

What is the role of nationalism and ethnicity in the Russia-Ukraine crisis?

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Abstract

The article explores the Russia-Ukraine crisis of 2014 within the context of post-communist nationalism and the disintegration of the post-Soviet space. The focus is on the politicisation of the ethno-linguistic divide and historical narratives in the interplay between Russia's determination to control Ukraine's political future and Ukraine's resolve to free itself from it. In highlighting the incompatibility between Russian and Ukrainian nationalising projects, it is argued that while the Ukrainian crisis is not an ethnic conflict *per se*, nationalism was a significant contributory factor in fuelling the conflict and remains a relevant obstacle to its resolution.

Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine crisis in the spring of 2014 stands for a series of interconnected and violent events. First between the then pro-Russian Yanukovich government forces and pro-reform demonstrators in Kyiv demanding the signing of the Association Agreement with the EU which Yanukovich reneged on. The annexation of Crimea, the 'first formal annexation of territory in Europe since 1945' (Wilson 2014, p. vi), wasn't marked particularly by violence, but rather by a blatant disregard for international law and Ukraine's sovereignty. The subsequent pro-Russia mobilisation in eastern Ukraine with military support from Russia culminated in the armed conflict in Donbas – to this day unresolved. If the promise of the fall of the Berlin Wall for a united, democratic and peaceful Europe was shattered by the wars on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, the Ukrainian crisis signalled a whole new disillusionment. Not a return to a 'common European home' as envisaged by Gorbachev, but a return to a renewed East-West divide: the conflict between the ever more authoritarian and nationalist Russia trying to thwart the popular uprising for democratisation and Europeanisation of an independent Ukraine. In the process, Russia (interchangeable with the Russian

Federation) not only exploited the weaknesses of the Ukrainian state and extended its territory, but exposed the fragility of the post-Cold War order in Europe.

This crisis constitutes an explosion of a number of internal and wider geopolitical factors connected to both Russia and Ukraine. To Sakwa (2014), the crisis is a result of misguided policies toward Russia by the EU and the West generally combined with genuine popular unrest against a corrupted government in Kyiv and further augmented by the identity crisis in Donbas. Wilson (2014) on the other hand, while acknowledging many internal problems Ukraine was facing sees the weight of the crisis in Russia's aggression and interference in Ukraine. The Russia-Ukraine crisis, due to the fact that it presents a considerable challenge to the existing order in Europe and questions the ability of the international community to shape events to their desired outcomes, does indeed appear to have different origins than other post-communist conflicts, such as the Yugoslav wars. On the other hand, the assessment of this crisis through the lens of Russia's role in it and 'what it means for the West' to quote the subtitle of Wilson's book *Ukraine crisis* (2014), may obscure the analysis of some of the more prosaic identity-related dynamics which the conflict escalated and which could have been observed in earlier conflicts in post-Soviet space, the Balkans, and less dramatically, in the rest of post-communist Europe. There are commentators who take a less global perspective on the crisis and focus on the problems associated with the failing democratisation process in both Russia and Ukraine (Bojcun 2015; Kuzio 2015b) and the rising Russian nationalism (Kuzio 2015b; Laruelle 2016; Nuzov 2016; Teper 2016), but also on the far-right groups operating on the Ukrainian side (Katchanovski 2015; Likhachev 2015; Marples 2006). Within these identity-related interpretations, one ought to include the disintegration of existing ties and separatism (Hughes and Sasse 2001; Sakwa 2014; Wilson 2016) as well as the role of the ethnic kin abroad (Harris 2012; Melvin 1995; Saideman & Ayres 2008; Shevel 2011).

The premise here is that the fast growing literature on this crisis does not analyse the huge impact of post-communism on identity – personal, ethnic and national - and consequently statehood (Beissinger 2008; Brubaker 1996 and 2011; Harris 2002 and 2009, chpt4; Verdery 1993 and 1996). Hence, my research question centres on the role and nature of nationalism and ethnicity in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The core contribution of this article is in deliberating the role of the conflicting Russian and Ukrainian nationalism, their respective utilisation of ethno-linguistic divide and manipulation of historical memory which, the author believes, provides a more comprehensive interpretation of this conflict. I apply theories of nationalism and ethnicity within the broader and appropriate context of the post-communist disintegration of multinational federations generally, but specifically in relation to nation- and state-building processes in Russia and Ukraine.

The underlying argument for this approach is threefold. In the world divided into nation-states, ethnic and national identities serve as a measure of political legitimacy and therefore, remain important categories for political analysis as well as powerful tools for political elites to exploit and manipulate. This is not a particular characteristic of post-communism, but a characteristic pertaining to the majority of nation-states; all tend to identify and define their national identities with one (in some, but not many cases with more) titular ethno-national group. The particularity of post-communism is the simultaneity and speed of social, political and economic transformation which were being implemented while the new nation-states were forming. The formation and the establishment of a nation-state in turn entails a mammoth task of the construction of a new national identity, citizenship legislation, minority protection, foreign policy orientation, etc., all of which – inevitably – increase the contestation of identities and general level of national mobilisation in highly uncertain political and economic conditions. While this was the situation in all post-communist states, only in some cases, it led to an armed conflict.

I do not argue that there is a causal connection between nationalism and ethnicity in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, but I seek to show that political disagreements about the future of the state, a change of regional dynamics related to the disintegration of the Soviet Union, incompatible interpretations of historical memory when expressed in identity-relevant terms do release the conflict potential of ethnicity. Ethnicity is affected by political developments and *vice versa* (Wimmer 2016, p. 1408), so in this article, the focus is on the politicisation of ethnicity which in this case has become interchangeable with ethno-linguistic divide, its exploitation and distortion into political affiliations in circumstances of divergent and mutually incompatible nationalising projects by Ukraine and Russia. Ukraine, seeking to extricate itself from the Russian sphere of influence and Russia, given its ‘nationalist reluctance’ to recognise the permanent loss of Ukraine’ (Brubaker 2011, p.1790), trying to subvert that process by exploiting the loyalties and identities of the population in eastern Ukraine.

