

Existential nationalism: Russia's war against Ukraine

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Abstract

'If Russia stops fighting, there will be no war. If Ukraine stops fighting, there will be no Ukraine' is the sentiment used by Ukrainian protesters mobilising against Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Such a sentiment signifies the stakes of a war where Ukraine is a democratic nation-state fighting for its right to exist against a Russian invasion. Meanwhile, Russia is fighting for a version of Ukraine that is subservient to Russia's idea of what Ukraine should be as a nation-state: under a Russian hegemon geopolitically, where Ukraine's national idea and interpretation of history can be vetted and vetoed by the Russian state. While nationalism scholarship equips us to study Russia's war against Ukraine through the lens of Russian ethnic nationalism and Ukrainian civic nationalism, the ethnic/civic dichotomy falls short of unpacking the more pernicious logics that pervade Russia's intentions and actions towards Ukraine (demilitarisation and de-Nazification). Instead, this article explores the logics of Russia's war and Ukraine's resistance through the concept of existential nationalism where existential nationalism is Russia's motivation to pursue war, whatever the costs, and Ukraine's motivation to fight with everything it has.

KEYWORDS

civic nationalism, ethnic nationalism, Russia, Ukraine, war

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1 | INTRODUCTION

I would also like to address the military personnel of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Comrade officers, Your fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers did not fight the Nazi occupiers and did not defend our common Motherland to allow today's neo-Nazis to seize power in Ukraine. You swore the oath of allegiance to the Ukrainian people and not to the junta, the people's adversary which is plundering Ukraine and humiliating the Ukrainian people. (Vladimir Putin, President of Russia, 2022a)

'If Russia stops fighting, there will be no war. If Ukraine stops fighting, there will be no Ukraine' is the sentiment used by Ukrainian protesters mobilising against Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Such a sentiment signifies the existential stakes of a war where Ukraine—a democratic nation-state—is fighting for its right to exist against a Russian invasion. Ukrainians are fighting and mobilising as citizens for the right of their democratic nation-state to exist, just as Ukrainians protested in 2004 during the Orange Revolution for free and fair elections and in 2013–2014 at Euromaidan for dignity and against corruption. Meanwhile, Russia is fighting for a version of Ukraine that is subservient to Russia's idea of what Ukraine should be as a nation-state: under a Russian hegemon geopolitically, where Ukraine's national idea and interpretation of history can be vetted and vetoed by the Russian state. In Russia, even calling its war against Ukraine *a war* faces harsh consequences, including arrest and imprisonment; for Russia, it is launching a 'special military operation' to save Ukraine as a state supposedly over-run by Nazis that needs to be demilitarised and de-Nazified. But, such a claim makes neither political, factual, nor discursive sense when Ukraine is currently headed by the democratically elected President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who is Jewish, lost family in the Holocaust and is a Russian speaker (Onuch & Hale, 2022).

Just as with Russia's annexation of Crimea and its covert efforts to occupy and stoke conflict in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts since 2014, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is further proof of its non-consensual approach to Ukraine. Regardless of Ukraine's sovereignty and whether Ukraine and Ukrainian citizens agree, Russia treats Ukraine as a state permanently tethered to Russia's idea of what it should be, as if it is a state incapable of governing itself, interpreting its own history, forming its own foreign policy, deciding if it is over-run by 'Nazis' or determining who 'Nazis' are in the first place. As Putin hauntingly claimed in 2021, preceding launching war and invasion against Ukraine, 'true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia' (President of Russia, 2021).

