Recent events in Kiev and Russian military actions in the Crimea have brought up topics that emerged with the dissolution of the Soviet Union: separatism, self-determination, and the question of how to define a ‘people’. This article investigates separatism in the former Soviet Union in order to clarify what this phenomenon is, what its goals are, and how it occurs ‘on the ground’.

To address these topics I compare recent events in Crimea to Transnistria, a de facto separatist state located in eastern Moldova. Transnistria first declared its independence in 1990 and has been a de facto state ever since. In this article I ask what Transnistria can tell us about Crimea, and, more broadly, what Eurasia’s de facto states can tell us about statehood, sovereignty, and a ‘people’ in the 21st century.

For the purposes of this article, I use the term de facto states (i.e. states in fact) to refer to polities that exist within the boundaries of recognized, de jure (i.e. by law) states.1 This article argues that performativity lies at the core of Eurasia’s de facto states. Specifically, I argue that the elaboration of a ‘people’ is based on Russian military tactics that enable the performance of de facto statehood as well as on the articulation of a unique form of identity politics based around the idea of protecting ethnic ‘compatriots’ residing outside of Russia.

After a theoretical introduction, I describe events that occurred in Transnistria and Crimea in order to discern their commonalities. Next, I address some of the threats and fears of populations who become the constituent ‘people’ of these de facto states. In particular, I examine how Russian military intervention enables the performance of de facto statehood. After a description of the local effects of separatism, I offer some thoughts about how these de facto states reflect some wider conceptual and theoretical concerns that emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.2

Sovereignty and state/nation
What is sovereignty, and what role does it play vis-à-vis the state and nation? In the 21st century, the state is the political institution in which sovereignty is embodied, while the larger assemblage of states constitutes the system of sovereign states (Rée 1992).

Sovereignty is the attribute of an effective state, yet it can be an illusion of a non-effective (though recognized) state. Sovereignty refers to governance, but on behalf of what sovereign body? Typically, a state acts as a sovereign entity on behalf of the people. Ernst Renan’s 1882 essay, ‘What is a nation?’ examines the historical and, as he terms them, spiritual factors underlying the nation.3 In Renan’s formulation, the nation is an everyday phenomenon that contributes to its continued existence: ‘The existence of the nation … is a daily plebisicite, just as the continuing existence of an individual is a perpetual affirmation of life’ (Renan 1990: 53). Renan’s stress on a nation’s internal consistency is analogous to state sovereignty vis-à-vis international law: the existence of the state is a matter of fact, and the effects of recognition by other states are purely declaratory. In Transnistria and in Crimea, a people and, by extension, a nation, is reinforced by not only a daily plebisicite, but called forth by an actual plebisicite backed by coercive force.4 Similarly, the Ukrainian state is trying to enact its sovereignty by force as well.

Eurasia’s de facto challenge international law by highlighting the ill-defined threshold for statehood. Article 1 of the Montevideo Convention on Rights and Duties of States (1933) articulates four features a state should possess as a subject of international law: a permanent population, a defined territory, a government, and the capacity to enter into relations with other states.5 Similarly, the Badinter Arbitration Committee defines a state as a community with a territory and a population subject to an organized political authority that is sovereign (Pellet 1992: 182). Yet both explicitly state that recognition is not constitutive: Article 3 of the Montevideo Convention says that ‘the political existence of the state is independent of recognition by the other states. Even before recognition the state has the right to defend its integrity and independence, to provide for its conservation and prosperity, and consequently to organize itself as it sees fit, to legislate upon its interests, administer its services, and to define the jurisdiction and competence of its courts’.6 Similarly, the Badinter Arbitration Committee states that ‘the existence or disappearance of the state is a question of fact; that the effects of recognition by other states are purely declaratory’ (Pellet 1992: 182). In other words, recognition is not a legal act, and, consequently, the existence of the state is a question of fact, not law. Performativity addresses the issue of what constitutes a ‘government’ and ‘organized political authority’, as well as whether the population is ‘subject to’ and accepts that authority.

For enterprising state-builders and their patrons, these features can be elaborated and assembled to create an entity that looks and acts like a state but which is actually, upon closer inspection, a vehicle for furthering Russian geopolitical interests. What remains of primary importance in de facto states is the performative nature of the state and the degree of cohesion it creates by changing the facts on the ground. The Donetsk People’s Republic declared its independence on 7 April 2014 and held a referendum scarcely a month later on 11 May 2014. Though the results of this referendum were predictably in favour of independence from Ukraine, the fact that it occurred is what matters. After the referendum, the basic conditions of statehood can be fulfilled. Tellingly, Russia has pledged to respect the ‘will of the people’ (Miller 2014). Post-referendum, the conflict

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2 Fig. 1. Transnistrian coat of arms.