Having clarified the context within which this article is located, I build my argument in the following steps. The next section clarifies the terms of reference and establishes the link between nationalism/ethnicity and regime type – within the Soviet Union and within post-communist transformation processes. This is followed by a discussion of what appears to be a continuing disintegration of the post-Soviet space, including the cases of Crimea and the Donbas and the gradual positioning of Russia as an ethnic ‘homeland’ in pursuit of a reversal of its diminished territorial and political status. The argument then moves to the political and regional fragility of the new Ukrainian state which culminated in the popular uprising against the Yanukovich government and the

role of Russia in the ensuing conflict. In presenting nation-building processes in Russia and Ukraine as seeking incompatible objectives, I then focus on the politicisation of the linguistic divide, as a proxy for ethnicity in this conflict (Brubaker 2006, p.239) between the Ukrainians and the ‘Russian speakers’ and the manipulation of this divide through incompatible historical memory by both Russia and Ukraine. I conclude that while the Ukrainian crisis is not an ethnic conflict as such (not on a par with the Yugoslav crisis), the number of factors driving the conflict between Russia and Ukraine and between Ukrainians are commensurate with the interpretation of this crisis from a perspective of nationalism and ethnicity and justify the analytical framework employed here.

Ethnicisation of post-communist transition processes

The dissolution of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia brought about a radical reconfiguration of the political landscape, the disappearance of states and the emergence of new successor states (Brubaker 1996; Harris 2009; Ramet 2010). This process engendered further re-evaluations of historical narratives, more questioning of people’s loyalties, more anxiety by ethnic groups finding themselves on the wrong side of the border, more opportunities for more territory and consequently – more politicised ethnic identity parading as political identity. Two extreme cases where the disintegration led to wars are the territories of the former Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union.

The disintegration of the Yugoslav federation produced competing and mutually incompatible ethno-histories of the constituent republics, political and socio-economic insecurity, resentments of the past, and dramatically altered political and legal status of ethnic groups *vis-à-vis* each other and their states. Added to this mix of ingredients was the cross-border military involvement of Serbia and Croatia in support of their co-ethnics (Kuzio 2016, p. 498) on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina – a scenario that resulted in vicious wars of succession on the territory of the former Yugoslavia (Banac 2009; Saideman & Ayres, 2008; Silber & Little 1996). The Russia-Ukraine conflict exhibits a number of striking similarities with Yugoslav wars (Harris 2015b): a dramatically altered legal, territorial and political status of both Russia and Ukraine further magnified by divergent political aspirations and the rising nationalist mobilisation and military aggression by Russia. Further down the line, the mobilisation of paramilitary units with dispersed loyalties and the presentation of the current crisis in the light of past conflicts. The similarities between these two post-communist conflicts however do not extend to the much wider geopolitical impact of Russia in its near abroad and globally.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russian nation became divided by numerous borders with a huge Russian speaking diaspora in Ukraine. For example, in Crimea ethnic Russians formed the majority (58%) and

Ukrainians were a minority (Wilson 2014, p.104). The study of the identity-related issues has produced a large body of literature (Beissinger 2008; Brubaker 1996 and 2011; Harris 2002 & 2009; Ramet 2010; Verdery 1993 and 1996;), but the full implications of the changing status of ethnic groups remain unexplored by academic researchers. As the Russia- Ukraine crisis contains all aspects of this condition, the analysis here refers to it, but only within the limitation allowed by the scope of this article. I will return to the attempts at the recovery of Russia's diminished post-Soviet status in more detail below, but for now it is enough to say that this issue continues to fuel Russian nationalism as the annexation of Crimea and the intervention in the overwhelmingly Russian speaking Donbas region in eastern Ukraine demonstrated. Drawing on theories of (post-communist) nationalism, the following paragraphs set out the analytical framework through which the relevance of ethnicity in the Russia- Ukraine crisis is reasoned in this article.

I take ethnic group to refer to a community characterised by a sense of belonging and loyalty to a group of a perceived 'sameness', usually based on common ancestry, common identity markers (language, lifestyle, value orientation, morality, behaviour) and/or a shared historical past (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, pp. 6-9). Ethnic group has a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order (Barth 1969, p.11). Given the contestation and changeability of social, physical and symbolic boundaries among groups, it is the self-ascription and ascription by others that contributes to the persistence of ethnicity and implies collective action.

In the present context there are three important characteristics pertaining to ethnicity. First, as a cultural trait, ethnicity transcends the physical boundaries of states and is not necessarily defined by state citizenship. Second point is particularly relevant to the context of post-Soviet space. When we speak of Russian speakers as an ethno-linguistic community, we essentially speak of using language as a proxy for ethnicity (Laitin 2000). In this respect, 'language is an important vehicle of ethnicity' (Brubaker et al 2006, p. 239) and expands the concept of ethnicity 'beyond traits which are descent-based' (Marquardt 2018, p.832) or historically determined. Language has different functions – it is an important marker of national identity, as well as a means of communication. Kulyk (2016) argues that while Russian is respected as an 'accustomed communicative means' for a large part of population, Ukrainian is valued 'not only for its communicative functions but also for its symbolic role as the national language' (Kulyk 2016, p.98). Accordingly, in 2014 survey, 56% of respondents want the state primarily to promote Ukrainian; not surprisingly, in the Donbas, the majority wanted the state to promote the local majority language (Kulyk 2016, p.98). The analysis below will show that 'Russian speakers'

became a politically relevant group, rather than a culturally distinct one for Russia and Ukraine (Marquardt 2018, p.836).

Third, ethnic (and language) diversity is a consequence of political developments and the history of state formation and nation-building processes (Wimmer 2016). As such ethnicity is situational, malleable and susceptible to contestation and change, thus also open to politicisation and manipulation (Bell 2010; Nuzov 2016; Wimmer 2013). In the complex process of state formation, where each ethnic group is seeking to secure autonomy and resources and address its position vis-à-vis other groups and the core nation of the state to which they may or may not be construed as belonging, the ethnicity-driven challenges from within and beyond the state may be inevitable.

Adding to the overall sense of heightened 'ethnic awareness' in post-Soviet societies (Harris 2012, p. 343) which contributed significantly to the ethnicisation of post-Soviet politics is the legacy of Soviet nationality policies (Brubaker 1996). The fundamental principle of federalism in the Soviet Union (but also in Yugoslavia, and after 1968 also in Czechoslovakia), was 'national-territorial autonomy' (Harris 2002, p. 22-23); that is the linkage of ethnicity, territory and political administration, thus institutionalising ethnicity by placing it at the base of its federal structure. More than fifty putatively autonomous national 'homelands' were established and arrayed in a four-tiered ethno-federal hierarchy (Brubaker 2011, p. 1786; Marquardt 2018, p.836) each defined as the territory of and for a particular ethno-national group. The Soviet institutional legacy for managing ethnicity within a controlled authoritarian system created inherent tensions among ethnic groups which were bound to rise to the surface with the demise of the system within which they existed. The reassembling of disintegrating states unavoidably focused on the communist legacy of the national question (Hughes and Sasse 2001, p.3) which in too many cases left unresolved antagonisms going back to the Second World War as is the case in Russia-Ukraine relationship (more on this issue in sections below this one).

