

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The Dangers of Ukrainian Revanchism

Don't the people of Crimea and Donbas have a right to self-determination?

Ukrainian soldier enters an armored vehicle on the Donbas frontline. (Photo by Diego Herrera Carcedo/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

**Michael Warren Davis**

Jan 28, 2023 | 12:00 PM



It has been almost a year since Russia launched its “special military operation” in Ukraine. For many of our friends in Eastern Europe, I’m sure it feels like a lifetime.

Still, it’s easy to forget that this conflict really began in 2014, when separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk declared their independence from Kiev. (Then, as now, the separatists were backed by Moscow.) That same year, Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine.

Since Russia invaded Ukraine’s core territory last year, Kiev and its allies have been adamant on one point: Whatever else happens in the course of this war, they will not accept the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk. Now, Kiev is upping the ante. Last week the *New York Times* reported that the United States may [supply Ukraine with arms](#) to retake Crimea as well.

We can argue about whether that goal is feasible, or even possible. But we should be absolutely clear about one thing: If Ukraine retakes Crimea—or Luhansk, or Donetsk—they will do so, not as liberators, but as conquerors.

Long before Russia invaded Ukraine, it was clear that Crimeans themselves overwhelmingly desired to join Russia. An official 1994 referendum found that nearly 80 percent of Crimeans desired greater regional autonomy. That same year, however, Yuriy Meshkov was elected President of Crimea with 72 percent of the vote. His campaign had only one major plank: unity with Russia.

The government in Kiev responded to the referendum, not by granting more autonomy to Crimea, but by scrapping their constitution, *taking away* whatever autonomy they once had. Ukraine also abolished the office of President of Crimea, arrested Meshkov, and exiled him to Russia.

If anything, Ukraine’s crackdown on Crimea *increased* locals’ desire to join Russia. A 2014 referendum found that 96 percent of the public supported the annexation. The results were understandably disputed, given that Russian troops had already begun to occupy Crimea. But when Gallup conducted a poll the following year, they found that [over 80 percent](#) of respondents felt the referendum was accurate.

Again: The overwhelming majority of Crimeans *want* to be part of Russia.

The same is true of Luhansk and Donetsk. In 2019, the *Kyiv Post*, a pro-Western newspaper, found that just 5 percent of residents hoped Ukraine would retake the region. And while the separatist armies are officially fighting for independence, that outcome is desired by only sixteen percent of the public. A majority—over 60 percent—want to join the Russian Federation.

Really, this isn't at all surprising. Crimea and the Donbas (the easternmost part of Ukraine, which contains Donetsk and Luhansk) are ethnically Russian. They speak Russian. Most of them are Russian Orthodox Christians. Historically, those regions belonged to the Russian Empire. Its sons fought in the Russian Army. They were loyal to the Russian tsar. Now, they would rather be part of Russia again. Is that really so surprising?

More to the point, why should we stop them?

Kiev would point out that the 1994 Budapest Memorandum—to which Moscow was a party—guarantees that these regions belong to the Republic of Ukraine. And that's true. But what about their right to self-determination? Don't the people of Crimea and Donbas get a say?

You would think any objective observer would say that the Memorandum was a bad idea. If the local populations want to be part of Russia, they shouldn't be forced to join Ukraine.

Put it this way: Imagine if the United States signed a treaty saying that Mexico could occupy Texas. The majority of Texans oppose the treaty. They do not want to be Mexican. They don't speak Spanish. Culturally, they're American. They've always considered themselves American. They fought in the U. S. Army—as did their fathers, and their grandfathers, and their great-grandfathers.

True: Historically, Texas was part of Mexico. But that was back when Mexico was rather an ill-defined concept. And, anyway, they've been part of the United States for much longer.

Now say that Texans were taking up arms in a bid to rejoin the United States, and Washington was backing them up. Would there be any sense in starting a new World War to defend Mexico's claim to Texas?

And if Mexico went to war with the United States to assert that claim, would they be considered liberators—or conquerors?

Let's recap. For nearly ten years, Ukraine has been fighting to suppress these popular revolts in Crimea and the Donbas. What should the United States do?

A realist would argue that we should do nothing. This is an Eastern European dispute. It's none of our business.

Presumably, an idealist—a believer in nation-building, “Wars of Democracy,” etc.—would argue that we should back Russia's claim to Crimea and the Donbas. The people of those regions want to be Russian. They *are* Russian, in every sense except their nationality. Kiev should not force them to remain under its jurisdiction.

Subscribe Today

Get weekly emails in your inbox

Your Email

Subscribe

Why on earth would anyone argue that we should support Ukraine's claim? There's only one possible answer. The United States simply wants to hobble Russia.

I'm not trying to justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine, or any crimes that they have committed over the last eleven months. But, once again, the overwhelming majority of eastern Ukrainians *want* to join Russia. Many thousands of them are willing to fight and die for that cause. The idea of the United States actively supporting Kiev's occupation of these provinces—of sending them weapons, which they will use to suppress the popular will—is morally repugnant.

Ukraine's treatment of Crimea and the Donbas is wrong. So is Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The United States should therefore insist that Kiev allow Crimea, Luhansk, and Donetsk to determine their own fates—while insisting that Russia allow Ukraine to do the same. Otherwise, we can never hope to be more than the lesser of two evils.



Michael Warren Davis

Michael Warren Davis is author of [*The Reactionary Mind*](#) and a contributing editor of *The American Conservative*. Subscribe to his newsletter, [The Common Man](#).

Articles by Michael →