The terms that nationalism studies most readily equip us to study Russia's war are those of ethnic and civic nationalism. While ethnic nationalism is a primordial, exclusivist and cultural ideology of blood and soil, civic nationalism is an inclusivist ideology built around political ideas of citizenship. These concepts are often framed as a binary, as a dichotomy of good and liberal civic nationalism and bad ethnic and illiberal nationalism (Brown, 1999). Using these concepts, we might view Russia as an aggressive ethno-nationalist state, and we might view Ukraine—and Ukrainian citizens—as demonstrating the mobilisational capacity and plural inclusiveness of civic nationalism. Indeed, while scholars used the concepts of ethnic and civic to explore national identification in Ukraine (Shulman, 2004), many scholars had also (wrongly) expressed doubt that Ukraine was a state capable of civic nationalism or mobilising citizens for the ends of civic nationalism (Onuch & Hale, 2022). What the ethnic/civic dichotomy falls short of unpacking in Russia's war against Ukraine is the more pernicious logics that pervade Russia's intentions and actions towards Ukraine (demilitarisation and de-Nazification).

Instead, the concept of existential nationalism demonstrates both sides of the coin: Ukraine is fighting for the right to exist and maintain its right to determine what that existence should look like (democratic, multicultural, tolerant and multiethnic). Russia is fighting for a version of Ukrainian existence that is non-consensual and hierarchical, where Ukraine is subservient to Kremlin hegemony and ideology, where Russia decides what is good and evil, and right and wrong, and where Russia has the right to occupy whatever territory of Ukraine it chooses. Existential nationalism is Russia's motivation to pursue war, whatever the costs, and Ukraine's motivation to fight with everything it has. Of course the stakes are different: Russia is not being invaded by Ukraine. But Russia's war is existential for *both* Ukraine and Russia, as I argue in this piece.

Conceptually, existential nationalism concerns a dyad: state A (in this case Ukraine), or polity A, fighting for its existence, and state B (here Russia), or polity B, fighting against A's right to exist. While the terms of the conflict, war and/or invasion are wholly existential for A, they are also existential for B. B's motivation for conflict, war and/or invasion is existential—originating in non-consensual claims over A. B's claims include both cultural and national claims over A's right to have a national imaginary separate from B. But, B's claims also extend into the political and territorial realm, concerning A's rights to self-govern and self-determine both its territory and right to construct political norms and a political system that B might view—however irrationally—as conflictual for its own (for example, if A is a democracy while B is an autocracy). But, in launching conflict, war and/or invasion that is likely intractable because of the inability for A and B to reach any trust or compromise, B is also setting existential terms for its own end result. For example, B's existential motivations could end up resulting in an existential reconfiguration of its own national imaginary, for example, by being required to imagine itself as separate politically and culturally from A and required to reconfigure what were previously existential claims to A into non-existential and more consensual norms.

2 | RUSSIA AND EXISTENTIAL NATIONALISM

Specifically, the concept of existential nationalism helps draw attention to, and unpack, the discursive roots of Putin's claims to Ukraine. The claims pertain, first, to Ukraine's own national imaginary and right to its own national imaginary. Second, Russia is mobilising existential nationalism to set the brutal and barbaric terms of war and invasion that aims for existential demoralising of Ukraine via the deliberate targeting of Ukrainian civilians—both ethnic Russians and ethnic Ukrainians, and Russia and Ukrainian speakers—and decimation of Ukrainian culture.

First, Russia views Ukraine's national imaginary as both 'artificial' and a threat to Russia. For Putin, Ukraine is an 'artificial' intelligentsia project where Ukraine's independence is justified 'through the denial of its past', a mythologised and re-written history that edits out Russia and Ukraine's common history and frames the Soviet and Tsarist rule of Ukraine as 'as an occupation' (President of Russia, 2021). Days before Putin's order to invade Ukraine, with troops amassed on the border, Putin made the spurious (and historically inaccurate) claim that Lenin was the architect of 'modern Ukraine' (President of Russia, 2022b; see also, 2021). Putin claimed that the creation of the Soviet state and its principle of national self-determination, in turn, created Ukraine (in 1922), which was itself an artificial intelligentsia project. To create such a state, Putin claimed Lenin separated and severed 'historically Russian land' without asking 'the millions of people living there what they thought', as if Ukraine was a national idea created out of Russia. Putin believes he is correcting Lenin's mistaken approach to self-determination, which created (what Putin imagines and claims) a Ukrainian state out of a Russian nation that, today, 100 years later, yearns to be reunited.

