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Farewell, Crimea

Why Ukrainians Don't Mind Losing the Territory to Russia

By Taras Kuzio

MARCH 13, 2014, FOREIGN AFFAIRS



Ukraine's Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk waves as he leaves a European Union summit in Brussels on March 6, 2014. (Courtesy Reuters)

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hen I recently asked one member of the Lvivska Sotnia -- an ardently nationalist self-defense brigade that provided security for the months-long protests at Kiev's Independence Square -- how he wanted Ukraine to respond to Russia's seizure of Crimea, one might have expected a fiercely jingoistic response. This was, after all, one of those Ukrainians whom Russian President Vladimir Putin used as a pretext for his invasion in the first place. But it turns out the last thing he wanted was for Kiev to try to retake Crimea by force -- that would only risk starting World War III, he said.

Lost in the recent discussion in the West about Russian aggression in Crimea has been the question of whether Ukrainians believe that Crimea is worth fighting for in the first place. Although Westerners (and the Ukrainian government) profess the importance of defending Ukrainian territorial integrity, most Ukrainians wouldn't seem to mind letting Crimea go. For them, the issue is much more a matter of prudence than principle.

There are three main factors that inform Ukraine's current passivity toward Russia's aggression in Ukraine. First, there is the fragility and disunity of the current political leadership. Until the elections scheduled for May 25, Ukraine has only an interim government -- and a weak one, at that. Arseniy Yatsenyuk, who is acting prime minister, is an ally of Yulia Tymoshenko, a former prime minister and head of the Fatherland party who was imprisoned from 2011 to 2014. Moreover, only two of the four main opposition forces that toppled the previous government -- Fatherland and the nationalist Svoboda (Freedom) party -- have joined the current governing coalition. The former

heavyweight boxer Vitaly Klitschko's moderate UDAR (Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reforms) has declined to participate, as has the group of businessmen affiliated with Petro Poroshenko, who was foreign minister under former president Viktor Yushchenko. The government has also failed to reach out to eastern Ukrainian moderates affiliated with ousted Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich's Party of Regions, including Sergei Tigipko, who came in third place in the 2010 presidential elections.

The government has also been forced to devote most of its time and attention to stabilizing the country's precarious economic and financial situation, rather than to developing an effective military response to Russian aggression. Even after Russia's invasion, acting President Oleksandr Turchynov and Yatsenyuk -- who was preoccupied trying to secure financial assistance from the IMF and United States, and preparing the European Union Association Agreement that will be signed next week -- failed to give clear directions to Ukrainian military forces in Crimea. The troops were ordered neither to withdraw nor to defend themselves and their bases. As a result, they have been stranded in Crimea, with many of their weapons forcibly transferred to local paramilitaries.

A second factor accounting for Ukrainians' passivity is their awareness of how difficult it can be to control Crimea. There is a deep strain of xenophobia among the region's Russian population. In 1991, I was physically attacked for speaking Ukrainian outside the Crimean parliament building, and was refused the purchase of a train ticket unless I spoke in Russian. The acting leader of Crimea, Sergei Aksyonov, has, like other Russian nationalists, openly

praised Soviet leader Joseph Stalin's 1944 ethnic cleansing of the region's Tatars, which resulted in the death of half of their entire population. (Tatars have since returned and now account for nearly 20 percent of the area's population.) And in 2006 and 2009, the local Russian nationalists -- under the direction of Yanukovich's Party of Regions -- successfully agitated against joint military exercises between Ukrainian and NATO military forces.

Putin has successfully mobilized these xenophobic sentiments to tie the region to Russia -- the many pro-Russian nationalist demonstrations of recent weeks offer plenty of evidence. Any window that the Ukrainian government had to offer a counternarrative -- it could have pointed out, for instance, that ethnic Russians are only 58 percent of the total population in Crimea, and that they have been guaranteed political and cultural autonomy -- has since shut.

The third and most important factor, however, is that most Ukrainians have always been ambivalent about Crimea. The region was transferred from Russian to Ukrainian control in 1954, and Russians still feel a much stronger sense of attachment to the region, and specifically to the port city of Sevastopol, than do Ukrainians. Some Ukrainians even believe that Crimea has a right to secede, although they may have wished that Crimea had done so in more orderly fashion. "If there is a clear majority of the people on a certain territory that do not want to accommodate themselves with the state they live in," Ukrainian writer Mykola Riabchuk said before the Russian incursion, "they should have a right to secede, which would require some negotiations, international mediation, referendums, and

post-separation settlements for national minority rights.” Russians, on the other hand, are willing to fight for it.

Should Crimea join Russia, many Ukrainians would mourn its loss as a blow to national self-esteem. But they would soon recognize that they have been freed of many of the burdens associated with the territory. First, Ukrainians would no longer be responsible for providing Crimea with enormous agricultural subsidies, or for propping up its ailing tourism sector. Second, Ukraine could more easily pursue clear, pro-European policies without having to consider blowback from an ardently pro-Russian domestic minority. Third, the government in Kiev would no longer have to invest resources to ward off a festering Islamist insurgency among Crimea’s underprivileged and repressed Tatar population (a task to which Kiev has consistently failed to offer adequate resources).

Finally, Kiev’s foreign policy would no longer be hostage to debates over the fate of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet. In 1997, the Black Sea Fleet was granted basing rights for a term of 20 years, after which Ukraine would become a neutral “non-bloc” country associated with neither NATO nor a Russian military alliance. But in April 2010, Yanukovich railroaded the Kharkiv Accords through parliament, which extended the fleet’s rights through 2042 -- although Ukraine’s official foreign policy strategy released in July 2010 still maintained that the country intended to pursue non-bloc status. Yanukovich never clarified the contradiction between accepting a de facto permanent foreign base and pursuing military neutrality.

Putin would be wrong to mistake Ukrainians' ambivalence about Crimea for a broader ambivalence about eastern Ukraine. Ukrainians would not hesitate to fight over the other territories there. Although they have sizeable Russian-language populations, Ukrainians think of these regions as an integral part of the country, historically and culturally. Most would feel that the loss of any territory beyond Crimea would represent an existential threat to Ukrainian independence.

And if Russia does end up annexing Crimea, Ukraine is sure to offer some diplomatic resistance, if only to save face. It's likely that Kiev will continue to argue that Crimea should be returned to Ukraine, much as Dublin argued for decades that Northern Ireland should belong to Ireland. Over time, however, Ukrainians will probably learn to thank Putin for taking Crimea off of their hands, thus clearing the way for them to join the European Union -- and, eventually, NATO.