

Self Determination: A Mistake?

On Christmas, 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev presented the West with the most heralded gift since the beginning of the Common Era: dissolution of the U.S.S.R. The eventual result, fifteen independent republics, was a ringing endorsement of liberal self-determination. However, in one such republic, Tajikistan, self-determination has been a mistake that reveals a blind spot in the liberal orthodoxy.

The woes of Tajikistan have been dictated in large part by the state's topography. Ninety-three percent of Tajikistan is mountainous, affording little to the agricultural sector upon which the Tajik economy is dependent. In the Soviet era, this untenable situation was allayed via subsidies with little attention to Tajik self-sufficiency. The region was designated to produce cotton with roughly forty percent of the Tajik budget coming from the central government.¹ The magnitude of Tajikistan's plight was apparent in the face of independence, as the Tajik parliament made clear to the Supreme Soviet: "We are convinced that alone, deprived of our cooperation of many years, we cannot overcome the present deep crisis... We cannot imagine our future outside the Union..."²

In May, 1992, Tajikistan lapsed into a civil war which lasted five years, killing tens of thousands and displacing far more. Holding power in a land laid destitute, Tajikistan's president Emomali Rahmon has done little to improve the lives of his citizens, preferring decadent pet projects—the world's tallest flagpole, for instance—to constructing a functional state.

Remittances provide over fifty percent of Tajikistan's GDP,³ while illicit narcotic trade has

¹ International Crisis Group, *Tajikistan: An Uncertain Peace*, in Asia Report No. 30; 2001, p. 1.

² Kirill Nourzhanov, and Christian Bleuer, *From Political Confrontation to Civil War, 1991–1992*, in *Tajikistan: A Political and Social History*; 2013, p. 279.

³ The World Bank, *Migration and Remittances: Recent Developments and Outlook*, in Migration and Development Brief; 2014, p. 4.

accounted for a majority of economic activity in the past.⁴ As is often the case in dictatorships, the citizens have borne the brunt of the nigh-nonexistent economy in Tajikistan, as USAID estimates that food insecurity directly impacts a third of Tajikistan.⁵

Regime change is unlikely, as Rahmon has consolidated power in the face of color revolutions throughout former Soviet republics. In 2016, a referendum passed with nearly ninety-five percent approval—a number to make Putin blush—crowning Rahmon president-for-life.⁶ Even if Rahmon heeded his presidential duties, Tajikistan’s lack of natural resources and rural countenance provide no clear path to reform. Tajikistan’s primary natural resource is the potential hydroelectric power in their mountain lakes. Establishing an extensive hydroelectric infrastructure, however, would put Tajikistan at odds with its more powerful neighbor, Uzbekistan, whose cotton industry is reliant upon the same water.

With its history of reliance upon outside support and the clear failure of self-governance, Tajikistan offers a question: is self-determination a mistake? While eastern Russia is plagued with poverty and scourged by the drug trade, by becoming independent Tajikistan consigned itself to the same fate. But this same fate came after a bloody civil war, and there is no clear path forward—but perhaps there *could* be a viable path to reform if Tajikistan was a part of a greater whole. Out of the post-Soviet ‘Stans,’ Tajikistan is joined by Kyrgyzstan as the only two nation-states with less than a seven billion United States dollar GDP.⁷ While Uzbekistan and other ‘Stans’ moved forward—albeit slowly—to dwarf these nations (Tajikistan’s GDP is roughly one-

⁴ International Crisis Group; 2001, p. 19.

⁵ USAID, *Tajikistan: Nutrition Profile*.

⁶ Reid Standish, *How Tajikistan’s President Extended his Term—for Life*, in *Foreign Policy*.

⁷ The World Bank, Data: GDP (current US\$), <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=TM-KG-KZ-UZ-TJ>.

tenth of Uzbekistan's, whose GDP is middling relative to other 'Stans'),⁸ the stark lack of natural resources and feudal conditions in Tajikistan have compounded upon the institutional fragility that typifies post-Soviet states. When the Soviet Union fell and self-determination carried the day, Tajikistan's future was a fait accompli. In light of the recent secession movement in Catalonia, Tajikistan shows that nationhood is not a cross for all to bear. Escaping the Iron Curtain was certainly an intuitive decision from the outside, but every aspiring nation deserves to be appraised based on its ability to provide for its citizens. Due diligence in this regard is a necessary precondition for self-determination, as unbridled liberal orthodoxy is not the guarantor of prosperity.

⁸ Ibid.