Nationalism - a 'political principle that holds that cultural and political unit should be congruent' (Gellner 1983, p.1) - is crucial to the politics of nation-states which like to present themselves as a state for and of one nation. The nation, similarly to ethnic group, is a social group but with an added political meaning: it is integrated by a combination of objective relationships, such as territory, economy, political organisation, history and culture and their subjective reflection in collective consciousness (Harris 2002 p.3). Nationalism - a 'political principle that holds that cultural and political unit should be congruent' (Gellner 1983, p.1) - is crucial to the politics of nation-states which like to present themselves as a state for and of one nation. But, nationalism is also at the heart of the national self-determination doctrine which holds that 'any self-differentiating people,

simply because it is a people, has the right, should it so desire to rule itself' (Connor 1972, p. 331), thus linking ethnicity to political legitimacy (Harris 2015a, p.191). When new political identities are forming, 'the people' need to be demarcated and so it is their ethnic affiliation that tends to fill the legitimacy gap left by the disintegrated 'old' political ties.

Closely related to these definitions is a nation-building process. Its policies are rooted in a deliberate effort to construct an overarching collective identity based on a putative common national sentiment. Parallel and complementary process ongoing at the same time is the state-building process which aims at social solidarity rooted in loyalty to the state and its institutions (Harris 2002, p. 3). The imbalance between those two parallel processes where the nation-building takes precedence over state-building suggests a nationalising state which is roughly what tended to happen in post-communist states, including Ukraine, but importantly also in Russia (Kuzio 2016, p. 499; Ziegler 2016; Brubaker 1996 and 2011) for reasons which I have indicated already and will elaborate on later.

Brubaker (2011, p.1786) suggests five motifs that characterise nationalist discourse in the successor states: (1) the idea that the state contains a 'core nation' or nationality, understood in ethnocultural terms and distinguished from the citizenry or permanent resident population of the state as a whole; (2) a claim to ownership or primacy: the state is understood as the state of and for the core nation; (3) the claim that the core nation is in a weak or unhealthy condition; (4) the claim that state action is needed to strengthen the core nation, to promote its language, cultural flourishing, demographic robustness, economic welfare or political hegemony; and (5) the claim that such action is remedial or compensatory, needed to redress previous discrimination or oppression suffered by the core nation.

While this list of key elements leaves a question of hierarchy of these elements open, I am suggesting that both Russia and Ukraine subscribe to some of these key elements, if not necessarily to all of them. For example, the perception that the Russian nation is in a weak position after the loss of territories and political status and that remedial action is necessary, resulted in greater emphasis on defining the Russian nation in terms of ethno-linguistic characteristic beyond the state rather than by the boundaries of the existing state only (Shevel 2011). By the same token, in Ukraine where ethnonational and linguistic boundaries are blurred nationalisation meant the reshaping and enlarging the core nation within the state and the need to redress the oppression suffered by the core nation.

So far, I have presented theoretical arguments for why in the conditions of reconfiguration of space, politics and people's identities, ethnicity assumes a political role and suggested that this analytical framework is

equally valid in reference to the crisis in Ukraine. While this is precisely the time when the political process would benefit from the absence of politicised ethnicity and history (which tend to go together) the contrary appears to be the case. But, before I turn to the Russia-Ukraine conflict and show the volatility of this practice in its full magnitude, an important qualification is in order.

While post-communism is presumed to be synonymous with democratisation, it does not mean that simultaneous processes of social, economic and political transformation intended towards democratisation is unidirectional and actually moving towards democracy; the politicisation of ethnicity and violence are particularly prevalent in ‘hybrid political regimes’ (Diamond 2002). These regimes, ranging from ‘semi to illiberal democracy’ to various forms of diminished authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2002, p.52), combine some democratic features with varied intensity of authoritarianism and are accompanied by economic mismanagement deriving from corruption and nepotism. In the case of the Russia-Ukraine crisis we need to move beyond the ‘transition paradigm’ (Levitsky and Way 2002, p.63).

It is important to emphasise that Ukraine’s democratisation process, despite its civic constitution with universal citizenship rights,¹ remained violated and manipulated by subsequent post-independence governments veering towards ‘authoritarianism with elections’ which Levitsky and Way (2002, p. 53) identify as ‘competitive authoritarianism.’ In these kind of regimes the formal democratic institutions are used to obtain and maintain political authority by the abuse of state resources and preventing the opposition from equal electoral competition. Ukraine’s current efforts at democratisation are challenged by Russia which under Putin with its militarism, state managed networks between public and private actors and great power nationalism has probably exhausted the limits of democratic hybridity and has moved further down the path of consolidating nationalist authoritarianism (Davies *et al.* 2016 p.133; Kropp and Schuhmann, 2016, p.173; Kuzio 2015b, p. 2). The Freedom House report ‘Nations in Transit 2018’ gives Ukraine a democratic score 4.64/7, described as transitional government or hybrid regime, and Russia 6.61/7 signifying a consolidated authoritarian regime.²

The next sections focus on the construction of Russian and Ukrainian nations and in particular on the use of historical memory in that process as well as on Russia’s continued effort to expand its geopolitical influence in the region at the cost to Ukrainian territory.

¹ *Constitution of Ukraine*, 1996, available at:

http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/cooperation/ccpe/profiles/ukraineConstitution_en.asp, accessed 23 August 2017.

² Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/nations-transit-2018> accessed 22 August 2018.

Russia in the role of nationalising (kin) state

After the initial break-up of the Soviet Union and the establishment of 15 successor states on its former territory,³ there were and continue to be many regional and ethnic conflicts among and within successor states. The following examples draw attention to a number of dynamics relevant to secessionism and interethnic conflicts in post-Soviet space.

The conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia (both autonomous republics within Georgia since the Soviet boundary-making policies in the 1920s) were exacerbated precisely by the fear of minorities at the nationalising policies of the newly independent Georgia (Hughes and Sasse 2001, p.28). The dynamic between South Ossetian separatists seeking reunification with its northern part in Russia and the pursuit of guarantees by the Abkhaz minority against the Georgian majority led to the military conflict in 1992. The tense standoff developed into a full war in 2008 in which Russian backed separatists defeated the Georgian government and froze their control over the separatist enclaves (Kuzio 2015b, p.8). In the conflict in Transnistria, where the Russian-speaking population in the post-independence Moldova felt marginalised by the newly privileged Romanian language, and the new Romanian-speaking economic elite (Kolstø 2002, p.2), separatists were supported by Russia too. A similar triadic dynamic between newly independent nationalising state and separatist minority supported from beyond the boundaries by the ostensibly ethnic kin state (Russia) could be observed in the Nagorno-Karabakh (an autonomous *oblast* of the Armenian population within Azerbaijan) which sought to unite with the Armenian homeland. In this case the irredentist politics garnered much support not only from Armenia proper, but also from the Armenian diaspora abroad.

Given the ‘frozen’ status (Kuzio 2015, p.8) of these all too briefly mentioned conflicts, they continue to fester and provide ground for new conflicts to re-emerge. Secessionism and interethnic antagonism were at the heart of the conflict in Chechnya too (1994 –1996 and 1999-2009). This violent and complex conflict is pivotal in the shaping of post-Soviet Russia – it was the making of Putin as the champion of national pride and the saviour of Russian territorial integrity (Galeotti 2014, p.9).

The compelling and in the case of post-Soviet space increasingly more destabilising aspect of identity politics is the scale and political consequences of the role of the kin-state and its impact on the politics of ethnic

³ These are: Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Armenia, Georgia, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

kin outside the 'home' state (diaspora) and nationalism of the state they reside in (Brubaker 1996, p. 56; Harris 2012, p.13; Hughes and Sasse 2001, p.4; Melvin 1995). In an effort to explain the rising levels of post-communist nationalism, including the rise of irredentist politics (effort to unite ethnic kin who due to repositioned borders has been 'lost' across the border), Brubaker (1996) proposes a triadic relationship between national minorities, nationalising states and external 'homelands.' Brubaker (1996, p. 4) argues that the collapse of multi-ethnic federations far from solving the regional national question merely 'reframed' it. In this 'reframed' scenario, the newly reconfigured states and their elites promote the core self-determining national group in whose name and on behalf of which the state came into existence. The promotion of language, culture, demographic position and political hegemony of the state-bearing ethno-cultural group alienates minorities. Their resistance and growing nationalism galvanises their 'external' homeland into protecting their co-ethnics in the new states, so that there are three different mutually interacting nationalisms (to varied degrees of intensity) around the border of nearly all new states.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, some 25 million people who could be construed by their ethnicity or language as Russians were left outside the current borders of Russia (Saideman and Ayres 2008, p. 135). This makes Russia which is pursuing the reversal from its somewhat diminished status to its previous status of regional dominance a kin-state of considerable importance. When Putin at the NATO summit (2008) says that Ukraine is not a 'real state' and that it 'received huge territories from Russia in the east and the south' and that 'seventeen million Russians' living in Ukraine gives Russia a legitimate interest there' (Kuzio 2015b, p.3), he is making the case for his domestic audience that the Russian nation is greater than its borders. He is also warning the international community about its future foreign policy targets. In that sense the annexation of Crimea (2014) on a flimsy pretext of the alleged discrimination against the Russian speakers should not have been a surprise after Georgia and Chechnya which set the template.

On 17 March 2014 the Republic of Crimea (Crimea) proclaimed independence and sovereignty on the basis of the referendum (11 and 16 March). The following day, Putin signed an executive order on the recognition of Crimea as a sovereign state which was followed by an agreement between Russia and Crimea on the accession of Crimea to the Russian Federation as one of its federal subjects. Explaining Russia's part in the annexation, Putin listed the right to self-determination of Crimean people, the protection of Russians living there and regional stability (for legal details, see Cwicinskaja 2017).

It is worth noting that Crimea has a number of exceptional features which set it apart from other Ukrainian regions (Sasse 2001 p. 86). After some 300 years being a part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet

Union, in 1954 the Khrushchev government transferred Crimea from the Russian Soviet Federation of Socialist Republics (RSFSR) to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (UkrSSR) (Kramer 2014; Sasse 2014). Crimea's economy was highly Sovietised and dominated by military-industrial complex and the Soviet tourism and remained a staunchly 'Soviet' region in the newly independent Ukraine. This resulted in demands for territorial autonomy which culminated in the Russian nationalist and separatist movement in 1994. Amidst much constitutional wrangling between Kyiv and Simferopol the Ukrainian constitution of 1996 revived Crimean status of the autonomous republic dating back to 1991; the revised Constitution of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea within Ukraine was adopted in 1998 and emphasises the inviolability of its autonomous status and Kyiv's control over the territory (Sasse 2001, p.93-94).

Due to its multiethnic (58, 3 % Russian, 24.3 % Ukrainian and 12.1% Tatar according to 2001 census) and multilingual character, the Crimean constitution contains language rights which specify that 'alongside Ukrainian, the application and development and use and protection of Russian, Crimean Tatar and other ethnic groups' languages are guaranteed.'⁴ The ousting of the pro-Russian Yanukovich and his replacement by the new pro-European administration sparked off demonstrations in Crimea and precipitated the Russian intervention. The initial and ill-advised decision of the new authorities in Kyiv to downgrade Russian from official language of the region alongside Ukrainian to solely Ukrainian was reversed, but the damage was already done (Raworth 2018).

While the Ukrainian government and the media, and their western counterparts characterised Crimean separatism as having minority support and the referendum as illegal, the official polls of the referendum claimed 97 percent support among Crimean voters for joining Russia and the Pew Research Center reported that 91% viewed the referendum as free and fair.⁵

The next act in Russia's quest to undermine Ukraine and exploit its weaknesses deriving from rebellious regions took place in the Donbas region in the far east of Ukraine which consists of Donetsk and Luhans'k *oblasts* (Sasse 2001; Sasse and Lackner 2018; Wilson 2014, chapter 7). After Crimea, it has the

⁴ 'An Introduction to the Constitution of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea', available at

<http://oxcon.ouplaw.com/page/crimea-constitution> accessed 29 August 2018.

