

# INDIVIDUAL SELF-DETERMINATION VS. UKRAINIAN OR RUSSIAN NATIONALISM

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Russian president Vladimir Putin's power grab and annexation of the Crimea has filled global news headlines as he attempts to reverse what he has called the «greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth Century» – the collapse of the Soviet Union. But it needs to be remembered that this conflict has its deeper roots in two ideas that have plagued the world for over two centuries: nationalism and government interventionism into economic affairs.

In the early years of the nineteenth century the new nationalist idea of self-determination in establishing in what country people should live was considered a logical extension of the general idea of individual liberty and freedom of choice.

Just as an individual should have the liberty to guide his own life according to his own values, beliefs and ideals; just as he should be free to peacefully associate with whomever he chose on the basis of commonly shared goals or mutually beneficial exchanges; so, too, individuals should have the freedom to choose in what political state they wanted to live.

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I  
FREEDOM AND THE GOVERNMENT  
UNDER WHICH TO LIVE

The (classical) liberal ideal included, therefore, the individual's right to freedom of movement. That is, if an individual chose to move to another country to live, work or visit, and as long as he was peaceful in his conduct and paid his own way, then there should be no legal barriers preventing him from freely migrating from one part of the world to any other.

Thus, if a person did not agree with the government under which he was living, or considered himself in some way oppressed or persecuted by that political authority, he should have the freedom to «vote with his feet» and move to a political jurisdiction more to his liking and desire.

However, it was also argued that people should not necessarily have to leave their home and country due to oppression and control by an arbitrary and tyrannical government under which they lived. They should be able to influence and determine both who held political office in that country and through them the policies implemented by that government. Thus arose the advocacy of representative government in place of absolute monarchies claiming to rule by «divine right.»

It was also argued, as stated in the American Declaration of Independence, that when a government has become oppressive, and after many reasonable and peaceful attempts for a redress of their grievances, individuals have a right to replace that government and form a new one that will respect and enforce their respective inalienable rights to life, liberty and honestly acquired property. This was the American Founding Fathers' rationale for revolution and breaking away from Great Britain, and in forming their own new nation and political system.

## II SELF-DETERMINATION AND THE RIGHT OF PEACEFUL SECESSION

But why should men have to resort to and bear the human and material costs of violent change if they no longer wished to live under a particular political authority? Thus, there arose the idea of a right to peaceful secession.

If a group of individuals who shared a set of common values and beliefs, or a similar language or culture wanted to form their own political country independent of the one that they had belonged to up to that time, or be joined with another existing political country through a territorial transfer, they should be free through peaceful plebiscite to make that decision.

The fundamental premise of this right to secession was that of the individual's right of self-determination. This was explained with great cogency by the free-market Austrian economist, Ludwig von Mises, in his book, *Liberalism* (1927):

«The right of self-determination in regard to the question of membership in a state thus means: whenever the inhabitants of a particular territory, whether a single village, a whole district, or a series of adjacent districts, make it known, by a freely conducted plebiscite, that they no longer wish to remain united to the state to which they belong at the time, but wish either to form an independent state or to attach themselves to another other state, their wishes are to be respected and complied with. This is the only feasible and effective way of preventing revolutions and civil and international wars...

«The right of self-determination of which we speak is not the right of self-determination of nations, but rather the right of self-determination of the inhabitants of every territory large enough to form an independent administrative unit. If it were in any way possible to grant this right of self-determination to every individual person, it would have to be done.

«This is impracticable only because of compelling technical considerations [in the provision and enforcement of police and justice], which make it necessary that a region be governed as a single administrative unit and that the right of self-determination

be restricted to the will of the majority of the inhabitants of areas large enough to count as territorial units in the administration of the country.»

### III THE COLLECTIVIST TURN TO NATIONAL SELF-DETERMINATION

The problem was that the idea of the individual's right of self-determination in the form that Mises explained became replaced by the collectivist notion of national self-determination in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

That is, the unit of decision-making was not the individual, but «the people» as a whole defined as a national group sharing some characteristic such as a common language, culture, religion, ethnicity or race, and an often presumed shared «national homeland» over a particular geographical area.

