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Pundits Blog

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One weekday morning in mid-March, the residents of Georgetown woke up to find themselves in England. Overnight, life as they knew it was over, as the former colonial power exerted historic claims on one of the oldest neighborhoods in Washington. The clock hands on Healy Hall tower, an iconic part of Georgetown's skyline, had moved five hours ahead to reflect London time. A long line snaked down Embassy Row, as residents of Georgetown waited to exchange their American passports for British ones. The banks in Georgetown were closed; all court cases pending; and more changes were yet to come. Some Georgetown residents were so distressed by the upheaval attending annexation that they went to Reagan National Airport; hoping to escape the country, they realized to their horror that all available flights were destined for London Heathrow Airport.

This storyline seems like the plot of a B-movie political thriller, but it is not too far off from what the people of Crimea, a peninsula formerly extending from mainland Ukraine, have experienced over the last two months, since the territory was annexed by Russia in March. Increasingly, many residents of East Ukraine's embattled territories fear the same fate – going to sleep in one country and waking up in a different one.

The full economic and political implications of Crimea's annexation may not be apparent for some time, but life has already turned upside down for most ordinary Crimeans. Food imports have fallen. Vigilante "self-defense units" pop up unexpectedly at train stations to conduct dubious "inspections." And because Russian media has seized control of Crimean news outlets, it is difficult to know what is actually happening on the ground.

Even the basic question of how Crimeans themselves voted in a referendum held in mid-March to secede from Ukraine is disputed. According to Ukrainian news, Russian President Vladimir Putin's Human Rights Council accidentally posted the real results of the vote, showing that only 30 percent of Crimean citizens turned out, and just 15 percent voted for annexation. Apparently, this notice was, however, quickly removed and replaced with different results, which showed a 97 percent vote in favor out of an 83 percent turnout.

Russia maintains that Crimea's annexation is a natural development, given that almost 60 percent of the peninsula's residents are ethnic Russian. Mainland Ukraine, on the other hand, is less than one-fifth ethnic Russian, meaning that the population is less likely to accept Russia's influence, much less vote for it, even as Russian proxies wage war through Soviet veterans, militants from Crimea, and mercenaries. So far, two provinces in eastern Ukraine, Donetsk and its neighbor Luhansk, have voted in referendums to secede from Ukraine. But with presidential elections a week away, Ukraine's political leadership seems determined for the country to remain united.

Russia's goals may well be different in Ukraine than in Crimea; Putin may not be looking to grab territory, but rather to continue seeding instability to keep Ukraine from drifting closer to the West. In short, Ukraine may not face wholesale annexation, but something else that is hardly preferable: A war of attrition that, day by day, brings the country more firmly into Russia's sphere of influence and threatens the bearings of ordinary life. ■

Kemper is founder and CEO of the Institute for Education, a nonprofit foundation that recognizes and promotes leadership locally, nationally and in the world community.