⁵ Katchanovski, I. 2015, 'Crimea: People and Territory before and after Annexation,' available at:

<http://www.e-ir.info/2015/03/24/crimea-people-and-territory-before-and-after-annexation/>, accessed 28 August 2017.

second highest proportion of ethnic Russians (38, 5 % in 2001) and Russian ‘native’ speakers (72 %) in Ukraine (Wilson 2014 p. 118). The Donbas was the industrial heartland of the Soviet Union and developed a particular identity (regional identities within Ukraine are discussed later on) and reliance on the Soviet economy which was declining even before the Soviet collapse. The Donbas miners, ‘the least nationally conscious group’ staged the first ‘major strike in Soviet history in July 1989’ (Marples 1991 p.175) and continued to strike until mid-1990s. Political mobilisation for regional autonomy was linked to the combination of socio-economic, ideological and identity factors, only some of which were mutually reinforcing. Nevertheless, the ‘consultative’ referendum (1994) included demands for Russian to be made the official language of the region, dual Russian-Ukrainian citizenship and a more open border with Russia (Sasse 2001).

The anger and dissatisfaction in the Donbas sparked off the separatist movement which was further exacerbated and manipulated by the rivalries among, often ethnically based, local business clans. The former President Yanukovich and his ‘Family’ emerged a winner from these rivalries (Wilson 2014 p. 121). The fall of his government was a serious threat to local oligarchs who relied on the Russian business as much as the Donbas industry relied on their subsidies. The Russian military involvement in eastern Ukraine was approved by the Russian Parliament in March 2014. Following the Crimea scenario, Putin (in one of his annual phone-ins) was again talking about Russia’s ‘territories lost to Ukraine’ and ‘the people who remained’ there (Wilson 2014, p. 120). The war between the Russia supported self-declared Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics – integrated into Russia’s political, economic and security structures and in possession of many Russian passports - and the Kyiv controlled parts of the Donbas remains in an unstable stalemate (Sasse and Lockner 2018, p.139).

There is little doubt that in both Crimea and the Donbas the long-standing historically evolved ‘social distance’ (Wilson 2016) from Kyiv was not diminishing in the new Ukraine, but growing particularly after 2004. Movement for regional autonomy is not the same as separatism, let alone the escalation into an armed conflict. In both cases the existing tensions and grievances were manipulated by both Ukrainian and Russian elites, but it is safe to assume that the war in the Donbas was unlikely to happen without Russia.

At this stage it is important to stress two points. First is the construction of the post-Soviet Russian nation in ethno-linguistic and ethno-cultural terms (Teper 2016, p.379) which, while somewhat delayed, confirms what we have already observed in the early 1990s in all post-communist states, but particularly violently on the territory of the former Yugoslavia. This is in some way a departure from Russian statist identity which reflected the fact that Russians became synonymous with the Soviet Union and did not develop their own ethnic subjectivity (Goble 2015, p.3; Teper 2016, p. 380). In Soviet times, Russian identity was neither ethnic

nor connected to the territory of the Russian Republic within the Soviet Union, but a 'supranational identity that was most closely identified with Soviet proletarian identity' which identified as 'national home the Soviet Union as a whole' (Shevel 2011, p. 181). Shevel (2011) on the pages of this journal describes dilemmas of post-Soviet Russian nation-building elites in constructing a new Russian identity which needed to reflect its new successor state status and diversity of ethno-histories and cultures within the Russian Federation.

The Russian nation could be defined by the territory of the existing state or by the territory of the former empire/ the Soviet Union (or parts of it), thus a civic '*rossiiskaya*' nation, or as ethnic Russian (*russkii*) nation. As mentioned already, this distinction is fraught with difficulties, particularly when the 1993 Russian Constitution⁶ says that 'the bearer of sovereignty and the only source of power in the Russian Federation shall be its multinational people' (Art 3/1). It is either viewed with suspicion by Russian nationalists who see it as discriminatory against ethnic Russians or by other non-Russian groups who fear the Russification. The dilemma of defining the Russian nation does not appear to be solved, but rather embellished by ambiguous inclusivity of 'all who speak and think in Russian, who consider themselves to belonging to the Russian culture' (Shevel 2011, p. 191). In the 2010 'Amendments to the law on state policy toward compatriots living abroad' whose interests are represented in Russian government bodies, this inclusivity stretches even further and includes compatriots 'based on the principle of self-identification.'⁷

The increasingly irredentist terminology of the Kremlin thus adds to a cultural and linguistic elements of the Russian nation a further element by identifying it with the former Soviet Union. The annexation of Crimea, the distribution of Russian passports in zones of frozen conflicts (Kuzio 2016, p. 499) and the military support for eastern Ukrainian 'self-identifying' compatriots follows a well-trodden path of a nationalising kin-state.

The second point is that the demarcation of the Russian nation, whereby the Russian nation is becoming interchangeable with Russian speakers is an elastic concept; this 'wherever nation' (Harris 2012, p. 349) stretches beyond the borders of the state to wherever it can serve as a remedy for territorial loss or aid the recovery of regional dominance and geopolitical influence. Thus, Putin's speech after the annexation of Crimea

⁶ *The Constitution of the Russian Federation*, 2001, available at: <http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-02.htm>, accessed 29 August 2017.

⁷ *Amendments to the law on state policy toward compatriots living abroad*, July 2010, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/copy/8429>, accessed 29 August 2017.

speaks of millions of people who ‘went to bed in one country and awoke in different ones, overnight becoming ethnic minorities in former Union republics, while the Russian (*russkii*) nation became one of the biggest, if not the biggest ethnic group in the world to be divided by borders.’⁸ In the same speech, Putin makes a reference to Russians and Ukrainians being ‘one people’ and Kiev being ‘the mother of Russian cities.’

Laruelle (2016, p.56) argues that Russian nationalism rests on the concept of ‘*Novorossiia*’ (New Russia) which dates back to the 18th century and looks to redesign the northern Black Sea space under which southern Ukraine from the Crimea to Odessa would secede from Kyiv. While Putin no longer makes reference to this New Russia, nationalist myths tend to find its own promoters to remain alive. The notion of *Novorossiia* and Ukrainian territories where Russians remained has been much promoted by the separatists of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics too. In that sense *Novorossiia* is not a geographical concept by which Russia includes territories lost in 1991; it stands for the justification of Russia’s interference in the neighbouring states and its re-assertion as a great power (Laruelle 2016, p.57-9; Pearce and Yuchshenko 2018, p.93). The recovery of Russia’s status and the ethnicisation of accompanying rhetoric is further complemented by the idea of *Russkii Mir* (the Russian World, a foundation of the same name was launched by Putin in 2007)⁹ which seeks to unite and support ethnic Russians and Russian speakers living outside Russia (Kuzio 2015b, p.3; Gobble 2015).