Once established, the government representing that national group was to use its political authority to enforce the use of a particular language or to educate and indoctrinate all inhabitants of this «nation-state» into the cultural customs and traditions of that national group through government schooling, propaganda and restrictions on the introduction of «alien» cultural influences – regardless of the wishes of the individual citizens of that country, including those who may happen to make up a linguistic or cultural minority in that nation-state.

### IV GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION AGAINST NATIONAL MINORITIES

Often in European history, national governments harshly discriminated against linguistic, ethnic or religious minorities within their national borders. Regulatory procedures have been used to restrict members of such a minority group from entering and practicing certain professions, occupations, or trades. Taxes have

been imposed in an apparently «neutral language» that, in fact, ended up targeting certain sectors of the economy containing many members of the minority group, and thus placing them at a competitive disadvantage relative to the majority national group.

Economic intervention by the government through taxing and regulatory procedures and practices can and have imposed biased burdens on individuals and minority linguistic, ethnic and religious groups under the cover of «preserving» the majority national group's cultural, linguistic, or historical heritage.

Here we see the «national self-determination» and government interventionist dilemmas in the current international crisis between Russia and Ukraine. This part of Europe never had the opportunity to fully absorb and integrate the ideas of «the West» concerning the political philosophy of individualism, personal freedom, private property, respect for contracts and the general, impartial rule of law.

## V

### THE COLLECTIVISM OF IMPERIAL AND SOVIET RUSSIA

Carried over from both the older imperial era of Russia before the Bolshevik Revolution as well as the nearly 75 years of communist control and economic planning has been the notion that the sole purpose of government is to plunder others in society through political privileges, favors and «connections» with those in authority.

In old Russia under the absolute monarchy, the Czar was the ruler and nominal owner of all land and property on it. Possession was not a «right» belonging to the individual, but a privilege bestowed upon a person and his heirs for as long as it served the «pleasure» of the Czar.

Both commoner and nobleman were subject to having all that they possessed taken back by the Czar if they fell out of favor due to criticisms or opposition to the wishes of the absolute ruler. This could include exile to the vast wastelands of Siberia.

Following the communist revolution of 1917, all privately owned land and capital were confiscated and transferred to the

new revolutionary socialist state. The means of production were controlled and managed by the new Soviet government through a comprehensive system of central planning – of course, in the name of the people and for their claimed benefit.

With the socialist government as the single monopoly producer and employer, every person within the Soviet Union had his fate and future determined and dictated by how he fit within the socialist «plan» of building the bright, beautiful collectivist future.

## VI POLITICAL PRIVILEGE IN THE SOVIET «CLASSLESS» SOCIETY

The asserted «classless society» of the Soviet Union was a huge and intricate system of power, position and privilege overseen, commanded and controlled by the Communist Party. Gradations of privilege permeated the entire Soviet system reflected in apartment allocations, accesses to special food shops and medical clinics, acceptance into institutions of higher learning for one's children and even designated resorts for rest and recreation based on one's position within the Party structure and management or employment in the various state enterprises.

The Soviet system worked on the basis of «rank» within the hierarchies of power. Within the Communist Party structure subordinates paid «tribute» to those above them with «gifts» and «services» and, in turn, these subordinates received «favours» and perks for loyalty and obedience from those «above,» in an almost feudal relationship of lord and serf.

In such a system the notion of «rights» to life, liberty and property had no meaning. The only implicit rule was to get what one could from any privileged access to the resources and goods owned and produced by the state.

Cheating, manipulating and stealing what you could was the nature of «competition» in the worker's paradise of socialist central planning. The only «rules of the game» were to not get caught, remain on the «good side» of those above you in the communist

power structure and often use people in any way that might further your personal interest.

## VII

### THE PLUNDER LANDS OF UKRAINE AND RUSSIA

This is the legacy inherited by those who came to power in the newly independent and «democratic» Ukraine, as well as in the post-Soviet Russian Federation.

Every political party that has come into office in Ukraine since 1991 has used the power of the State to enrich its leading members and others who have given support and allegiance to those in power who can bestow various privileges and favors.

