

Russia Cannot Accept Ukrainian Defiance

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Russia formally annexed Crimea this morning (the actual vote by the Russian parliament will be a mere formality, as always under Putin). The political realists who argued that Russia would not go as far, and use its self-generated Crimean crisis to obtain maximal autonomy for Crimea within Ukraine, were wrong. These same realists who have been arguing that Crimea is a special case and that Russia will not dare invading Eastern Ukraine will also be wrong. What annexing Crimea does is not to single out Crimea, but to create a precedent, and a most dangerous one: to use the claim of ethnic kinship to expand a state's territory. We have been here before, and the results were catastrophic. Nazi Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union used the same principle to expand in the 1930s-early 1940s (and in the Soviet case to deport border nationalities for fear that the ethnic kin principle would be invoked by border states). Once the principle is used, it will be used again.

Less audible in the triumphant announcement in Moscow today is a request by the Transnistrian authorities to join Russia. Transnistria (Pridnestrovia in Russian) is the disputed territory that de facto broke away from Moldova in 1991 following a brief war and whose "independence" has been recognized by no one but Russia. The morning announcement was at a minimum coordinated

by Russia and foretells the forthcoming annexation of Transnistria. The legal basis is already in place, since the draft law registered in the State Duma in the past weeks was about the annexation of territories in the generic sense, rather than the specific annexation of Crimea. South Ossetia and Abkhazia will be next. All these territories were already occupied by the Russian military and massively subsidized from the Russian state. Eastern Ukraine will follow and this is why we should all be looking at the precipice right now. The looming invasion of Eastern Ukraine will have uncontrollable consequences, uncontrollable both for Russia and Ukraine, and for the world.

President Putin told us this morning that Crimea has always been Russian in the “hearts and minds” of the Russian people. But what about continental Ukraine? A new survey by the reputable Levada Center in Moscow tells us that two-thirds of Russian residents consider Eastern Ukraine as Russian, the direct result, in the words of Levada director Lev Gudkov, of “a two-week long campaign of propaganda and disinformation unprecedented for the entire Soviet period.” The first element of disinformation is to give impression that Russians are in the majority in the East. In fact, two-thirds of residents of the nine provinces of southeastern Ukraine define themselves as ethnic Ukrainians, and only 30 percent as Russians. (Even in Crimea, more than 42 percent of the population is not Russian, showing the groundlessness of the referendum claim that 97 percent voted for annexation to Russia).

The second element of disinformation is the claim that ethnic Russians are under threat in Ukraine. No such threat has been independently reported, but it is increasingly highlighted in fabricated reporting in the Russian media. Last Thursday, a group of pro-Russia young men attacked pro-Ukraine demonstrators, killing at least one, with video evidence on YouTube. The Russian media presented it as an attack of Ukrainian extremists on Russian civilians, eliciting a note of high concern from the Russian Foreign Ministry. The same pattern was repeated on Friday in Kharkiv in violent clashes that led to two deaths. The Russian state claims that fascists are in power in Kyiv and as such pose a threat to the security of Ukrainian citizens, beginning with this elusive Russian population. The reality on the ground in Eastern Ukraine is that the intimidating crowds of young muscular men beating up people, storming buildings and, as happened Sunday in Kharkiv, burning books from

a Ukrainian cultural center, are the pro-Russia groups. The incendiary label of “fascist” is constantly used in the Russian state-controlled media, but beating up people and burning Ukrainian-language books is not exactly anti-fascist behavior.

International relations analyst tend to think in terms of rational actor behavior and heads of state acting like chess player. Yet President Putin, who has amassed more powers in his hands than any Russian leader since Stalin, as there are no institutional checks left to curb his power domestically, appears to be driven by emotion when it comes to Ukraine. Mr Putin announced today that Crimea would never be “Banderite”, a reference that non-area experts will find incomprehensible. The Banderites were the radical Ukrainian nationalists, under their leader Stepan Bandera, who led an armed insurgency against Soviet power during World War II. This gets at the core of Putin’s psychological predisposition towards Ukraine, a view now at center stage in Russia’s severely controlled political system. The Banderites led one of the greatest and long-lasting insurgencies in twentieth-century Europe, and certainly in Soviet history, and this act of resistance clashed with the long-held Russian view of Ukrainians as conciliatory, if not obedient, little brothers.

It is this defiance of Russian power, symbolically expressed first by the Orange Revolution, and now with the Maidan insurrection, that President Putin seeks to quash. To be sure, the Banderites (the OUN-B), were involved in pogroms against Jews (and massacres of Poles), but this was then and this is now. The radical groups who led Maidan and received posts in the government (Svoboda and Pravyi sector) and who claim lineage to Bandera have far right views, which is worrisome enough, but they do not attack civilians, let alone massacre them. Russia calls them Neo-Nazis and anti-Semites, a stance now denounced by leading Jewish organizations, such as the US Anti-Defamation League, which admittedly has no illusions about the responsibility of Banderites in pogroms against Jews during the war, and yet sees the current accusations as an attack on Ukrainian sovereignty.

The fundamental problem for Russia, under President Putin, is not the foreign policy orientation of Ukraine, but the very nature of its political system: Russia is now calling for the federalization of Ukraine, Russian as a second state

3 Russia Cannot Accept Ukrainian Defiance

language and, obviously, a “legitimate” government. The alleged threatening nature of the Maidan government is now invoked as a right to intervene to restore order, which is why we should all be looking at the precipice now.