Transcript: Q&A

Ukraine: The International Response

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UKRAINE: THE INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE: Q&A

James Nixey:
I’d like to, by way of a first question, ask you – since you mentioned points of no return – what would make the West react with even stronger measures than it already has? What are the red lines for the West as far as Russia’s actions are concerned? So if you could take that as question number one, Roderic, and I will immediately open this up to question number two, effectively.

Question 2:
I wanted to ask what the panel’s view were on the offer from the EU to sign the political elements in the association agreement probably next week, with the interim government in Ukraine. It seems to me that there is a risk that if they do that when the present government doesn’t have a formal mandate, given how divisive it was and the key role it played in creating the disruption in Ukraine in the first place, that that might be a hasty move before any government in Ukraine has a full mandate.

Question 3:
The question is related to Turkey, because of the minority in the area in terms of the Tatars. What do you think the Turkish position would be in terms of reacting to this? Also the value of the Bosporus, in terms of trade.

James Herbst:
First, let me offer what I consider a minority view regarding what precipitated the crisis. I don’t think [Viktor] Yanukovych backed away from the trade deal with the EU because of the Russian threat. I think he backed away because the EU insisted on [Yulia] Tymoshenko’s release and he was not going to go for that. I think he hid behind the Russians.

Having said that, in specific response to the question, I believe it would not be politically problematic for the government in Kyiv to sign that deal now, because I don’t think there’s tremendous opposition anywhere in the country to that agreement. Having said that, I think it would be prudent for them to hold off until after the election. Why take any risks whatsoever?
Neil Buckley:

I actually think this is potentially very problematic. I think it’s important that the EU sends positive signals to Ukraine and gives whatever support it can, but what we’ve been hearing is that Russia has particular concerns about the association agreement which may not have been widely appreciated previously. Not so much about the trade elements of the association agreement and the DCFTA (Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area) but about some security elements, security guarantees, that are in the political chapters of the association agreement. I’ve been told that Sergey Glazyev, Mr [Vladimir] Putin’s adviser on Ukraine and the kind of front man on Ukraine, has in a number of conversations made clear that it’s these security guarantees in fact that are a particular concern for Russia, because although they may look rather innocuous if you read them, Russia sees in them a kind of backdoor attempt to put closer integration with Western security structures, particularly NATO, back on the table or even accelerating it. Now those concerns may be misguided but they are concerns of Russia. I also heard from an EU ambassador that it was an issue that Mr [Sergey] Lavrov had raised quite forcefully recently.

So I think actually it would be – if there are any EU diplomats listening – I think it would be potentially a very big mistake actually to sign this agreement next week, because I think it could send precisely the wrong message to Russia at a very sensitive time. Our understanding is that the whole idea to sign these political chapters only came up during the European Union’s summit last Thursday, when they were groping for some kind of positive signal to send. Someone said – in fact it was Mr [José Manuel] Barroso – let’s sign the political elements of the association agreement. Quite possibly, none of the EU leaders in the room had read those chapters and knew what they said.

So I think we should be looking for other ways to support Ukraine right now and not, in my view, doing that. I think there is a perfect reason to delay this, to say that we should only sign these agreements once there is a democratically elected president of Ukraine in place, which there will be after 25 May.

Roderic Lyne:

I think I’ll leave Turkey to Ambassador Herbst, who knows much more about it than I do. I think red lines, after Syria, may be a term best avoided.
The EU's announcement had three stages in it. The first stage has already effectively happened. If Russia formally and unilaterally annexed Crimea following the referendum on Sunday, then clearly we are in the next stage. I think the space for negotiation at that point is gone. That would trigger second-stage sanctions by the West. Russia could leave some wriggle room by doing something short of that, by saying: we note your very strong opinions and desire to join us, oh Ukraine, but of course there are procedures that need to be gone through. Then they could, as it were, spin that process out. Ideally they’d say: all right, that's your wish, but this thing can only happen under international law, through agreement with the sovereign government of Ukraine. They might say 'when there is such a government’ – at the moment, we don’t recognize it.

So they do have, as I said, a number of options. But if they go for annexation, in effect integration, then I think that does cross a point. Clearly the most serious escalation would be if Putin used the powers he has given himself – and you've got these people exercising on the borders right now – to deploy forces into eastern Ukraine. I don't just mean Crimea, I mean towards the Donbas and so on. At which point we'll be into a deep freeze.

