

Russian TV and Radio Highlights, March 10-16, 2014

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Crimea's referendum, in which the region's residents ended up overwhelmingly voting in favor of becoming a constituent part of Russia, dominated the end-of-week news roundups on the main Russian television channels for the week of March 10-16.

While the referendum's outcome was seen as a foregone conclusion, some commentators expressed concern at the growing tension in relations between Russia and Ukraine, with one journalist putting it rather bluntly. "Will there be a war with Ukraine?" she asked.

Coverage of the latest events in Ukraine on state-controlled Russian television channels continued to be in sharp contrast to coverage in the Western media. Russian commentators questioned the legitimacy of the new Ukrainian authorities, stressing that the fact that the new Ukrainian government had a significant number of nationalists — official state channel Russia 1 described them as "neo-fascists" — makes it "unfit" to run the country, putting Ukraine on the brink of collapse.

Radicals from the west of Ukraine were blamed for rampant crime in the capital, Kiev, and held responsible for attacks on pro-Russian supporters in eastern regions. "In one way or

another, eastern Ukraine is now forced to fight in real earnest against newcomers from the country's more western regions who want to occupy it," presenter Dmitry Kiselyov said on Russia 1.

Meanwhile, commentators on the few remaining media outlets that are not controlled by the state expressed their growing concern at rising tension in relations between the two countries.

What next?

"Few doubt that Crimean residents will vote for the peninsula becoming part of Russia. But the most interesting part is yet to come," Marianna Maximovskaya, the independently minded presenter of the "Nedelya" program on privately owned Ren-TV, observed ironically on the eve of the referendum.

While "everyone already realizes that Crimea will become Russian," the future of Ukraine's southeast still remains "vague," she said. According to Maximovskaya, the Russian authorities are using clashes between pro- and anti-Russian protesters in the east as an excuse to make statements along the lines of "Moscow reserves the right to protect its compatriots in Ukraine."

"This is precisely what both Kiev and the West fear most. In the event, the escalation of the conflict may become irreversible," she warned.

According to another outspoken commentator, Yulia Latynina on Gazprom-owned but editorially independent Ekho Moskvyy radio, the main question now is: "Will there be a war with Ukraine?"

"Crimea is not the only goal. Crimea is the program minimum," Latynina said on her regular slot "Access Code" on Ekho Moskvyy.

"If you look at the map," she continued, "you will discover two things. The first is that Crimea without communications and without a corridor leading to it alongside the southeast of Ukraine is a suitcase without a handle. So it would be very difficult to maintain Crimea, and not so much because of electricity but because of water.

"Most important ... it is obvious that the Kremlin's actions will be aimed at getting a piece of land all the way to the Dnestr region and, of course, getting eastern areas, too," she said.

According to Latynina, getting Ukraine's eastern regions is the Kremlin's "program maximum." "Whether it succeeds in this remains to be seen," she added.

Situation in Ukraine

Meanwhile, Dmitry Kiselyov, presenter of the "Vesti Nedeli" program on Russia 1, told viewers that the new Ukrainian government was "absolutely unfit" to run the country.

"While Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk goes begging cap in hand to the West, Ukraine is getting weaker and weaker. Sad as it may sound, Ukraine looks more and more like Libya where armed groups are still carving up what is left there for carving up."

"One can see with the naked eye that the current government in Ukraine has on its hands a situation in the country that is almost out of control and that most people in Ukraine do not recognize this government because its members have too many skeletons in their cupboard for the country to go back to stability under it," Alexei Pushkov, presenter of the "Postscript" program, said on Center TV, a national channel owned by the Moscow city authorities.

"Even in the West they cannot but see this," he said.

The above sentiments were echoed by Kirill Pozdnyakov, presenter of "Itogovaya Programma" on Gazprom-owned but state-controlled NTV. "This week Ukraine has drifted further away from law and order," he said.

Reaction in the West

Russian commentators admitted that Moscow was at odds with the U.S. and Europe over Ukraine but emphasized that there had been some voices, albeit not many, in support of Russia's stance.

According to state-controlled Channel One, while German Chancellor Angela Merkel was calling for sanctions against Russia, other members of the German parliament were pointing out that there were now "fascists" in the Ukrainian government and that, according to these lawmakers, "in the circumstances, Crimea's choice is logical."

"Postscript" presenter Alexei Pushkov is also chairman of the State Duma International Affairs Committee who, at the head of a State Duma delegation, visited the European Parliament during the week.

According to Pushkov, European lawmakers "even if they were listening to us, they were not hearing us."

"The European Union has already decided everything," he said. "It already decided a long time ago that a democratic revolution had taken place in Ukraine. And the revolution was declared democratic only on the grounds that it was pro-Western and anti-Russian.

"On the other hand, Russia, of course, was declared an aggressor that had to be stopped by threats and sanctions.