3 Fig. 2. Map of Transnistria bordering Moldova and Ukraine.

4 SPIRIDON ION CEPLEANU / CC BY-SA 3.0
is no longer between Ukraine and individuals or groups challenging its authority, but between two polities, one recog- nized, the other not. Both see themselves as sovereign. According to international law, both are sovereign if they can successfully exercise authority in the contested territor- ies – this is what is now being tested. A few flags, occu- pied buildings, and a made-to-order referendum do much to legitimate an otherwise tenuous claim to statehood. Defactostates raisethequestionastowhethertheexistenceof the state is a formal condition proclaimed by out- siders, or a condition of effective governance of a defined territory, with a population that is accepting of being sub- ject to that governance. Transnistria and Crimea illustrate how sovereignty becomes a natural right for any entity seeking to form a state – it is the universal ideology of human rights applied to state formation. Just as human rights become a tool wielded by states to suit a state’s own interests, Russia uses these defactostates’ quest for sov- ereignty as a means of strengthening its strategic interests.

Separatism occurs when a subset of a state’s population declares their independence in defiance of the de jure state. In Eurasia, the impetus for separation varies widely and can include some or all of the following characteristics: actual or potential linguistic disenfranchisement (Transnistria and Ukraine); persecution at the hands of an ‘illegitimate’ national government (Moldova, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Ukraine); economic inequality (often the separatist region subsidizes the state they wish to secede from, as was the case in Transnistria); and vio- lence, both actual and imagined (to a degree common to all of Eurasia’s defactostates). With each of Eurasia’s defactostates – Transnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh and the contested territory of Crimea – one may discern the involvement by the Russian Federation. Humanitarian intervention by the Russian military allows the Russian Federation to ‘legitimize’ these conflicts and provide further economic, political, and diplomatic support to them. ‘Compatriots’, sootchestvenniki, living in these defactostates often hold Russian passports, speak Russian, and consider themselves to be culturally Russian.

During fieldwork in Transnistria, residents stressed the region’s ethnic diversity as a pre-Soviet pheno- menon dating to Imperial Russian rule. Though a majority consider themselves to be culturally Russian. states often hold Russian passports, speak Russian, and support and the adoption of a Russian curriculum further stresses the region’s ‘Russianness’ as existing in opposi- tion to Moldova, viewed as a foreign, nationalizing state. Eurasian separatist movements appeal to the law and common sense, but from where do these claims to legality emerge? Two demands of separatists in Ukraine and Moldova – the right to secede and to hold a referendum – were enshrined in Soviet law. Secession and referendum are political acts, and recognition of their validity is also a political act, not a legal one. Formally, Soviet republics could secede, enter into foreign relations, and administer their territory, but other elements such as statehood, sov- ereignty, and autonomy were constitutional fictions that became possible with the collapse of the Soviet state (Brubaker 1996: 30).

Why Russia’s sudden concern with its ‘compatriots’ abroad? Military intervention on behalf of ‘compatriots’ constitutes tangible steps by Russia to restore its influence in its near abroad. Though masked in a humanitarian guise, the Russian military protects and guarantees the rights of ‘compatriots’, rather than any other international organi- zations with experience in protecting minority rights in Europe and Eurasia.

During President Putin’s address to the Federal Assembly in 2005, he called upon Russians to recall ‘Russia’s most recent history’.

Above all, we should acknowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century. As for the Russian nation, it became a genuine drama. Tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory. Putin’s comments on this ‘genuine drama’ are particu- larly relevant to recent events in Ukraine. Russians living outside of Russia constitute a category of people that under Russian law can and should be protected by the Russian state. The law ‘On State Policy of the Russian Federation with respect to Compatriots Abroad’ defines compatriots as ‘people living in other states deriving from some eth- nicity that has historically resided in Russia’, along with people who have ‘made a free choice to be spiritually, cul- turally and legally linked to the Russian Federation’. According to the above-cited law, this ‘choice’ may take a variety of forms, including ‘an act of self-identification, reinforced by social or professional activity for the pres- ervation of Russian language, the native languages of the peoples of the Russian Federation, the development of Russian culture abroad …’ Are compatriots free to choose to exist as such, or is this category ascribed to them? The variation within this term is not unlike the ‘people who are the constituent holders of sovereignty’ (Derrida 1986) in the West. How Russia recognizes and formalizes this indeterminacy constitutes the core element of separatism as a political technology. Separatism and the Soviet state: Notes from Moldova