**James Nixey:**

What would trigger a response well beyond financial sanctions and expulsions from clubs? What will make the West do something qualitatively different? The West has been, as you say, tougher than most of us in this room I think expected. What would Russia have to do to make it even tougher? I don’t want to talk about a military response but what would be –

**Roderic Lyne:**

I don't want to talk about a military response either but clearly the limits of NATO membership are well defined and clearly will be defended and Russia knows that. But I think I've just identified the two steps that are likely to take us into deeper territory. If Russia went for the most serious of these, I think there would be a huge and lasting Western reaction. I think it would have a material effect on defence budgets in Europe. I think that it would have a very large effect on the amount of trade and other interaction with Russia. I don’t want to go into all of it because I hope it's not going to happen, but also I think we can get into rather dangerous territory. But it would be very strong and I think it would unite a lot of people behind these measures.
**Question 4:**

While 20,000 anonymous soldiers are milling around in the Crimea, a state-of-the-art helicopter assault ship is going through sea trials in the Atlantic. It is one of two assault ships which were sold to Russia by President [Nicolas] Sarkozy as a reward – or presumably is perceived as a reward – for the Russian invasion of Abkhazia and Ossetia, and one of the reasons, I suspect, why we’re in the position we’re in now. My question is: at what point do we tell the Russians that this contract is no longer viable and at what point does NATO start to use these two vehicles – because France obviously is going to need to have them bought by somebody, hopefully NATO – what would that do to improve the strategic position of the West in the Mediterranean?

**James Nixey:**

The Russians are training on them now, aren’t they?

**Question 5:**

If Putin plays judo, which game of sport does [Barack] Obama play? Isn’t the matter that what encourages Putin to play tough is a perceived weakness of the American president? Is Obama weak? I would like to know the panel’s opinion.

**Question 6:**

My question is about energy. What do you think will happen with the very significant resources of gas and oil in the Black Sea, just off the coast from Crimea? EBF and Eni and ExxonMobil are – ExxonMobil are negotiating and [indiscernible] have already invested into the exploration of the resources there. What do you think will happen? Don’t you think that international companies now investing into the energy resources of Russia can no longer do that, and by actually doing that they are supporting Russia’s aggression in Ukraine and actually violating international law?

**James Nixey:**

Ambassador Herbst, perhaps you could answer the Obama question. Do we have a foreign policy American president again?
John Herbst:

I think this is an urban legend which has been pedalled by people who don’t understand foreign policy. Dick Cheney tried to sell this to the American public last weekend. He was asked: wasn’t Mr [George W] Bush in power when the Russians did the same thing in Georgia? No one ever accused Mr Bush of being slow to pull the military trigger. Mr Cheney answered: that happened at the end of the Bush, beginning of the Obama administration – a weasel answer.

I think President Obama’s foreign policy has not been wonderful. If I were to grade it, I would give it a C+ maybe, a little bit better than that. But that stands very tall compared to President Bush’s – the younger Bush’s – F on foreign policy. In other words, it’s not nearly as good as Bush One’s B+ or A-.

Putin went into Crimea because of his interests in Ukraine, his misguided interests, not because of any perceived weakness in Washington. I think President Obama has done a pretty good job since this crisis has begun.

James Nixey:

Thank you. Can I also invite you to answer the Turkey question, in terms of how do you rate its importance and its possible effect on the current crisis? Clearly a key player.

John Herbst:

The government of Turkey and the people of Turkey are very upset by what has happened in Crimea. There’s always been a great relationship historically between the Crimean Tatars and the Turks. As we all know, the Crimean Tatars were forcibly pushed off the peninsula by Stalin during World War II. A small portion of them have come back, they now represent at a minimum 12 per cent of the population (that was 12 per cent according to the census of 2001). Their birth rate is much higher than that of the Slavs in the peninsula and there has also been some in-migration since that census.

