



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE

T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: contact@chathamhouse.org

F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 www.chathamhouse.org

Charity Registration Number: 208223

Transcript

Is the Age of Intervention Over?

Professor Michael Ignatieff

Professor of Practice, Harvard University; Centennial Chair, Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs

Chair: Lindsey Hilsum

International Editor, *Channel 4 News*

19 March 2014

The views expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of Chatham House, its staff, associates or Council. Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to any government or to any political body. It does not take institutional positions on policy issues. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s)/ speaker(s) and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the publication or details of the event. Where this document refers to or reports statements made by speakers at an event every effort has been made to provide a fair representation of their views and opinions, but the ultimate responsibility for accuracy lies with this document's author(s). The published text of speeches and presentations may differ from delivery.

Lindsey Hilsum:

Thank you very much for coming and welcome to Chatham House. My name is Lindsey Hilsum, I'm the international editor of *Channel 4 News*, and it's my great pleasure to introduce Professor Michael Ignatieff. Now, Professor Ignatieff is now a professor at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. It said in my notes that he was a professor of practice, so I don't really know what it is but I do know that practice makes perfect so that, I presume, is what we're going to hear. You may well be familiar with Professor Ignatieff from many different incarnations, as a leading politician in Canada, and also in this country where he lived for many years where he was a broadcaster, an academic, a thinker, and above all somebody who really championed the idea of humanitarian intervention, and that is what he is going to talk about tonight. Is this now the end of humanitarian intervention? This is on the record. I see that the wifi thing is up there so you are welcome to tweet or any of those other things that we do these days. So what we'll do is Michael will speak for 25 minutes or so, I may then ask him a couple of questions and then it'll be open to the audience, so Michael.

Michael Ignatieff:

Thank you. It's a great pleasure to be here. It's a great pleasure to be on the stage with Lindsey. We go back a long way. I haven't seen you for a long time.

Lindsey Hilsum:

That's true.

Michael Ignatieff:

But I think it is safe to say that she is one of those few who gives her profession a good name and so I thank you for decades of reporting. This talk is going to change direction slightly. When I signed up for it, I signed up for is the age of intervention over, and was going to talk to you a little bit about Syria and then we had an intervention. And what is interesting about the intervention, and it's obviously a hinge moment in the 21st century, is that the justifications for intervention used in Kosovo, used in Bosnia, are being served back to the West in parody form and so I want to talk about the parody justifications of intervention that we've seen in the last little while, In other

words, spend some time talking about Ukraine, and then perhaps we can talk about Syria and I want to talk about some other matters.

But I think the first thing to say about Ukraine and Crimea is that it's not over, it's not even the end of the beginning. I have a great sense of fateful foreboding about this, not because I think that the strategic purposes of Vladimir Putin are unclear, I think the purposes are to take Crimea, I think the further purpose is to prevent Ukraine moving into the NATO orbit to, as it were, insert a large sliver under the finger of Ukrainian political culture and make it constantly aware of the limits on its sovereignty, and that it constrain in perpetuity the self-determination of the Ukrainian people. And he said it's only the Crimea, he's not going into Eastern Ukraine, but he also said he wasn't going into Crimea so we don't know where we are. That's as evident to you as it is to me.

The thing I would say as someone who is a historian and actually has great grandparents buried in Ukraine, Russian grandparents buried in Ukraine, is just to emphasize a point made by Professor Timothy Snyder of Yale which is this is the blood lands, this is cursed blood soaked ground, and what fills me with foreboding about what's happening is that we have a confrontation between Ukrainian nationalists and Russians in which a fantastic amount of denial of each other's history is going on, and that's a very toxic and geo-strategically dangerous thing. That is when Putin accuses the Ukrainian nationalists of being fascist he is, of course, evoking 1941 and the collaboration of a tiny proportion of the Ukrainian population in the Wehrmacht's destruction of European Jewry in Ukraine. A tiny proportion of Ukrainians did collaborate in that horrible crime, in that genocide, but to use the word fascist is then to deny any legitimacy to the claims of Ukrainian nationalists and it evokes in my memory the ways in which Serbs called all Croats fascist in 1991.