Ukraine: between east and west

The hugely destabilising Ukraine crisis is a conflict between a weak and divided pro-western Ukrainian regime and an increasingly more authoritarian Russia (Kuzio 2015b), determined to keep Ukraine within its sphere of influence. The corruption, the military involvement and resources provided to divert Ukraine from its intended political path toward the West and the EU make the extent to which this crisis can be interpreted from nationalist perspective debatable, but my aim throughout and in the next section is to show that nationalism and ethnicity while not decisive explanatory factors, play a significant contributory role, if at times indirectly.

Identity and historical factors are instrumentalised and mobilised for the purpose of the polarisation of the Ukrainian society, thus diverting attention from the political reform and demonstrating that Russia’s interests

⁸ *Crimea crisis: Russian President Putin's speech annotated*, March 2014, available at:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-26652058>, accessed 29 August 2017.

⁹ <http://russkiymir.ru/en/fund/>, accessed 30 August 2017.

override international law and Ukrainian independence. To the outside world, the message is similar - the Russian values and its sphere of influence can't be undermined (Pieper, 2016, p. 99). The mobilisation of ethnicity and language by elites - both reformers and status quo - draws on the existing divisions and earlier struggles and creates new narratives which project past events and fears onto present concerns. This has been the case in other post-communist conflicts too and it would seem that underestimating this aspect from the analysis of the Ukrainian crisis does not reflect its full complexity.

It is beyond this article to delve into the origins and details of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.¹⁰ At the heart of this conflict is the fragility of the post-communist independent Ukraine as a state of a number of regions which have never before been united within one independent state. The new Ukraine was always facing a potential territorial challenge from its regions – mostly from the Sovietised Crimea, the western region of Transcarpathia and the eastern Donbas region, as became obvious in 2014. This is before one even mentions the failure of the consecutive post-communist Ukrainian governments to complete the democratisation process and invest in the development of its own society rather than the development of a very narrow economic elite through the privatisation of national assets (Bojcun 2015, p.397). Its successive governments veered between semi-authoritarianism and economic crisis and finally ended up with the corrupted and populist Yanukovich government representing the 'Donbas clan', the Russian money and a 'Family' of oligarchs and thugs (Wilson 2016, p. 645).

Maidan 2013-14 (as in 2004) was a response to the failure of the political establishment, the persistent corruption and the frustration at thwarted non-integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures. The Yanukovich government which was supposed to guarantee that Kyiv was firmly within Russia's 'zone of privileged interests' (Kuzio 2015b, p.9) was failing both sides. It was threatening the Russian interests, but at the same time it was failing its own people who were seeking a different – rival – sphere of integration into the EU free trade regime and even an association agreement with the EU which spelled a very remote possibility of NATO membership. Moreover, the popular uprising threatened the oligarchic class beyond Ukraine which suggests that the annexation of Crimea and backing of separatists in the east may have less to do with the territorial expansion

¹⁰ For a more detailed debates see Bojcun 2015; Gobble 2015; Kudelia 2015; Kuzio 2015b, Riabchuk 2015; Sasse and Lackner 2018; Pieper 2016 and Wilson 2014). Furthermore, the special issue 'The Ukrainian Radical Right in Past and Present: Studies in Ideology, Memory and Politics' (2015), *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 48, 2-3.

and more to do with the restoration of Russia's economic and security influence over Ukraine at any cost. Maidan's popular uprising did remove president Yanukovich who fled the country and his pro-Russian Party of Regions lost the parliamentary majority.

Ukrainian nationalism, just as nationalisms of other eastern and central European peoples originates in the nineteenth-century national movements (Harris 2009 p. 108), but with added complications. The process of nation-building was much more successful in Western Ukraine which at the end of the eighteenth century came under Austrian rule (Riabchuk 2015, p.141). The different historical trajectory of western Ukraine where the national intelligentsia was able to engage in the nation-building process during the nineteenth century has little meaning in eastern Ukraine. The overarching identity there is connected to the Soviet Union and the story of the working class and the heroism of the Second World War. This Soviet identity put down deep roots particularly in the Donbas region, because 'nothing much came before it' (Wilson 2016, p.636), little that could be constructed into a semblance of a coherent story of identity divorced from the Soviet times.

Given the security situation in Luhansk and Donetsk *oblasts*, the recent opinion surveys do not include them, but eastern and western Ukrainians indeed appear to differ on issues, such as integration into Euro-Atlantic structures and solutions to the conflict in eastern Ukraine and Russia. The Public Opinion Survey of Residents of Ukraine (April- May 2017),¹¹ shows that the support for the EU in western Ukraine was 83%, in eastern Ukraine it was 27%; membership in the NATO in eastern Ukraine was 21%, in western Ukraine 71% (p. 51 and p.54 respectively). When it comes to separatist regions, 61% of western Ukrainians are more supportive of reverting back to the situation before the crisis than granting autonomy to separatist regions (27%). Eastern Ukrainians are divided – 37% prefer the previous status quo while 41% support more independence.¹²

In the independent nationalising Ukraine, the nation-building process seeking to construct an overarching national identity became inevitably focused on the past and the difference between eastern and western versions of Ukrainian identity. The Russian commonly expressed vision of Ukrainians as 'little

¹¹ Public Opinion Survey of Residents of Ukraine by the Government of Canada, available at: www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2017-may-survey-of-residents-of-ukraine_en.pdf, accessed 20 August 2018.

¹² 'Nato Publics Blame Russia for Ukrainian Crisis, but Reluctant to Provide Military Aid', available at: www.pewglobal.org/files/2015/06/Pew-Research-Center-Russia-Ukraine-Report-FINAL-June-10-2015.pdf, accessed 20 August 2018, p.13.

Russians' that are separate, but 'almost the same' as the 'great Russian' older brother' (Kuzio 2015a, p. 173; Riabchuk 2015, pp.141-42) and the difference between the more compliant east and suspiciously nationally aware west became reduced to the attitude toward Russia, or alternatively, pro-Russian and anti-Russian Ukrainians. The assumed division of Ukraine between the 'nationalistic' west and 'pro-Russian' east obscures the fact that Ukraine is not sharply divided along ethnic or even linguistic lines and that both east and west are heterogeneous regions. Riabchuk's (2015), study while acknowledging the historical relevance and complexity of ethnic Russians and Ukrainians, or east and west, argues that the main fault-line is ideological: between post/neo-Soviet and non/anti-Soviet which roughly translates into 'European' and 'East Slavonic'.

