

Donbass Is Not Scotland

By [Ivan Sukhov](#)

September 17, 2014



Russia's state-controlled television and propaganda is fixated on Scotland, in part because Britain is one of the foundation stones of Western society. If something goes wrong there, it will provoke foolhardy gloating in Russia.

Russian Internet activists have assembled a collage showing Mel Gibson playing Scottish hero William Wallace in the film "Braveheart." Just over his shoulder the collage shows Igor Strelkov, the former defense minister of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic. Many Russians would like to believe that Girkin is a hero of similarly epic status and that events transpiring in Scotland and Donetsk are roughly the same. State TV constantly suggests that a parallel does exist, and some Russian politicians openly declare that if Scotland secedes, it gives legitimacy to Crimea's break from Ukraine.

But no such similarity exists. Igor Strelkov and other Donbass "heroes" are fighting not for freedom but for the diametrically opposed goal of restoring the Russian Empire. Wallace would probably have fought on the other side in Donbass.

But right or wrong, separatism seems to be the next big trend in global politics. In fall 2008,

after Russia gave formal recognition to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, an alarmed Ankara convened an expert conference on international security. At that meeting, an eminent Armenian political scientist suggested that the formation of new geographic entities from the territory of existing states marked a new global trend in the 21st century, one that would even become routine.

It is difficult not to agree. More countries exist in the 21st century than did 100 years ago. Just recall how Eritrea seceded from Ethiopia, South Sudan from Sudan, Kosovo from Serbia, and how, before that, the federative structure of Yugoslavia broke up and the republics of the former Soviet Union disbanded. Numerous such instances lie ahead, and many, such as Kurdistan, are already discernible.

But for two reasons, the precedent of Scotland — like a number of other European movements advocating territorial separation — represents a minor departure from the larger trend.

First, modern Europe has a functioning, albeit imperfect, system for regulating inter-state relations. An independent Scotland would not leave the European orbit. Even if the referendum for independence passes and Brussels finds it challenging to integrate the new entity, it is difficult to imagine that Scotland's southern boundary line would become a modern-day Hadrian's Wall, much less a Berlin Wall, along with visas, customs clearance, a separate currency and so on.

The territorial fragmentation of the former Soviet Union is a very different story. There we see new borders and new states at economic loggerheads — their borders now reinforced with several rows of barbed wire and, in some cases, full-scale trenches and redoubts. Fully 20 years after signing a cease-fire agreement, the border of Azerbaijan's breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh still resembles a front line.

There are two basic causes for these repeated traumas — events that more closely resemble conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa than the "gentlemen's regionalism" of Europe.

First, leaders have failed to create a creditable supranational organization uniting the republics in the 23 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization are great for flying flags at summits but useless in times of crisis.

The second shock-absorber in Scotland is the sanctity of the voting procedure. Just as with Canada's 1995 negative vote on Quebec independence, there will be winners and losers. That particular vote plunged separatists into a deep depression. But such an emotion is proof of the legitimacy of the voting process and its capacity to reflect real sentiment.

By contrast, in the post-Soviet space, the splits are rarely the result of democratic, reasoned debate, due to the cynicism of both voters and their leaders. Although the referendum is considered the most direct form of democracy, it carries almost no value. The republics have held plenty of referendums, beginning with the referendum on preserving the Soviet Union. That referendum passed in about half of the republics and should have preserved the Soviet Union in at least a truncated form — that is, if voters had taken a more active role than simply putting a checkmark on a ballot.

Instead, leaders often use plebiscite votes to resolve complex territorial conflicts only after carrying out a preliminary ethnic cleansing. By the time the vote takes place, there is nobody left to vote against the measure. As a result, both those who voted as well as those who became refugees have become accustomed to the fact that referendums mean nothing.

It is commonly held that, in the 2003 referendum on the republican constitution that would have made Chechnya a part of Russia, the Russian authorities cynically forged figures indicating universal support for the measure.

But even that holds true only for Chechen cities: Almost everybody turned out to vote in the villages. In fact, most everyone voted in favor of the constitution — perhaps even those who immediately afterward grabbed their guns and headed for the hills to hunt down federal soldiers.

The reason is that the vote was simply a ritual for those people: Whole villages came together in what was essentially a social event in a region whose social life had been largely destroyed by war. The food and dancing at the polling station carried more importance than the political significance of the event.

Just the presence of voting booths and the counting of ballots do not constitute true elections when voters view the entire process as nothing but an empty ritual, and not a chance to influence the course of events through the exercise of free will. In this sense, the Crimean referendum was no exception.

The Scottish example could help Russians to understand that, as the traditional states disintegrate, splits are likely to develop in the body of their own country. Unfortunately, there will be no way to soften these metamorphoses. But, of course, to gloat over others problems is always a good way to distract from ones own.

Ivan Sukhov is a journalist who has covered conflicts in Russia and the CIS for the past 15 years.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/09/17/donbass-is-not-scotland-a39513>