

# The Nationalism Inequality

There is an inequality in how much credence we give to nationalism as valid reasoning for the existence of an independent nation state. I must acknowledge that this is an opinion that is based solely on my own experiences, which are somewhat limited. Nonetheless, I believe that scholars in America tend to lend credence to the validity of some nation-states based on a nationalist argument, but reject this same argument for other nationalities. The primary region where I have seen this inequality is in the post soviet states, and thus, to explain and further my argument, I will analyze how American scholars tend to accept Nationalism as an argument for the existence of some independent states in the post-soviet sphere, mainly the former republics of the USSR, but do not accept this same argument when it is applied to other regions which are attempting to become independent states, primarily regions attempting to break away from the currently established post soviet states. I will particularly look at Moldova and Transnistria, Georgia, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia, and Kosovo. I will also look at regions of Ukraine which have armies supporting independence from Ukraine.

Before I get into any of the examples which I'd like to discuss, I must first place this discussion into context, particularly because there is some very important context. One important piece of context is that the scholars who I will argue have propagated this inequality are mainly American, and by that I mean study, teach, research, or write at primarily American institutions. This is not to say it is not also propagated by non-American scholars, just that I will only discuss this as propagated by American scholars. American scholars have a tendency to have a view that is somewhat biased by America's geopolitical relations and policies. In the context of this discussion, this means that the way American scholars may give credence to nationalism for

some nations and not others may be informed or influenced by America's relationship with these countries.

The other important piece of context which must be addressed is Russia's place in this discussion. I am well aware that Russia is backing these breakaway regions, and not for altruistic reasons. All of these attempted breakaway regions are vehicles for Russia to increase its power in Eastern Europe and diminish the ability of post-soviet states to move away from Russia and draw closer connections to the West. With that said, at least Transnistria, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia have a desire for national independence separate of Russia. As for the Ukrainian breakaway regions, I have seen little to no evidence of actual desire for independence from the local peoples. Nonetheless, I am not writing to truly argue for the validity of these countries' claims to the right of self determination as independent states. This is a topic I am not educated enough to speak on. I am only arguing that American scholars unequally give credence to countries' right to statehood based on a nationalist argument. Because this is what I am discussing, even these Ukrainian breakaway regions have value. It doesn't matter their relation to the US in geopolitics or the validity of their independence, nor does their Russian backing. All that is relevant to this discussion is American scholars' treatment of these regions' claims to statehood on a nationalist basis.

So with that out of the way, I'd like to discuss the most contentious of these areas first. Russia backed separatists movements in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions of Ukraine even before their full-scale invasion [1]. Since the full-scale invasion, they have declared the annexation of these and other territories. Their influence is impossible to disentangle from these separatist movements. Nonetheless, if the peoples of these regions claim that they have a right to self-determination on a national basis, what makes this any less valid than when it is Estonia or

Armenia claiming that they should be independent on the basis of national self-determination? Now, the issue with this is that it has been documented that this is likely not the will of these peoples. Polls conducted by the Kyiv Institute of Sociology shortly before the annexation of Crimea and the subsequent formation of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) by Russian Militants show that roughly 30% of people in both of these provinces supported the conjoining of Ukraine and Russia into a singular state [2]. While this is a significant amount, it is far from a majority. This indicates that it is likely not the will of the people to separate from Ukraine. These areas are valuable to our discussion because they show a valid reason that American scholars likely don't give credence to the nationalist arguments of these regions: they do not appear to be the will of the people. So while I still argue that there is an imbalance in the validity these regions nationalist claims are given compared to some other regions, the reasons why are understandable and thus it is justified. I will, however, argue that this is not a valid reason for the other regions which I will discuss.

