



Finnish official treats Russian threat 'like dandruff'

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By J.J. Green

WASHINGTON -- Andrei Illarionov, a former top envoy to Russian President Vladimir Putin, created a whirlwind of anxiety in late March, when he told a Swedish newspaper that Putin's annexation efforts will not stop until Finland and the Baltic states were part of Russia.

But Finnish officials discount Illarionov's predictions as uninformed analysis of foreign policy.

"My original thought was rubbish and still remains rubbish," said Alexander Stubb, Finland's Minister for European Affairs and Foreign Trade.

"There's a lot information-war going on and there's a lot of over-analysis and under-analysis going on. I think anyone who draws a parallel between Finland and Ukraine doesn't necessarily know exactly what's going on in foreign policy and security policy," Stubb said in an exclusive interview with WTOP.

Stubb, in Washington on a fact-finding mission regarding the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) -- a trade agreement being negotiated between the European Union and the U.S. -- dismissed the speculation saying, "It's a bit like dandruff -- you brush it off."

But when asked directly by WTOP about Putin's plans, Illarionov suggested it's more than idle speculation, saying it's all based on public documentation.

"As we all know, Russian troops occupied the Crimean Peninsula and later on March 18, Crimea and Sevastopol were annexed by Russia. This was the first part of the plan and there are some other targets of this plan (in the longterm)," Illarionov said.

Now a senior fellow at the Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity at the Cato Institute, Illarionov declined to characterize his personal relationship with Putin, his motivations or his strategies.

As a former top envoy to Putin, however, Illarionov likely had a significant window into Putin's mindset.

Illarionov was Putin's top economic adviser from 2000 to January 2005 when he resigned as Putin's presidential representative to the G8, declaring "this year Russia has become a different country. It is no longer a democratic country. It is no longer a free country."

He became an outspoken critic of Putin's government, moved to the U.S. and in 2010 was among the first to sign on to an online petition called "Putin must go" urging him to leave office.

Putin, now in his third term as president over a 15-year period, appears resolute on remaining in power and expanding Russia. In a March 18 speech to the deputies of the state DUMA (council assemblies) and the members of the Federation Council, Illarionov says Putin clarified his intent to reunite Russia with Ukraine and Belarus.

"Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride. This is the location of ancient Khersones, where Prince Vladimir was baptized. His spiritual feat of adopting orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilization and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus," Putin said during his March speech.

According to Illarionov, "Putin said later that day, speaking at the mass rally in Red Square in Moscow, this is not the end of his plan."

Illarionov's suspicion that Russian annexation would continue to spread was further stoked when Putin made a curious reference to German reunification in 1990 and the rise of the European Union.

Putin said "Berlin is still ahead," suggesting there is a competition, between the two countries to build the largest block of countries.

Illarionov said Putin's reference to "Berlin is not being used only as the name of a city in Germany, but as some kind of symbol" of his plans which are not limited to Belarus, but include some other countries.

Regardless of its neighbors geopolitical aspirations, Finland's leaders are confident in its *raison d'etre* and their destiny is not becoming a victim to a Russian power grab.

Stubb said, after Swedish rule ended in 1809, Finland was an autonomous part of the Russian Empire until 1917, but since the separation, "we've prospered quite well as a nation-state. We're culturally very separate. We happen to share a border of 1,300 kilometers with Russia and there are some Russian elements in Finnish society, but anyone who knows their history knows that

we are a Western nation, we believe in Western values, we believe in Western institutions and we live accordingly."

For a second time during the interview, Stubb shrugged off speculation about Russian annexation referring to it as "dandruff," suggesting that Illarionov's assessment was off-base.

Noting that Finland is a strong, independent nation, and fully vested member of NATO, Stubb said, "Comparing Finland to Crimea is like apples and oranges."

Russia annexed Crimea during a period of political and economic turmoil in Ukraine, a far cry from the current status in Finland.

But Illarionov warned, "six years ago, there was nobody in the world, that believed Russia would attack Georgia and occupy Abkhazia and South Ossetia. At the time Western leaders and Western public opinion didn't pay much attention to that and six years later, the whole world paid the price for that," with the occupation and annexation of Crimea.

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