Crimea’s Case for Leaving Ukraine

Exclusive: Virtually everyone in Official Washington is condemning Russian “aggression” in Ukraine and demanding a belligerent U.S. response to Crimea’s desire to secede and join Russia, as a new Cold War hysteria grips U.S. pols and pundits, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

If you were living in Crimea, would you prefer to remain part of Ukraine with its coup-installed government — with neo-Nazis running four ministries including the Ministry of Defense — or would you want to become part of Russia, which has had ties to Crimea going back to Catherine the Great in the 1700s?

Granted, it’s not the greatest choice in the world, but it’s the practical one facing you. For all its faults, Russia has a functioning economy while Ukraine really doesn’t. Russia surely has its share of political and financial corruption but some of that has been brought under control.

Not so in Ukraine where a moveable feast of some 10 “oligarchs” mostly runs the show in shifting alliances, buying up media outlets and politicians, while the vast majority of the population faces a bleak future, which now includes more European-demanded “austerity,” i.e. slashed pensions and further reductions in already sparse social services.

Even if the U.S.-backed plan for inserting Ukraine into the European Union prevails, Ukrainians would find themselves looking up the socio-economic ladder at the Greeks and other European nationals already living the nightmare of “austerity.”

Beyond that humiliation and misery, the continuing political dislocations across Ukraine would surely feed the further rise of right-wing extremists who espouse not only the goal of expelling ethnic Russians from Ukraine but Jews and other peoples considered not pure Ukrainian.

This troubling racist element of the “inspiring” Ukrainian uprising has been mostly airbrushed from the U.S. media’s narrative, but more honest sources of news have reported this disturbing reality. [For instance, watch this report from the BBC.]

What’s Wrong with Secession?

And, despite what you hear from the U.S. government and the mainstream U.S. media, it’s not at all uncommon for people to separate themselves from prior allegiances.
It’s especially common amid political upheavals, like Ukraine’s neo-Nazi-spearheaded coup that ousted elected President Viktor Yanukovych after he signed an agreement on Feb. 21 to relinquish much of his power, hold early elections and order police to withdraw.

Though this agreement was co-signed by European nations, they stood aside when neo-Nazi militias exploited the police withdrawal and overran government buildings, forcing Yanukovych and many government officials to flee for their lives.

Then, under the watchful eye of these modern-day storm troopers, the rump parliament “impeached” Yanukovych but did not follow the procedures laid out by Ukraine’s constitution. The overthrow was, in reality, a putsch.

But American political leaders and journalists have pretty well expunged that inconvenient history, making the crisis simply a case of black-hatted villain, Russian President Vladimir Putin, bullying the white-hatted “pro-democracy” coup-making heroes of Ukraine.

U.S. politicians and pundits now cite the Ukrainian constitution as some sacred document as they argue that Crimea has no right to hold a popular referendum on leaving Ukraine and joining the Russian Federation. President Barack Obama says a Crimean plebiscite would be illegitimate unless Crimea gets permission to secede from the national government in Kiev as stipulated in the constitution.

In other words, the Ukrainian constitution can be violated at will when that serves Official Washington’s interests, but it is inviolate when that’s convenient. That situational view also presumes that some normal constitutional process exists in Kiev when one doesn’t.

More Hypocrisy

This U.S. government/media hypocrisy on the Crimean vote is underscored, too, by Official Washington’s frequent role in advocating and even mid-wifing secession movements when they correspond with U.S. foreign policy interests.

Fifteen separate nations emerged from the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991 as U.S. politicians celebrated. No one seemed to mind either when Czechoslovakia split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993.

That same decade, U.S. officials helped negotiate the dissection of Yugoslavia into various ethnic enclaves. Later in the 1990s, the U.S. government even bombed Serbia to help Kosovo gain its independence, despite centuries of deep historical ties between Serbia and Kosovo.
In 2011, the U.S. government supported the creation of South Sudan, carving this new oil-rich nation out of Sudan. The supposed motive for breaking South Sudan loose was to stop a civil war, although independent South Sudan has since slid into political violence.

The Obama administration disputes allegations of U.S. hypocrisy about secessions, calling these comparisons “apples and oranges.” But the truth is that all secession cases are unique, a balance of history, pragmatism and politics. Very seldom are they simple and clear-cut.

In Crimea, the case for secession from Ukraine seems strong: Crimea is populated mostly by ethnic Russians; many people speak Russian; and they have historically viewed themselves as part of Russia. If a large majority of the voters prefer joining Russia, why shouldn’t they?

Perhaps the case for Crimea’s secession would have been weaker if the Western nations hadn’t so eagerly embraced the putsch in Kiev. If the Feb. 21 agreement had been enforced clearing the way for Yanukovych’s orderly departure Obama’s argument might make more sense. The constitutional procedures would have remained intact.

But the haste with which Washington and Brussels recognized the coup government with Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland’s choice for Ukraine’s leadership, neoconservative favorite Arseny Yatsenyuk, named interim prime minister shattered the formal political process of Ukraine.

That was followed by the post-coup rump parliament passing measures, often unanimously, that targeted the political security of ethnic Russians in the country’s east and south. Combined with threats from the neo-Nazis who have grabbed significant power and favor a purified Ukraine for ethnic Ukrainians, the nation confronts a potential civil war.

In such a case with the prospects of ethnic cleansing and the violence that would surely follow the most reasonable solution might well be to hold referenda in Crimea and in eastern Ukraine on whether the people in those areas want to stay attached to the Kiev regime. If the people in those regions want independence or association with Russia, why should the United States ratchet up a new Cold War to prevent that?

If what’s left of Ukraine wants to join the European Union – and if the EU would want it – then those Ukrainians could vote for their future, too.

Democracy means little if populations are compelled to remain part of an undemocratic regime that has seized power in the capital by force and demonstrates hostility toward outlying regions. Since such a predicament now
exists in Ukraine, the best-imperfect solution could be to dispatch international observers to Crimea to monitor the plebiscite and verify whether the popular vote fairly reflects the people’s will.

[For more of Consortiumnews.com’s exclusive coverage of the Ukraine crisis, see “The ‘We-Hate-Putin’ Group Think”; “Putin or Kerry: Who’s Delusional?”; “America’s Staggering Hypocrisy”; “What Neocons Want from Ukraine Crisis”; “Ukraine: One ‘Regime Change’ Too Many?”; “A Shadow US Foreign Policy”; “Cheering a ‘Democratic’ Coup in Ukraine”; “Neocons and the Ukraine Coup.”]

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, America’s Stolen Narrative, either in print here or as an e-book (from Amazon and barnesandnoble.com). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only $34. The trilogy includes America’s Stolen Narrative. For details on this offer, click here.