unequivocally confirmed Russia's deep fear that the United States government was already planning to preside over the post-Yanukovich transition in Ukraine and even going as far as deciding who among the leaders of the disparate anti-government opposition should lead the country after the Yanukovich's government implodes.¹⁷

The true purpose of the American diplomats' actions in Ukraine notwithstanding, the actions of Assistant Secretary Nuland and Ambassador Pyatt prompted Russian government to reevaluate the situation in Ukraine and reassess its willingness to interfere into the country. In other words, the provocative actions of the American diplomats and politicians at the height of the crisis in Ukraine confirmed a long held belief among Russian conservatives that the West will never recognize and respect the significance of the legitimate economic, social and cultural links that exist between Russia and Ukraine. Thus, the clumsy diplomacy helped to unleash political forces in Ukraine that the West can neither fully understand nor control.

STRATEGIC MISTAKES

Following the coup that effectively ousted the legitimately elected President Yanukovich from power, the new and haphazardly organized government in Kiev made a series of strategic mistakes that precipitated Russian annexation of Crimea. Impatience and the search for immediate vengeance of the new Ukrainian government compromised its authority and legitimacy in the eyes of ethnic Russians in Ukraine. This section will briefly set forth the most damaging mistakes made by the self-appointed Ukrainian government:

The Coup

Following the tragic and indiscriminate shooting of the protesters and police officers on the Independence Square on February 20, 2014, the opposition and the government signed an agreement intended to immediately stop the senseless violence.¹⁸ Thus, on February 21 then President Yanukovich signed the agreement in the presence of the representatives from the EU: Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikors, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier,

French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius. Also present was Russian special envoy Vladimir Lukin. It should be noticed that the Foreign Minister of Poland later reported that Russia “had played a constructive role in reaching the agreement.”¹⁹ The signing of the agreement signified Yanukovich’s acceptance of virtually all of the demands of the anti-government protestors, including: 1) complete amnesty to all the detained protestors; 2) restoration of the 2004 Constitution that strictly limited the presidential powers; 3) formation of the new national unity government; and, 4) early elections to be held December. However, the day after the agreement had been reached and signed under the auspices of the EU and with Russia’s endorsement, the opposition forces defaulted on their commitments and moved to oust the president and create self-appointed transitional government. Hence, the agreement, officially titled by the EU as “Agreement on the Settlement of Crisis in Ukraine,” was cast aside and became null. The EU and the US remained silent and voiced no objections with regard to the opposition’s abrogation of the agreement.

The decision to depose Yanukovich was adopted by the deputies of Ukraine’s Parliament – the Verkhovna Rada – in extraordinary haste and in violation of the existing constitutional procedures.²⁰ Hence, Yanukovich’s removal essentially constituted a political coup d’état. The EU and the US accepted the coup and immediately recognized the new government in Kiev as legitimate. On the other hand, the Russian government opposed and condemned these developments concluding that it cannot rely on the assurances of the Western mediators as they will renege on their promises when changes in the circumstances appear to be advantageous to the Western interests. As a result, the impatience of the anti-government opposition and unconstitutional decision to expel Yanukovich from power destroyed any prospect of a gradual political transition in the country.

Language Policy

Since Ukraine became an independent state, some of the country’s political leaders consistently dismissed the reality of Ukraine’s ethnic composition. Ukrainian leaders were eager to bolster the hegemony of Ukrainian culture and eschew Russia’s cultural influences that, according to many Ukrainian nationalists, have polluted the authentic culture of Ukraine.²¹ Evidently, the political leaders failed to understand the counterproductive effect of such blind nationalism and linguistic chauvinism on ethnic harmony and social cohesion of the country. This tendency came to light when immediately after President Yanukovich was expelled from power, the Ukrainian parliament voted to lower the status of Russian language in the country. Namely, Russian language was stripped of its status as a regional language. Many ethnic Russians and Russian speaking Ukrainians in Crimea interpreted this ill-conceived law as a grim harbinger of what was to come in the future. It is important to note, however, that after being rebuked by European partners the acting President of Ukraine, Oleksandr Turchynov, vetoed the law a week after the parliament adopted it. However, by then, the damage has been done and the government in Kiev had lost its legitimacy in the eyes of many ethnic Russians.

