

Vladimir Putin's justification for Russian action in Crimea undermines his previous arguments over Syria, Libya and Iraq

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The European Union and the United States have heavily criticised Russia's involvement in Crimea, following the referendum on the region's secession from Ukraine on 16 March. Valerie Pacer writes that while Vladimir Putin has attempted to justify Russian intervention in Ukraine as compatible with international law, his statements completely contradict his previous arguments on western interventions in countries such as Libya and Iraq. She argues that Putin's prior perspectives on national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and international law no longer seem to be valid if he feels Russia's interests are threatened.



With Crimea serving as the headquarters for the Russian Black Sea Fleet and with its large ethnically Russian population, the importance of the Crimean peninsula to Russia cannot be overstated. When then-President Medvedev signed the agreement which extended the stationing of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Crimea until 2042, Putin (then-Prime Minister) stated that 'it would be possible to build several bases with this money' but that cooperation with Ukraine was more important.

The current situation in Ukraine whereby Russia has, in the words of an unnamed U.S. official, 'complete operational control of the Crimean peninsula', marks a clear shift away from Putin's long-standing arguments in favour of international law, national sovereignty, and territorial integrity, and shows a new assertiveness in Russian foreign policy. On 4 March Putin stood before the press and shared his perspective on Ukraine. Throughout the lengthy press conference, Putin contradicted many of his old arguments regarding these points in an attempt to support his position on Crimea.

Putin's justification for action in Crimea

Putin argued that Yanukovich was still president of Ukraine and called what had happened in Kiev 'an anti-constitutional takeover, an armed seizure of power.' Although the unconstitutional removal of Yanukovich might justify Putin's support of him, it does not, in itself, provide a rationale for Russia's military actions. Later Putin stated that Yanukovich had 'no political future'. Putin is willing to state that Yanukovich is president, even knowing that Yanukovich is powerless, because it means he can claim Russian actions in Crimea have presidential approval.

Putin spoke out against accusations that Russian actions were illegitimate and pointed to Western involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, which lacked UN mandates, and Libya where the UN resolution was 'distorted.' Since other nations have pursued military action without UN approval, Putin claims the right to do so despite being a consistent opponent against such action in the past. Putin stated that if Russian forces were used it 'will be a legitimate



Vladimir Putin and Angela Merkel, Credit: G8 UK (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

decision in full compliance with both general norms of international law, since we have the appeal of the legitimate President, and with our commitments, which in this case coincide with our interests to protect the people with whom we have close historical, cultural and economic ties.’ Close ties to people are not a legal basis for military action and there is no reference to seeking a UN mandate in his statement.

Putin’s mention of Afghanistan appears peculiar since he approved many measures that assisted the West in its campaign, such as providing intelligence about terrorist locations, and he did not speak out against action. In the case of Iraq, [Putin argued](#) that ‘such disputes can only be solved on the basis of international law and within the framework of the UN Security Council.’

In 2011, [Putin called](#) UNSC Resolution 1973, which established the no-fly zone over Libya and resulted in the toppling of Muammar Qaddafi, ‘flawed and inadequate’ with the ‘flaw’ being that it allowed others to ‘take any action against a sovereign state.’ Although the West argued its actions in Libya were for humanitarian reasons and Putin makes the same argument about Crimea, Putin supported national sovereignty over humanitarian concerns. Putin did not mention Syria, but in 2013 he wrote in a [New York Times editorial](#) that Russians ‘[we]re not protecting the Syrian government, but international law’ and that countries should ‘return to the path of civilized diplomatic and political settlement.’ Despite the recentness of these arguments, Russia’s actions contradict the desire for diplomacy that Putin had argued for. Putin can state that what is happening in Crimea ‘is a humanitarian mission’ but in doing so he is still working outside of international law without a UN mandate – behaviour he has argued against.

Although Putin said the use of the military ‘would certainly be the very last resort’, Russian actions over the past week have shown that Russian forces were already involved, [although not necessarily overtly](#). The Federation Council has given its [consent](#) to using Russian forces ‘on the territory of Ukraine until the socio-political situation in that country is stabilized.’ Putin stated that ‘not a single gunshot’ had been fired in Crimea but [warning shots](#) fired by Russian officers at unarmed Ukrainians at the Russian-controlled Belbek airbase contradict that.

When questioned whether Russia violated the [Budapest Memorandum](#), under which Russia, the U.S., and U.K. agreed to recognise Ukraine’s independence, sovereignty, and existing borders and ‘to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine’, Putin argued that if we consider what happened in Ukraine to be a revolution, ‘a new state with which we have signed no binding agreements’ has been created. Given that the composition of parliament is still the same and that it was Yanukovych who left Ukraine, the situation can hardly justify sweeping away all treaties and agreements. Putin said he did not think that Crimea could someday join Russia but he did emphasise that ‘people living in a given territory have the right to determine their own future’.

On 6 March, following a decision by the Crimean parliament to ask Putin to consider their request to join Russia, it was announced that the Crimean referendum, now scheduled for 16 March, will [ask Crimeans](#) whether they want to become part of Russia, while the second referendum question would ask if Crimea should remain part of Ukraine but with the same level of autonomy it had under the 1992 Crimean constitution. Should Crimea secede from Ukraine and join Russia, the response of the United States and the European Union, in addition to that of Ukraine, will be critical. Discussions of sanctions and an appropriate response are on-going and such a decision would certainly influence results as it would be a clear violation of the already violated Budapest Memorandum.

No similar events to the shelling of Tskhinvali prior to the Russian intervention in Georgia in 2008 occurred in Crimea before Russian troops began their movements, and it has become clear that the arguments Putin has been making for years are no longer ones that he supports. Any future statements regarding the importance of national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and international law will be undermined by recent events. Putin’s own remarks indicate previous opinions regarding the importance of these three points are no longer the rules of the game if Putin feels Russian interests are threatened.

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