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Navalny Wouldn't Return Crimea, Considers Immigration Bigger Issue Than Ukraine

By Anna Dolgov

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Opposition leader Alexei Navalny, center, has lost some influence among liberal supporters over his nationalism.

Prominent Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny said in an interview this week that he would not return the Crimean Peninsula to Ukraine if he had the power to do so, and that the issue of illegal immigration was more important for Russia than anything happening in neighboring war-torn Ukraine.

In the second part of an interview with the Ekho Moskvy radio station posted online on Thursday, Navalny said that from the point of view of Russia's development, "the issue of illegal immigration is 100 times more important than any Ukraine."

Navalny, who has been criticized by some members of the liberal opposition for being

nationalist, is vocal in his calls for the introduction of visa requirements for migrant workers from former Soviet states such as Uzbekistan.

The opposition activist, who is under house arrest as part of a criminal investigation, said in the first part of the interview from his home, broadcast Wednesday night, that Crimea — which Russia annexed from Ukraine in March — "will remain part of Russia and will never again in the foreseeable future become part of Ukraine."

Asked by Ekho Moskvy host and editor-in-chief Alexei Venediktov to share his views on the popular slogan among Russian supporters of the annexation — "Crimea is ours" — Navalny initially appeared to evade the question, saying that "Crimea belongs to the people who live in Crimea." When pressed for a direct answer, he added that "Crimea, of course, now de facto belongs to Russia."

"I think that despite the fact that Crimea was seized with egregious violations of all international regulations, the reality is that Crimea is now part of Russia," he said. "Let's not deceive ourselves. And I would also strongly advise Ukrainians not to deceive themselves."

Navalny said he would not return Crimea to Ukraine if he were to become the president of Russia.

"Is Crimea some sort of sausage sandwich to be passed back and forth? I don't think so," he said.

Crimea was part of Russia under the U.S.S.R. until Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev transferred it in 1954 to the fellow Soviet republic of Ukraine. At the time, when the countries were both part of the Soviet Union, the move was a symbolic one.

Navalny told Ekho Moskvy that Crimea's legal status could be bolstered by holding a fair referendum on secession. Ahead of the annexation this spring, a hastily prepared ballot was held amid the heavy presence of Russian troops on the peninsula.

"From the viewpoint of politics and restoring justice, what needs to be done now in Crimea is to hold a normal referendum," he said. "Not the kind they had, but a normal one. And whatever the people decide will be how it should be."

Navalny did not specify what he would consider a fair referendum in Russia, which he has repeatedly accused of rigging its balloting results.

The anti-corruption crusader said that acquiring territory from nearby countries was a policy that would ultimately harm the interests of the Russian people.

"There is nothing more damaging to the interests of the Russian people than this imperial chauvinism," he said. "It's not in the interests of Russians to seize neighboring republics, it's in their interests to fight corruption, alcoholism and so on — to solve internal problems," he added.

Navalny also said that Russia should stop "sponsoring the war" in eastern Ukraine between pro-Moscow separatists and government forces, but insisted that Russians and Ukrainians are the same people.

"I don't see any kind of difference at all between Russians and Ukrainians," he said, adding that his views might provoke "horrible indignation" in Ukraine.

Dismissals of Ukraine's claims to a separate culture, language and ethnicity are popular among Russian nationalists.

Navalny rose to prominence in the late 2000s as a critic of government corruption, and spearheaded protests in Moscow against fraud in the previous parliamentary and presidential elections. He ran for the position of mayor of Moscow last year, winning 27 percent of the vote.

He also attended and took the stage at the nationalist "Russian March" in 2011 — an alliance with nationalists that appears to have cost him a number of his liberal supporters.

Nationalist groups were rallying as opposition to the Kremlin at that time, but many of their followers have enthusiastically supported Moscow's recent moves, such as annexing Crimea, and have organized drives for "volunteers" to fight alongside pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine.

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