The events in Crimea are remarkably similar to events that occurred in Moldova in the early 1990s. Moldova experi- enced a brief but bloody conflict in 1992 as authorities from the newly independent Republic of Moldova sought to assert their sovereignty over Transnistria, a strip of land located east of the Dniester River. Residents of this territory have seen themselves as a separate state since they declared their independence from the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) in 1990. With this initial declaration, residents hoped to become a new con- stituent republic of the USSR. Yet since its 1990 seces- sion, Transnistria has existed as an international orphan, acting and claiming to be a state but without international recognition.

From December 1989 to November 1990, Transnistrian residents voted in a series of referenda that sought to increase local autonomy as a bulwark against Moldovan nationalism. Transnistria was Russophone, industrialized, and the home of the 4th Soviet Army (King 2000: 183). These steps stood in contrast to most of Moldova, which sought closer cultural and political ties with Romania. Through a referendum campaign, regional and municipal councils in Transnistria sought a popular mandate for dis- engagement (Mason 2009). Transnistria’s secession was originally an attempt at preservation: residents sought to save the Soviet Union by revitalizing its federal structure. Transnistrians moved to create a separate political existence from the MSSR after the passage of a contro- versial 1989 Moldovan language law, which (1) declared Moldovan the state language of the republic; (2) man- dated the transition to the Latin alphabet; (3) recognized the unity of the Moldovan and Romanian languages; and (4) laid out a programme for extending its use in govern- ment, education, and other related spheres (Ciscel 2007: 42; King 2000: 186).
Fig. 3. Sevastopol, Crimea, home of the Russian Black Sea Fleet.

Fig. 4. Military parade in Tiraspol, Transnistria, October 2009.

Fig. 5. Advertisement for Crimean vacations, Tiraspol, Transnistria.

Fig. 6. Memorial ‘Glory’ in Tiraspol, Transnistria.

Fig. 7. Lenin statue in front of the Transnistrian parliament, Tiraspol, Transnistria.

Fig. 8. Military conflict, Crimea, March 2014.

Fig. 9. Demarcated border, Crimea, March 2014.
During fieldwork, activists involved in the earliest movement for independence stressed that this attempt to debunk the idea of a separate Moldovan language and culture was the first step toward reunification with Romania.\(^{12}\) Transnistrians viewed this shift away from Soviet (Russophone) norms as ‘Romanianization’, a phenomenon that threatened non-Romanian speakers with persecution, disenfranchisement, and death (Bobick 2011). Violence directed at Russian speakers in Moldovan cities, increasingly shrill nationalist rhetoric (‘Suitcase, train station – to Russia!’) and armed attempts by the Moldovan state to assert its sovereignty over Transnistria contributed to a heightened sense of threat internalized by residents. During an interview in 2008, one elderly civil society activist asserted that only Russian intervention averted a ‘genocide’. Ongoing Russian support for Transnistria keeps this nascent genocide at bay.

Today the Transnistrian state includes a tripartite government: an army and police force; a territory delineated by borders that it maintains, secures, and regulates; and a ‘national’ economy with its own currency and tax system. The Transnistrian state issues various documents, including birth certificates, passports, residency permits, and marriage certificates. A Transnistrian passport is required to purchase a mobile phone, hook up utilities, open a bank account, obtain internal registration (propiska), enrol in school, receive healthcare, or register property transactions. If they wish to leave Moldova, Transnistrians must hold a foreign passport. Out of an official population of 550,000, approximately 200–300,000 residents hold Moldovan citizenship; Russian passport holders range from 100,000 to 140,000, and between 70,000 and 90,000 hold Ukrainian passports. The vast majority of Transnistrian state officials hold Russian passports (Allin 2009).

Transnistria’s de facto statehood is only possible because of Russian military and financial support (1,500 Russian troops serve as peacekeepers in the region). Moldova’s neutrality is enshrined in its constitution, yet it must accept the presence of these Russian troops who thwart Moldova’s European aspirations (Dunn & Bobick 2014). European efforts to transform the peacekeeping mission to an international, civilian mandate have thus far failed. Far from being a neutral force, Russia occupies the role of aggressor and peacekeeper, which marginalizes Moldovan attempts to re-assert its sovereignty over the region.

