

ANALYZING THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR THROUGH ETHNIC CONFLICT THEORIES

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Abstract

Since 2014, Russia and Ukraine have been locked in a protracted conflict in Eastern Ukraine, escalating in the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Both sides utilized various ethnically charged propaganda themes to justify their positions. This paper examines the extent to which the conflict is framed as an indispensable necessity to protect the ethnic interests of Ukraine and Russia. The paper employs the three ethnic theories—primordialism, constructivism, and instrumentalism—to analyze the underlying dynamics of the ethnic propaganda in the Russia-Ukrainian conflict. The finding suggests that the broader geopolitical interests are veiled in the ethnic narratives from both sides.

Keywords: Russia, Ukraine, Conflict, Propaganda, Geopolitical

Introduction

The Russian President accused the Ukrainian government of fostering the neo-Nazi elements that have been bent on eliminating the ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking minorities in Ukraine. He showed his determination to de-nazify the Ukraine in his military operation, which he launched in February 2022. Russia constructed the narrative of Ukrainian neo-Nazism, however, there is growing concern for the democratic bloc and the Euro-Atlantic community about human rights violations, as well as the anti-Semitic and neo-fascist rhetoric of far-right organizations in

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Ukraine. Moreover, the government's integration of the paramilitary wing of these groups into the Ukrainian Guard and tacit support for them raised further alarm bells. While anti-Semitism, ultra-nationalism, and racial discrimination do not enjoy wider acceptance, their presence is concerning. In Ukraine, Racial discrimination against Africans, Asians, foreign students, asylum seekers, and other ethnic religious minorities—Poles, Tatars, Russian Jews, and Romani—is noted and documented frequently. International human rights groups compiled and brought the incidents of racial discrimination in Ukraine to light. In 2008, Amnesty International published its report entitled "Ukraine: Racial discrimination on the rise", in which it expressed concern over an alarming increase in violent attacks in Ukraine against foreigners and members of racial and religious minorities, as well as the lack of a sufficient reaction from the authorities (Amnesty International, 2008). In a report by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) in 2017, ECRI was emphatic on racist violence against LGBT and Roma and hate speech constituting the core still dominating public discourse as a major challenge and further asked for improvement of IDPs conditions (Council of Europe, 2017). The much-hyped far-right and ultranationalist presence in Ukraine has been the cornerstone of the Russian propaganda machine since 2010. Since 2014, Eastern Ukraine and Crimea constitute the hotbed of the ethnic conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Similarly, the Russia far right and Ultranationalist, Russian imperialist, and Eurasianists groups are equally active, especially in Eastern Ukraine, by supporting the pro-Russian separatists across the border. These groups found their likeminded separatist element in eastern Ukraine, providing diplomatic, moral, and military support.

The paper covers the ethnic conflict between Russia and Ukraine with special emphases on the Donbass war in Eastern Ukraine since 2014. The aim of this paper is to analyze the ethno- political contours of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The geopolitical context is outside the scope of this paper.

In this regard, the spearhead ethnic groups or a conglomeration of the smaller far-right groups have been profiled. The development since 2014 has been viewed through the lenses of ethnic conflict theories: primordialism, constructivism, and instrumentalism. The paper is divided into three main sections. The first section delineates the important essentials of the ethnic conflict theories; the second section details the vital far-right, ultranationalist groups on both sides of the border and their role in the Donbass war. The third applies the essentials of the ethnic conflict theories to the Donbass war in order to ascertain which theory or set of theories can best explain the issue in ethnocentric terms.

The Theories of Ethnic Conflict

Primordialism

According to this theory, the idea of ethnic identity is rooted in genetics or culture. Each of us is a member of one and only one ethnic group, and that membership is set over the course of a lifetime and passed down unaltered through generations. The term was first used by Edward Shils and mainstreamed by Clifford Geertz in the 1950s. As a theory of ethnicity, primordialism makes three major propositions: (1) ethnicity construction is structurally limited, especially by ancestry, which sets the baseline for assumed kinship; (2) an ethnic group has a single identity with multiple dimensions; and (3) ethnicity can be assumed to be fixed after the group experiences violent out-group conflict and/or achieves mass literacy (Bayar, 2017). Primordialism is defined as a sentiment, or affect-laden set of beliefs and discourses, about a perceived essential continuity from group ancestry to progeny (perceived kith and kin), located symbolically in a specific territory or place (which may or may not be the current place of the people concerned) (Weinreich, Bacova and Rougier, 2003). It attributes the connection of the individual's relations to a particular community due to its birth in the same community; such bonds hold sacred and ineffable

attributes. The options for primordialism are limited by the ancestry. According to this theory, people are genetically predisposed to hatred and violence against other ethnic groups, and ethnic conflict is a natural phenomenon between different cultures.