The minute this language creeps into political argument geo-strategically run for cover, it's extremely dangerous, because the other function of this is to hide the other crime just behind the horror of 1941, and that's the Holodomor, the massacre of seven million Ukrainian kulaks and peasants between 1931 and 1938. There are very deep enduring reasons why a majority of Ukrainians don't want to be under Russian domination ever again. This is said with feeling by the grandson of a Russian landowner in Ukraine! They have very deep reasons not to want to be under Ukraine and that has to do with the fact that seven million of their fellows died horrible and merciless deaths between 1931 and 1938, and this accursed encounter of two genocides that cannot acknowledge and speak truth to each other is the single most

dangerous thing about this and that's why it's not over. There is simply no language in which both sides are acknowledging the historical realities that are driving the passions, the frenzies and the murderous desire for revenge and vengeance. So, if you ask me what worries me most it's that. It's not - the realpolitik analysis I can get, Putin is a realpolitik actor but he's unleashed realpolitik intentions into the most toxically dangerous place in Europe and that's why I think we should all feel deep concern.

Ukraine also cast into light the new shape of the post-Cold War order. We seem to have the re-problematization of post-Soviet borders everywhere from the Baltics, through the Balkans, through Poland, through Romania, through Georgia. There isn't a country that borders in the post-Soviet area that isn't concerned literally about its territorial integrity, sovereignty and safety, and that creates a tremor of fear right throughout a wide arc that goes from the Baltic Sea right to the Black Sea. The denuclearization of Ukraine that was so happily agreed in 1994 now seems a bitter irony to Ukrainians. They traded their nuclear weapons for a guarantee of their territorial integrity by Britain, the United States, and Russia. There will be some Ukrainian nationalists who wish they had a nuclear weapon. I certainly don't wish they did, but you can understand why it would have given them an absolute lock on their sovereignty at a critical moment.

No, it's not a new Cold War, and it's not a new Cold War as countless commentators have said because this is an encounter between two capitalist societies now. The global integration of these two worlds that is authoritarian crony capitalism from the Russian border eastwards faces oligarchic democratic capitalism west of the Russian frontier. These two systems are deeply integrated and that is constraining the kinds of interventions that each can do to constrain the other, so it's not the Cold War, that we understand, but it is massively concerning. And the parodic aspects of the Putin intervention are what I'd like to focus on a little bit, and by parodic I mean the focus on the word protection, the protection of civilians. The normative justification for the seizure of Crimea was to protect ethnic Russians and Russian language speakers from imminent danger. The protection language is a language with which I have a certain association since I was a member of the International Commission on Sovereignty and Intervention that devised the notion of the Responsibility to Protect, and the Responsibility to Protect has now been served back to us in a highly ironic form, that is the normative justification for this operation is protection.

And one lesson I think to draw from the Crimean catastrophe is to require those of us who have defended the idea of humanitarian intervention to

protect civilians to re-seize that language of protection and purify it of the grotesque caricature that has been served back up to us, and I think that three clarifications seem in order. One of them is to say that if you're going to advance the normative justification of protection when you use military force, then one criterion you must absolutely meet is you protect everybody. What is parodic about Putin's language is you're going in to protect one group of human beings. Protection normatively can only be justified when it's protection of all.

Secondly, the only grounds on which protection has normative validity, is when those persons are threatened with ethnic massacre or genocide. That was what the R2P (Responsibility to Protect) criteria were and they're worth restating, since a lot of people think if you use the language, we must use force to protect civilians, you can use it when their democracies are overthrown, when they've got bad governments. Well no, the normative justification for protection was to protect them from massacre and ethnic cleansing. What's precisely parodic about Putin's use is that needless to say the ethnic Russians were under no such threat whatever.

I think the third lesson about protection is much more painful and difficult to draw, and here I cede to Lindsey Hilsum's expertise on Libya. Protection was in the UN Security Council mandate to authorize the intervention in Libya, and there protection of civilians morphed very quickly into regime change, and that is one of the ways in which protection of civilians, that normative justification seemed to ally itself with geostrategic purposes that actually could not be justified normatively by protection, so R2P, give you a headline, R2P became RC. Protection of civilians became a legitimation for regime change and of all the things that has bounced back to us was Russian fury, some of it justified, in the ways in which that language was used in Libya. So if we're going to protect civilians, let's protect civilians, let's not make it a cover for regime change. I know how complicated that statement actually is. The question then arises can you protect civilians in certain cases unless you change their regime, but let's understand that the Libyan story created a normative opportunity for an authoritarian rogue, and the question we need to ask is whether protection of civilians in Crimea is going to become regime change in Ukraine, because if protection of civilians in Ukraine is regime change that's a recipe for civil war and we should be very clear that it's a recipe for civil war.