What should concern us here is the radicalisation of the ethnic and linguistic divide. The popular uprisings tend to unleash nationalist forces of various intensity and intentions which then invoke past struggles and fears. The new post-Yanukovich government included the far-right *Svoboda* party and Maidan's self-defence team included paramilitaries with fascist sympathisers. The presence of the far-right, some of whom turned towards the east in the form of volunteer battalions and some remained within the Ukrainian army or interior ministry was greatly exploited by Russia and used to justify the support for separatists in the east (Bojcun, 2015,p 412). The separatists declared aim was to protect the region's Russian speakers from Ukrainian 'fascists', but given the huge business relevance of eastern regions for Yanukovich's supporters one must question the true seriousness of this claim. Their forces were backed up by a selection of disparate interests such as Russian nationalists, mercenaries and neo-Nazis. Notwithstanding, whether as a result of propaganda or politicised historical memory, the east-west divide descended into the stereotyping of 'fascist' west and anti-Ukrainian pro-Russian east.

Politics of incompatible historical memories

As my definition of ethnicity indicated, ethnic groups are characterised by presumed 'sameness.' Constitutive of this ethnic consciousness of 'sameness' is collective memory which distinguishes them from 'others.' Nation-building elites engage in shaping a state's identity which reflects a specific vision of the state (Nuzov 2017, p. 135-37) and corresponds best with its political aspirations. The quest for new identity is particularly important to new nationalising states with insecure identity such as Ukraine, or Putin's Russia seeking to restore its regional and international status amidst economic crisis at home and continuing conflicts in its neighbourhood. Such rhetoric relies on re-telling a story; a story of disparate events, different contexts and fragments of experiences into one relatively coherent story which nevertheless could be told in many different ways (Hayward and O'

Dochartaigh 2013,p.7), but, particularly in times of crisis and threats to the state, a just historical account is not the aim of historical narrative. The aim is to mobilise solidarity, identify enemies and explain the present struggle in a way which seems to makes sense in terms of a long historical narrative that is being re-told in order to substantiate policies and justify collective action (Nuzov 2017, p. 135; Subotić 2016, p. 611). The following illustrates that nationalist elites manipulate historical memory, but do not necessarily fabricate the whole story. They promote a particular section of the story until the revised version emerges as a dominant narrative for many sections of the population. In times of societal unrest and confusion, the main contributor to tension is the politicisation of historical memory, a story of victimisation, injustice and unresolved conflicts told in identity-relevant terms.

The creation of an independent Ukraine was a triumph of Ukrainian nationalism which spread – consistent with my argument that societal changes tend to invigorate national mobilisation - during the 2004 Orange Revolution¹³ and during the 2013-4 Euromaidan and subsequent conflict with Russia (Kuzio 215a, p. 171). The new national identity in the post-Soviet Ukraine, seeking to extricate itself from Russia and its crippling sphere of interest and leave its ‘little Russians’ status behind, predictably relates to its rejected Soviet past and embraces the nationalist historical narrative originating in western Ukraine and promoted by its western orientated leadership. The objective here is clear: to emphasise European values, European roots and distance itself from Russia as far as it is possible. This could not be more contrary to the narrative of contemporary Russia which portrays it as historically a great power and hails above everything its fight against Nazism in the Second World War, referred to as the ‘Great Patriotic War’ (Nuzov, 2017, p. 142). The statements these two narratives make about identity of their respective nations are incompatible and in both countries lead to extremes.

The post- Orange revolution pro-Western and per definition anti-Russian government of Viktor Yushchenko embarked on the rehabilitation and heroisation of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN – *Orhanizatsiya Ukrayins'kykh Natsionalistiv*) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA- *Ukrainska Povstanska Armiiia*) who had a history of collaboration with the German Nazi regime and shared its anti-Semitic ideology and policies; this involved participation in massacres against Poles and anti-Jewish pogroms (Marples 2015 and 2006). The attempts at rehabilitation of these types of organisations and its leaders could be observed in other

¹³ ‘Orange’ revolution refers to mass protests between November 2004 and January 2005, following presidential elections which was claimed to be fraudulent and marred by voter intimidation and corruption.

post-communist states, where inter-war national movements, in the belief that their collaboration would be rewarded by national independence, descended into extreme violence against ethnic or religious groups who they perceived as the enemy of the nation. For example, President Tudjman in the newly independent Croatia has often made reference to the positive aspects of the war-time Independent State of Croatia and its brutal Ustashe regime,¹⁴ despite its well-documented atrocities against Jews, Serbs and Romanians (Goldstein 1999). During the Serbo-Croat war, the Second World War featured heavily (and continues to do so) in both Serbian and Croatian political discourse and identity formation (Jović 2012). While Croat anti-Serb propaganda rested on the partisan Yugoslav project which by implication was anti-Croat and constituted a 'direct jeopardy to the existence of the Croatian people' (Ramet 2010, p. 267), the Serbian military campaign against Croatia was presented as the 'liberation from Ustashe rule' (Banac 2009, p.467).

The historical and political revisionism of the Yushchenko government went as far as to posthumously awarding the 'Hero of Ukraine' title to Stepan Bandera who was the leader of the main faction of the OUN (OUN-b) and to Roman Shukhevych, the supreme commander of UPA (Katchanovski 2015, p.217). The commemoration of these 'national heroes' who supposedly sought to free Ukraine from the Soviet Union and establish its own government, Stepan Bandera in particular, was much criticised by the European Parliament, Poland and the Wiesenthal Centre who all pointed out his Nazi collaboration and involvement in mass murder (Katchanovski 2015, p. 218; Nuzov 2017, p. 145).

The Yanukovich government (2010) abandoned these policies. Katchanovski (2015, p. 224) however, shows that influence of the OUN and UPA varies from region to region with quite obvious support in Western Ukraine where its ideological successor, the radical nationalist party *Svoboda* was very successful (10% of the vote, 37 seats) in parliamentary elections in 2012 (Likhachev 2015:258). Predictably, the support for these organisations was minimal in eastern regions which corroborates the regional division of Ukraine as was already discussed above. Whilst the far-right was in a minority among the Euromaidan leadership, their active role in the overthrow of the Yanukovich government served the Russian propaganda in mobilising Donbas's insurgency against western Ukraine's 'Banderites.' In a poll taken in March 2014, some 60, 5% of interviewed locals 'identified the main threat to inhabitants in the Donbas as western Ukrainian 'Banderites' (Wilson 2016, p. 643).