It is important to recognize that since Ukraine left the Soviet Union and became an independent state, the Russian language has never enjoyed the status of the official state language in the country. Thus, it is hard to understand the benefit of further discouraging its use even at the regional level. In short, the successful passage of the language law immediately after Yanukovich's deposal is reflective of the terrific failure of successive Ukrainian governments to fully integrate and welcome ethnic Russians into the country's diverse national fabric. The reluctance to build bridges and foster a sense of national unity premised on ethnic equality and mutual respect ultimately alienated Russians living in Crimea.

Ukrainian Far Right

Although grossly exaggerated by the Russian government and media, the presence and instrumental role of Ukrainian ultra-nationalists and Nazi sympathizers in Euromaidan is undeniable.²² The British Broadcasting Corporation, almost alone among the Western media in its willingness to reveal the more sinister dimensions of the protests in Kiev, created a very concise yet very powerful documentary that clearly illustrates the rise of Ukraine's far-right in the national politics and its growing influence in the country's political discourse.²³ Conversely, Ukrainian Neo-Nazis were featured prominently on the Russian television networks creating a false impression that the new self-appointed Ukrainian government espoused fascist views. These accusations, of course, were groundless and an unfair distortion that overshadowed the majority of much less radical groups and individuals who gave life and legitimacy to Euromaidan. Nevertheless, it is also true that Ukraine's Neo-Nazi groups were implicated in the murder of police officers, committed serious crimes of vandalism, incited violence, threatened ethnic Russians and acted with complete impunity on the streets of Kiev.²⁴ The displays of rampant hostility and extremely inflammatory speeches made by the leaders of the Right Sector, C14 and other Neo-Nazi organizations, served to further abet anxiety among ethnic Russian population of Ukraine. Indeed, crucially, in the first few weeks following the coup, the self-appointed Ukrainian government did absolutely nothing to try to alleviate valid fears and concerns of the people living in the East and South of the country. However, recent denunciations of the ultra-nationalist groups' actions made by the EU and government in Kiev reflect the increasingly critical attitude toward the rise of the far-right organizations.²⁵ The alleged killing of Mr. Muzychko, an odious member and one of the leaders of the radical Right Sector, by the Ukrainian police underscored this trend.²⁶ The EU foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, made an apt remark when discussing Ukraine's far-right groups: "threats from the Right Sector radical group to Ukrainian parliament members are against democracy principles and rule of law and will only destabilize the fragile political system in the country."²⁷

CONCLUSION

Russia's annexation of Crimea should not be justified, but it can be explained in a rational and objective manner. Undoubtedly, Russia's actions on the peninsula were in severe violation of international law and must be condemned. Nevertheless, only careful and informed

analysis of the political coup that ousted the government of Yanukovich and familiarity with Crimea's history can illuminate one's understanding of the causes of the territory's decision to secede from Ukraine's authority and reunite with Russia.

Far from the speculations of pundits and analysts of international relations, who claim the arrival of the new world order, the events that took place in Crimea illustrate the depressing evidence of the persistence of the old world order, one in which myopic national interests are repeatedly prioritized over intricate regional histories and delicate political alliances.

Indeed, Russia's actions in Crimea were not part of a geopolitical stratagem to extend Russian control over Europe and elevate its global profile as a nascent super power. Russia's annexation of Crimea must be understood in the context of tenacious historic links of Russian people with the peninsula and the Ukrainian nationalist politics that alienated the country's ethnic Russian community. Thus, it should not be surprising that the people of Crimea took advantage of the coup in Kiev and voted to be reunified with Russia. Alas, the economic and political future of the modern Crimea under Russian governance is very uncertain. However, the Republic of Crimea is unlikely to become part of Ukraine ever again.

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