



## Russia vs. Ukraine: The Tragic Perils of Nationalism

By Doug Bandow  
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No good end to the Crimean crisis is likely. Moscow seized territory historically part of Russia and won't retreat. Ukraine won't accept Moscow's land grab.

The West can't ignore flagrant aggression and is headed toward a "cool war" with Russia. Crimeans unwilling to shift allegiance will have to leave their homes. Such are the perils of nationalism, which remains sadly popular today.

Russia has officially absorbed Crimea. The veneer of legality doesn't disguise Moscow's act of war. A majority of the territory's people may have wanted to leave, but a referendum framed by Russian advocates and conducted under Russian military occupation was certain to yield the result desired by Vladimir Putin, not Crimea's citizens.

Kiev is no more interested in the desires of Crimea's people. Although Ukraine enthusiastically seceded from the Soviet Union, the new state does not want its own people to leave.

The West proclaimed itself shocked at Moscow's move, even though the former routinely intervenes militarily for its own ends. Moreover, Washington and Brussels contributed to the current crisis by using the violent protests against former president Viktor Yanukovich to push for a new, Western-oriented government.

While the Russian government deserves to be punished for its bad behavior, there is no chance it will reverse course. The U.S. and Europeans are heading toward extended confrontation with Russia.

The biggest losers are Crimeans who prefer Ukraine's inefficient and corrupt, but still functioning—at least until the violent overthrow of the elected government—democracy to Putin's wealthier but increasingly authoritarian wannabe empire. Although ethnic Russians make up a majority of Crimea's population, even some of them might have preferred to deal with

Moscow from afar. Ethnic minorities have more reason to worry about their future under new rulers.

There is no right answer to the controversy. Ukraine only had formal legal title to Crimea because in 1954 Soviet Communist Party General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev, who ran Ukraine before ascending to the summit of power in Moscow, transferred control of the territory from Russia to Ukraine. At the time, no one imagined the Soviet Union dissolving.

But in 1992 Ukraine fled the collapsing Communist superstate with Crimea in tow. Last month violent street protests shifted control in Kiev from Russophiles in eastern Ukraine to nationalists in western Ukraine.

That angered the former and sparked a violent response from the Kremlin. Putin's conduct, though deplorable, was understandable. As Henry Kissinger once said, even paranoids have enemies.

Since the end of the Cold War the West has pursued its version of the notorious Brezhnev Doctrine: What's mine is mine and what's yours is negotiable.

The U.S. and Europe advanced NATO to Russia's borders, poured money into Ukraine to promote pro-Western candidates, pressed Kiev to choose between Russia and the European Union, and pushed friendly politicians toward power after the ejection of Russia-friendly Yanukovich.

Yet none of this would have mattered if the majority of Crimeans had clearly wanted to switch allegiance and Putin had waited for them to act. In general, people should be able to freely decide their political destinies.

However, even a voluntary transfer along ethnic lines would raise larger concerns. In principle, there is nothing wrong with wanting to live with others who share family, traditional, historical, and cultural ties. But setting up a government in the same way turns the state into a vehicle for ethnic aggrandizement rather than liberty advancement.

Moreover, once ethnic division begins, the process usually leaves newly dissatisfied ethnic minorities, who have an equal right to demand ethnically-based states. Indeed, the Versailles Treaty allowed friends of the winners, like the Czechs and Poles, to create ethnic-based states incorporating multiple minorities from the losers, particularly Germany. The latter demanded similar self-determination, with Adolf Hitler's backing.

Of course, Putin is not Hitler and authoritarian Russia is not Nazi Germany. Nevertheless, Moscow's resort to nationalism has revived a tragically misguided approach to international affairs.

Given Russia's brazen misbehavior, the West should take measured steps to impose some costs on the regime and its supporters. U.S. and allied officials need to play the long game, finding ways to help encourage moderation in Russia.

Washington and its European friends also should avoid triggering a serious cool war. Maintaining at least correct relations with Moscow is necessary to protect U.S. interests elsewhere. Equally important, Washington and Brussels should be more cautious before again undermining important Russian interests next door to the angry bear.

From America's standpoint, whose flag flies over Crimea today is irrelevant. But the revival of nationalism backed by military intervention sets an ominous precedent. The allies still are reaping the whirlwind from the nationalist winds sown by the Versailles Treaty nearly a century ago.