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Nationalism in Russia and Europe: Workshop Summary

LSE IDEAS

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A few weeks ago it is probably fair to say that the point of a workshop on Russian and East European nationalisms and identities would probably have been lost on most people. Events in Ukraine have shaken the complacency of those who saw nationalisms as an increasingly irrelevant and niche concern of political scientists or the preserve of right-wing parties with limited genuine political impact.

The workshop at LSE IDEAS in some ways then could not have come at a better time. The relevance of nationalism in Europe is absolutely self-evident with each new media bulletin from Kiev and Crimea. Yet at the same time as the relevance has been re-established there is another problem which

debates over the Ukrainian disputes have highlighted which many of the contributors were keen to address. Simply put, coverage of events has generally been of a pretty low quality. Too often the old language of empire or the Cold War has been allowed to dominate alongside lazy stereotypes and overly simplistic categories.

Accordingly there was a great deal of discussion devoted to challenging the idea that Russian or Ukrainian nationalism are single categories which can be brought to bear on the debate. More attention was given to the plurality of nationalisms within the Russian and Ukrainian contexts. In Ukraine the [focus](#) has been on “ethnic Russians” versus “ethnic Ukrainians” yet neither category is a simple bloc. Lost amid the rhetoric has been any appreciation of the [significant Tatar community](#) or of the divides within the ethnic groups. Cossack nationalism, which has always been a trans-regional and fluid identity increasingly rarely founded on much of a genuine ethnic basis (Despite recent efforts to reclaim it as a pure Slavonic ethnic group) has similarly been broadly ignored.

This is not a problem limited to the Western media however. Ukraine itself has to some extent sown the seeds of its own problems [with its instrumental attempts to create a Ukrainian nationalism founded simply on ethnic Ukrainians](#). This approach excluded other ethnicities from the narrative of Ukrainian identity – making the issue of keeping Ukraine together now far more difficult.

That issue is mirrored in Russia. Again the state has attempted to use [nationalism in an instrumental way](#) to support the state and again this has proven extremely difficult. There is an appreciable change in the way the media portrays Russia and efforts to [re-institutionalize the Orthodox Church](#) and bring in single textbooks. None have been especially successful, and in an internet age their chance to do so is limited. Putin and the Russian government have been forced to limit themselves to discussions of those who speak the Russian language as criteria – rather than any more substantive basis.

It is important to note though, as many did throughout the conference that these issues are not exceptional to Russia and Ukraine. Too many crude binaries and simplifications assume that the situation is one of Russia versus Europe, East versus West. In fact the problem of nationalisms so prominent in Ukraine is no less of an issue across Europe. Big countries need narratives to keep themselves together and are often struggling to come to terms with a failure to do this. The UK and Spain and on a bigger scale the EU itself are prime examples of a struggle to keep disparate nationalisms together in a single collective narrative. The UK at least as much as Russia struggles with coming to terms with an Imperial past and regional nationalisms. The EU no more than Russia has concerns over its spheres of influence and keeping people together.

This is not to say that all the issues are perfectly mirrored across Europe. To deny exceptionalism is not to deny differences. The Russia Empire was different from other empires, and Crimea is not Scotland or Catalonia. But it is to provide a note of caution before too hastily looking at the problem as being wholly alien from that being encountered elsewhere.

One of the great paradoxes of the current world order is that problems have become so internationalised while the only unit seen as a valid agent to counter them remains so essentially based on a nation state model that is rarely the best actor in that context. Many places are struggling with similar problems of forging a narrative and finding an identity in today's world. The IDEAS workshop has demonstrated where perhaps the debate needs to go next if there is to be a chance of analysing the Ukraine crisis and the future of nationalisms to any productive end.

Watch the two video debates from this workshop exclusively on our [LSE IDEAS Channel](#).

1. [Nationalist wars in Europe?](#)
2. [What happened to fascism in Ukraine and Russia?](#)

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