According to Putin, Ukraine's contemporary national imaginary threatens the existence and longevity of the contemporary Russian national imaginary. As Bogomolov and Lytvynenko wrote in 2012, before Russia annexed Crimea, '[F]or Russia, maintaining influence over Ukraine is more than a foreign policy priority; it is an existential imperative' where Russian powerholders view Ukraine as 'part of their country's own identity' (Bogomolov & Lytvynenko, 2012). These ideas fuse Russian ethnonationalism with an imperial overtone as if Ukraine—politically and as a nation—would not exist but for Russia and the Soviet Union (Plokhly, 2017). Indeed, scholars disagree whether Russia's actions since 2014 demonstrate ideologies of imperialism or ethnic nationalism (see Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2016).

But the focus on ethnonationalism or imperialism is also insufficient to capture the deep-seated existential contestation that Russia, and the Putin regime more specifically, has pursued discursively and politically via conflict since 2014 and war against Ukraine since 2022.

For example, in 2016, Putin reinvigorated claims that the Russian nation emerged from Kyivan Rus' via Prince Volodymyr, a Prince who Putin described as the 'gatherer and protector of Russian lands and a prescient statesman'

(cited by Plokhy, 2017, p. vii). Despite being a 'relatively young state', emerging in the 1470s under Ivan III, Putin imagines Russia as the 'legitimate political, cultural, and religious successor to the medieval state of Kyivan Rus' (Plokhy, 2017, p. ix). Such articulations present a subservient Ukraine as pivotal and existential to Russia's national imaginary. Russia's paranoid idea of itself and history is 'all hinged on a view of Ukraine as a distinct but integral part of Russia' where the 'possibility of Ukraine leaving the Russian sphere of influence as an attack on Russia itself' (Plokhy, 2017, p. 348). Only Russia can be the home and champion of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers and the hegemon who decides who belongs to the Russian nation and who does not. After all, Putin has claimed repeatedly (e.g., in 2013 and 2021) that Russians, Ukrainians and Belarussians are 'one people' (President of Russia, 2013, 2021).

Ethnic nationalism and imperialism are both at play in Russia's war against Ukraine. But these concepts are insufficient to explicate the magnitude of what is better understood as a conflict-turned-war fuelled by existential nationalism. Just like in Aleppo, Syria (2016), and Grozny, Chechnya (1999–2000), Russia's 'programmatic' targeting of civilian and military targets alike is meant to demoralise as much as defeat (Troianovski, 2022). Without understanding the existential terms and motivations of Russia's war, we cannot understand Russia's willingness to pursue such indiscriminate killing, and commit war crimes and genocide in Ukraine (Finkel, 2022).

As another example, under Putin, Russia has claimed ethnic Russians and Russian speakers as its so-called Compatriots. In turn, Putin has articulated Russia's claims to have legitimate interests over how Ukraine was governed through the size of those Russia claimed as Compatriots in Ukraine (2008 NATO summit, Unian, 2008). In 2014, without any supporting evidence, Russia claimed Russia's Compatriots faced a grave threat in Ukraine (President of Russia, 2014b). Putin legitimised annexing Crimea by claiming Russia was acting to prevent a potential massacre at the hands of (what Putin claimed was) a discriminatory Ukrainian government (President of Russia, 2014a). Indeed, even in 2022, Russia renewed its non-evidenced claims that Ukraine was planning to target ethnic Russians and 'bring war' to Crimea just as 'Hitler's accomplices did during the Great Patriotic War' (President of Russia, 2022a).

Putin claimed in 2021 that Russia was doing 'everything to stop fratricide' (President of Russia, 2021). In 2022, Russia is now killing civilians in Ukraine who are as likely ethnic Russians as they are ethnic Ukrainians and as likely Russian speakers as they are Ukrainian speakers. Bilocerkowycz and Khromeychuk (2022) explain how: 'Kharkiv, Kherson, and Mariupol are all primarily Russophone cities. Their inhabitants are being shelled, not "rescued" by Putin'. Thus, without the concept of existential nationalism, we cannot explicate the escalation of Russia's claims and actions that have had no factual basis throughout. Moreover, we cannot explain Russia's willingness to claim ethnic Russians and Russian speakers need protecting, on the one hand, and willingness to kill them in Ukraine to pursue existential nationalism, on the other hand.

