

Oral statement to Parliament

Russia's actions in Crimea

The Foreign Secretary spoke in Parliament about the referendum in Crimea and preparations for further EU sanctions on Russia.

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The Foreign Secretary William Hague opened a debate on the

Ukraine crisis in the House of Commons. He said:

The crisis in Ukraine is the most serious test of European security in the 21st century so far, and the United Kingdom's interests are twofold:

First, we want to see a stable, prosperous and unified Ukraine able to determine its own future free from external pressure or interference. Second, we have a vital interest in the upholding of international law and the UN charter, the honouring of treaties, and the maintenance of a rules-based international system. Russia's actions in Crimea run roughshod across all of these fundamental principles and threaten the future of Ukraine.

I pay tribute to the extraordinary restraint shown by the Ukrainian government, its military forces and its people in the face of immense provocation, with part of their country invaded and tens of thousands of forces massed on their border by a neighbour that refuses to rule out further military intervention against them.

There is a grave danger of a provocation elsewhere in Ukraine that becomes a pretext for further military escalation. We are working urgently to agree the mandate for an expanded OSCE monitoring mission to all parts of the country in the coming days.

On Friday I met US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov before their bilateral talks here in London. Russia was presented with a series of proposals to de-escalate the crisis and to address the situation in Crimea. After six hours of talks Russia rebuffed these efforts, and on Sunday the referendum went ahead. The Crimean authorities claimed a turnout of 83% of the population, with 96.8% voting in favour of joining Russia. Yesterday the Parliament of Crimea formally applied to join the Russian Federation, and President Putin signed a decree recognising Crimea as a 'sovereign state'.

He has now announced, in the last two hours, new laws to incorporate Crimean into the Russian Federation.

It was regrettable to hear President Putin today choosing the route

of isolation, denying the citizens of his own country and of Crimea partnership with the international community, and full membership of international organizations, and Russia's right to help shape the 21st century in a positive manner. No amount of sham and perverse democratic process or skewed historical references can make up for the fact that this is an incursion into a sovereign state and a land-grab of part of its territory, with no respect for the law of that country or for international law.

The referendum was clearly illegal under the Ukrainian Constitution, which states that the Autonomous Republic of Crimea is an integral constituent part of Ukraine, can only resolve issues related to its authority within the provisions of the Constitution, and that only the Ukrainian Parliament has the right to call such referendums.

This was a vote in circumstances where Crimea is occupied by over 20,000 Russian troops, and indeed the meeting of the Crimean Parliament that announced the referendum was itself controlled by unidentified armed gunmen and took place behind locked doors.

This referendum in the Crimea took place at ten days' notice, without the leaders of Ukraine being able to visit Crimea, without meeting any of the OSCE standards for democratic elections. These include verification of the existence of an accurate and current voter registration list and confidence that only people holding Ukrainian passports were eligible to vote. The OSCE mission to Ukraine was refused entry to Crimea on 6th March, and there are reports of considerable irregularities including voting by Russia citizens, Crimean officials and militia taking mobile ballot boxes to the homes of residents, a blackout of Ukrainian television channels. The outcome of the referendum also does not reflect the views of minorities in Crimea, since the region's Muslim Tatar minority, who make up 14-15% of the population, boycotted the referendum.

Furthermore, the ballot paper asked the people of Crimea to decide either to become part of the Russian Federation, or to revert to the highly ambiguous 1992 Constitution. There was no

option on the ballot paper for those who support the status quo. The House should be in no doubt that this was a mockery of all democratic practice.

The Organisation for Cooperation and Security in Europe unequivocally stated last week that that the referendum was illegal and should not go ahead. On Saturday the UN Security Council voted on a resolution condemning the referendum as “unconstitutional” and “illegitimate”, which was co-sponsored by 42 nations. Russia was completely isolated in vetoing the text, while 13 members of the Security Council voted in favour and China abstained.

Indeed the House should be clear about the illegality not only of the referendum but also of all of Russia's recent actions in Crimea. Russia has advanced several wholly spurious arguments to try to justify what it has done:

First, that it has acted in defence of Russian compatriots who were in danger from violence and a humanitarian crisis. However the OSCE High Commissioner for National Minorities has stated that there is “no evidence of any violence or threats to the rights of Russian speakers” in Crimea. There is no evidence of Russians being under threat anywhere in Ukraine, or of attacks on churches in Eastern Ukraine, as Russia has alleged. It is not true that thousands of refugees are fleeing Ukraine into Russia. Nor is there any threat to Russian military bases in Crimea, since the Ukrainian government has pledged to abide by all existing agreements covering those bases.

