

Gorbachev Says Outcome of Crimea Referendum Corrected Historical 'Mistake'

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Former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev has defended Russia's takeover of Crimea, saying that the referendum among the peninsula's voters corrected a historical "mistake."

"While Crimea had previously been joined to Ukraine based on the Soviet laws, which means [Communist] party laws, without asking the people, now the people themselves have decided to correct that mistake," Gorbachev said on Monday, Interfax reported.

"This should be celebrated, not sanctioned," he said.

Gorbachev, the recipient of the 1990 Nobel Peace Prize, added that international sanctions — such as those the U.S. and European nations have brought against Russia — would be justified only on "very serious grounds," which he said the takeover of Crimea had failed to provide.

Crimea was part of Russia until Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev handed it over to Ukraine

in 1954, in a symbolic gesture that had little significance at the time since both countries were part of the Soviet Union.

In 1991, the leader of the Russian Soviet Republic, Boris Yeltsin, and his counterparts from Ukraine and Belarus signed a deal breaking up the Soviet Union and establishing new independent states. Gorbachev did not participate in the 1991 meeting.

Many Russians have used Crimea's history as a reason to legitimate Russian military intervention in the peninsula, which harbors a 60 percent Russian-speaking population and voted in favor of joining Russia in Sunday's referendum.

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