

Putin's Claim on Crimea: Spurious or Legit?

In an interview with ABC News last July, then-candidate Donald Trump said: "You know the people of Crimea, from what I've heard, would rather be with Russia than where they were." Sounds about right: the [ethnic split](#) in Crimea is more than 65 percent Russian versus 15 percent Ukrainian. The results of a [poll](#) by the German firm GfK, published just a year ago, revealed that 82 percent of Crimean respondents supported the annexation.

Last month, President Trump and President Putin held a phone conversation and there was no discussion on Crimea's status. That makes sense since geopolitically Crimea matters far more to Russia than to Europe or America (a 2016 Pew Research [survey](#) found that 57 percent of Americans say the nation should "deal with its own problems and let other countries deal with their problems the best they can.")

Historically, Crimea only became part of Ukraine when Nikita Khrushchev, by an impulsive stroke of the pen, gave the peninsula to his native land in 1954. When the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, Crimea ended up inside an independent Ukraine. Vladimir Putin described the situation this way: "Millions of Russians went to bed in one country and woke up abroad. Overnight, they were minorities and the Russian people in Crimea became one of the biggest if not the biggest, divided nation in the world."

By refusing to demonize Putin, Trump has frustrated Republican and Democratic politicians. He has taken the reasonable position that, whenever possible, the U.S. should work with Russia in areas of mutual concern.

So, just when the stars seem to line-up regarding U.S.-Russia-Ukraine-Crimea policies, the White House now insists that President Trump “has made it very clear that he expects the Russian government to de-escalate violence in the Ukraine and return Crimea.”

Huh?

The Crimean vote to re-join Russia is in compliance with the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights article 15: “Everyone has the right to a nationality. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.” (I don’t like the U.N. much either, but some tenets are universal.)

Meanwhile, U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley claims that, “The United States continues to condemn and call for an immediate end to the Russian occupation of Crimea.” Haley may be excused since she’s new and likely unfamiliar with Chapter 1, Article 1, part 2 of the U.N. Charter: “To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of self-determination of peoples.”

In this apparent flip-flop on Crimea, the administration has not addressed Vladimir Putin’s observation:

Kosovo is a precedent our Western colleagues created with their own hands, in a very similar situation, when they agreed that the unilateral separation of Kosovo from Serbia – exactly what Crimea is doing now – was legitimate and did not require any permission from the country’s central authorities. If the Kosovars have the right to self-determination, why should people in Crimea not have it?

While the U.S. sputters contradictions, diplomats, legislators, public figures, businessmen, scientists, and journalists from 60 countries invested time and talent in Crimea in 2016. It's time to catch up with the rest of the world.

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