Clare V. Dueweke,
Seton Hall University
ORCID ID: 0009-0003-0375-4780

A geopolitical puzzle: the rise of Ukrainian nationalism

Abstract. This essay analyzes the progression of Ukrainian nationalism, focusing on the pivotal role of historical context, geopolitical location, former Soviet influence, and modern politics. For centuries, Ukraine has faced the challenge of being geographically located next to the complex country of Russia. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a change in mindset towards a sovereign and nationalistic Ukraine. Following the collapse, key events like the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution of Dignity, the conflict in Donbas, and the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine have continued to develop a united and proud Ukraine. Further, the election of Volodymyr Zelenskyy in 2019 has solidified the nation's commitment to self-determination during the ongoing war. This essay argues that Ukraine's geopolitical challenge of sharing borders with Russia has significantly created a unified national identity.

Introduction. Nationalism has historically played a role in state development because it forms a community to fight for and have pride in. National identity is often built from connections through culture, language, ethnic background, shared struggle, and race. In the case of Ukraine, the state's complex relationship, shared history, and cultural ties with the bordering country of Russia have shaped nationalism. Recently, key turning points in Ukrainian history have proved an urgent need for a separate national identity. These include the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, which gave Ukraine the opportunity for self-determination; the 2014 Orange Revolution and Euromaidan Revolution, which proved Ukraine's desire for European integration; the ongoing conflict in Donbas; and the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian War. Additionally, the 2019 election of Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his leadership have further supported Ukraine's fight for sovereignty. It can be argued that the interplay between culture, politics, and geopolitics has played a significant role in uniting Ukraine under the goal of self-determination, forging Ukrainian nationalism.

Historical Context of Russian Influence through Geopolitical Factors. Ukraine and Russia have a complex and interwoven history spanning centuries. Though history spans prior, a pivotal point was in 1654 when the Treaty of Lublin was signed. This treaty allowed Russia to "protect" Ukraine from enemies in the west. However, as the Russian Empire expanded, it began suppressing Ukrainian national liberation movements, culture, and language (Masenko, 2020).

After decades of fighting for rights in imperial Russia, Ukraine still found itself oppressed simply due to the strength of the empire. This all changed during World War I after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Poor wages, food scarcity, Tsar Nicholas II's war policies, and the high casualty rate of soldiers during WWI encouraged revolutionaries led by Vladimir Lenin to put the Marxist Russian Social Democratic Labor Party in place (Krebsbach, 2020: 82-83).

With the collapse of the Russian Empire, Ukraine emerged as a new state, but by 1919, the Soviet Union took over Ukraine and formed the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. During this time, Ukrainian national identity was deeply tied to Soviet and Russian ideals, and the name "Little

Russia" was even used to describe Ukraine. Additionally, Kyiv was a religious hub for the Orthodox Church, which provided a religious, ethnic, and cultural connection to Russia. The role of communism and the symbolism of a united Russia prevented Ukraine from showing its individualistic identity separate from Russia until 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed (Kravchenko, 2015: 447-484).

Nationalism in Ukraine. Nationalism is a problematic theory, but traditionally it is seen as an identification with a large group of people, often a state. Ukrainian nationalism has developed throughout history closely alongside Russia, where we see many issues between the countries today. In Ukraine, the western-central region is mostly Ukrainian-speaking and is home to the national democratic parties. On the other hand, the eastern part of Ukraine, known as the Donbas region, is where eleven million Russians live. This area shares a border with Russia and is a widely disputed area between the countries. This divide makes the country politically confusing because some places will support Russian ideas, while others prefer Ukrainian independence, and later in history, more Western-aligned politics (Wise & Brown, 1996: 116-137).

Post-Soviet Union Collapse leading to the 2014 Revolution and Conflicts. After the Soviet Union collapsed, Ukraine faced a new dawn. Ukraine always had strong nationalistic ideals, but was forced to conceal them while under the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union. Once independent, Ukraine tried to align itself closer to Western powers, specifically NATO. Under Vladimir Putin's leadership, Russia did not like the idea of Ukraine joining the Western powers because they feared the West coming too close to Russian borders, and Putin wanted to restore Soviet influence (Orobets, 2022: 47-62).

The "Orange Revolution" took hold after the presidential election 2004 became heated. Viktor Yushchenko and Viktor Yanukovych were in the running, and it was known that Russian President Vladimir Putin supported Yanukovych while Yushchenko ran on anti-corruption. Eventually, Yanukovych won the election, and protesters took to the streets, charging that the election was fraudulent (Karatnycky, 2005).

In 2014, after many talks of the European Union-Ukraine Association Agreement (EU-UA), the Ukrainian Prime Minister, Mykola Azarov, announced they would not sign the agreement. This began the Euromaidan Revolution of Dignity, where Ukrainian citizens took to the streets to express their desire to join the EU. As the protests grew larger and became more violent, Ukrainian President Yanukovych underestimated the growing nationalism in Ukraine and quickly fled Kyiv; it was later revealed that Russia aided in his escape. Soon after this, in March of 2014, amidst the protests, Crimea, which had formerly been Ukrainian territory, was annexed by Russia. Though there were Ukrainian military operations in Crimea, the strength of the Russian military operation, as well as the difficulties in Kyiv, allowed for the annexation. To most scholars, these protests in 2014 were the tipping point for many Ukrainians. After centuries of being suffocated by Russian nationalism, this was the first time the Ukrainian people truly stood up to Russia, and this fight was only the beginning (Useinov, 2017).

Modern Day Ukrainian Politics. In 2019, Volodymyr Zelenskyy of the newly formed Servant of the People party was elected as the president of Ukraine. For the first time in Ukrainian history, a single party had won the majority of the seats in the Ukrainian Parliament. Zelenskyy

aimed to minimize tensions with Russia and gained more support in the pro-Ukrainian population due to the annexation of Crimea only a few years earlier. This loss of Russian-leaning voters in the Russian-occupied Donbas and Crimea areas helped Zelenskyy take on the role of president and Ukrainian nationalist leader (D'Anieri, 2022).

The world was shockD'Anieri22 when Russian President Vladimir Putin intended to take over Kyiv and with it the rest of Ukraine. Ukraine had the spirit and ability to fight against Russia, and the Western world quickly aided. Most of this invasion was centered on Putin's fear of NATO getting too involved in Eastern Europe. During this ongoing war, Zelenskyy has been praised as a charismatic leader due to the Ukrainian military's reaction time, and military's invasion that Russia thought would last two days has lasted three years. The UN condemned Russia's actions under international law. As a result, Ukraine has received extensive aid from around the world regarding troops, resources, humanitarian aid, and more (Johnson, 2022).

The real heroes in this ongoing conflict have been the civilian combatants. At the start of the war, many Ukrainian civilians with no military experience took up arms to fight for their country, proving the proper level of pride and national identity in Ukraine (Bryant, Schnurr, Pedlar, 2022: 346).

Conclusion. Ukraine is a country that has faced extensive hardship due to many factors, but its geographical proximity to Russia is the primary reason for this. This intersection between Russia and Ukraine has been a dominant and submissive relationship during early history due to the strength of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Ukraine has proved the world's assumptions wrong by rising and fighting for the future children of Ukraine and its willingness to lay their lives on the line and define what it means to be a Ukrainian. Through examining key events such as the end of the Soviet Era, the 2014 revolutions, the election of Zelenskyy, and the ongoing conflict, the Ukrainian people grew nationalism through blood, sweat, and tears. Ukraine has etched itself into the history books and the hearts of anyone who knows what it is like to love their country.

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