The next regions I would like to address are South Ossetia and Abkhazia, breakaway regions from Georgia. These regions are of particular interest to the question of nationalism as a justification for independence, because, as the Soviet Union fell, its former member republics claimed independence with justification based on the right to national self-determination. South Ossetia and Abkhazia posed the question: If that is a valid reason for Georgia to be a separate state from Russia, then why would it not also be a valid reason for South Ossetia or Abkhazia to be separate states from Georgia? First, we must assure that the people of these regions want independence from Georgia. When Georgia boycotted the Soviet referendum on Gorbachev's proposed union of sovereign republics, 52% of the electorate in Abkhazia voted overwhelmingly to join the union [3]. For South Ossetia, Georgia's first president Zviad Gamsakhurdia

campaigns against South Ossetians rather openly [4], so there is certainly reason to believe that they would want independence. So it does not seem to be an issue of the people's true desire for national self-determination. So why then, was Georgia's claim to statehood accepted by the UN and scholars, but these regions' claims were not? Likely for political reasons: the UN wanted to promote stability in the region, and more breakaway regions would certainly not benefit this. Scholars should not be affected by geopolitics in such a way though. American scholars should be able to place the value of South Ossetian and Abkhazian nationalism as the same as that of Georgian nationalism, but since one is a voting member of the UN and the other two's claim to statehood is problematic to the UN's mission, Georgian nationalism gets glorified while Abkhazian and South Ossetian nationalism and right to national self-determination do not.

This is further placed into a poor light when analyzed against the context of Kosovo. Kosovo was under UN administration between 1999 and 2008, when it declared independence from Serbia. The US was among the countries which encouraged this action, but claimed that the situation was unique and thus didn't set a precedent. Ted Carpenter of the CATO institute aptly points out that the US claim that the situation in Kosovo is unique is both naive and unconvincing [5]. Further, he even goes so far as to say Russia could use it as precedent to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The situation of Kosovo is relatively similar to that of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Kosovo is recognized as an independent nation by the US on the basis of the right of national self-determination. So why isn't the same recognition given to South Ossetia or Abkhazia? Abkhazian president Sergei Bagapsh even went so far as to call support for Kosovo's independence "a visible demonstration of the policy of double standards" [6]. This is clear evidence of an inequality in whose claim to national self-determination receives respect.

Moldova and Transnistria are another clear example of this inequality. American scholars recognize Moldova as a legitimate state, while they view Transnistria as an illegitimate breakaway region. What makes this region interesting in comparison to the other areas we've discussed is the goals of the parties involved. Transnistria wants to break away from Moldova and become a Russian territory [7], but Russia does not want this [8]. Russia's goal in the region is to use Transnistria to keep Moldova from joining the EU and keep influence over the country. Moldova itself has a, limited but still significant, desire to unify with Romania, on the basis that Romanian and Moldovan are actually just one singular nationality. This all combines to create a strange situation where Moldova's right to national self determination is respected, even though there is some level of support for unification with Romania. On the other hand, in Transnistria this same right is not given the same respect. This inequality is made even more visible when considering possible reunification with Romania is one of the reasons Transnistria broke away from Moldova (*de facto*). Transnistria's right to self-determination is not given the same credence as Moldova to the level that Moldova's choice to unify with Romania would seemingly be more respected than Transnistria's explicit desire not to.

Russia has given material support to Transnistria and does support their *de facto* independence from Moldova, but actually seems to not desire for them to gain *de jure* independence, as it would weaken the Russian position in Moldova. With that said, I'd like to again address Russia's place in this discussion. For the US as a political entity, it makes sense not to recognize the statehood of these breakaway regions for a plethora of reasons, but foremost so because they would end up as Russian puppet states most likely. But as for scholars, this context should not cloud our ability to discuss isolated aspects of these regions separate from this. A more unbiased view of the validity of these regions' claims to statehood on the basis of a national

identity is possible, and scholars should pursue it. Russia may support Transnistria's separatist movement with an ulterior motive, but there exists genuine desire for independence from Moldova within Transnistria [9], and thus their claim to national self-determination should be examined in the same light as Estonia, Georgia, or Moldova's. This goes for South Ossetia and Abkhazia as well [9], although I would not argue the same for the Ukrainian breakaway regions.

To conclude, it seems to me that there is an imbalance in how American scholars treat the validity of claims to statehood on the basis of nationalism. This can be illustrated through Transnistria and Moldova, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Georgia, and Kosovo. The breakaway regions of Ukraine also hold some value to this discussion. The breakaway regions of Transnistria, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia are given less credence when they claim statehood on the basis of nationalism when compared to the larger states which they are trying to escape. This imbalance is put further into perspective when compared to the relatively similar situation of Kosovo, whose claim to statehood on a basis of national self-determination American scholars accept. Altogether, despite the context which clouds judgements about these regions claims to statehood, American scholars should seek to better examine these regions' claim to national self-determination on more even ground.

## References

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