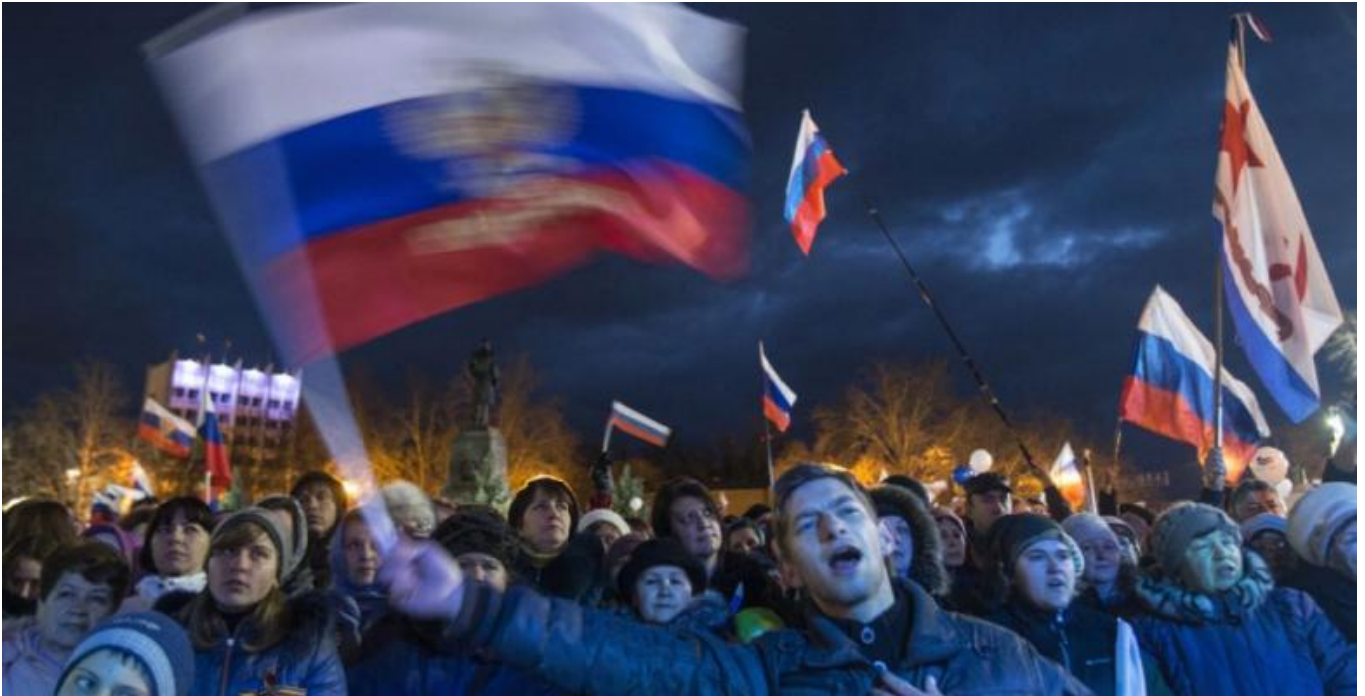


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'Is this not democracy?': No conditions will make Russia return Crimea to Ukraine rule – Putin

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Moscow will never return Crimea to Ukraine, because the republic overwhelmingly opted to reunite with Russia in a free referendum, Vladimir Putin has told Austrian ORF broadcaster, in an exclusive interview.

*“There are no such conditions and there can never be”* for Russia to return Crimea to Ukraine, Putin, who is to visit Austria on Tuesday, said. Russia was forced to act in Crimea because of the *“unconstitutional armed coup,”* which took place in Ukraine in February 2014.

The President addressed the issue of Russian military presence on the peninsula at that time by saying that *“our army was legally deployed in Crimea – under the agreement on our military base there.”*

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And, following the regime change in Kiev, “the first thing we did was increase our contingent to guard our Armed Forces, our military facilities, because we immediately saw that they were being threatened,” he said.

The mostly Russian population of Crimea also *“sensed danger, when trains started bringing aggressive nationalists there, when buses and personal vehicles were blocked, people naturally wanted to protect themselves,”* Putin recalled, adding that *“the first thing that occurred was to restore the rights that Ukraine itself had issued by granting Crimea autonomy.”*

He pointed out that the decision to hold a referendum on secession from Ukraine *“was made by the Crimean parliament, which was elected in strict accordance with the Constitution and the laws of Ukraine before any such events.”*

*“Crimea gained independence through the free will of the Crimeans, expressed in an open referendum, not as a result of an invasion by Russian forces,”* Putin said. The Russian forces were only in Crimea to ensure a free and independent plebiscite, he added.

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The March 2014 referendum showed 96.77 percent of voters supported joining Russia, with an 83.1 percent voter turnout. *“Is this not democracy? What is it then? And what is democracy?”* Putin wondered.

But with ORF journalist Armin Wolf continuing to call Russia's reunion with Crimea an *“annexation,”* Putin referred him to the example of Kosovo, which declared independence from Serbia in 2008 with broad Western backing. *“Why do you not say Kosovo was annexed after the invasion of NATO troops? You do not say that. You are talking about the Kosovars' right to self-determination,”* he said, adding that *“the Kosovars did this by a parliamentary decision alone, while the Crimeans did it in a referendum.”*