¹⁴ Ustashe (*Ustaša*), a Croatian fascist organisation led the Independent State of Croatia (NDH- *Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*, 1941-45) under Hitler's tutelage.

A number of these organisations, such as the Right Sector, Svoboda, Social National Assembly (whose leader was made head of the National Security and Defence Council) formed paramilitary units under their own command or the command of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and played a significant role in the civil war in eastern Ukraine (Bojcun 2015, p.413).

The post-Maidan Ukrainian Parliament adopted draft laws (*Verkhovna Rada*, no.2538-1 and 2558) which declares the OUN and UPA ‘fighters for Ukrainian independence’ and forbids public denial of their legitimacy in this struggle. The dramatic break with the Soviet past comes together with more laws on historical memory (possibly in response to the annexation of Crimea) which ban propaganda of Communist and National Socialist Regimes¹⁵ and make it a criminal offense to deny the totalitarian nature of these regimes (Katchanovski 2015, p.218; Marples 2015). The legitimization of violence by ‘fighters for independence’ is thus matched by the criminalisation of the communist regime - the suggestion here being that the latter is implicit in the denial of Ukrainian independence. The timing of these laws during the current crisis with Russia is difficult to ignore – historical memory was politicised and exacerbated nationalist rhetoric which in turn fed into Russian aggression and contributed to the ideological divide on both fronts between Ukrainians and between Russia and Ukraine.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict is not explained sufficiently without accounting for the ever intensifying instrumentalisation of historical narrative which is then translated into fear of the possible repetition in the present. There are two aspects to this dynamic. Political regimes create a context in which this ‘crisis frame’ (Oberschall 2010, p. 989) becomes an acceptable narrative. This was well demonstrated in both major post-communist conflicts – in wars on the territory of the former Yugoslavia and by the conflict in Ukraine. The danger of provocative politics of memory lies in the context in which certain elements of history are magnified, for what purpose and by whom (Kolstø 2005, p. 14).

¹⁵ ‘On the Condemnation of the Communist and Nazi Totalitarian Regimes in Ukraine and Banning of Propaganda of Their Symbols,’ and on ‘Access to the Archives of the Repressive Agencies of the Communist Totalitarian Regime 1917-1991,’ respectively available at:

<http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-REF%282015%29045-e>, and <http://www.memory.gov.ua/laws/law-ukraine-access-archives-repressive-agencies-totalitarian-communist-regime-1917-1991>, accessed 28 August 2018.

The second dynamic concerns the invocation of victimhood which was crucial to the commencement of hostilities in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The story of the victimisation of Ukraine during the Soviet era was exacerbated by the Yanukovich pro-Russian government which failed to protect the newly independent state against corruption and the influence of the ever rising Russian nationalism and authoritarian practices. Russia tried to hold onto Ukrainian assets and denied it the right to choose its allies by exploiting the weaknesses and divisions of Ukraine and emphasising its role as the protector of pro-Russian speakers against the Ukrainian rising nationalism.

While the historical memory of the Second World War and the Ukrainian collaboration with Nazi Germany was much exaggerated by Russia, the invocation of it did not require complete fabrication. The involvement of the far-right in Maidan's popular revolt against the pro-Russian government was used to invoke the memory of atrocities committed by Ukrainian 'fighters for independence' against Russians. Equally, Russia's attempt to block Ukraine's independence and thwart its desired political future did not need to rely on fabrication either as it easily tapped into the existing national historiography of Ukraine.

The Russia-Ukraine crisis started as a popular uprising for democratisation and the Europeanisation of Ukraine, but very soon the ever escalating narrative of crisis in which all available identity markers and historical memory of earlier struggles became conflated and manipulated into ever sharper division between 'us' and 'them.'

Conclusion

Four years since the annexation of Crimea and the Russian military support for the separatists in the Donbas, the Russia-Ukraine conflict remains in a tense stalemate, while 'the number of war dead in Ukraine lies above 10,000 (Sasse and Lackner 2018, p.139). Presenting both Russia and Ukraine as post-communist nationalising states within the context of political transformation processes, my aim was to complement the existing literature by exploring a different perspective: away from a geopolitical interpretation to the role of nationalism and ethnicity in this crisis. I have shown that from a theoretical perspective, there are a number of reasons for the assertion of ethnicity in post-communist conflicts which can be summed up as ranging from the political legitimacy it provides in conditions of new states formation, through historical legacies to its inherent contestability and changeability.

This led me to analysing the politicisation of ethno-linguistic identity which in the post-Soviet space is increasingly utilised as a proxy for ethnicity, the exploitation and distortion of this identity into political

affiliations in circumstances of competing and mutually incompatible nationalising projects of Russia and Ukraine. More specifically, I have focused on the the construction of the post-Soviet Russian nation in ethno-linguistic and ethno-cultural terms which aids its positioning as a kin-state in the continued and ever more aggressive quest to reassert Russia's regional dominance and its great power status – most acutely demonstrated by the annexation of Crimea and the armed conflict in the Donbas. Furthermore, the manipulation of historical memory, particularly the events of the Second World War and projection of divisions of that time into the present conflict. The much exploited Nazi collaboration in Western Ukraine is set against the anti-fascist heroism of Russia, as much as the heroisation of the war-time 'fighters for independence' in the newly independent Ukraine serves the narrative of victimhood and arrested national development under the (shared) Soviet regime.

The Russia - Ukraine conflict is fundamentally about redressing their national position *vis-à-vis* each other: Ukraine is seeking the extrication from the Russian sphere of interests while Russia is determined to re-establish it, if necessary, by breaching international law. This fact tends to eclipse the role of nationalism and ethnicity in this conflict, but it does not disqualify it from the analytical framework presented here. I have not argued that there is a direct causal link between nationalism and ethnicity in this conflict, but I have shown that nationalist interpretation of rivalling historical memory and the exploitation of the thus politicised ethno-linguistic divide played a role in this conflict. This role was significant enough to escalate the conflict between Russia and Ukraine into a crisis which is far from yet resolved.

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