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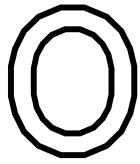
FOLIO

History Is Repeating Itself in Ukraine

Cycles of nationalism
have existed for centuries.
What do they reveal?

Andreas Wimmer

Overlapping ethnic demographics and inverse power relations across a border often draw neighboring states into domestic conflict, and Ukraine and Russia have proved no exception.



VER THE PAST TWO CENTURIES, nationalism has provided the ideological fuel for many political conflicts and wars around the world, and it continues to do so today. Nationalism is a particularly conflict-prone ideology. It demands self-rule by a people but does not define who qualifies as “a people” and is therefore entitled to political self-determination. Nor does it identify the linguistic, religious, and cultural boundaries of a nation. These ambiguities open a new competitive field of conflicting claims and contentious power struggles, which often escalate into violence.

The story of the global spread of nationalism and the nation-state goes as [follows](#): empires lose legitimacy when the idea that the state should be ruled in the name of a royal dynasty or a universal civilization is eclipsed by the idea that the state should be ruled in the name of a particular people, usually defined on the basis of shared cultural characteristics. For hundreds of years, we have seen this process happen repeatedly, as empire after empire has been replaced by nation-states, often after violent wars of independence.

The last empire to dissolve was the Soviet Union, which fell apart largely peacefully, unlike most of its predecessors. And after the USSR's fall, the newly founded country of Ukraine faced the same question as did the successor states of the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires after the end of World War I, and as did many of Africa's newly independent states in the 1960s: Who represents the nation, and in whose name, according to nationalist doctrine, should the state be ruled?

Soviet nationality policy, which gave each Soviet republic a “titular nation” to contain and tame the insurrectionary spirit of early twentieth-century nationalism, seemed to provide an easy answer: “Ukrainians,” who had been designated as the titular nation of the eponymous Soviet Socialist Republic, [would be the sovereign nation](#) of the post-Soviet state as well. But that begged the crucial questions of how, exactly, to define this membership: Where should the boundaries of the Ukrainian nation be drawn? Who are its most “typical” members and thus, according to nationalist ideology, most entitled to rule?

As in many newly independent countries, multiple candidate ethnic groups could claim to represent the core of the national community. In Ukraine, those who simply called themselves “Ukrainians” were, perhaps obviously, the main candidate. Their ancestors, who had lived under the Habsburg Empire, [had been educated](#) in Habsburg schools in the Ukrainian language and taught to identify as Ukrainians, or they had adopted a Ukrainian national identity later on, during the early decades of Soviet rule, when the so-called nativization policy sought to spread the culture and identity of the titular nations. Other citizens, though, identified as Ukrainian “Russians.” Their ancestors had grown up speaking Russian and been taught in Romanov rather than Habsburg schools, or they were born in the era of renewed Russification after the nativization policy came to an end in the mid-1930s. They saw Ukraine as part of the Russian cultural world and wished it to remain in the Russian sphere of influence.

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Because of this complicated history, the boundary between “Ukrainians” and Ukrainian “Russians” was never that sharp. Nevertheless, as in many other postcolonial states, political coalitions quickly formed along this ethno-regional divide, pitting the Euro-Ukrainian west and center of the country against the Russian-leaning east and south. This was because there were few other organizational channels in post-Soviet Ukraine, such as networks of voluntary organizations, through which to build political alliances across the entire territory and thus across the ethno-regional divide.

Since the newly independent state also lacked the capacity to provide public goods equally and uniformly across the territory, a zero-sum game emerged. When Ukrainian-leaning governments were in power, they expelled Russian-leaning politicians from government, proclaimed Ukrainian the country’s sole official language, and privileged western and central regions in the allocation of public goods. When Russian-leaning rulers were elected, they reversed course, declaring Russian an official language in the eastern parts of the country, expelling Ukrainian-leaning politicians from their coalition, mending ties with Russia, and so on.

This political back-and-forth came to an end in 2014, when the Maidan Revolution sealed the triumph of the Western-leaning Ukrainian factions (including some right-wing neofascist elements), which quickly cleansed the government of Russian-leaning politicians and bureaucrats. That, in turn, made many Russian-leaning Ukrainians feel like second-class citizens in their own country. With encouragement from the Kremlin, Russophile leaders soon declared Ukraine's eastern territories independent, a move mirroring that taken by the leaders of other politically disadvantaged minorities, such as the Ossetians in Georgia, the Southern Sudanese in Sudan, and [many others around the world](#).

Following another postcolonial pattern, this domestic struggle over who owned the new state was compounded by the rivalry between neighboring successor states.

[Overlapping ethnic demographics](#) and inverse power relations across a border often [draw neighboring states into domestic conflict](#), and Ukraine and Russia have proved no exception. Russians represent the state-controlling majority in neighboring Russia, whose government tried to protect its cross-border co-ethnics from political discrimination (hyped up as “genocide” in Vladimir Putin’s hysterical rhetoric). Such tensions [often snowball](#) into full-scale armed conflict between neighboring states, as happened with Greece and Turkey in the 1920s, Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s, and Eritrea and Ethiopia more recently. The Russian invasion of Ukraine fits into this broader pattern.

Of course, this concern for co-ethnics in neighboring states may or not be genuine. Whether Hitler really cared about the second-class status of ethnic Germans in Czechoslovakia and Poland is, to put it mildly, a matter of considerable doubt. It is far more plausible that he merely used them as a pretext for his project of building a German empire in Eastern Europe. The same goes for Putin's 2014 annexation of Crimea, a prelude to the recent assault on Ukraine. Whatever the motives, revisionist states are given unique opportunities to pursue their expansionist agendas when nationalist principles of self-rule are violated in neighboring states and cross-border co-ethnic minorities are treated as second-class citizens in their own countries, which often happens as newly nationalizing elites cement their power to the detriment of supposed foreigners within. This helps explain why civil wars over the ethno-political balances of power and wars between neighboring states over ethnically mixed territories are common in the first fifty years following the emergence of new nation-states from the ashes of empire.

After this first half century of independence, the probability of conflict continuously recedes because the underlying political causes disappear through a variety of historical pathways: there may emerge an inclusive ruling coalition that gives majorities and minorities a seat at the table of power (as in Canada); after ethnic cleansing and/or emigration, the minorities may end up too small in strength to dare make any political claims on the state (as in Pakistan); or the old ethnic divide may fade into the background and cease to be politically relevant when minorities assimilate into the majority group and become fully accepted by its members (as in France and Botswana).

What do this pattern and the example of Ukraine teach us about the political role of nationalism in the future? As long as there are ethno-political inequalities around the world (and there are plenty, including extreme cases like the Tutsi ethnocracy in Rwanda), many politically marginalized groups will continue to mobilize and demand self-rule, or at least a seat at the table of government. Some of these contestations will [escalate into armed violence](#), and nationalism will continue to provide the justification.

But even without ethno-political exclusion, nationalism persists: the deep incentive structures baked into the nation-state model, where rulers are supposed to represent and act in the interests of the national majority, offer plenty of opportunities for left- or right-wing populists to decry the selling out of national interests to global elites as they promise to put “the people” back at the heart of the national political agenda. Nationalism’s demand for representation and inclusion continues to provide a fertile ground for both inclusionary and exclusionary projects, depending on who is seen as representing the true interests of “the people” and how, exactly, to define who is a full member and who is merely a tolerated guest in the national family. The hopes that we have entered a “post-national” age, so prominent among liberal, globally oriented politicians and intellectuals in post-Cold War public debate, have been predictably premature. Nationalism, in its many variants and political incarnations, is here to stay for the foreseeable future.

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