Numerous international mechanisms exist to protect the rights of minorities, and Russia's own actions are the greatest threat to stability in Ukraine. On top of evidence of gangs of thugs being bussed across the Russian border to provoke clashes within communities in Eastern Ukraine, over the weekend the Ukrainian government reported that Russian forces have seized an oil and gas facility five miles outside Crimea.

Second, Russia claims not to be bound by any of its previous

agreements with Ukraine, including the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, on the grounds that the new government in Ukraine is illegitimate. However the interim government, formed when former President Yanukovich fled his post, was approved by an overwhelming majority in a free vote in the Ukrainian parliament including representatives from Yanukovich's Party of the Regions. The government has restored the 2004 Constitution and scheduled Presidential elections. Its legitimacy and its commitment to democracy are clear. Moreover Treaties and international agreements are between States, not between governments. A change in government does not in itself affect the binding force of those agreements. The commitments in the Budapest Memorandum still stand, and Russia has flagrantly breached its pledge to, in the words of the Memorandum, "refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity of political independence of Ukraine".

Third, although Russia still denies that its troops are in Crimea, they maintain that former President Yanyukovich, whom they describe as the 'legitimate President of Ukraine', is entitled to request military assistance from Russia. This too is false, since the Ukrainian Constitution is clear that only the Ukrainian Parliament has the authority to approve decisions on admitting foreign troops. The President has no such right, nor does the Crimean Parliament. In law and as a matter of logic it is clearly ludicrous to argue that a President who abandoned his post and fled the country has any right whatsoever to make decisions about the future of that country let alone inviting foreign troops into it.

Fourth, Russia argues that the people of Crimea have a right to self-determination and that it is their basic right to choose to join Russia, citing Kosovo as an alleged precedent. But there is no equivalence whatsoever between Crimea and Kosovo, and as Chancellor Merkel has said, it is "shameful" to make the comparison. NATO intervention in Kosovo followed ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity on a large scale. An International Contact Group, including Russia, was brought together to discuss the future of Kosovo after the conflict. The independence of Kosovo followed nine years of work by the

Kosovan authorities to satisfy the conditions of independent statehood, and mediation by a UN Special Envoy. None of these circumstances apply to Crimea.

In all these areas Russia is attempting to find justifications in precedent or law to excuse its actions in Ukraine and to muddy the waters of international opinion. What we are actually witnessing is the annexation of part of the sovereign territory of an independent European state through military force. The fall of President Yanyukovych and the change of government in Ukraine was a massive strategic setback for the Russian government, which had made no secret of its desire to prevent Ukraine from moving towards closer association with the EU. Seen in this light the annexation of Crimea is a bid to regain the advantage, to restore Russian prestige and permanently to impair Ukraine's functioning as a country. And given that Russia still maintains it has the right to intervene militarily anywhere on Ukrainian soil, there is a grave risk that we have not yet seen the worst of this crisis.

If we do not stand up to such a profound breach of international agreements and the use of force to change borders in Europe in the 21st century, the credibility of the international order will be at stake and we will face more crises in the future. Russia and others will conclude that it can intervene with impunity in other countries where there are either Russian compatriots or orthodox populations. Indeed it has been a Russian policy over a number of years to encourage such links and dependencies, through the issuing of millions of Russian passports in Ukraine and other countries bordering Russia. Events in Crimea form part of a pattern of Russian behaviour including in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Transnistria.

Our national interest depends on a rules-based international system where nations uphold bilateral and global agreements in a whole variety of areas from trade to security. We have worked with Russia in recent years to uphold such agreements, such as the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty. The credibility of the international system rests on there being costs attached to breaking binding commitments and refusing to address disputes through peaceful

diplomacy.

The door to diplomacy of course always remains open, as it has been throughout this crisis. We have continued in recent days our efforts to persuade Russia to enter into direct talks with Ukraine and to take part in an international coordination group.

But faced with these actions it will be necessary to increase the pressure and our response.

Following the invasion of Crimea, the European Union took action at the Emergency European Council meeting on 6th March to suspend visa liberalisation talks with Russia and talks on a new EU-Russia Cooperation Agreement.

The European Council also agreed that unless Russia de-escalated the crisis, we would move to a second stage of sanctions including travel bans and asset freezes against named individuals.

Yesterday the European Foreign Affairs Council meeting that I attended decided to introduce additional measures, including travel restrictions and an assets freeze against 21 individuals, not just in Crimea but also in Russia, people responsible for actions that undermine or threaten Ukraine.