Second, Russia is mobilising existential nationalism with the aim of humiliating Ukraine via targeting civilians and Ukrainian culture. While indiscriminately shelling and killing Ukrainian civilians, Russia also deliberately targets sights of Ukrainian culture, history and heritage, such as theatres, concert halls, libraries and museums. On the one hand, as Stepnisky (2022) argues, this targeting indicates Putin's 'recognition of the unique and strong character of Ukrainian cultural identity'. On the other hand, it demonstrates the unreasonable sense of threat that Russia perceives from Ukraine's desire for independence from a Russian cultural, political and geopolitical yoke. Putin claims Ukrainian culture is part of Russia's own and sees denial of this as cutting into Russia's existential core. As Putin claimed in 2021, works by Ukrainian writers such as Taras Shevchenko and Nikolai Gogol are 'our common literary and cultural heritage' (President of Russia, 2021), in part because these writers wrote in the Russian language (due to Russian imperial hegemony). Russia perceives claiming these heroes as Ukrainian as an existential threat by dividing what Russia views as indivisible. Meanwhile, on aspects of culture and history Russia recognises as unique to Ukraine, Russia considers these as 'meaningless, second-rate or blasphemous to a large number of Russians' even if it might 'bring the majority of Ukrainians together as a nation' (Bogomolov & Lytvynenko, 2012).

Finally, existential nationalism as motivation and justification for invading Ukraine serves more than a purely ideological function of positioning—and trying to coerce—Ukraine as subservient. Putin's strategy, and enactment of existential nationalism, is designed 'not only to oppress Ukrainians, but also to prevent his own people from

imagining a future in which their lives are worth more than serving as cannon fodder for his wars' (Bilocerkowycz & Khromeychuk, 2022). By contrast, these authors argue, 'Ukrainians have a clear vision of the future for themselves and their country, and they will do everything to protect it' (Bilocerkowycz & Khromeychuk, 2022). In other words, Russia's existential motivation to invade Ukraine is not only to coerce Ukraine to be subservient, culturally and politically, but also to coerce subservience from its own citizens towards Russia. In other words, the terms of Russia's war and invasion are existential for Ukraine but *also* existential for Russia. First, via military coercion of both Russian and Ukrainian citizens, and second, by reproducing a non-compromising national Russia imaginary that views Ukraine as non-consensually tethered to Russia, that makes war likely intractable where any alternative is constructed as antagonistic to Russia's own continued existence.

3 | UKRAINE'S MOBILISATION AGAINST RUSSIAN EXISTENTIAL NATIONALISM

While we should be impressed by the mobilisation capacity of Ukrainian citizens, we should not be surprised; we should never have doubted that it was possible. We now understand the mobilisation capacity of Ukrainian society through images of civilians peacefully facing down tanks and chasing them out of Ukraine's towns, videos of mass protests gathering under reams of Ukrainian flags while being shot at by Russian troops (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2022a) and Ukrainian farmers using tractors to tow broken down Russian tanks (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2022b).¹

But, for too long, Ukraine has been described as a weak and divided state and a state made weak by its ethnic and linguistic diversity. Scholars have recently observed shifting forms of identification in Ukraine and the growing prominence of civic nationalism (Barrington, 2022; Kulyk, 2018; Onuch & Hale, 2018). My research points to civic forms of identification and the importance of Ukrainian citizenship in the most unexpected region of Ukraine: Crimea prior to Russian annexation, in particular for younger Crimeans who grew up in a Ukrainian state disconnected from prior Soviet realities (Knott, 2022).