Criticism

However, this theoretical understanding of ethnic conflict faces criticism on several grounds. Jack David Eller argued that " primordialism is a bankrupt concept for the analysis and description of ethnicity (Eller and Coughlan, 1993)." It does not explain the emergence of new ethnic groups, especially in the sub-Saharan region and immigrant countries. In Puerto Rico, the majority of the population changed from "Negro" or "Mulatto" to "White" over fifty years (Domínguez, 1997). It also does not explain how several ethnic groups in Asia, Africa, and Europe have lived together in peace for millennia. Moreover, It also does not explain the variation in conflict between different ethnic groups. Why do different ethnic groups fail to achieve peaceful coexistence at one point while causing conflict at another point between them? Conflict between some ethnic groups is more violent and leads to genocide, while conflict between others remains benign and even peaceful. The theory failed to adequately respond to the aforementioned criticisms.

Constructivism

The term constructivism does not represent a unified set of theory; rather, it enwraps different critical insights aimed at the primordialism. Constructivism goes contrary to primordialism and challenges the notion that ethnicity is fixed. According to constructivism, people frequently alter the categories that describe their ethnic identification as products of stable democracy, economic growth, welfare spending, and violence. And newly

activated ethnic categories sometimes appear to have been created out of nowhere—a phenomenon that Weiner might call "ethnogenesis" by redefinition (Chandra, 2012a). Ethnic identity is not exogenous to politics and economics; rather, both define the dynamics of the ethnic conflict. An individual has a multiethnic identity that can change with political and economic processes. Every individual holds an "identity repertoire" of nominal identities (skin color, place of origin, physical features, etc.) that can be transformed into activated ethnic identities. Constructivism does not deny the role of descent in ethnic identity, but it does not subscribe to the myth of common ancestry.

According to this theory, identities can be created and recreated according to political and economic need. Taking the example of an election, the political leaders often tie together and activate a set of attribute-values in a population's repertoire for their political ends. However, it is not necessary that the same combination be feasible for other elections or other political and economic gains. In the developed world, the issue dimension dominates, while in the third world, identity remains at the heart of constructivism's theoretic framework. As primordialism contends that ethnicities are inherently conflictual, constructivists argue otherwise. Most ethnic groups often pursue their goals through recognized political mechanisms in a peaceful manner (Lake and Rothchild, 1996). Ethnic riots are best understood not as the outcome of already high degrees of competition, polarization, and hatred between solid ethnic groups but rather as the means through which political parties and political entrepreneurs construct solid ethnic categories, however briefly, for a clear political purpose (Chandra, 2012b). The argument suggests that politicians who are at a disadvantage in competitive elections use riots to activate ethnic identity categories or dimensions that had been dormant or merely marginally activated, altering the situation to their advantage.

Criticism

This theory explains the macro-level processes, but it is difficult for it to explain what is happening at the grassroots level, and it produces resolution strategies that are too focused on state building while ignoring the underlying animosity (Williams, 2015). Additionally, as literacy increases, it hardens the ethnic affiliation. The production of more books, speeches, and awareness campaigns enhance the cache of intellect and provide ample sources for inculcating ethnic affiliations. This is an unanswered criticism of the constructivism approach's argument that modernism unfixed the ethnic affinities.

Instrumentalism

This theory contends that individuals, groups of individuals, or elites can use ethnicity for their own interests. It is a rational choice approach and similar to how interest groups, political leaders, elites, or any other individual invoke ethnic identity for personal or political goals. The approach argues that individuals within a group have strong social cohesion, and it is easy to mobilize them in the name of ethnic identity for violence and, in extreme cases, genocide against other ethnic groups. The proponents of this approach contend that tension arises when economic and political disparities exist between two ethnic groups in a society. Leaders bent on engaging in conflict can mobilize ethnicity by tapping into ethnic differences and perceived threats to the ethnic group by other ethnic groups (Lake and Rothchild, 2011). According to this perspective, ethnic conflict is a common aspect of a larger conflict process.

Criticism

However, critics like Anthony Marx argue that "beliefs and collectivities often persist even when they become costly rather than profitable (Marx, 2002).

