

Russian Parliament Tries to Further Legitimize Crimea as NATO Boosts Presence

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The speakers of both houses of Russia's parliament are busy finding ways to strengthen the country's legitimacy for taking over Crimea, with one speaker attesting that the land grab was perfectly legal and another planning to nullify the region's 1954 transfer to Ukraine.

The moves come days after the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly renewed sanctions against its Russian delegation due in part to Russia's "continued illegal annexation of Crimea."

NATO is also heightening its military presence "as a response to the aggressive actions we have seen of Russia violating international law and annexing Crimea," NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said Thursday.

That same day, the speaker of Russia's lower house of parliament, Sergei Naryshkin, said his

country's annexation of Crimea last year was just as legitimate "from a legal point of view" as when "East Germany became a part of West Germany," the Interfax news agency reported.

Naryshkin's comments seemed to dismiss a discussion with fellow lawmakers last week about issuing an official condemnation of West Germany's supposed "annexation" of its communist counterpart during the German reunification a quarter-century ago, as an apparent response to heightened international pressure over the Ukraine conflict.

Meanwhile, the parliament's upper house plans to pass a bill this spring that would annul the Soviet Union's transfer of Crimea to Ukraine six decades ago, Speaker Valentina Matviyenko said in comments carried by Interfax.

The bill aims to restore "historic and legal justice," Matviyenko said Wednesday. "No one asked the residents of Crimea or Sevastopol back then. No one consulted the regional authorities."

Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev handed over Crimea to Ukraine in 1954 in a symbolic gesture that appeared to be of little consequence at a time when both Russia and Ukraine were part of the U.S.S.R. But after the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991, many Russians felt they had lost a territory that was rightfully theirs.

The new bill aims to "establish the fact that already back then, in 1954, an illegal act was committed," Matviyenko said. "We want to document the injustice done to Crimea and Sevastopol."

The annexation of the Black Sea peninsula by Russia in March last year has been widely condemned by Western governments, many of which have referred to the annexation as an invasion and disputed the results of a local referendum in favor of joining Russia.

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