However, it should also not take Russia launching a war against, and an invasion of, Ukraine for wider public recognition that "'Glory to Ukraine" can be said in Russian with the same conviction as in Ukrainian' (Bilocerkowycz & Khromeychuk, 2022), that the capital of Ukraine is Kyiv and not Kiev, or 'why it is now a "Russian invasion" and not a "crisis"' (Mykhed, 2022). It should not take an escalation of existential nationalism in the form of Russia's war for wider public recognition that Ukraine is simply Ukraine, not *the* Ukraine—as if Ukraine is not a sovereign state but an existentially tethered vassal of Russia. As Bilocerkowycz and Khromeychuk (2022) suggest: 'It took thirty years of independence, eight years of war in the east, and several days of heavy shelling this past month for the Western media to stop saying "*the* Ukraine"'.

In sum, existential nationalism provides the tools to understand the stakes of the conflict that concepts like ethnic and civic nationalism, imperial nationalism and ethno-imperialist nationalism fall short in capturing. Existential nationalism allows us to capture both sides of the dyad: the claims of the invader, and their willingness to decimate whatever the costs, and the mobilisational capacity of the state and citizens of the polity under invasion. More specifically, Ukraine is fighting to be free from a version of itself that Russia desires and existentially requires, and for a state that is politically and culturally plural, and territorially free and integral.

4 | NATIONALISM STUDIES AND THE STUDY OF UKRAINE

To conclude, I want to shift attention to the importance of reversing the peripheral position of Ukraine and Ukrainian scholars in nationalism studies, to demonstrate also how the existential nature of the context prior to the war has effects on knowledge production. Not only has Ukraine been marginalised in the broader study of

nationalism,² so have the voices of Ukrainian scholars themselves. In its 27 year history, *Nations and Nationalism* has only published a handful of articles by Ukrainian scholars (Szporluk, 1998; Kulyk, 2011; Mokrushyna, 2013; e.g., Kozachenko, 2021; Kulyk & Hale, 2021). For example, Kulyk (2011) exposed through Ukraine the importance of understanding what a linguistically diverse society looks like as a new and important way to study political attitudes by disaggregating between 'language practice' (i.e., languages used in daily life) and 'language identity'.

My point is not to chastise a journal that can only publish articles that are submitted and pass peer review. But, as Rory Finnin argued—in the wake of the Euro 2012 football championship co-hosted by Poland and Ukraine and 2 years before Russia annexed Crimea—Ukraine is Europe's 'terra malegognita' (Finnin, 2012). For too long, we have side-lined the case of Ukraine within nationalism studies and concurrently the perspectives of those who know about and understand this case most profoundly.

Ukraine is a state of 40 million people. In area, Ukraine is the second largest country in Europe after Russia. Ukraine's economy was the 40th largest in the world in 2021. Ukraine's peripheralisation, politically and intellectually, for the last 30 years makes no sense. Analysing Ukrainian nationalism through the lens of Russia's existential interpretation is also insufficient. In other words, it is also time to turn inwards and understand the scholarly effects of Russian existential nationalism, which play out not only in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. These dynamics also play a role in reproducing knowledge hierarchies that privilege which sovereign states are studied over others, which voices matter, and what kinds of knowledge are produced and privileged in the first place. We can create a better and more equal future.

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I dedicate this article to all Ukrainian campuses and libraries that were bombed by the Russian army, to all Ukrainian students, scholars and citizens who are displaced and refugees.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Ukraine citizens place this mobilisational capacity as the second most important reason (59%), behind the armed forces (65%), that Ukraine is likely to secure victory against Russia, ahead of western military support (58%) or sanctions (50%, Gradus Research Company, 2022). Meanwhile, in addition to 3% of Ukrainian citizens in the army, 39% have reported they are volunteering in the army; these figures are even higher for those aged 18–35 (46% and 6%, respectively) (46% and 6% respectively, Reiting, 2022).

² While Ukraine was a topic that made it into the early volumes of *Nations and Nationalism* (1995–present), it was always in passing or a sweeping comparative perspective, or as a subject of analysis—and Soviet rule—than an object of analysis (Neuberger, 1995). The first articles covering Ukraine explicitly as a case emerged later (Liber, 1998; Szporluk, 1998).

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