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Crimean Invasion Is Worse Than a Crime

By Konstantin Sonin

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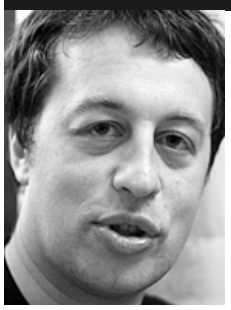
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It is said that after Napoleon committed a particularly shocking and amoral blunder, Foreign Minister Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord remarked that "it was worse than a crime, it was a mistake." Those are timeless words, and it is no wonder that Talleyrand's political career began earlier and lasted far longer than the emperor's.

The same observation applies to the recent actions of Russia's political leadership. Whatever the legal or moral implications, sending troops into a neighboring country is a tragic mistake.

This move ended all hopes of Russia attaining the long-term stability it has been working toward ever since the fall of the Soviet Union, and it will lead to serious political and economic consequences that will continue to affect this country for many years.

Historians will long debate how such a major miscalculation could have happened, but for the moment, other considerations deserve more immediate attention.

As many observers have warned in recent years, the government and presidential administration have completely dismantled all feedback mechanisms from the public or other independent sources. The actions and statements of Russian leaders indicate that they lack credible information about what is happening not only in Kiev, Donetsk and Simferopol, but also in Russia and in the world. And, as strange as it is for the regime to issue blatant misrepresentations and exaggerations for the consumption of a savvy and well-informed foreign public, when the regime begins basing its own strategic decisions on such fallacious ideas, major blunders are inevitable.

That problem results in part from the authorities' decision to "cleanse" the media environment, thereby silencing the critics' voices. It also results from the falsification of the results of 2011 State Duma elections, resulting in a lack of representation for those Russians who do not support the military action in Ukraine.

The Crimean intervention might have far less support from the general public than in the State Duma and presidential administration. Just recall how little support former mayor Yury Luzhkov received when he delivered speeches stressing the importance of Sevastopol and made "the defense of Russians" an important part of his political platform.

The Russian Army has regained some of the strength it lost since the 1990s, which has played a role in the conflict. Resentment for the collapse of the Soviet empire, phantom pains from losing the Cold War and a baseless but nagging sense of inferiority have all prompted the Russian leadership to take military action in Crimea. A similar thing happened in the U.S. in the 2000s when the generation that grew up during the 1960s sought to compensate for the humiliation of Vietnam by showing its new military might. This played a role in provoking the second invasion of Iraq in 2003.

I don't want to even think or talk about the worst-case scenario in Ukraine. However, the best possible option at this point would be "national humiliation" — that is, withdrawing Russian troops and retaining only the Black Sea Fleet's base at Sevastapol. Even then, it would take years to restore relations with Ukraine and a sense of calm and stability in the hearts of the Russian people. A mistake cannot be undone, but at least you can try to correct it.

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