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Russian TV and Radio Highlights for March 17-23, 2014

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The results of the Crimean referendum and President Vladimir Putin's signing of a law making Crimea part of Russia were greeted with jubilation on state-controlled Russian television channels. Russia will never give Crimea away again, reports said.

Also, commentators blamed the West for the current crisis in Ukraine and spoke of a major shift in Russian foreign policy.

Crimea 'returns home'

"Crimea has returned home," presenter Dmitry Kiselyov said in his opening remarks on the "Vesti Nedeli" program on official state channel Rossia 1.

Irada Zeynalova, presenter of "Voskresnoye Vremya" on state-controlled Channel One, described Crimea's joining Russia as a "reunification" and a "homecoming."

Let's be honest, she continued, "Crimea has always associated itself with Russia and the mood there has always been 'we want to return.'" Now, finally, Moscow has been able to say to the Crimeans "welcome back," Zeynalova added.

NTV described Crimea's becoming part of Ukraine after the break-up of the Soviet Union as a "historical injustice" which has now been rectified.

Crimea's joining Russia was marked with fireworks and celebrations both in Moscow and Crimea. Reports conveyed the jubilant and defiant mood of celebrating crowds, people overcome with emotion, saying how happy they were to be back in Russia.

"We have waited 23 years for this moment. I am so happy to be home," one woman said.

"We love Russia. We have relatives there and we have friends there. Well, you can't tear us away from Russia. We want to be in Russia, definitely. Hooray, we have won!" another woman said.

Not a single dissenting view was voiced in reports on Russian television.

"What has happened in Crimea is not aggression or annexation — it is the free choice [of its people]. The choice that Western politicians talk so much about. The same choice that, according to them, the Maydan [anti-government protesters] in Kiev made. But if the Maidan has this right, why should the people of Crimea be denied it?" said Alexei Pushkov, presenter of the "Postscript" program on Center TV, a national channel owned by the Moscow city

authorities.

"For 20 years the Kiev authorities have kept Ukraine in a state of permanent crisis. And when, on the wave of the Maidan victory, anti-Russian rhetoric became the core of Kiev policy, Crimea could do nothing but run away from all this, and this is what it has done," Vladimir Chernyshev said on "Itogovaya Programma" on Gazprom-owned NTV.

Russia will never give Crimea away again

Former Ukrainian Prime Minister and presidential hopeful Yulia Tymoshenko has said there should be no talks with the Russian president until Putin returns Crimea to Ukraine.

To that, Alexei Pushkov on Center TV retorted: "What does she mean by saying that Kiev should have no talks with Russia until Russia returns Crimea to Ukraine? This only means that these talks will never take place."

"Sooner or later," Vladimir Kondratyev said on NTV, "the West will have to realize that no sanctions will force Russia to give away Crimea."

"Most important, sanctions are meaningless because they won't change the status quo — Crimea is in Russia. ... No matter what anyone might say, there is no going back," Dmitry Kiselyov said on Rossia 1.

History lesson

Yes, the way Crimea joined Russia was "swift" but "one needs to know Russian history to understand what Crimea means to our country and why at the referendum all its residents overwhelmingly voted for the reunification with Russia", correspondent Anton Vernitsky said on "Voskresnoye Vremya" on Channel One.

"In London they say the referendum is illegitimate because allegedly the period of campaigning was short. Allow me to disagree. The period of campaigning has been going on for 23 years — for the whole time that the peninsula was part of an independent Ukraine," Dmitry Kiselyov said on "Vesti Nedeli" on Rossia 1.

The report that followed showed excerpts from a 1993 documentary about protests in Sevastopol "against forced Ukrainization and for the right to speak and think in Russian."

"Sevastopol is a native Russian city. I can't say this without tears. How could Sevastopol be Ukrainian? It is our, Russian, city," one protester said in the film.

"I have lived in Sevastopol since 1970. I have served in the [Black Sea] fleet for 27 years. We will never give the fleet away and we will never give Sevastopol to [Ukrainian nationalist leader Stepan] Bandera's scum," another protester said back in 1993.

Putin's Crimea speech

On March 18, Putin delivered a strongly emotional speech at a joint session of the two chambers of parliament in the Kremlin, in which he presented his legal and historical arguments supporting the return of Crimea to Russia.

But, most important, in his Crimea speech Putin announced a major shift in Russian foreign policy. It was welcomed by commentators on state-controlled television channels.

According to Irada Zeynalova on Channel One, "the keynote of the speech is that we are going our own way and that we are choosing our own future."

From now on, she continued, "Russia takes the firm stance of a country that has its own foreign policy, a policy which does not always coincide with a Western orientation, and its own domestic policy, in which it will not allow any interference."

In the report that followed correspondent Pavel Krasnov observed that from now on "the post-Soviet history of relations between Russia and the West will be divided into 'before' and 'after' Crimea."

"For Russia it is the end of an era marked by Russia's monotonous retreat. ... Russia is challenging the system in which there appeared to be an equivalence between the will of the West and the generally accepted rules of the game," he continued, adding that the crisis in Ukraine was the last straw.

Krasnov admitted that the latest deterioration in relations "may turn into the worst confrontation since the Cold War."

Cold War rhetoric

Arguably the most striking element in coverage on Russian state-controlled television in the past few weeks was how quickly commentators resurrected the now almost forgotten rhetoric of the Cold War.

Pavel Krasnov on Channel One dismissed the threat of sanctions, saying they will have no effect.

