

Foreign Politicians' Visit to Crimea Is Russia's Latest Disinformation Failure

Western politicians from marginal parties may help Putin score points at home, but the international community rejects a Russian Crimea.

By [Anton Shekhovtsov](#)

March 29, 2017



Members of Italy's regional councils and representatives of Italy's business communities seen by a monument to Polite People during their visit to Simferopol, Crimea. **Alexei Pavlishak / TASS**

On March 19, a motley crew of foreign politicians landed in Crimea. The group included representatives from Serbia, Montenegro, the Czech Republic, Kyrgyzstan, Brazil, the United Kingdom, and the U.S. — all on an official visit to the peninsula annexed by Moscow. Their trip was the latest in a series of similar excursions to Crimea, where Russian authorities continue to seek Western legitimization. A few days later, another delegation of businessmen

and politicians from Germany's Left Party (Die Linke) visited Crimea for a similar purpose.

This trend is as old as Russia's land grab itself, dating back to March 2014, with the arrival in Crimea of more than 20 foreign politicians and activists (mainly from the European political fringe). Invited by the Moscow-based "Civic Control" Association," these visitors monitored the illegitimate and illegal referendum that preceded Russia's formal annexation.

In 2016 alone, several foreign delegations visited Crimea to take part in different events. In April, the Second Yalta International Economic Forum hosted politicians from far-right parties, such as the Austrian Freedom Party, Alternative for Germany, Bulgarian Attack, Polish Change, and the Japanese Issuikai group, which discussed the "absurdity" of Western sanctions imposed on Crimea and how to circumvent them. In July, eleven politicians (mostly from the French Republican Party) went to Crimea on what was essentially a propaganda trip to convey the impression that France recognizes Crimea's "Russian status." In autumn, a group of Italian politicians (largely from the far-right Northern League and Brothers of Italy) traveled to Crimea to discuss the imaginary prospects of Italian investments in Ukraine.

Most of the individuals who visited Crimea in March this year are right-wing politicians, too. Dubravko Bojic, Milovan Bojic, and Aleksandar Seselj are members of the ultranationalist Serbian Radical Party; Jaroslav Holík represents the Czech right-wing populist Freedom and Direct Democracy; and Nigel Sussman and Richard Wood are members of the Eurosceptic UK Independence Party (UKIP). Others may not be openly on the far right, but they are implicitly involved in pro-Kremlin activities: for example, Alexandr Gegalcij promotes the idea of Ruthenian separatism in Ukraine's Subcarpathian region, while Stefan Djukic's Movement for Neutrality of Montenegro opposes Montenegro's membership in NATO. Another member of the delegation, Srdja Trifkovic, served as an observer of the Crimean "referendum" in 2014, as well as a monitor during "parliamentary elections" in Russian-occupied parts of Eastern Ukraine the same year.

This month's visit to Crimea pursued the same objectives as previous foreign visits: feigning international recognition of Crimea as a part of Russia, criticizing the sanctions imposed on Crimean businesses, and recruiting unofficial emissaries to "take the message" back to the West.

Georgy Muradov, Crimea's "envoy" to President Putin, met with the delegation and later asserted that the visit of "a large group" of members of different parliaments of "many countries" was indicative of Crimea's "wide network of foreign contacts," suggesting that the republic is now internationally recognized as a subject of the Russian Federation.

While in Crimea, delegates spoke to people the Russian media described as "local residents." In one of these conversations, a "local resident" asked Nigel Sussman to convince the British parliament to recognize Crimea as a part of Russia, while another asked Dubravko Bojic to tell the Europeans that everybody in Crimea lives "in peace and harmony."

Obviously, no one mentioned the political prisoners now held in Crimean and Russian prisons.

Sussman would later claim that the Crimean "referendum" was just and fair, that people in Crimea live peacefully, and that Western sanctions should be lifted. Sussman's level of understanding of the developments since 2014 is illustrated well by one of his statements

parroting Moscow's rhetoric: "In order to lift the sanctions, Russia must fulfill the Minsk Accords. As for me, I can say that Russia has already done everything on its part. It is time to lift the sanctions and let the Crimean people live their own lives."

The sad irony here is not only that Russia has failed to fulfill its obligations under the Minsk Accords, but also that this settlement has nothing to do with Crimea, and relates exclusively to Russia's ongoing occupation of parts of eastern Ukraine.

During the visit, the delegates also met with Remzi Ilyasov, a "deputy chairman" of the Crimean "State Council" and the leader of a pro-Russian group of Crimean Tatars. Ilyasov's task was to assure the foreign delegation that Crimean Tatars enjoy the same freedoms they had under Kiev, including the right to use their own language, practice their faith, educate their children as they wish, and observe their own cultural traditions. Ilyasov told the group that the Western media deliberately misinforms its audience about supposed infringements on Crimean Tatars' rights.

But Ilyasov never mentioned the names of the Crimean Tatars who have been killed, abducted, or persecuted over the past three years for their political positions.

The timing of this latest staged trip to Crimea is likely no accident. The visit took place only a few days after the European Parliament adopted a resolution on "Ukrainian political prisoners in Russia and the situation in Crimea," reiterating its "condemnation of the illegal annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea," and expressing "strong concern over the many credible reports of cases of disappearances, torture, and systematic intimidation of local citizens opposed to the annexation of Crimea."

By regularly inviting politicians and activists from Europe's pro-Kremlin and far-right organizations, Russian-annexed Crimea's so-called authorities are mounting a disinformation campaign to try to influence foreign public opinion, but the effort is a fool's errand. Today, the "Russian status" of the disputed peninsula is recognized only by Afghanistan, Cuba, Kyrgyzstan, and Nicaragua. For the foreseeable future, there is no reason to expect any Western country to abandon its defense of Ukrainian sovereignty over Crimea.

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Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/03/29/foreign-politicians-visit-to-crimea-is-russias-latest-disinformation-failure-a57569>