The Crimean scenario

In Crimea, one can see similar pretexts for intervention that build upon the Transnistrian template. In both of these cases, a sudden power shift to a ‘nationalist’ government alienated those who see themselves as ethnically or linguistically outside of the nation. This perceived threat, coupled with Russian military backing, creates the conditions for the emergence of a hitherto non-existing nation. Next, constituent holders of sovereignty are called forth through the most democratic of all processes, the referendum. Finally, Russia stabilizes the situation with a one-sided peace agreement (Transnistria), annexation (Crimea), or international recognition (Abkhazia and South Ossetia).

The first step in creating a de facto state involved breaking the de jure state’s Weberian monopoly on the legitimate use of force. After the Ukrainian president, Yanukovych fled Kiev, pro-Russian protesters blockaded the Crimean parliament in Simferopol, which was later occupied by pro-Russian gunmen. During an emergency session under armed guard, the Crimean parliament voted to terminate the Crimean government and installed a new pro-Russian leadership. Unmarked military forces – “little green men” (Yurchak 2014), who later turned out, unsurprisingly, to be Russian soldiers – seized airports and transport infrastructure. This seizure of infrastructure and a subsequent blockade of Ukrainian military and naval installations created a patchwork of competing sovereignties in which coercive force (‘self-defence’ forces and ‘little green men’) diminished Ukraine’s ability to exert control and maintain order. Existing Russian military and naval installations in Crimea led to confusion as to whether these ‘little green men’ were legally allowed to be there according to the terms of a 2010 basing agreement. In Transnistria, the Russian military did not seize infrastructure; residents blocked roads, railways and other transit points.

Next, self-determination must occur – a ‘people’ must be created in order to proclaim their sovereignty. The newly installed Crimean authorities hastily organized a referendum on 16 March 2014, when nearly 97 per cent of those voting (voter turnout was 83 per cent) supported integration with Russia (RT 2014). This referendum was also a political performance directed to Crimea’s nascent constituents and to the Kremlin. Though Crimean ‘independence’ disappeared four days later when Putin ratified the inclusion of Crimea and Sevastopol as new units of the Russian Federation, the important step of self-determination had been performed and was, according to official results, wildly successful.

Above all, what is important in the Russian annexation is the theatrical narrative that preceded annexation. An occupation had to be staged on humanitarian grounds – who or what these forces were protecting and from what remained unclear – and self-determination occurred under the watchful eye of masked men with guns (Dunn & Bobick 2014). Similarly to Transnistria, Crimea illustrates how this performative sovereignty lies at the core of a somewhat contradictory identity politics through which a ‘people’ is constructed.\(^{13}\) This ephemeral ‘people’ is both nationally unique yet culturally and linguistically Russian.

Nationalism, public order, and provocations

Viewing separatism as a process wholly directed by Russia obscures the real fears of minorities in nationalizing states. The fundamental texts of nation-states tend to privilege one ethnic nation over others. This constitutional nationalism (Hayden 1992: 68) exists in opposition to decades of enforced Soviet internationalism. The Soviet Union’s explicit internationalism and its nationality policy (Hirsch 2005) was not simply an ideology, but the basis for engaging the Soviet state and its institutions, whose categories permeated individual and collective social bodies. In Transnistria, internationalism was important in a region where no single nationality dominated. Even today, Russians, Ukrainians, and Moldovans each make up nearly a third of the population. Transnistria’s urban, multi-ethnic populace was largely Russophone. In 1992, as the nascent Transnistrian state institutions attempted to consolidate their power in the region, Transnistrian forces (ethnically-mixed group of residents, non-standard military forces, foreign volunteers, and Cossacks) fought a brief war with Moldovan forces (Bobick 2012). The 14th Soviet Army, based in Transnistria, decisively intervened on behalf of the separatists to defeat Moldovan forces. After a Russian-brokered peace, Russian military forces were legalized under the guise of a peacekeeping mission. This quick victory and subsequent peace allowed Transnistrians to claim victory and secure Russian support for their de facto state.\(^{14}\)

The ‘undeclared war’ with Moldova became a foundational element for the Transnistrian state and today takes the form of a collective trauma internalized by residents and reiterated in a variety of settings. The 1992 war is analogous to the Great Patriotic War for the Transnistrian state – it is a fundamental event upon which it bases its legitimacy (Babilunga & Bomeško 1993). Transnistrian
Fig. 10. Local pro-Russian social movement ‘breakthrough’, Transnistria.


