

# Taras Kuzio: Frozen conflicts and Western inaction

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A handout picture released by the Prime Minister Press Service shows Ukraine's Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk shaking hands with a trooper during his visit to a checkpoint near the Ukrainian eastern city of Slavyansk on May 7, 2014. President Vladimir Putin told pro-Russian rebels fighting in east Ukraine to halt plans for independence referendums and said his troops had been withdrawn from the border, a potential breakthrough in the worst showdown between Moscow and the West since the Cold War. AFP PHOTO/ UKRAINIAN PRIME MINISTER PRESS SERVICE/ ANDREW KRAVCHENKO

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The US, European Union and international organizations were taken by surprise with Russia's intervention in the Crimea and annexation of the peninsula. Yet this was not the first occasion Russia had used force in the former Soviet space either to carve out frozen conflicts that it controls.

The case of Armenian occupied Nagorno-Karabakh and Russian annexed Crimea have many similarities. Armenia had already taken a precedent two decades earlier by annexing Nagorno-Karabakh after it received massive military support and energy subsidies from Russia.

The West has never sought to realistically remove Russian control over frozen conflicts that have been in place since the early 1990s in Moldova and Georgia where Russia has controlled Transdniestria in the former and South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the latter. These regions have been subsidized by Russia and its Moldovan and Georgian citizens illegally given Russian passports making it possible for Russia to claim in August 2008 it was intervening in defense of its citizens in South Ossetia. The same strategy is being used in the Crimea and Eastern Ukraine with Russian President Putin claiming he is receiving thousands of requests for Russian intervention.

In 2008, when Georgia attempted to re-take South Ossetia there was greater EU and to a lesser extent US condemnation of President Mikheil Saakashvili's "recklessness" and "provocative action" than criticism of Russia's invasion. The EU's dislike for Saakashvili was surprising as he had presided over the most successful Europeanization of the judicial system and the best executed anti-corruption campaign in Eurasia.

Saakashvili was merely undertaking what Putin claimed when he first came to power in 2000 he had a right to do in Chechnya; that is, defend his country's territorial integrity. Such a right and duty for Presidents and heads of state is enshrined in most of the world's constitutions.

Would the EU position be similarly critical if Ukraine sought to militarily re-take the Crimea or alternatively launch a guerrilla war against Russian occupation forces? Ukraine is undertaking an anti-terrorist operation in Eastern Ukraine which has Western support, but for how long?

Turning a blind eye to Russian policy of promoting annexations and frozen conflict zones was mistaken.

Firstly, they became major sources of soft security threats to Europe; Transdniestria, for example, became a black hole through which flowed arms, narcotics and human beings who were sex trafficked. Transdniestria's black hole inevitably exported corruption to neighboring Ukraine, especially through the port of Odesa (The "Odessa Network") which has long been notoriously corrupt. Soft security threats were also faced by EU and NATO member Romania which has a cultural and linguistic affinity with its former region of Bessarabia (that with Transdniestria added became Moldova).

Ethnic cleansing of Georgians in South Ossetia and Abkhazia under Russian eyes took place to a greater degree than that undertaken by Serbian nationalist leader Slobodan Milosevic against Kosovar Albanians. In Kosovo ethnic cleansing was halted by NATO's intervention and the region became an independent state. Milosevic was declared a war criminal and died in 2006 in his cell in the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

President Putin - responsible for more human rights atrocities in Chechnya than Milosevic in the former Yugoslavia - has never been indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC). Putin continues to not be included on any international wanted lists for his brazen annexation of the Crimea and proxy intervention in Eastern Ukraine, for which there is massive evidence.

Ethnic cleansing of the Crimean Tatars is only a matter of time. Anti-Tatar xenophobia and racism has always been rife in the Crimea fanned by the Communist Party, Party of Regions and local Russian nationalists who continue to argue Soviet leader Joseph Stalin was correct to ethnically cleanse them in 1944. The deportation led to half of the Crimean Tatar population dying and is remembered as genocide by them. A Tatar was tortured and murdered during the initial Russian occupation in March 2014.

In Ukraine, racism and xenophobia has been the most widespread in the Crimea and the Council of Europe's European Commission on Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) condemned the fanning of anti-Tatar xenophobic and anti-Tatar 'hate speech' by the Crimean authorities.

Nagorno-Karabakh and the Crimea remain similar cases of foreign annexation by Armenia and Russia respectively and yet Western reaction to them has been very different.




Firstly, Russian actions have been ignored because it has nuclear weapons and is a member of the UN Security Council. Iran should take note that Putin - but not Milosevic - has been able to get away with murder. Russia's flouting of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, where Ukraine received security guarantees in exchange for denuclearization, will inevitably spread nuclear weapons around the world.

Secondly, this is not the first time European lives are viewed as more important. The West intervened to protect Kosovar Albanians but will it intervene if there is ethnic cleansing of Crimean Tatars?

The Crimean Tatars have been largely ignored in the furor over Russia's annexation of the Crimea, even by Turkey's ruling party. Indeed, four Turkish Justice and Development deputies in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) voted against the 10 April resolution on the Crimea, whilst another three opposition Turkish Republican People's Party PACE delegates supported it. The resolution suspended Russia's voting rights in PACE.

Thirdly, Armenia has a large lobby in the US with which it has proven difficult for Azerbaijan to compete.

The Crimea is the second occasion Russia has backed annexations following its support for Armenia annexing Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia has also supported three frozen conflicts in Georgia and Moldova. These taken together should be dealt with as one common threat to the UN Charter and the sanctity of territorial integrity.

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