"There are, of course, individual voices in the West that see the situation differently," Pushkov said, but these people are "in a clear minority."

The report that followed included excerpts from an interview that Stephen Cohen, an American academic in the field of Russian studies, gave to CNN. Cohen said Putin was not to blame for the crisis in Ukraine.

"It was not Putin who provoked the Ukrainian crisis — it was imposed on him and Putin had no other choice but to respond and, as we can see, this is what he has done," Cohen said.

Yevgeny Baranov on Channel One described the European Parliament's reaction to the Crimean referendum as "real hysteria."

NTV correspondent Vadim Glusker stressed that in the U.S. "voices are increasing being raised to the effect that America should not quarrel with Russia but rather mind its own business."

As for Europe, Glusker said, "the EU is trying to save face by trying to pass between the devil and the deep blue sea."

"On the one hand, it does not want to lose the financial benefits of cooperation with Moscow but, on the other, it is continuing to demonize Russia when the latter acts without its agreement or blessing," he said.

On Russia 1, presenter Dmitry Kiselyov stressed a "crucially important" point, as he put it: "It is not we who have created the problem of Ukraine and, as a result, now a problem in Crimea."

"We were dragged into the events that had been imposed on us," Kiselyov said.

Defiance in face of sanctions

Commentators on state-controlled channels reported that the U.S. and the EU had threatened sanctions against Russia, but sounded defiant.

"It is clear that the West has economic levers to put pressure on Russia, including imposing an embargo on some Russian goods or restricting gas sales. But it is also clear that these sanctions will hit not just Russia. Economists have already calculated that they may lead to a major crisis in Europe and that it cannot be ruled out that this crisis will become global. Simply, Europe cannot afford this," Irada Zeynalova, presenter of "Voskresnoye Vremya," said on Channel One.

Marianna Maximovskaya on Ren-TV pointed out that, "despite all the talks," Russia and the West "disagree on absolutely everything."

Channel One also made it very clear that Moscow's and the West's positions on Ukraine were diametrically opposed. "Moscow's position is that the people of Crimea have the right to self-determination. The position of Kiev and its supporters is that this is separatism," was how Irada Zeynalova summed it up on the "Voskresnoye Vremya" program.

According to Ren-TV presenter Marianna Maximovskaya, the week of March 16-22 — when the Kremlin announces its decision and Western countries their reaction — will be "momentous." "The most important question is: what will happen to Ukraine's southeast?" she said.

And, according to Channel One correspondent Yevgeny Baranov, "every day it is becoming more and more obvious that in this whole story there are only two real players, Russia and the U.S." As for the Europeans, "their decisions are not independent and they find themselves in subordinate positions," he said.

The correspondent blamed the U.S. for lack of progress at Russian-U.S. talks. He said it was the result of Washington's "unwillingness to admit its responsibility for what is happening in Ukraine," which "leaves Washington no other arguments but threats."

Precedents

There appeared to be no doubt in pro-Kremlin commentators' minds that the Crimean referendum was legitimate. To support their argument, they looked for precedents elsewhere in the world.

Reporting from Kosovo, correspondent Mikhail Antonov on Russia 1 said the Crimea and the Kosovo situations were "the same" or "almost the same."

The report included remarks by Elmar Brok, chairman of the European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs, who pointed out that the difference between Kosovo and Crimea was that "in Kosovo there was a genocide that had to be stopped, while in Crimea nobody violates the rights of Russian speakers."

Does this mean that Russia is to blame for the fact that it has not waited for a genocide of Russian speakers to start in Crimea? the correspondent asked.

For two days the UN discussed a resolution submitted by the U.S. that condemns Russia, NTV correspondent Alexei Veselovsky said in his report on NTV. "The United States criticizes Russia for the referendum in Crimea, insisting on Ukraine's territorial integrity, as if forgetting that in 2008, when Kosovo declared independence from Serbia, the U.S. and its Western allies simply bypassed the UN resolution recognizing Serbia's territorial integrity as inviolable," he said.

Peace March

While state-controlled channels widely reported a rally in support of the Kremlin policy organized in Moscow on March 15, privately owned Ren-TV was the only Russian television channel to carry a report about a peace march staged by the opposition in Moscow on the same day.

According to "Nedelya" presenter Marianna Maximovskaya, it was the "biggest opposition rally" in recent times.

Maximovskaya clearly stated that it was a "protest against the Russian authorities' interference in Ukraine's affairs and against any military action."

About 50,000 people took part, she said.

For her part, Yulia Latynina on Ekho Moskvyy welcomed the fact that as many as 50,000 attended the peace march. She reminded listeners that in 1968 when the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia only seven people had come out on Red Square "to rescue the honor of the Russian people."

"From seven to 50,000 — in my opinion, there has been progress," she said.

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