Ibid.


K. 1992. The causes and origins of this war have never been clearly ascertained. Veterans I interviewed from both sides spoke of uncertainty, provocations, and of the ‘artificial’ nature of the conflict.


Nationalism reframed: Nationhood and the national question in the new Europe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


Prisoners of war against Georgia, the Russian army has established an administrative boundary line with barbed wire, military installations, snipers’ nests, and newly constructed roads and patrol paths (Dunn 2012).

Putins’s claim that Russian-speakers in Ukraine are essentially Russians, and therefore the legitimate concern of the Russian state, is based on at best an oversimplified, and at worst, a deliberate mischaracterization of the relationship between language, identity, and culture in Ukraine. Bilingualism is widespread in Ukraine, and dividing the country according to ethnicity and language in and of itself is problematic not only because there is no unitary relation between ethnicity and language, but also because many Ukrainians do not define themselves solely in ethnic or linguistic terms (Bilaniuk 2005).

Performance sovereignty and the daily plebiscite

How do these performances become the basis for a de facto state? In situations in which the Russian military intervenes in these contested territories, intervention occurs, not in order to achieve a decisive victory, but rather to keep the de jure sovereign at bay. This happened during the 1992 war between Transnistria and Moldova, when locals loyal to separatists began taking over Moldovan police stations and government buildings. This too occurred in Crimea, and is happening in eastern Ukraine as well. De facto separation entails delimiting and fortifying the ill-defined borders of the nascent polity, the boundaries of which will later be formalized, as was the case in Transnistria and in Georgia. In Transnistria, a security zone bracketed by Russian and Moldovan soldiers in observation towers, tanks, armoured personnel carriers, and camouflaged machine gun nests serves as a buffer for the unofficial border between Transnistria and Moldova.

In Crimea, there is a reason that bunkers and checkpoints suddenly proliferated, and that airports and the ferry terminal at Kerch were taken over. These points facilitate not only the movement of troops and arms, but filter unwanted individuals. The Ukrainian government has no means of entering, much less asserting control over Crimea. By diminishing Ukrainian sovereignty, Crimean separatists and their Russian backers create a prolonged period of uncertainty in which their original claims of discrimination and violence may emerge, either through a further deterioration of an already tense situation or through organized provocations. Ukraines’s flegling government will remain unstable, which will create further uncertainty insofar as their claims to the lawful Ukrainian government have already been questioned and undermined by Russia. Russian authorities remain vigilant of any perceived threats to its compatriots.

The Russian Foreign Ministry’s response to clashes between pro-Russian demonstrators and pro-Ukrainian forces in the eastern city of Donetsk in March 2014 that left two dead, illustrates the degree to which any bloodshed risks escalation: ‘Russia is aware of its responsibility for the lives of fellow citizens on the right to take the people under its protection’.15

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The course of events leading to Crimeas’s annexation illustrate how Russia intervenes on behalf of ‘compartists’ and adopts military tactics for the sake of performing de facto statehood. In this sense, the performative nature of the Russian incursion is particularly illuminating. At first, these soldiers – described by the Russian government as ‘self-defence forces’ – operated unofficially, without insignia, though their Russian military licence plates said otherwise. Having been unmasked as Russian, they enabled the new Crimean authorities to perform the constituent actions of any sovereign – creating a ‘people’ around which the institutions of government can develop. This happened on 16 March 2014, when residents voted for reunification with Russia. Yet after the referendum the performance cannot stop – the new Crimean authorities must begin performing core government functions.

De facto states’ sovereignty operates both in terms of the performance of government functions and at the level of Renan’s daily plebiscite. Engaging (and believing, or at least tolerating) the de facto state and affirming its existence allows residents see themselves as sovereign; they perform it well enough to convince themselves of their right to existence. According to international law, this performance is what creates sovereignty. For Transnistria, acting and pretending to be a state has proven to be a durable means of organizing the polity. It remains to be seen what will happen in Crimea. Time is on the separatists’ side. 

FIG. 10. LOCAL PRO-RUSSIAN SOCIAL MOVEMENT ‘BREAKTHROUGH’!, TRANSnistria.

SkrpIm-VmeTe c RIK OLENI

Raymond Zoller
These entities exist only because one state continues to claim sovereignty over a territory where someone else is actually performing it, with enough popular support that it is unlikely residents of the de facto state would accede to the de jure sovereign. From an international position of power, de facto states are dismissed as illegitimate rogues (Bobick 2011; Chomsky 2000; Derrida 2005; Galeotti 2004). The local perspective, however, is more nuanced.