Ukraine, like most of the other former Soviet Republics, has been a plunder land of abuse, corruption and huge wealth grabs for plutocratic oligarchs and special interest groups that revolve around and manipulate the redistributive and interventionist halls of political power.

In Ukraine, however, the thousands who demonstrated against and overthrew the corrupt and murderous government of Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014 have shown their desire, and some of them with the loss of their lives, that they want a new and more «Western»-oriented country.

Yet among those Ukrainians are a significant number of ardent nationalists who are more concerned with their collectivist conceptions of a «protected» and enforced Ukrainian culture and language than an open and free society in which each citizen makes his own choices on such matters, and lives his life in his own way as he considers best and most desirable.

The main difference between Ukraine and Russia over the last 22 years since the end of the Soviet Union in this regard is that Russia is a larger land to plunder and far worse in its political authoritarianism under Vladimir Putin.

Nothing happens in Russia without connections, «pull» and bribes. Property rights have no meaning – a Russian or a foreigner can find that one day they own a business and the next it has been confiscated under some trumped up charges, with the Russian

owner imprisoned and sent off to Siberia or in the case of the foreign investor, being expelled from the country with a total loss of his investment.

The news media, especially radio and television, are under virtual government monopoly control. Even «independent» newspapers and other Internet information outlets are subject to conscious degrees of self-censorship under the threat of being shut down. Those from the West wishing to share and disseminate news or information that is in any way viewed by the Russian government as a challenge or threat to the existing system of power have their permissions to operate and their visas to reside in Russia revoked.

Dissent in the street is often met with harsh treatment from the police, and with the danger of high financial fines and uncertain periods of imprisonment.

## VIII ETHNIC CONFLICTS WITHIN RUSSIA

In addition, Russia's central, regional and municipal governments have also dealt harshly with some ethnic minorities within the Russian Federation. Several Muslim and ethnic groups in southern European Russia in the Caucasus mountain region, especially the Chechens, have attempted to gain national independence.

This has resulted in massive physical destruction and thousands of deaths as the Russian government under Putin has tried to crush the rebellions in this part of the country. In response, the Chechens and some other related groups have resorted to indiscriminate and deadly terrorist attacks on civilian targets, including in Moscow and most recently, shortly before the winter Olympics, on a train station in Volgograd.

This has angered and frightened ethnic Russians in many parts of the country. Chechens and other groups from that southern region of European Russia have been beaten up, had their property vandalized, and in some cases have been killed in Moscow and other places. In addition, in spite of the fact that every Russian citizen is lawfully to have freedom of movement and residence

within the borders of the Russian Federation, the Chechens and some other groups have been required to have residency permits or have been expelled from Moscow and other cities, simply based on their ethnicity.

## IX

### UKRAINIAN AND RUSSIAN CONFLICT OVER CRIMEA

In Kiev, it is said that Crimea is an integral part of Ukraine and cannot secede from that country, either to be independent or a part of Russia, without the approval of the entire country. In Moscow, it is said that Crimea is a historically important area for Russia, and the people of the peninsula had to decide whether or not to join the Russian Federation.

The problem is that Crimea is populated by three groups: Russian-speakers who make up almost 60 percent of the population, Ukrainian-speakers who represent around 25 percent of the people there, and the Muslim Tartars, who make up an additional 12 percent.

If any referendum on Crimea's future were to require a vote by the entire population of Ukraine, or by the representatives in the parliament in Kiev, the Ukrainian majority would no doubt vote against it. This would result in many in the Russian-speaking majority in Crimea forced to live within a country of which they do not want to be a part.

Any vote in Crimea, even if «fair» and open to international supervision to prevent «irregularities» compared to the vote recently taken for incorporation into Russia, easily would end in the Russian majority expressing their desire for unification with the Russian Federation. This would leave many of both the Ukrainians and the Tartars forced now to be citizens of a country (Russia) they would prefer not to live in as a result of a change in the political lines on a map.

After the thuggish and brutal behavior of the «self-defense» gangs of Crimean Russians and the Russian military forces «hiding» their identities by not having official insignias on their jackets since the «non-invasion» by Russia, the Ukrainian and

Tartar minorities most certainly would be frustrated and fearful of a pro-Russia outcome to such a free and impartial referendum.

