

Comparing Nationalism in Ukraine and Georgia

Written by Nicholas Chkhaidze and Taras Kuzio

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2025/02/26/comparing-nationalism-in-ukraine-and-georgia/>

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Nationalism continues to arouse controversy with most observers continuing to believe it to be a negative phenomenon, although as Taras Kuzio (2002) and Oxana Shevel (2024) have shown, this is a far more complicated question. This is especially the case when scholars continue to misuse terms such as civic and ethnic to describe, for example, Ukrainian and Georgian presidents. Olga Onuch and Henry Hale's (2022) book is an example of how Volodymyr Zelenskyy has been described positively as 'civic' and contrasted with his negative 'ethnic' predecessor Petro Poroshenko. In fact, both Ukrainian presidents have implemented similar policies on language, religion, national identity, nation-building and relations with Russia. After the Euromaidan Revolution, Presidents Poroshenko and Zelenskyy both removed Russian influence and soft power from Ukraine.

Scholars also have also routinely described only one side of the political fence in Georgia and Ukraine as 'nationalist' and the other side as 'pro-Russian.' It is never explained why only pro-Western political forces (e.g., Poroshenko in Ukraine, Saakashvili in Georgia) are 'nationalists' while their opponents (e.g., former President Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine, de facto ruler of Georgia Bidzina Ivanishvili) are 'pro-Russian.' Onuch and Hale (2022), Serhiy Plokhy (2023), Maria Popova and Shevel (2024), and Adrian Karatnycky (2024) describe Ukraine's centre-right political forces as 'nationalist.' In Georgia former President Mikhail Saakashvili, leader of the centre-right United National Movement who was imprisoned in 2018 on flimsy political charges, was usually negatively described as a 'nationalist.'

There has been insufficient recognition by scholars that 'pro-Russian forces' in Ukraine, Georgia and elsewhere can be also nationalists. It is also mistaken for scholars of Russia to confusingly inter-mix the terms 'patriots' and 'nationalists' when writing about Russia's far-right who should be described as imperial nationalists and in some cases fascists (Kuzio, 2023). Meanwhile, it is mistaken to lump centre-right political forces in Ukraine, Georgia and elsewhere together with populist nationalists as 'nationalists.' Pro-Russian forces in Ukraine were supporters of a pan-Russian nationalism that included Ukrainians within a larger Russian people alongside Russians and Belarusians (Kuzio, 2024).

Understanding Nationalism

Nationalism can be both negative and positive; it just depends which type. Nationalism – even of the far-right variety as in Ukraine – can play a positive role in a country's liberation from colonial rule, removing corrupt pro-Russian despots and mobilising public support for European integration. All three factors have been supported by Ukraine's, but not Georgia's, populist nationalists and far-right.

Two factors distinguish Georgia and Ukraine from each other. First, Georgian and Ukrainian nationalism have very different values, with Georgian nationalists favoring pro-Russian regimes and Ukrainian nationalists consistently combatting Russian influence in Ukraine. In Georgia and Ukraine, nationalists are electorally unpopular; nevertheless, during revolutions, they play an outsized roles as anti-Russian protestors in Ukraine and pro-Russian vigilantes in Georgia. In Georgia, nationalists are used as vigilantes by the pro-Russian regime with masked vigilantes in black attacking protestors, journalists and lawyers.

Second, Georgia's Orthodox Church has close and friendly ties to the xenophobically anti-Western Russian Orthodox

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Church. The Russian Orthodox Church supports what it calls Russia's "holy war" against Ukraine. The Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), however, which was granted autocephaly by Patriarch Constantinople Bartholomew I in 2019, is pro-Western.