Putin has been clever in courting Turkey. This has been part of his effort to outflank the United States in Europe. I think that tactic of courting Turkey has taken a severe blow, and it will not recover from that blow in the near term. So I think there will be a new coldness in relations between Ankara and Moscow. But the Turks are not going to do anything provocative. They are pragmatic.
Neil Buckley:

On the US foreign policy question, I think that Russia is reacting not to perceived weakness on the part of the Obama administration. I think you have to understand the Russian perception of what’s been happening in recent years. I’m not sure they actually differentiate that much between the different US administrations. The Russian view that we hear over and over again from very senior people in Russia, people connected with them, is that they believe the US has had a habit over the past decade of interfering beyond its borders, where it didn’t have the right to interfere, repeatedly. We heard President Putin criticize that in his speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 very strongly.

I really think what has provoked Russia’s very strong reaction this time is that it honestly believes that the West has tried to lever Ukraine away from Russia. First of all coming up with this EU treaty as a way of doing it, then when Mr Yanukovych didn’t sign the EU treaty the West fomented the demonstrations in Kiev and then was in a certain way complicit in the overthrow of Mr Yanukovych. I think the top people in Russia do believe this. However absurd it may seem to us, I think that’s what they think. It may be that the KGB or the FSB, which Mr Putin used to work for, is feeding him slanted information. But I think a kind of paranoia has set in in the Kremlin.

So they don’t see the US as weak, they see it as interfering and having interfered once too often in their backyard. I think there is now a decision on behalf of Moscow to, if you like, teach the West and teach the US a lesson by responding in very robust way. My concern is what Russia may go for, if it doesn’t feel that it’s being listened to and that this message has got through.

Roderic Lyne:

You asked at what point we should tell the Russians that the Mistral contract is no longer viable. While I have reason sometimes to feel envious of President [Francois] Hollande, I’m not President Hollande. That’s a question you should direct to him. But your question does illustrate both the much higher degree – as does the question about energy – of interdependence now between the West and Russia, since the end of the Cold War. That means that Russia has much more to lose. It also means that we have more to lose. None of the things that could happen are going to be cost-free.

I would be appalled in any case if Russian troops were deployed into eastern Ukraine, and I would be utterly horrified if in those circumstances the French continued with that contract. That will of course be a decision from them but I
imagine there would be some heavy persuasion from their allies, were they inclined to do anything other than that, which I’m sure they wouldn’t do.

On the question of gas, obviously it would be extremely painful, particularly for Germany, to have to do without Russian gas. It would be painful for all of us if this crisis caused a major spike in energy prices. But there comes a point at which you say: we will have to put up with that, and we can. I think that Russia is much less able to do without its export of gas to Germany – after all, it has nowhere else to send those molecules – than Germany could do without Russian gas, because it has alternative sources of supply. Remember that the Japanese were able to re-divert 30 per cent of their energy needs after the Fukushima nuclear disaster into other sources of energy. If push comes to shove, the same can be done on our side. But we don’t want to have to do it.

**Question 7:**

Are we not the pot calling the kettle black in our application of analysis in this situation, given that in other areas of world – as Mr Buckley has suggested – the West has acted incredibly unilaterally and without benefit of international law, and without respect for territorial integrity of the countries it’s attacked in the last few years? Beginning with Yugoslavia, moving through Iraq, through to Libya and so on and so forth. Can we criticize the Russians for taking the obvious message, which is: we have to do the same. We have to be strong and if they’re going to buck international law, who are they to tell us not to?

**Question 8:**

Obviously Russia and Europe have very different visions of the role of Ukraine and their rights *vis-à-vis* Ukraine. But at the end of the day, is the major problem and the major cause of the conflict the monopoly in the media in Russia? Because there are such a number of facts that happened, but systematic lies in Russian media, and people start believing these lies. As long as there is no competition and capacity to present facts to the people and the leadership, there’s no way Russia can have a different perspective on Ukraine. My question is: is there something that the West could do in terms of fostering media diversity in Russia, to avoid the next conflict?
Question 9:
If I heard Neil Buckley correctly, he said that signing the association agreement now would be sending an unhelpful signal to Russia. The fundamental rules of the post-Cold War system have been very visibly and brutally transgressed. My question, in those circumstances, is what message do we want to send Russia? What message do we also want to send others, not only Latvia and Poland but others who are watching this? Japan, China, Iran, Israel.

Neil Buckley:
I think you have a strong point, as I said in my previous answer, that because the West has played fast and loose to some extent with international laws in the last decade, that has somewhat weakened our position. I think it's something we have to look at very carefully, the role that we have played in creating this kind of environment.

