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Back to which future? Putin and the nationalist playbook

What explains Russia's decision to invade Ukraine in 2022? Drawing on a new study, Lars-Erik Cederman, Yannick I. Pengl, Luc Girardin and Carl Müller-Crepon write that nationalism – rather than realist geopolitics – lies at the heart of the conflict.

Putin's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 shocked many observers in the West. Clearly, the hopes of a cooperative, borderless world have been dealt a serious blow. In many ways, however, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 heralded the **"return of geopolitics"**.

It can even be argued that the current war vindicates – with some delay – John Mearsheimer's **"Back to the Future"** article from 1990, which predicted that the end of the Cold War would bring a new phase of old-fashioned great-power balancing rather than an era of liberal peace.

But does realist theory depict this seeming anachronism correctly? Indeed, geopolitics is back with a vengeance – not just in Ukraine but also more recently in the Middle East. But the question is: which type of geopolitics?

While many realists, including Mearsheimer, identify with the allegedly sober and sophisticated 19th century masters of Realpolitik, their perspective seems oddly anachronistic even by 19th century standards. Great power competition, the law of the strongest, and territorial conquest dominated international relations long before the 19th century and partially persisted beyond 1945.

Nationalism and the war in Ukraine

Our **recent research** suggests that rather than century-old geopolitical forces, it is the 19th century ideological innovation of nationalism that helps to make sense of what is going on in Ukraine. While realising that power politics and nationalism are intimately related – or **"kissing cousins"** to use Mearsheimer's term – realists have so far failed to integrate important aspects of nationalist politics into their theoretical edifice.

Drawing on **Clausewitz' ideas about the mobilisational potential of nationalist warfare** evidenced by Napoleon's *levée en masse*, they view nationalism primarily as a "power booster" within fixed state borders, rather than a truly border-modifying force. Crucially, due to its fixation with states as the only important actors in world politics, realist theory loses sight of the autonomous impact of ethnically defined nations.

At its core, nationalism is a principle of political legitimacy that takes sovereignty away from dynastic overlords and instead vests it in the nation, a community of citizens striving for political self-determination. As Ernest Gellner famously argued, **realising this principle required aligning political and national boundaries**.

Since most national communities in 19th and early 20th century Europe were constructed around ethnic cores, nationalist grievances served as a rallying cry for political action wherever ethnic groups found themselves under alien rule by another nation or divided by state borders.

Our research shows that these deviations from Gellner's nationalist congruence principle have shaped patterns of warfare in Europe since 1816. State-nation incongruence itself is a source of both civil and interstate conflict. Relatively large ethnic minorities under alien rule by another group are significantly more likely to start secessionist civil wars. This risk almost doubles for powerless groups divided by state borders. Both conditions apply to the Russian-identifying population in Ukraine which formed the main support base for separatist violence in the Donbas.

Obsessions with history

Yet studying state borders and ethnic group distributions in geographic space is only a first step toward understanding the violent potential of ethnic nationalism. To better predict which state-to-nation mismatches are likely to cause war, we need to comprehend ethnic nationalists' obsession with history.

In a **new study**, we find that incongruent borders are more likely to be contested by violent means where nationalist rulers can contrast current division and alien rule with supposedly more unified and independent "golden ages" in the past. Our analyses reveal that European states have been significantly more likely to make territorial claims or fight against neighbours hosting powerless ethnic kin when past state borders incorporated larger parts of territory currently inhabited by the ethnic nation than the contemporary rump state.

Putin has repeatedly lamented Russia's lost power and unity resulting from the breakup of the Soviet Union and his **essays** and **speeches** reveal a motivation to restore Tsarist imperial glory. Putin and many other nationalist leaders go back centuries to unearth medieval kingdoms, early modern territorial states, or empires that allegedly satisfied the nationalist ideals of ethnic unity and home rule.

Going even further back, Israeli nationalists justify their claims to territory inhabited by Palestinians by **referring to Jewish settlement patterns in biblical times**. Projecting modern notions of national consciousness onto pre-modern populations and constructing lines of continuity across centuries, nationalists blend historical facts and fiction into self-serving narratives aimed at contemporary audiences.

Europe's response

Nationalist conflict has become an extremely rare phenomenon in post-1945 Europe. In this sense, Russia's territorial revisionism in Ukraine does, in fact, throw us back to the 19th and early 20th centuries. But instead of revealing the primacy of security-related grand strategising and hard national interests over naïve idealism and soft ideas, Russia's actions pit old-fashioned ethnic nationalism against the norms and institutions devised to contain this quintessentially European ideology.

Against this backdrop, the outcome of the war in Ukraine is crucial for the future world order. Should Russia be seen as a winner, there is a risk that revisionist nationalists elsewhere will take notice. A hollowing out of the **territorial integrity norm** could pave the way for further destabilising events. Most ominously, China's irredentist desire to "reunify" Taiwan increases the risk of major war.

Within Europe, Serbia and Hungary could be expected to more offensively mobilise grievances around ethnic division and lost unity. For these reasons, western support for Ukraine is critical. If, instead, we were to follow naïvely realist analyses of current events, we risk being as surprised by the subversive force of nationalism as was Prince Metternich in 1848 when nationalist turmoil forced him to resign.

*For more information, see the authors' accompanying paper in **International Organization***

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: kremlin.ru



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