The significance in this difference is that nationalists supported Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution and 2013-2014 Euromaidan Revolution and were an important factor in ensuring the success of these two protests. In the Euromaidan Revolution, Ukrainian nationalists countered the pro-Russian regime's use of deadly violence with violence of their own. Ukrainian nationalist groups played a central role in confronting the Interior Ministry's *Berkut* riot police and Internal Troops and built tall catapults to hurl flagstones at the riot police. 108 protestors and 13 security personnel were killed and over a thousand protestors were wounded. Toward the end of the Euromaidan Revolutionary uprising, nationalists brought weapons to Kyiv that had been looted from armouries in Western Ukraine. In Georgia, nationalists have supported the regime's security forces in aggressively repressing pro-Western forces.

Ukrainian nationalists, irrespective of how scholars and journalists have negatively portrayed them, took the fight to the regimes security forces and vigilantes and prevented Yanukovich from clearing and capturing the Maidan (main protest square). In Georgia the absence of radical nationalists in the opposition camp has made them unable to counter the regimes security forces and vigilantes.

This clearly shows how scholars need to approach the study of nationalist and far-right forces with nuance. In Ukraine, nationalists have been a support base for the Ukrainian fight against pro-Russian kleptocrats and in support of integration away from Russia into the West. Meanwhile, in Georgia nationalists have supported pro-Russian kleptocrats and opposed the country's integration into the West.

Pro-Western Ukrainian Nationalism

In Ukraine, nationalist organisations were primarily based in the western region, which has traditionally been more anti-Russian than the rest of the country. Western Ukrainian nationalist groups drew upon the tradition of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN). The *Svoboda* (Freedom) political party emerged in western Ukraine in the 1990s as the Social National Party of Ukraine. *Svoboda* was able to enter parliament only once in 2012.

During the Euromaidan Revolution, *Svoboda* and other nationalist groups created self-defence companies (*sotnia*) which fought against the *Berkut* riot police and vigilantes organised by the pro-Russian regime. After the Euromaidan Revolution, *Svoboda* created the *Sych* volunteer battalion to fight the first Russian invasion in the eastern Ukrainian region of Donbas. *Sych* was one of forty volunteer battalions created in 2014 by Ukrainian patriots and nationalists to fight Russian military aggression; the following year they were integrated into the military and national guard.

The *Pravyi Sektor* (Right Sector) political party was formed during the Euromaidan Revolution. During the first Russian invasion, Right Sector formed the Ukrainian Volunteer Corps (UVC). After the incorporation of volunteer battalions into the army and national guard, UVC remained independent and continued to fight against Russian forces independently.

A third group, the Social National Assembly, was centred in the eastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv, and thus many of its members were Russian speakers. Social National Assembly members and eastern Ukrainian ultras (football fanatics) formed the Azov volunteer battalion which liberated the port city of Mariupol from pro-Russian proxies in May 2014. Azov became a special forces regiment in the national guard Azov and, after 2022, the Third Separate Assault Brigade in the Ukrainian army. The Social National Assembly became the National Corps Party in 2016. After Russia's second full-scale invasion in 2022, Azov and Ukrainian marines members defended Mariupol for 86 days before 1,026 were forced to surrender and become prisoners of war.

Pro-Russian Georgian Nationalism

Ivanishvili moved from Russia to Georgia in 2010-2011 when he created the pro-Russian political force, Georgian

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Dream. The entrenchment of the pro-Russian regime led to the proliferation of pro-Russian far-right groups coupled with the growing influence of Russian soft power in Georgia. Pro-Russian nationalist groups are the real “power source” of the Georgian Dream regime who have solidifying the country’s pivot away from the West. In November 2024, the Georgian Dream government suspended the country’s accession talks into the EU which led to mass protests. Exactly a decade earlier in November 2014, Yanukovych suspended Ukraine’s signing of an Association Agreement with the EU leading to the Euromaidan Revolution.