**Local perspectives on separatism**

Separatism has its benefits. In Transnistria, in addition to citizenship, the Russian Federation provides significant symbolic and material benefits, primarily humanitarian and economic aid to an otherwise moribund economy. Locals reciprocate in the only way they can: by professing loyalty to Russia. Russia has essentially opened the ultimate gift (Mauss 1990; Dillon 2003), not only a state, but an existence as recognized subjects ("compatriots") of the Russian Federation, a rising superpower and heir to the Soviet Union. Given the profound loss associated with the demise of the Soviet Union, reciprocation becomes an obligation for 'compatriots' living an otherwise peripheral existence outside of Russia.

The murky jurisdictional terrain of de facto states allows for illicit privatizations and monopolies to form with the explicit backing of local authorities (Bobick 2011). The sudden seizure of Ukrainian assets, most notably the valuable energy firms Chornomornaftogaz and Ukrtransgaz, illustrates the degree to which these incursions create the conditions for capital accumulation (Reuter 2014). This seizure and likely sale to Gazprom will further increase the ability of Russia to wage an energy war against unfriendly countries.

More broadly, the shift from Ukrainian to Russian rule in Crimea will require a wholesale re-titling of property and tax assessments, which will likely occur, as in much of the former Soviet Union, under less than transparent circumstances. In Transnistria, similar processes have occurred. Russian oligarchs own the most profitable local enterprises. These same oligarchs use Russian subsides – the region’s discounted natural gas, conveniently billed to the Republic of Moldova – to enrich themselves. In this way, separatism creates a system whereby everyone appears to benefit, whether it takes the form of Russian pension supplements (an extra US$15 per month in Transnistria), energy subsidies, corrupt state officials, or nationalist politicians in the Russian Duma who raise their profile by supporting ‘compatriots’.

For minority populations with an existential unease in nationalizing states, asserting an existence in opposition to the de jure state offers a sense of order and understanding that disappeared along with the Soviet state. The militarization of Transnistrian society – ranging from the latent standards that allow for recognition of some states yet determine, and intervention are fundamental political concepts – federalism, autonomy, neutrality, self-determination – can become the basis for new subjectivities. As the constituent peoples of de facto states uncritically invoke these terms to support claims made on their behalf (e.g., Russia’s insistence of Ukraine’s federalization and neutrality), these terms come to challenge the status quo, which becomes increasingly untenable. These subjectivities and identities, initially cultivated by the Russian state as a means of weakening Moldovan and Ukrainian sovereignty, are embodied and performed by individuals and institutions. The ideological foundations of these geopolitical divisions are obscured by local demands and grievances against the central government, while the latent idea of empire slowly shifts the geographic boundaries of Europe and Eurasia. Amidst this shifting conceptual basis, territories are conquered not through brute force, but through tactical incursions that enable sovereignty and self-determination to be performed. Far from waging a war on nationhood, de facto states are merely expressing their desires through the most democratic of all institutions, the referendum. Though the results of referenda are predetermined, what is important is that it occurred and its results can serve as the basis for subsequent performances of sovereignty.

Broadly stated, it is not the practices and concepts of liberal democracy that will bring Russia closer to the West, as many believed after the Soviet collapse, but the illiberal practices of the Soviet era that have come to infuse liberalism (Losurdo 2014). The leaders and elites of Eurasia’s unrecognized states champion national self-determination, while the states in which they reside stress the need for stability. In the face of these incompatible principles, these entities illustrate the uncomfortable precedents and double standards that allow for recognition of some states yet deny it to others. Attempts to delegitimize these entities or to discern their artificiality obscures their communality with our own existence as political subjects. Crimea and Transnistria illustrate the very real conceptual slippage of the foundational terms of contemporary politics. Freedom, equality, democracy, self-determination, and intervention are fundamental political concepts of the 20th century, yet in the 21st century what we are witnessing is their ongoing (re)definition. Far from being concepts with a common basis in reality, their flexible reimagining in Eurasia’s de facto states illustrates their indeterminacy. The West intervenes on behalf of principles, while Russia intervenes to further their strategic goals. Given the absence of the Cold War as a stabilizing reference point, we are left to comprehend our own uncertain moment with political concepts that have long lost their referents. In this sense Russia’s humanitarian intervention and support for self-determination should not be seen as perversions of long-sacred principles, but as a reflection of the times.