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[A Nonviolent Alternative for Ukraine](#)

**Ukraine faces a rising tide of violence in the restive east.
Here's why nonviolent activism is the best strategy for fighting back.**

On May 15, thousands of unarmed residents and steelworkers of the eastern Ukrainian city of Mariupol [did nonviolently](#) what a bloody attack by Ukrainian troops six days earlier was unable to: rid the region's second-largest city of armed pro-Russian separatists who had held key buildings and other parts of the city for weeks. Smaller protests have taken place in other cities in eastern Ukraine held by separatists.

In the eastern cities targeted by armed pro-Russian militias, such as Donetsk, Lugansk, and Krivy Rig, large nonviolent protests in support of national unity have taken place in recent weeks. (The photo above shows a pro-Ukrainian unity rally in Lugansk on April 18.) But as the country prepared for its presidential election on May 25, there was also an uptick in violence. In particular, a separatist attack on a government checkpoint just before the election left 16 dead; shortly after the polls closed on Sunday, the Ukrainian government launched bloody airstrikes against separatists who had taken control of the Donetsk airport. Given this turbulent context, a great deal depends on whether Ukrainian civil society relies on nonviolent action in coming weeks and months.

A reliance on nonviolent methods makes it far more difficult for the separatists — and their allies in Russia — to claim the majority of the region's people are on their side. Military operations by the Ukrainian armed forces, as well as the mob violence that resulted in the deaths of more than 40 ethnic Russians in Odessa [a few weeks ago](#), have already done much to fan anti-government sentiment. Relying on local groups to use peaceful resistance — rather than sending in counterterrorism squads from Kiev or arming local pro-Kiev militias — avoids the risk of turning residents against the central government. It was precisely such violent threats that Putin used, back in March, to justify his annexation of Crimea on the grounds that Russian-speaking people needed "protection."

Minorities wishing to secure or expand their rights should not underestimate the power of nonviolent resistance in achieving these goals. [Over the past century](#), the power of civil resistance has played an important role in resisting foreign occupation. Moreover, campaigns that used armed struggle to liberate themselves from foreign occupation were less likely to succeed than those that used nonviolent resistance.

Perhaps one of the most intriguing recent examples of nonviolent resistance comes from the Middle East. Despite being torn by sectarian divisions and the legacy of a bloody civil war, the people of Lebanon were able to rise up nonviolently in 2005 to force an end to decades of Syrian domination, in what became known in the West as the "Cedar Revolution" — though the Lebanese themselves revealingly refer to it as the *intifada istiqlal*, or "struggle for independence." The 25,000 troops in the country and the influential agents within key sectors of the Lebanese government were no match for the will of the majority the Lebanese people.

India, the largest country ever under direct foreign rule, freed itself from Britain through the nonviolent campaign led by Mahatma Gandhi. Nonviolent campaigns played a significant role in a number of African

struggles against European occupation, most notably in Zambia. Despite concurrent armed struggles, nonviolent resistance in East Timor against the Indonesian occupation and in Namibia against the South African occupation played a major role in mobilizing global civil society in their support, which proved to play a far more significant role in enabling freedom for those nations than did the guerrilla forces.

Throughout the Cold War, movements throughout Eastern Europe resisted Soviet influence and occupation via unarmed resistance. The nonviolent resistance in Czechoslovakia following the 1968 Soviet invasion, despite its unplanned nature, prevented consolidation of control by the Soviets and their allies for a full six months (in contrast to the 1956 invasion of Hungary, where the armed resistance was brutally crushed within days).

Those months of active defiance of the Soviet occupation helped create a culture of resistance that lasted for the next 20 years, preventing Moscow from ever reasserting its total control over Czechoslovakia due to the unwillingness of many people in that country to obey, leading eventually to the Velvet Revolution of 1989 and the country's freedom. The occupied Baltic nations of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia freed themselves from Soviet control largely through widespread nonviolent resistance.

Even in the face of German occupation during World War II, nonviolent resistance in Norway and Denmark greatly reduced the ability of the Nazis to control those countries and suppress their populations relative to elsewhere in Europe. Today, small Eastern European states like Lithuania, recognizing the limitations of their armed forces in resisting conquest by powerful neighbors, have adopted as part of their national defense policies the mobilization of the population in civil resistance. Recognizing the power of total withdrawal of cooperation by civilians, Lithuania's grand strategy explicitly incorporates "civilian-based defense" — or the threat of continual resistance against any foreign invader — as a way to deter occupation by a foreign country.

Nonviolent resistance is certainly more difficult in situations where the majority of the population supports the occupation, such as in [Western Sahara](#), where Moroccan settlers brought in since the 1975 conquest and illegal annexation of that country now outnumber the indigenous Sahrawis. The ongoing nonviolent resistance movement in Western Sahara, while thus far failing to end the occupation, has nevertheless prevented Morocco's conquest from becoming a *fait accompli*.