Georgian March and similar far-right organizations have been frequently accused of having ties to Russia. Established in 2017, Georgian March brings together thousands of ultranationalists from throughout Georgia. Their discourse replays Kremlin and Russian nationalist disinformation. Georgian March is similarly named to the Russian March of imperial nationalists and fascists marching on the 4 November Day of Unity holiday. The annual holiday was introduced in Russia in 2004, not coincidentally at the same time as Ukraine’s Orange Revolution. Georgian nationalist organisations have never expressed opposition to the regime’s pro-Russian policies or toward Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the killings and kidnappings of Georgian civilians, and the creeping Russian annexation of Georgia’s two provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgian nationalist groups propagate anti-Western xenophobia, anti-LGBT discourse and disparage Western liberalism. Since 2012, anti-Western discourse and Russian soft power has grown in Georgia under Ivanishvili, culminating in the adoption of the “foreign agent law” in May 2024. Russia adopted a “foreign agent law” in 2012.

Georgia’s Demographic Revival Foundation, a division of the ultra-conservative World Congress of Families, and Eurosceptic and pro-Russian political party “ERI” were founded by another Kremlin-linked oligarch, Levan Vasadze. Vasadze had pursued religious studies in Moscow, where he joined Russian imperial nationalistic groups, such as Eurasianist fascist Aleksandr Dugin.

From the mid-2000s, nationalists from Georgia attended summer camps in Russia where they were trained in paramilitary tactics and read lectures by Dugin and other Russian nationalists. Russian nationalists from Ukraine also attended these same camps and in 2014 they transitioned into Russian-financed and paramilitarily trained separatists in Crimea and the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine.

The most violent pro-Russian nationalist group in Georgia is the Conservative Movement, better known as Alt-Info, which has significantly increased its presence in Georgia over the past years. Nationwide demonstrations against the group and threats of violent reprisal have followed the group’s growth. Alt-Info’s illiberal discourse draws on the Georgian Orthodox Church’s religious conservatism and promotes close Georgian-Russian ties, claiming that this would provide for better security for Georgia than integration into the West.

Alt-Info participated in the October parliamentary elections as a member of the pro-Russian Alliance of Patriots’ electoral bloc. Like nationalist groups in Ukraine, they were unable to win parliamentary seats. Nevertheless, Alt-Info supports the pro-Russian Ivanishvili regime as violent vigilantes and participates in interviews and TV talk shows in the media. The police have refused to bring criminal charges against Alt Info leaders despite evidence of their violent assaults on politicians, activists and journalists.

Conclusion

A comparison of Ukraine and Georgia clearly shows how nationalism can be very different. In the former, nationalists have played a positive role in overthrowing the pro-Russian kleptocrat Yanukovych, ensuring the victory of the Euromaidan Revolution, fighting Russian military aggression and supporting Ukraine’s integration into the West. In Georgia, nationalists are supporting the pro-Russian kleptocrat Ivanishvili, assisting the security forces in repressing protestors, ignoring Russia’s *de facto* annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and opposing Georgi’s integration into the West.

Ukraine’s nationalist groups have been anti-Russian from their inception and supporters of the anti-Russian Orthodox Church of Ukraine. Ukrainian nationalist anti-Russian sentiments has grown after their violent fight against the Yanukovych regime and their participation in military combat against Russia’s two invasions in 2014 and 2022.

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Georgia's nationalists are pro-Russian, allied to the pro-Russian Ivanishvili regime, and work with and are supported by the Georgian Orthodox Church.

Ukraine's nationalists, ready to take the fight to the security forces and die for their beliefs during the Euromaidan Revolution, tipped the balance in favour of protestors. In Georgia, the absence of anti-Russian nationalists has led to weaker mass protests fighting against the Ivanishvili regime. The support of pro-Western Ukrainian nationalists made the Euromaidan Revolution a success while the absence of pro-Western nationalists in Georgia makes the outcome of on-going protests unclear.

Ukrainian nationalists do not fit the European pattern of being hostile to European integration. The Russian existential threat to Ukrainian statehood and identity leads to nationalists supporting Ukraine's membership of NATO and the EU. In contrast, Georgia's nationalists do fit the European pattern of populist nationalists and the far-right being hostile to the EU and pro-Russian.

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