At the same time, given the behavior of a seemingly sizable number of the Russian-speakers in Crimea to actively and aggressively support the move for annexation by Russia, if the peninsula remained a part of Ukraine resentment and anger against them could easily result in their lives being made «uncomfortable,» or even arrest and imprisonment of some of them as «traitors» to the Ukrainian motherland.

These alternative possible outcomes reflect the effect of thinking of self-determination in nationalist and collectivist terms. The «nation as a whole» of Ukraine has to decide, or the national majority within the entire Crimean peninsula must have its political way and impose it on the ethnic and linguistic minorities who live around them.

## X

### A MORE INDIVIDUAL SELF-DETERMINATION SOLUTION FOR CRIMEA

What, then, could be a (classical) liberal «third way» rather than a nation-wide Ukrainian referendum or a «winner-take-all» plebiscite on the Crimean peninsula? A solution to the dilemma along the lines presented by Ludwig von Mises would suggest that each village and town in Crimea should have a plebiscite, in which the residents would decide between independence, reunification with Russia, or continuing political unity with Ukraine.

A new political map of Crimea might look like a colored checkerboard, with some villages or towns where the majority of the occupants are Ukrainians or Tartars being the same color as Ukraine. Other portions of the Crimea, perhaps a large part of the peninsula, would be the same color as Russia on the map. And possibly some areas would be a color different from either Ukraine or Russia, being those districts or towns in which the majority had opted to form a separate Crimean government.

Would this prevent the continuing discomfort of some ethnic or linguistic minorities who might still find themselves surrounded

by a majority of people who speak a different language or practice different customs in the village or town in which they reside? Or would it prevent political discrimination or favoritism against them by the majority if state power were used in this way? Unfortunately, the answers are, «No.»

As long as people believe that it is the duty and responsibility of government to regulate commerce and industry, redistribute wealth and interfere into the individual's right of free and peaceful association, political power will be used and abused to benefit some at others' expense.

But such a system of local plebiscite in determining both the formation of governments and the boundaries of political entities would give each individual more weight in deciding his own future and fate than when he is lost in the great mass of people in the modern nation-state. And it would at least tend to minimize the number of people who might find themselves in the situation of being an ethnic or linguistic or other type of minority within a political entity.

The fact that some areas belonging to one political authority may not be contiguous to the others but separated by the territories of other countries need cause no problems if a minimum of freedom of movement and free trade exist between them. One particularly enlightened outcome of the European Union has been the dismantling of border controls, so people may move as freely between member countries, for the most part, as Americans take for granted in traveling between and across the states that make up the U.S.

If such a more (classical) liberal method was followed as an answer to these types of disputes everywhere, then at least state borders and political frontiers would no longer be determined by blood and conquest, but by the local choices of the people themselves who reside in such areas.

In addition, they could be open to revision and change periodically as demographics and people's preferences changed. A plebiscite might be held once every ten or twenty years, as a formality. Or it could be held whenever, for example, two-thirds of the population in an area petitioned for the holding of such a plebiscite.

Such a system for the defining of boundaries of political entities does not necessarily imply exclusionist nationalism. The people of some regions, towns or districts might wish to form separate states or join larger ones that are consciously multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic, and culturally diverse precisely because of the societal advantages of such pluralistic communities. Furthermore, to the extent that freedom of movement and trade existed, everyone could take advantage of global culture diversity and a commercial international division of labor.

## XI

### THE IDEAL OF INDIVIDUALIST SELF-DETERMINATION FOR THE FUTURE

Unfortunately, too many people and their governments are not ready for such a system of tolerance and respect for the choices of their fellow individual human beings in establishing their political affairs and boundary lines. Too many still take the collectivist view that the group or tribe owns the entire territory of a nation-state, including those who live, work and die within it.

But we may wish that after enough wars and conquests, civil wars and campaigns of terrorism against the innocent, people may finally come to see the importance and value of respecting the rights and choices of the other individuals with whom they live in this troubled world.