Belarus Says Russia's Annexation of Crimea Sets a 'Bad Precedent'

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Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko on Sunday criticized Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea as setting a "bad precedent," but said that the territory was now "de facto" a part of Russia.

A close ally of Moscow, Lukashenko nonetheless said that Ukraine, another former ex-Soviet republic which shares a long land border with Belarus, should remain "a single, indivisible, integral, nonbloc state."

"Crimea is not dangerous because it has become part of Russia, but ... a bad precedent has been created," he told reporters in Minsk.

But he said the territory was now "de facto" part of the Russian Federation. "You can recognize it, or not recognize it. It does not change anything," he said.

Belarus borders Russia, Ukraine and NATO members Poland, Lithuania and Latvia.

Lukashenko, who has been almost 20 years in power and is criticized in the West because of his harsh policies toward the opposition at home, relies heavily on economic and military — including air defense — support from Moscow.

Russia sees Belarus equally as a useful buffer between it and NATO. Despite the close integration of the two states, relations often appear tense with Moscow but Lukashenko can usually be counted on to keep ranks with Moscow on big international issues.

On March 12, Russia sent several warplanes to Belarus at Lukashenko's request in response to increased NATO activity involving the U.S. and Poland near the borders of the ex-Soviet republic.

While obliquely criticizing Russia for seizing and annexing Crimea, he has implied that the Ukrainians have brought crisis on themselves by allowing years of poor and corrupt leadership.

On Sunday, while backing Ukraine's territorial integrity, he implied understanding and sympathy for Russia's argument that the rights of Russians and Russian speakers in Crimea had to be protected.

The new Kiev authorities had drawn Moscow's anger with policies threatening ethnic Russians in Crimea, including bringing in a law that downgraded the use of Russian.

"As soon as the Russian Federation saw how the Slav world was being strangled, it stepped in. These [Ukrainian] authorities provided the reason or, at the very least, the pretext," he said.

Lukashenko, himself the victim of Western sanctions and a travel ban because of his clampdown on dissent, poured scorn on the U.S. and European Union action against Russia over Crimea.

"They are banning 20 guys from going to Europe? So what?" he said. "They [the West] start prevaricating, twisting and turning to save face. They are not capable of doing anything."

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