The second issue, I've raised a set of normative issues about protection. The second issue in which I think we need to do some thinking is about secession and unilateral secession, and here I'll suddenly become a Canadian again

because we know something about this. We run a political system in which 25 per cent of our population wants out. I think it's one of the glories of our constitutional democracy that we maintain a democracy of citizens some of who don't want to be in the same room, want to have their own independent state and so we've been forced by the conditions of our existence as a country to imagine what should be the rules for secession when citizens withdraw their consent from a state. This came to the Canadian Supreme Court in 1998 and it's a juridical precedent that is of some relevance here.

As you know, Putin is saying unilateral secession from Crimea is mandated by the popular consent shown in the referendum. Some consent if you've got Spetsnaz watching the voters. This is constrained consent at the very best. But even if it's genuine consent, even if you could strain and torture the Crimean situation into actual consent for secession, the fact that it's unilateral, the fact that it occurs without the consent of the Ukrainian people seems to me you store up infinite amounts of trouble for the future. And don't forget there's still Ukrainian troops on those bases as we speak, awaiting orders from Kyiv to withdraw presumably, but no government in Kyiv can survive were it to give an order to withdraw, so the Ukrainian soldiers are there as hostages and the possibility that someone will spray ordnance around and trigger civil war is very, very real, which is why I say this is not over.

But get back to the issue of secession, unilateral or otherwise, I think the normative principle we need to reaffirm here in international affairs is that you can't compel a people to remain inside another country if they withdraw their consent, but if you leave, this is the key Canadian insight, you retain obligations to the normative and constitutional order you wish to leave. This is a counterintuitive thought but a deeply important one, that is you can't walk out of the house of a state and slam the door behind you. You retain obligations to the constitutional order you want to leave; the constitutional order of Ukraine, the constitutional order of Canada, the constitutional order of the United Kingdom, the constitutional order of Spain. This is a lesson that needs to be understood. Why are you bound to respect the constitutional order of a state you wish to leave? To avoid civil war! That's why. There are 20 other reasons I could give you, but that's the core of it. The reason the Supreme Court of Canada decreed that if a Québécois want to secede they must negotiate the terms of their exit from the state they wish to leave, is to avoid civil war, to avoid troops being dispatched to defend the territorial integrity of Canada.

We have to think these constitutional issues through deeply and understand that a unilateral secession in Ukraine is unacceptable to the majority of the

Ukrainian people. It's force majeure but the long term consequences of this are explosive, and not just for Ukraine but, needless to say, for other nations in Europe, small nations in Europe that may want to leave their constitutional homes. A Scottish referendum, to stray into explosive territory in this country, the Scottish referendum is legitimate because it's agreed by both sides to the argument and were the Scots to decide to secede in September, and don't exclude that as a possibility ladies and gentlemen, what then must follow is a long protracted, difficult negotiation about everything including borders, including national debt, including currency. And don't suppose British civility can cope with this easily, it's bloody awful work, and you want, desperately want to avoid civil conflict. I trust because I love this country and love its constitutional traditions that you would be able to navigate that rapid successfully, but the Ukrainian emphasis, the Russian emphasis on the rights of unilateral secession are fatal to the constitutional order of every society in Europe and we need to reaffirm the necessity of negotiated secession in every case. Why? To avoid civil war.

I've got a few minutes and then I want to stop. I've talked to you about protection. I've talked to you about the necessity to reclaim the moral legitimacy of protection, to define what it is we think protection can do in the world we inherit. I've talked a little bit about secession and the need to reclaim clarity about the conditions under which secession can occur. Let me come to Syria which appears to be a very different story, but Syria and Ukraine are deeply linked. It was always going to be difficult to get the Russians to come on side on Syria. It was always going to be difficult to get any common action to stop the killing there. It now seems to me to be absolutely impossible and so we can't quite understand where that leaves us. Does it, for example, let's not exclude the possibility, leave us in a situation where the Americans, were the killing to mount, you don't like 125,000 dead, you'll love a quarter of a million dead, because that's where we're going. At some point this does become unendurable in the international system.