"Russia is ready to oppose any pressure. In the circumstances this is the only way we can make the West respect our interests and build truly equal relations with us," he said.

He accused the U.S. of "violating international law" and of applying "double standards."

"Postscript" presenter Alexei Pushkov admitted the situation in Ukraine had provoked an "international crisis" and the "worst tension" in Russia's relations with the West since 1991.

But Crimea is not the main reason for this crisis, according to Pushkov. "The main reason is that Russia has refused to play according to the rules of the game imposed on us earlier," he said.

According to these rules, Pushkov continued, "time and time again we were cheated, and decisions were taken behind our back."

Over on NTV, Vladimir Chernyshev said that over the past 20 years the U.S. "has made the cult of force an absolute in politics, imposing its interests on the whole world and ignoring the opinion of other countries."

According to Pushkov, "what we can witness today is the deepest crisis of the Euro-Atlantic interpretation of international law, according to which everything that meets the interests of the Euro-Atlantic community is legitimate, while all the rest is against the law, illegitimate and deserves to be totally condemned."

Europe divided on sanctions

According to reports, there is no unity in Europe on sanctions against Russia. "It turns out that every action meets with an opposite action," presenter Irada Zeynalova said on "Voskresnoye Vremya."

In Germany, she said, industrialists are demanding that its leaders think again and revise their decision to cut cooperation with Russia because thousands of German companies are working with Russia.

London has "loudly" announced that it is "suspending military cooperation with Moscow" and for Britain "this is a very convenient political decision because the British are losing almost nothing," Ivan Blagoy said in his report on "Voskresnoye Vremya."

"But the French, who have been urged to do the same, are furious because they have a billion-plus contract to build Mistral-class helicopter carriers for Russia," he said.

According to the correspondent, this week "the myth of a single Europe capable of taking tough decisions has been crumbling before journalists' very eyes."

Privately owned Ren-TV was the only channel to voice a note of caution. Marianna Maximovskaya, presenter of the "Nedelya" program, warned that, if the U.S. introduces sanctions against major Russian companies, "this will mean a global economic war and unpredictable consequences from the economic point of view."

In the report that followed correspondent Vadim Kondakov admitted that "the Russian financial market is already suffering badly" and that the authorities "are having to spend huge amounts of money to support the ruble."

Sanctions have already affected some Russian banks but, according to the Ren TV correspondent, "this is just the beginning." "It appears that the West is determined to go to the end," Vadim Kondakov said.

Europe loses its way

"Vesti Nedeli" presenter Dmitry Kiselyov expressed disappointment with the reaction in Europe to the crisis in Ukraine.

"In general," he said, "there are no surprises as regards America because one expects nothing else from there. But Europe does surprise one."

Kiselyov lamented that Europe — a continent with a rich culture, great traditions and political Titans such as de Gaulle, Adenauer, Churchill or Margaret Thatcher — has lost its diversity of opinion, its insight, competence and identity. According to Kiselyov, they were "rubbed out

as if with an eraser."

What is in their place now is "empty political correctness," Kiselyov said.

"It is amazing that it is only European bureaucracy that is strong now. And its symbols — [European Commission President Jose Manuel] Barroso and [European Council President Herman] Van Rompuy. One looks at them and wants to ask: Who are you and what are you for?" Kiselyov said.

Situation in Ukraine

Commentators on state-controlled Russian television channels agreed in their negative view of the current situation in Ukraine.

"Ukraine still remains in the grip of political chaos," Pushkov said on Center TV.

"At some stage any revolution gives rise to chaos. Events in Ukraine only confirm this thesis," Alexei Pobortsev said in his report on NTV.

According to Kirill Pozdnyakov, presenter of "Itogovaya Programma" on NTV, "Kiev has been usurped by nationalists and right-wing radicals." "There is only one question: Are the Ukrainian authorities capable of doing anything apart from making statements?" he said.

Interim Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, who visited Brussels during the week, signed the political part of the association agreement with the EU. It is noteworthy, Alexei Pushkov said on Center TV, that the EU and Ukraine did not sign the economic part of the agreement.

The pro-European protests in Kiev which led to the overthrow of the authorities had been provoked by the decision of the deposed Ukrainian president, Viktor Yanukovych, not to sign the association agreement with the EU. But he was right, Pushkov said. In the same way, "the current leaders in Kiev realize perfectly well that Ukraine is not ready for an economic association with the EU and that such an association would have the most detrimental effect on the economy and the social situation in the country since it could give rise to widespread discontent."

According to Pushkov, "the collapse of state power in Ukraine" could have been avoided had the U.S. and the EU resisted the temptation of "toppling the legitimate president and bringing their own people to power."

"As the U.S. wanted, Arseny Yatsenyuk has become prime minister. But the price of this victory has been the refusal by a significant number of people in Ukraine to recognize his government as legitimate," Pushkov said.

"Had the overwhelming majority of those who live in Crimea recognized the new authorities in Kiev, the referendum would simply have been impossible on the peninsula and there would have been no unrest in Ukraine's southern and eastern regions. All this is the consequence of the Western policy of regime change. In Kiev it succeeded — at least, for the time being. In Crimea, it failed."

According to Center TV, in the current circumstances the "most optimum scenario" for Ukraine is a federation.

"But will Kiev agree to give more powers to the regions in order to keep the country together? To all appearances, in Kiev they simply do not have an answer to this question," correspondent Artyom Shirokov concluded in his report on the "Postscript" program.

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