

Opinion – The Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on European Nationalism

Written by David Pimenta

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2022/05/11/opinion-the-impact-of-the-russia-ukraine-war-on-european-nationalism/>

DAVID PIMENTA, MAY 11 2022

On 24 February 2022, Europe saw the re-emergence of mass ethnic conflict, fuelled by nationalism, when Vladimir Putin's Russia invaded Ukraine, accusing Volodymyr Zelensky's government of attacking ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine. On that day, Europe had a wake-up call. About thirty years ago the Soviet Union collapsed and Francis Fukuyama announced the definitive triumph of liberal democracy over other ideologies and the establishment of a kind of Kantian perpetual peace, managed by the West. However, the subsequent events in Europe and around the world in the following years demonstrated that nationalism is not dead and the present conflict in Ukraine is a piece of unquestionable evidence.

Considering Anthony Smith's ethnosymbolic approach, my observation and reflection of the nationalism phenomenon regard the ideology and nationalist political movements as predominantly modern while acknowledging that nations occur in every period of history; limiting the analysis of nations and the nationalism phenomenon to a static moment of history (e.g. Industrial Age) is insufficient. If it is clear that nationalism has been very present in Eastern European countries in recent decades, it is also unrealistic to think that nationalism disappeared from the Western major nations of Europe and North America.

In fact, nationalism, as a 'thin-centred ideology', has been having a supportive role as a part of more 'robust' ideologies like liberalism or conservatism, while its importance depends on the context. In a way, nationalism is in fact more or less complemented by other ideologies and this theory is reinforced by some ambiguity of nationalism's core elements (namely authenticity, continuity, destiny, attachment and homeland). However, another reading can be made – the mixing of nationalism with other ideologies represents the different kinds of nationalism that exist; ideologies have malleable shapes. Moreover, there are different kinds of nationalism that populate eastern and western politics: civic nationalism, when there is a promotion of ethnic blindness; ethnonationalism, when it appeals to ethnic homogeneity; and multicultural nationalism, characterized by ethnic diversity.

Since nationalism can reappear and grow strong in different periods of time, with different shapes, the full impact of the War on European nationalism is yet to be seen and understood. At the time of writing, the European Union (EU) is showing an apparent unity regarding refugee protection, energy embargo policies and defence and security strategy. But one must not forget that the conflict has lasted only two months and that economic hardships, resulting from the conflict, haven't fully taken over the lives of European citizens and their homelands, which are asymmetrically affected (some countries depend much more on Russia's natural gas than others).

Since the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014, nationalism in Central and Eastern European EU member states grew as a counterreaction to Russian nationalism. This was the case in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Romania. Nationalism was also present in the paradigmatic case of Orbán's Hungary, but not necessarily associated with the Ukraine crisis.

The War has also been impacting the Balkan region, specifically Bosnia and Herzegovina, where ethnonationalism is very much alive. The Bosnian War that started thirty years ago is still fresh in the nationalist rhetoric of the different Bosnian political leaders, both from the Bosniak-Croat Federation and Republika Srpska. The major risk factor

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comes from Milorad Dodik, the Bosnian Serb leader and member of Bosnia and Herzegovina's inter-ethnic tripartite presidency, which shows strong signs that point in the direction of secession, supported by the announcement of plans to form an independent Bosnian Serb Army and pull out of joint state institutions.

Serb nationalism has solid historical links with Russia – the Slav, Christian Orthodox ally and “big brother”. Russia not only has the motive of projecting power in the Balkans region, which comprised several countries eager to join the EU and NATO, but also could seek to support a secessionist Serbian attempt in Bosnia in order to deviate Western public attention and resources from Ukraine. The nationalist tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina also have obvious links with the rest of the Western Balkans states, namely the Croatian and Serbian governments that support Croatian and Serbian Bosnians respectively. Moreover, there are pro-Western countries, like Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia, which condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In a nutshell, the Balkans are the cradle of several antagonist ethnonationalist forces that may resume conflict due to the present geopolitical context.

Besides the Balkanic ethnic chessboard, the current Russian invasion of Ukraine had a bigger and more dramatic impact on Western European public opinion when compared with the Crimea invasion. Although some far-right groups are split between a pro-Russia and a pro-Ukraine stance, radical right nationalist party leaders speaking to the general voters, like Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini, condemn with more or less vehemence the Russian actions.

An important aspect to consider in Western countries is that Ukraine's nationalism is being presented as a benign one, opposing the Russian imperialistic nationalism. The Ukrainian fight for their homeland independence and national identity may inspire the civic and ethnic nationalists across Europe to legitimise and gain momentum for their own nationalist struggle. In this sense, we would expect a resurgence in secessionist and independentism inspired nationalisms that argue against sovereignty loss at the hands of bigger states (e.g. United Kingdom, Spain) or supranational political entities (e.g. EU). Such could be the cases of mature independence movements like the ones that prevail in Scotland, Basque Country and Catalonia, or nationalist political parties (e.g. Rassemblement National, Lega, AfD) in major European countries. The concepts of sovereignty, security and national identity, typically expressed in Zelensky's speeches, are more and more replicated by Western European politicians.

Finally, there is a growing concern over the present conflict spilling over into Moldova, considering that Russian high personalities repeat the typical argument that Russians are being oppressed in Transnistria – a potential hotbed for an ethnonationalist conflict between Moldovans and Russians that occupy the region evenly.

The Russo-Ukrainian War reminded Europe that nationalism (in its civic, ethnic or multicultural form) not only lives in the hearts of Europeans but also is part of current political agendas and speeches. Therefore, a revival of nationalism across Europe is a scenario that should not be excluded, especially if the economy deteriorates and the security menace increases.

About the author:

David Pimenta is a PhD candidate in Comparative Politics at the Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon. He holds an MS in Business Administration from ISCTE Business School and a BA in International Relations from the Catholic University of Portugal. He is Editor at *Politikon – IAPSS Journal of Political Science* and columnist at Público newspaper, where he writes on politics, international relations and history. Previously he held several management positions across various organizations. His research interests include nationalism, ethnic conflicts, geopolitics and history.