Ukraine holds "Crimean Platform" summit

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The inaugural "Crimea Platform" summit was held Monday in Kiev in an attempt by the government of President Volodymyr Zelensky to build international support for a military offensive against Russia to "return" the Crimean peninsula to Ukraine.

Officials from 44 countries and blocs took part in the summit, including representatives from all 30 NATO members.

Zelensky opened the conference by denouncing Russian "aggression," and accused Moscow of militarizing the peninsula and persecuting Crimean Tartars, a Muslim minority living on the peninsula in the Black Sea.

"I will personally do everything possible to return Crimea so that it becomes part of Europe together with Ukraine," Zelensky stated.

In addition to taking part in a large number of photo ops on a stage standing next to Zelensky, the participants of the summit issued a Joint Declaration which stated: "Participants in the International Crimea Platform do not recognize and continue to condemn the temporary occupation and illegal annexation of Crimea, which constitutes a direct challenge to international security with grave implications for the international legal order that protects the territorial integrity, unity and sovereignty of all States."

The declaration also included a call for Russia to join the initiative and engage in talks over giving Crimea back to Ukraine, a suggestion which was predictably ridiculed by Moscow.

The event was the culmination of a strategy approved by Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council in March which is aimed at retaking Crimea and reintegrating the strategically important peninsula.

As part of its "3 pillars" strategy for "retaking" Crimea, Zelensky's administration sought "full Ukrainian sovereignty" over not just Crimea but that of the port city of Sevastopol as well, which serves as the home of the Russian Navy's Black Sea Fleet. The provocative announcement of this strategy triggered a major military crisis in the Black Sea this spring.

Crimea, a peninsula in the Black Sea, was annexed by Russia in March 2014, following a US-backed, far-right coup in Kiev, the capital of Ukraine. A referendum was held at the time on integrating Crimea to Russia and received support from over 95 percent of the Crimean population.

Crimea was previously part of Russia, but was transferred by decree to the Ukrainian SSR in 1954 by Nikita Khrushchev.

Following the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the port of Sevastopol had been leased to Russia by several successive Ukrainian governments. Its potential loss following the US-backed ousting of the President Viktor Yanukovych in 2014 was widely seen as one of the primary motivators in Russia annexing the militarily strategic peninsula.

Both Zelensky and the Crimea Platform's participants are well aware that Moscow would never willingly place its only major warm water seaport back in the hands of a right-wing NATO-affiliated government, imbuing the entire conference with a high degree of political provocation.

While the Ukrainian government gloated over the number of attendees—including the presidents of Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Moldova, Slovenia and Finland—French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel were conspicuously absent from the summit.

Merkel's absence was particularly glaring as she had just left the country the previous day after meeting with Zelensky in an attempt to control the fallout between the two countries over the completion of the $12 billion Nord Stream 2 pipeline that will carry Russian gas directly to Germany through the Baltic Sea. The pipeline's completion threatens to significantly

undercut Ukraine's importance to European energy markets and deprive it of approximately $2 billion in annual gas transit fees.

Prior to meeting with Zelensky in Kiev, Merkel had met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow to discuss Nord Stream 2 and the ongoing civil war in eastern Ukraine between the Ukrainian military and Russian-backed separatists that has claimed the lives of over 14,000.

The United States, which has been Ukraine's biggest military supporter since 2014 providing the country $4.9 billion in military aid, sent its Secretary of Energy Jennifer M. Granholm. The real purpose of her visit in Kiev was to meet with both Ukraine's and Germany's energy ministers to smooth over strained relations between Kiev and Washington over Nord Stream 2.

The Zelensky government was essentially blindsided when the Biden administration announced in July that it had come to a deal with Berlin not to oppose Nord Stream 2's completion.

Zelensky is currently scheduled to travel to Washington to meet with Biden on August 31. Last week, in an interview with the *Washington Post*, Zelensky again expressed his disagreement with the Nord Stream 2 deal.

In line with the course taken by the Biden administration, German Economy and Energy Minister Peter Altmaier made clear that the purpose of meeting with Granholm and Ukrainian officials was not to put Germany's participation in the pipeline in question, stating, "From today's perspective we shouldn't reject any suggestions, but also not create any insurmountable obstacles [for the completion of the pipeline]."

The entire Crimea Platform summit was predictably met with disdain in Moscow where Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov denounced the summit as an "anti-Russian event."

Following the meeting spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Ministry Maria Zakharova called it a "political performance that is removed from reality." She warned that Russia "will be forced to view participation of separate countries, international organizations and their representatives in the Crimea Platform as encroachment on Russia's territorial integrity which will inevitably have its effect on our relations."

Zakharova's comments make clear that the continued attempts by an increasingly authoritarian Zelensky

government to gain support for an aggressive offensive to "retake" Crimea are a reckless provocation that threatens the outbreak of a full-scale war between Russia and Ukraine.

While Zelensky was initially elected in 2019 on the basis of a rejection of the far-right militaristic nationalism espoused by his predecessor Petro Poroshenko, Zelensky has increasingly decreed authoritarian anti-Russian measures by prosecuting political opposition and banning media outlets it dubs "Russian propaganda."

On the eve of the Crimea Platform summit, the Zelensky government last week banned the popular opposition website strana.ua by decree. The site was one of the few major media outlets in Ukraine that reported on the violent exploits of the country's various militant far-right nationalist groups and corruption within the Ukrainian government

Earlier in February, Zelensky undemocratically shut down three popular predominantly Russian-speaking television stations—ZiK, 112 Ukraine and NewsOne—all of which were affiliated with the rival oligarch and pro-Russian opposition leader Viktor Medvedchuk.

Medvedchuk was later arrested and charged with "high treason" by the Ukrainian government.

Hypocritically, the Crimea Platform denounced Russia for supposedly limiting "fundamental freedoms" in Crimea, "such as the right to peaceful assembly, the rights to freedoms of expression and opinion, religion or belief, association, restrictions on the ability to seek, receive and impart information, as well as interference and intimidation that journalists, human rights defenders and defense lawyers face in their work."

Since coming to office, the Zelensky government has made clear that, in Ukraine, such "fundamental freedoms" do not apply to anyone that does not blindly support the nationalist and right-wing course of the government in Kiev.