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Le Pen Says Crimean Annexation Legal (While Also Looking for Russian Cash)

January 03, 2017



Thibault Camus / AP

French presidential candidate Marine Le Pen says she believes that Russia's annexation the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine was legal.

"I absolutely do not believe that it was an illegal annexation," she told the BFMTV television channel. "There was a referendum and residents of Crimea wanted to join Russia."

The Front National leader also said that France and Russia must establish "strategic relations" in the fight against the Islamic State terrorist group, the RIA Novosti news agency reported.

Le Pen's comments do not come as a surprise. Like many right-wing nationalist candidates in Europe, she is widely seen as holding pro-Russia views and maintaining close ties to the Kremlin.

Le Pen's campaign was also previously funded by a loan from a Russian bank. However, in

July, the Russian Central Bank revoked the license of the lender, First Czech Russian Bank, for "unsatisfactory assets." In December, Bloomberg reported that Front National was struggling to find funding for Le Pen's presidential campaign. Last week, the party's treasurer said the it was seeking financing and would not rule out another Russian loan.

The French presidential election will be held in two rounds on April 23 and May 7.

Le Pen's election rival, Republican party candidate Francois Fillon, also boasts close links with Moscow, and is reportedly on first-name terms with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Fillon has stressed that Russia is a "crucial partner" for France, and has promised to lift European sanctions imposed on Moscow following the 2014 Crimea annexation.

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