I understand that the Americans and the Brits, everybody, deeply reluctant to intervene, deeply reluctant to use military force, I get all that. The democratic constituency for humanitarian intervention has evaporated and for good reason, because of Iraq, because of catastrophes in the way it's been executed, although I wish to remind you, *entre parenthèses*, that no-one is dying in Kosovo and no-one is dying in Bosnia, sometimes these things do work. But I understand that in the Syrian case the democratic legitimacy for the use of force has collapsed, the possibility of UN Security Council approval to authorize a Chapter 7 mission has just vanished in perpetuity. And then the

question becomes, what happens next? Is it possible that as a result of Vladimir Putin's flagrant violation of international law that the United States might decide in its term what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, that is proceed to unilateral military action without Security Council approval, as it's done in the past over Kosovo. I don't actually exclude that as a possibility, not this year, needless to say. But as the body count piles higher and higher in Syria sooner or later we're going to be back talking about what do you do to stop this carnage? In other words, the age of intervention, the age of humanitarian intervention, the age of intervention to protect civilians is not over, because civilians keep dying. At a certain point this imposes geostrategic cost on everybody, at a certain point it becomes a matter of shame, at a certain point domestic constituencies are out, and at a certain point you've got to decide what to do.

If you ask me what to do about Syria I would engage in air interdiction almost immediately to stop him using, [Bashar al-] Assad using airpower, barrel bombs, helicopters, to torment and kill civilians in wherever. As Lindsey has pointed out to me and many others have pointed out, the problem here is to get the other side to a ceasefire. The purpose, the exclusive and only defensible purpose of the use of military force by outside powers in Syria is to force a ceasefire. Military force absent of diplomatic strategy to secure a ceasefire is just throwing ordnance around. The only rationale would be to force Assad to the table and the problem needless to say is there's no-one on the other side who can deliver a ceasefire. He can deliver a ceasefire but the other side cannot. And remember what you're using force in this case to do which would be to simply say to Assad, you can't win. You're not using airpower in this case as close air support for the rebels. You want to stay as far away from them as possible, but you might want to use it to simply say to Assad, you can't win, okay, you can't win. You can hold onto what you've got but you can't win, so if you can't win come to Geneva and negotiate a ceasefire. And the problem, as Lindsey has pointed out before our evening began, is that there is nobody on the other side who could similarly enforce a ceasefire, but unless you get a ceasefire they keep dying and they could die for a very long time to come and that is not just a problem of conscience. I'm not asking you to weep for the Syrians; I'm just saying it's a geostrategic disaster. And at some point this question will return to the international agenda in a much more envenomed environment than it would have had we intervened in 2011 because by 2014 we're in a new world in which any possibility of engagement with the authoritarian on the other side has simply been foregone.

So where are we? I want to conclude. We are in a world that's split in two and it's not just an authoritarian crony capitalist regime versus an embattled democratic capitalism, it's a world fundamentally irrevocably split over the normative justifications for intervention, so that all we do is serve up parodic versions of each other's argument. That's not a recipe for stability and comity. And it's a world where unfortunately where we have discovered, that is the West has discovered, an unfortunate but simple truth that is as old as the Melian dialogue; the strong will now have to protect the weak. The strong will now have to protect the weak in the Baltics, on the Black Sea coast, in Southern Europe, all the frontiers that face Putin will now want security guarantees from us and suddenly we will be in the business of having to provide security guarantees that we actually don't want to make, but unless we do we're going to live in a much more dangerous world.

What restrains that world is the economic logic of global integration which is making everyone think, well what if we shut off the taps, if we close access to the capital markets, what can Putin do to us? It's very good that the economic logic of globalization is restraining hotter heads, I like all that, but let's understand that the economic logic of globalization and the political logic of great power confrontation are in a collision mode. And just to conclude and this is not the most popular thought. We do want to live in a world where great powers, combinations of powers, use military force to keep civilians from dying. I don't care how unpopular the thought is, I think we do want that world, and if we don't get that world the world will be ever more at the mercy of the bad faith of dictators. Thank you very much for listening.