In terms of the media monopoly, I think it is an extremely worrying thing. We have seen a mobilization of the Russian media to the extent that we've never seen before really, since the Soviet era – and in some ways even in the Soviet era – to put across a highly slanted, often entirely false picture of what's going on in Ukraine. It's very damaging and very dangerous, and I think it's something people have been warning about for a long time, the extent to which the Russian state dominates the media.

I think it's something that unfortunately is very difficult for us to do anything about from the outside. The one big difference today, compared to the Soviet era, is the internet and the fact that there are a sizable proportion of Russians now who are getting news from the internet and not from television. Unfortunately, we are seeing some signs at the moment that Russia may be starting to clamp down on the internet as well, which I think is a particularly worrying development.

The third one – I take your point. I think we are in a very tense situation. I think it's still possible that Russia could consider going into eastern Ukraine, which I think would be a disastrous step. I think the overwhelming priority right now is to calm tensions and not do anything that might provoke Russia into taking the next step. Therefore, I don't think this is a very propitious moment to be signing an agreement, if indeed this is the very agreement Russia is most concerned about. I think the overwhelming priority is to calm tensions, keep Russia out of eastern Ukraine, which would be highly damaging. I don't
see any overwhelming need to sign that agreement on Thursday of next week.

**John Herbst:**

Regarding the first question, I agree with the questioner and Neil that in fact promiscuous Western interventions have created an environment which makes it a little bit easier for the Russians to justify what they’ve done. Having said that, it’s worth noting that each of the interventions in question were interventions against nasty and autocratic regimes, whereas the Russian intervention was precisely against democratic forces.

Second question, regarding the Russian media. The problem is not just that it’s a monopoly, the problem is that it’s being directed by the top in a nasty direction. Neil’s right that the information age, the internet and Twitter and all that, is a partial offset. But as we’ve seen, as attitudes have been mobilized in Russia, it’s only a partial and unsatisfactory offset. So I don’t think there’s too much we can do about it.

Three, I agree with my other panellists that the real disaster – excuse me, an even greater disaster – is the Red Army in Donetsk. Their position in Crimea is already a disaster. I think for that reason we have to send a message now. It would be very nice right now if both the United States and the EU were to financially sanction at least one or two prominent people in Moscow. That would put some teeth behind the threat of sanctioning a whole bunch if things get worse. I think we need to have more in the way of deployments to the east in NATO, as they get a demonstration that the Russian strategic position has not improved as a result of potentially seizing Crimea. We have to send some very clear markers now in order to make the second-order consequences even more real for planners in the Kremlin.

**Roderic Lyne:**

I’m very wary of applying moral relativism in these circumstances. You can draw lots of analogies but they’re all inexact. What we’re actually looking at here, if Russia annexes Crimea, is that that would be a unilateral and flagrant breach of international law, for which there would be no acceptable justification. If one allows this to happen by force, then you are risking a repetition. There are so many international boundaries around the world which could be vulnerable to similar treatment. We could find ourselves in the deepest possible consequences, not just around the borders of the Russian
Federation. Yes, this is one of the aftershocks of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Yes, Russia certainly had a case to argue over Crimea. There was an awful lot, I said earlier, which could be negotiated over the status of Crimea. But it cannot be negotiated if Russia is unilaterally using force there and our response to that has got to be very firm and very clear. We certainly should not step back from the position we’ve taken.

So I think that’s the message that has to be sent, that none of this says that all of our behaviour over the last 20 years (or however many years you want to make it) has been perfect, but let’s not beat up on ourselves for something here that has been done in such a flagrant way. We must be very clear on that.

**James Nixey:**

Excellent, thank you for ending on that very strong, very firm and no-nonsense note, as always, Roderic. Ladies and gentlemen, we’ve packed – as always at members’ meetings – a tremendous amount into one hour, thanks to great discipline and tremendous technology. I’m so surprised, once upon a time I tried to do a Skype link with Tiraspol, and Tiraspol managed to do it and we failed. So we’ve come on a lot.

I would say, just by way of self-publicity, that the Russia and Eurasia Programme is producing work on Ukraine on a daily basis. I would invite you to check out our website, including some policy options, perhaps answering the question of tonight’s meeting. Thank you very much indeed, especially to the ambassador for giving up your living room for the last hour, and also to Roderic Lyne and Neil Buckley.