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## Russians And Ukrainians Battle Over Crimea, But What About Tartars? 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, putting the nations at odds long-term. 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, the collectivist ideology 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 separate, but no one really knows. 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, ending centuries of outside control, the new state does not want its own people to leave. So Crimea will become yet another "frozen conflict" between neighbors.

The West proclaimed itself shocked at Moscow's move, even though the former routinely intervenes militarily and violates international law for its own ends. Moreover, [Washington](#) and Brussels contributed to the current crisis by pressing Kiev to choose between [Europe](#) and Russia and using the violent protests against former president Viktor Yanukovich to push for a new, Western-oriented government.

While Russia deserves to be punished for its bad behavior, there is no chance a Putin government and little chance a successor regime will reverse course. While a new Cold War is unlikely—there is no grand ideological struggle—the U.S. and Europeans are heading toward extended confrontation with Russia. Relations will become more distant and difficult, risking tit-for-tat retaliation targeting issues of interest to the West, such as Afghanistan and Iran.

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. Ukrainians could suffer if conflict erupted between Moscow and Kiev. Tartars predate Russians in Crimea, having lost out when Catherine the Great grabbed the territory from the defeated Ottoman Empire. The former suffered even more when Joseph Stalin ordered mass deportations. Few Tartars are happy ending up back under Moscow's control.

There is no right answer to the controversy. Ukraine only had formal legal title to Crimea because in 1954 Soviet Communist Party First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev, who ran Ukraine before ascending to the summit of power in Moscow, transferred control of the territory from Russia to Ukraine. Theories why he did so include linking administrative control to economic relations, winning political support as he consolidated power, providing a territorial gift to his favorite Soviet republic, strengthening Soviet control over an unruly region, and acting foolishly while drunk. In any case, the action meant little in practice since no one imagined the Soviet Union dissolving.

However, in 1992 Ukraine fled the collapsing Communist superstate with Crimea in tow. Kiev didn't consult Crimeans over their preferences but eased tensions with Moscow by leasing the Red Navy's old base at Sevastopol on the Black Sea to Russia. Last month violent street protests shifted control in Kiev from Russophiles in eastern Ukraine to nationalists in western Ukraine. That angered the former, especially in Crimea, spurring interest in secession.

More important, the power grab 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. That Putin was not amused should surprise no one. Washington would not meekly accept comparable Russian efforts in Mexico City.

Yet none of this would have mattered if the majority of Crimeans had clearly wanted to transfer allegiance and Putin had waited for them to act. In general, people should be able to freely decide their political destinies. If that means switching political overlords in distant capitals, so be it. While it might be best to observe constitutional niceties, leaders of Ukraine's new regime did not let proper legal procedure get in the way of ousting the country's elected president.

However, even a voluntary transfer along ethnic lines raises larger concerns. In principle, there is nothing wrong with wanting to live with others who share family, religious, historical, and cultural ties. But setting up a government in the same way, thereby sharing political life only with one's "own kind," turns the state into a vehicle for ethnic aggrandizement rather than liberty advancement. Past results of doing so rarely have been pretty, even if the routine invocation of Adolf Hitler generates far more heat than light.

Moreover, once ethnic division begins, the process usually leaves newly dissatisfied ethnic minorities, who have an equal right to demand ethnically-based states. There is no obvious end, with ever smaller groups successively attempting to secede from each new territory. And who, having supported an earlier secession, can credibly oppose a new round?

In the Balkans the allies cheered Bosnia and Croatia when they fought to leave Serb-dominated Yugoslavia, and backed Kosovo with military force when it broke away from Serbia. Then Washington and Brussels were embarrassed when large Serbian communities sought, with equal justification, to secede from Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo. Of course, had those Serbs left, there may have been smaller communities within their midst prepared to make similar claims.

Indeed, the victors' maladroit and hypocritical attempt after World War I to promote ethnic self-determination planted the seeds of World War II. The Versailles Treaty allowed those favored by the winners, like the Czechs and Poles, to create ethnic-based states incorporating minorities from the losers, particularly Germany. The latter eventually demanded similar self-determination, with Hitler's backing. The allies could make no principled objection.

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. Using ethnicity as a political organizing principle is likely to result in more hardship and perhaps even bloodshed.

Given Russia's brazen misbehavior, the West should take measured steps to impose some costs on the regime and its supporters. However, U.S. and allied officials should have no illusions about reversing Putin's policy.

Moreover, the U.S. and its European friends should avoid triggering a serious cool war. Maintaining at least correct relations with Moscow is important to protect U.S. interests elsewhere. Washington and Brussels need to play the long game, finding ways to encourage moderation in Russia. They certainly 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 as an international principle justifying 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. [Russia's revival of nationalism in Crimea to justify military intervention sets an ominous precedent.](#)

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