These measures have been taken in close coordination with the United States and allies such as Canada, Japan and Australia.

Preparatory work is underway for a third tier of sanctions, including economic and trade measures. The European Council will consider further measures later this week in the light of President Putin's speech today and Russian's actions in recent days. In the British Government we are clear that further measures need to be taken and in the light of President Putin's speech today we will argue at the Council for the strongest position and range of measures on which agreement can be obtained in the European Union.

We have already decided with our G7 partners to suspend preparations for the G8 Summit in Sochi this summer.

We are also determined to ensure that we are taking all appropriate national measures. The Prime Minister announced last week that we would review all UK bilateral military cooperation not subject to treaty obligations with Russia. I can announce now that we have suspended all such cooperation, including the finalizing of the Military Technical Cooperation Agreement, the cancellation of this year's French, Russian, UK, US naval exercise, and the suspension of a proposed Royal Navy ship visit to St Petersburg and of all senior military visits, unless in direct support of UK objectives.

We believe that under current circumstances there is a compelling case for EU member states to act on defence export licences.

The UK will now with immediate effect suspend all extant licences and application processing for licences for direct export to Russia for military and dual use items destined for units of the Russian armed forces or other state agencies which could be or are being deployed against Ukraine. We will also suspend licences for exports to third countries for incorporation into equipment for export to Russia where there is a clear risk that the end product will be used against Ukraine.

All such licences were reviewed following the Prime Minister's Statement to the House on 10th March, and so we are able to act immediately. We encourage other European nations to take similar action.

As well as responding to Russia's aggression in Crimea, it is also vital that the international community increases its financial and technical support to Ukraine through the IMF and European Union, to ensure that an economic crisis does not contribute to further political instability. We are absolutely clear with the Ukrainian authorities that this support must be matched by economic and political reforms. I gave them this clear message when I was in Kyiv two weeks ago, and yesterday I met the Acting Foreign Minister. Given that they have got many difficult decisions to take it is vital that they build up support in Ukraine and in the international community, and part of the way to do that is to tackle corruption at

the very outset. We will insist on such reforms and use the technical assistance I announced to the House in my last Statement to help bring them about.

We are sending technical teams to Kyiv to support reforms to the energy and social security sectors, and to work with them on their business environment and strengthen public financial management. We are also working up UK support for a flexible and rapid funding mechanism to support economic reform, further work on asset recovery, a partnership with Germany on public financial management, support to Parliamentary and local elections and so on.

At the emergency European Council, in response to a request by the Ukrainian Prime Minister, Heads of State and Government agreed to sign the political parts of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. This is an important symbol of the EU's support for Ukraine.

In taking these steps Ukraine should not and is not being asked to choose between Russia and the EU. It should be possible for Ukraine to enjoy strong relations with both, and it is in Russia's own economic interest that it does. I found on my visit to Ukraine that even in the South and East of the country Ukrainians do not welcome Russian intervention. And even those with many links to Russia or from the Party of the Regions believe in the independence and territorial integrity of their country.

By treating the situation in Ukraine as a zero-sum context Russia itself will lose strategically. Russia miscalculated its ability to control and influence the political situation in Ukraine in the events leading up to President Yanyukovych's departure. And I would argue that by seizing Crimea the Russian government has miscalculated again, since it has alienated a huge majority of public opinion in Ukraine, done immense damage to Russia's reputation over the world, and increased the likelihood of European countries taking long term-action to reduce the balance of leverage in the relation with Russia.

We should be ready to contemplate a new state of relations

between Russia and the West in the coming years that is different from the last twenty years; one in which institutions such as the G8 are working without Russia, military cooperation and defence exports are curtailed, decisions are accelerated to reduce European dependence on Russia energy exports, foreign policy plays a bigger role in energy policy, Russia has less influence in Europe, and European nations do more to guard against the flagrant violation of international norms we have seen in Crimea in recent weeks from being repeated. This is not the relationship that we want to have with Russia, but it is the relationship which Russia's actions look like they will force us to adopt.

Over the last four years we have worked to improve relations with Russia and we have worked closely with them on Iran and many areas of UN Security Council business. But there is no doubt however that if there is no progress on Ukraine relations between Russia and many nations in the world, including ours, will be permanently affected in this way.

Russia should be clear about the long term consequences and in the United Kingdom we will not shy away from those consequences, on that, in this House and with our allies we will be clear and clear about our own national interest, which is in Ukraine being able to make its own decisions and in the upholding of international law and the UN charter, and the prevention of future violations of independent European states.

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