

Donald Trump's Echoes of Fascism over Crimea

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, MAY 30 2017

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Donald J. Trump's co-chairman, Sam Clovis, maintains that the presidential candidate 'was thinking about something else' when he made his comments on Crimea to ABC network's 'This Week' programme.[1] Yet they are consistent with his astounding lack of knowledge about all parts of the world beyond the borders of the United States. If Trump becomes president, will he offer Russia the freedom to assert control in the former Soviet republics? Would he support a NATO response to an incursion into the Baltic States, for example? Would the United States stand by an ally like Ukraine? It doesn't appear so, to the extent that he has given any thought to the situation. Together with Russia, he believes, the US could defeat ISIS while retreating into isolationism behind walls and economic protectionism. By way of compensation, Russian military power can prevail over morality and human rights. For the record, the key part of the interview was the following:[2]

GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS: Why did you soften the GOP platform on Ukraine?

DONALD TRUMP: I wasn't involved in that. Honestly, I was not involved.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Your people were.

TRUMP: Yeah. I was not involved in that. I'd like to — I'd have to take a look at it. But I was not involved.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Do you know what they did?

TRUMP: They softened it, I heard. But I was not involved.

STEPHANOPOULOS: They took away the part of the platform calling for provision of lethal weapons to Ukraine to defend themselves. Why is that a good idea?

TRUMP: It's, look, I have my own ideas. He's not going into Ukraine. OK? Just so you understand, he's not going to go into Ukraine. All right? You can mark it down. You can put it down. You can take it any way you want —

STEPHANOPOULOS: Well, he's already there, isn't he?

TRUMP: OK. Well, he's there in a certain way, but I'm not there. You have Obama there. And frankly, that whole part of the world is a mess under Obama. With all the strength that you're talking about and all the power of NATO and all of this. In the meantime, he's going away, he takes Crimea. He's sort of, I mean—

STEPHANOPOULOS: But you said you might recognise that.

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TRUMP: I'm going to take a look at it. But, you know, the people of Crimea, from what I've heard, would rather be with Russia than where they were. And you have to look at that also.

Several points are worth contemplating further. First of all, Trump appears to condone military aggression and equates Putin and Russia as if they are synonymous. 'He's there in a certain way' signifies the complete annexation of a territory that Russia had recognised, both implicitly and explicitly, in several international treaties. It suggests that Trump perceives the leader as ipso facto the voice of the state, and one who is free to determine the policies and image of that state.

Second, he implies that under a Trump presidency the invasion would not have happened. One is left to assume, indeed he states overtly as well, that President Obama is to blame for Russian actions, and by deduction, for Ukraine's Euromaidan uprising (the direct cause of the invasion) as well. But the United States is not omnipotent. It does not control international politics and it has considerably less influence in Ukraine than, say, in countries that are part of the NATO alliance.

Third, he states that from what he has heard, the people of Crimea prefer to be under Russian rule 'than where they were'. Does that statement signify faith in a referendum conducted under military occupation? It is true that a slight majority of residents of Crimea are ethnic Russians and perhaps many of them sought more autonomy from Ukraine. Since 1992, there had been occasional protests toward rule from Kyiv.

Of far more importance, and ignored by Trump, is the fate of the Crimean Tatars, who lived here for several hundred years before Russia invaded in 1783. Crimea has a lengthy and colourful history, but perhaps the Tatars above all residents have the strongest claim to a homeland. There is no evidence they were discontented under rule by Ukraine after 1991. There are, on the other hand, disturbing revelations about how they are treated today that are too numerous to ignore.^[3] They are of course Muslims, which may explain the silence on the part of the Trump campaign.

Lastly, Trump says he did not know about the softening of the GOP platform on aid to Ukraine. Why not? Does it mean that his campaign manager Paul Manafort, who formerly worked for the disgraced former president of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich, decides Republican foreign policy? Does it mean that a Trump presidency would move closer to Russia under Vladimir Putin?

Trump has already hinted strongly that he might recognise Russia's annexation of Crimea (even though Putin is 'not going into Ukraine'). He sees Putin as a fellow 'strong man', someone who attains power by denigrating his rivals and openly lying about his actions. Trump's disdain for minorities (Mexicans, Muslims) is evident as is his enormous faith in himself. He lacks Putin's erudition and knowledge but recognises a kinship in terms of attitude and disdain for the rights of small powers.

Below the rhetoric lies a dichotomy between two worldviews. One holds that Putin's Russia is simply asserting itself in response to NATO expansion and Western influence in territories that were formerly part of Russia's neighbourhood. The annexation of Crimea by this token symbolises Moscow fighting back after 25 years of retreat and kowtowing to US and Western European demands.

The other view is that of Russian aggression to establish a 'Russkiy Mir' in its region, meaning that the independence of countries such as Ukraine and Belarus, or even the Baltic States, must fall into question. In the absence of a protector, Russia can use force when needed, as has been the case in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014.

Admittedly these statements represent a gross simplification of a complex problem that also entails the future and role of the European Union, various political actors, and not least US policy in a world in which it may no longer be the key economic player, but remains by far the chief military one. There is some truth in both worldviews. Certainly, there were times in the late Soviet period when it appeared that most of the concessions – not least a reunited Germany within NATO – were coming from Moscow.

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Prior to the invasion of Crimea, nonetheless, there was a more stable, and largely peaceful environment in geographical central Europe. That event changed the situation radically and led directly to the conflict in eastern Ukraine that has clouded the situation ever since. If one accepts the annexation of Crimea, it offers a green light to more powerful regimes to take over territories of weaker ones (one recalls Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990). Without the US, NATO becomes a severely weakened force and European divisions would become accentuated.

Russia's main 'excuse' for its actions has been that a 'neo-Nazi regime' took over in Kyiv in the spring of 2014, ousting the legitimate president. It has also maintained it has no presence in eastern Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions, where breakaway regimes are in power. But the decisive battles to date (Ilovaisk, Debaltseve) have been fought mainly by regular Russian troops. Left to their own devices these 'republics' could not survive even though many residents are disillusioned by rule from Ukraine – and more importantly the destruction of their homes and livelihood as a result of Ukraine's Anti-Terrorist Operation.

Moreover, Russia has taken no steps to help re-establish Yanukovich as president. On the contrary, he is derided as a man who refused to defend his domain against an extremist insurgency, a weak leader undeserving of support. It is hardly far-fetched to see deeper motives here, the exploitation of an opportunity to change the status quo in Ukraine.

It is small wonder that the analogy of fascism in the 1930s appears in so many analyses of the Trump campaign. It has many similar features: demagoguery, false creation of internal enemies as the source of all problems, autarky, isolation, mass propaganda, and a bombastic leader. The difference is that unlike Italy and Germany, the United States did not suffer military defeat and a harsh peace treaty in a world war. The images of a state maligned and deprived of its rights are based on illusions. But they do ally with similar self-images of post-Cold War Russia.

Over the next few months of the election campaign, it is to be hoped that the Western media will question Trump further on his intentions. The quoted comments are disturbing in many ways. Not only do they reveal an alarming ignorance of world affairs – something well established by now from other interviews – but they also suggest should he win the election a dramatic change of American foreign policy direction and a lack of recognition for the rights of smaller nations, particularly in Europe.

Notes

[1] <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/08/trump-crimea-ukraine-sam-clovis-226501>

[2] <https://mediamatters.org/research/2016/08/01/trump-s-fact-free-comments-russias-annexation-crimea-roundly-condemned/212070>

[3] <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/03/russia-continues-oppress-crimea-tatars-160308054208716.html>

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