Similarly, nonviolent resistance in Crimea would make Russian control of the peninsula, despite the referendum victory, problematic. Tatars and Ukrainians [constitute nearly 40 percent](#) of the population of Crimea combined, but far fewer than that are required to make the Russian occupation difficult. A variety of low-risk actions — such as subtle forms of noncooperation, tax boycotts, and even [sex strikes](#) are currently underway in both Crimea and parts of Ukraine as ways to maintain autonomy and resist the Russian annexation.

Crimean Tatars may even have the ability to use nonviolent resistance to elicit the support of powerful third parties, both in mainland Ukraine and even in Russia. They have the sympathy — if not overt support — of allies in Ukraine, which [provides most of Crimea's electricity and 70 percent of its food](#). Despite the unanimous support in the Duma of Putin's military moves in Ukraine, the Russian public [appears to be ambivalent](#) if not unenthusiastic about further Russian intervention in Ukraine. The widespread use of nonviolent resistance in mainland Russia would serve notice that opposition to Russian annexation of Crimea goes beyond the Western nations and includes the heartfelt sentiment of a significant number of Crimeans themselves.

Remaining nonviolent certainly won't guarantee that the occupier will treat the opposition peacefully. In fact, most nonviolent campaigns face considerable violence. But remaining nonviolent means that the pro-Russia militias and the Russian regime's uses of violence are more likely to produce difficulties with sustaining repression over the long haul, while also increasing the chances that such repression will backfire and elicit more support from the international community. Moreover, nonviolent methods of resistance — such as foot-

dragging and other forms of noncooperation like those used by the Czechs and Slovaks during the 1970s and 1980s — are less likely to elicit as violent a response from regime forces than, say, open armed rebellion, street fighting, or sabotage.

A strategy of nonviolent action also has important long-term implications (though Ukrainians can be forgiven if they find it hard to look beyond the urgent present). Studies have shown that the way groups prosecute a campaign strongly affects the way the country evolves in the longer term: Countries that experienced campaigns of nonviolent resistance were about 15 percent less likely to relapse into civil war within a decade than those with campaigns waged through armed struggle. Moreover, nonviolent campaigns that use small amounts of violence are likewise more than twice as likely to experience civil war as those that use strict nonviolent discipline in the prosecution of the campaign.

The international community should, meanwhile, act delicately toward the nonviolent movements that emerge. Supporting them outright could actually undermine their domestic legitimacy and feed into Putin's propaganda that the West is conspiring to use the unrest in Ukraine to expand its influence to Russia's borders. Moreover, [research](#) suggests that overt forms of material assistance — such as funds — do not increase the average success rate of grassroots movements.

Instead, the international community should use whatever means necessary to reinforce the goal of reducing violence in the country as the primary aim of all negotiations. Moreover, international actors should strongly assert the right of people in Ukraine — of all political persuasions — to engage in peaceful protest and resistance in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Violations of these rights by Russian forces — or by the Ukrainian government in Kiev — should continue to be punished, first through travel restrictions against guilty parties, then by targeted economic sanctions such as the freezing of economic assets held in foreign banks. The international community should also demand that both eastern Ukraine and Crimea remain open to journalists from all countries — not just from Russia and Ukraine. The world needs to witness what unfolds in Ukraine in the coming weeks and months, and watching through a solely Kremlin or Kiev-oriented lens is unlikely to yield credible information. Armed struggle, if used by pro-Kiev groups, would likely undermine the willingness and capacity of the international community to maintain commitment to such steps, while threatening to create truly massive humanitarian crisis in the country both in the short and longer term.

In the end, it may not be politicians in the Kremlin or in Kiev who have all the power in this situation. It may be the people themselves. As political scientist [Oliver Kaplan has shown](#), a number of nonviolent options are available to civilians — even in the midst of violent conflict and against armed militia groups — to protect their autonomy. Villages in rural Colombia have nonviolently resisted pressure from the military, leftist guerrillas, and right-wing paramilitaries to be conscripted, extorted, or controlled. In such violent regions as the Niger Delta and the Guatemalan highlands, nonviolent resistance has similarly challenged both armed groups and government forces.

If Ukrainians need a source for inspiration, perhaps they can look to the Tatars, who utilized nonviolent resistance in successfully demanding a fair degree of autonomy for the Tatar Republic within the Russian Federation, avoiding the carnage, repression, and emergence of extremists of Chechnya, another Muslim republic within the Russian Federation. And on May 18, more than 20,000 Crimean Tartars [protested in the capital](#) of Sevastopol and many thousands more would have taken to the streets in Simferopol and elsewhere had Russian troops not prevented the rallies from taking place. The people in Crimea, eastern Ukraine, and throughout the country do not want to be pawns in a great power game. They are increasingly recognizing that the best way to stop Russian irredentism and challenge ethnic chauvinists on both sides is for civil society to take the lead and fight for their freedom through strategic nonviolent action.