Result and Discussion

Profiling of Far-Right Groups

President Putin asserted that the aim of his military operation (the Russian invasion of Ukraine) is "demilitarization and denazification" of the Ukrainian government (Putin, 2022). The statement evinces the two most important reasons for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The process of demilitarization alludes to Ukraine's desire to be an important member of the Western-designed alliances, while the denazification project spearheads the ethnopoltical differences between Ukraine and Russia. The former stems from the global power influx, while the latter is rooted in ethnic dynamics. In the wake of the power transformation, a polycentric world replaced the American-dominated unipolar world. The great enthusiasm and welcome that democracy and the liberal paradigm received— Francis Fukuyama's book "The End of History and the Last Man" declared liberal democracy a perfect system—sees its end. The rise of China and economic momentum in other authoritative regimes pose a great challenge to the liberal essentials of the world order. In this backdrop, the Biden administration had forged the catchy slogan of democracy vs. autocracy in order to refurbish and renew American commitment to democracy. The Russian invasion of Ukraine was a great test for the Western commitment to the protection of democratic ideals. So, in the structural dimension, there is a tug of war between democracy and autocracy on the European

continent, the birthplace of liberal thought.¹ The other dimension is more local in dynamics and limited to ethnopolitical aspects. Since 2015, Russia's President Putin has been claiming the alleged genocide of the Russian-speaking people by the Ukrainian government in the Donbas, where the Ukrainian army has been battling separatists backed by Russia since 2014 (Al Jazeera, 2022). One analyst depicts the country as, in fact, a "state of regions."

Ethnic Groups in Ukraine

The last census in Ukraine was conducted in 2001. Although it was scheduled for various dates between 2014 and 2023, got postponed due to the turmoil in the country. According to the 2001 census, Ukraine is home to various ethnic groups, with 77.8% of the population being ethnic Ukrainians and 17.3% being ethnic Russians. Other minority ethnic groups are included: Crimean Tatars (0.5%), Bulgarians (0.4%), Hungarians (0.3%), Jews (0.2%), and Roma (0.1%) (Constantin, 2022). The majority of the ethnic minority groups speak Russian in eastern Ukraine.

Following the Cold War, the interstate conflicts were replaced with intrastate conflicts guided by ethnic identity and nationalism. The post-Soviet space turned into breeding grounds for this shade of politics, and various ultra-far-right parties emerged in the newly independent states of the Soviet Union. Ukraine was not an exception; nevertheless, the intensity and acceptance of the ultra-far-right parties in Ukraine were far lower as compared to the other post-Soviet spaces. Despite their less than 3 percent ballot box power in 2019, the far-right groups in Ukraine have their prints in the military and power corridors of Ukraine. A "united nationalist bloc" with a joint "National Manifesto" was formed by the National Corps,

¹ President Trump reversed Biden's stance on the Ukraine war, shifting from a "democracy vs. autocracy" narrative to a more isolationist and negotiation-focused approach, advocating for de-escalation over direct confrontation with Russia.

Freedom (Svoboda), the Governmental Initiative of Yarosh, the Right Sector, and others. Only in the 2012 elections did the Ukrainian far-right group Svoboda get 10% of the vote in parliamentary elections. In Ukraine, both pro-Russian (Eastern Ukraine) and anti-Russian (Western Ukraine) far-right groups have been proactive since the 2014 Crimean annexation. The following are the few active far-right groups that have been part and parcel of the Russia-Ukraine conflict since 2014.

Ukrainian Far-Right Groups

1. Svoboda

Svoboda is the successor to the radical right-wing populist party, the Social-National Party of Ukraine (SNPU). The ultra-nationalism and anti-communism colors were so dominant in SNPU. However, after 2004, when Oleh Tyahnybok took matters into his own hands, he moderated its ultra-nationalist rhetoric and changed its name to Svoboda. Neo-Nazi, anti-Semitic, and Neo-Fascist elements still have ample room in Svoboda, and the entry of Oleh Tyahnybok was banned to the US in 2013. The party pays tribute to Stepan Bandera, who served as a Nazi agent during WWII and played a critical role in the Polish Jewish massacre (Goncharenko, 2022). In the 2014 he Maidan Revolution or the Ukrainian Revolution, it was an important political force in the Ukrainian parliament. Its members took an active part in the 2014 protests against president Viktor Yanukovych, who is ethnically Russian. However, in the 2014 elections, it could not deliver and failed to surpass the election threshold.

2. Right Sector

The group came into being in 2013 and emerged as one of the ultra-nationalist groups composed of different smaller far-right groups in Ukraine's Maidan revolution. The extremist ideology of the groups provided ample material for the Russian propaganda machine. When the Ukrainian army's capabilities dwindled, its paramilitary wing, the Right Sector Ukrainian Volunteer Corps, fought in ranks with the Ukrainian army in the Donbas region in 2014. Its leader, Dmytro Yarosh, ran for president in May 2014, but failed to secure the minimum electoral threshold. Later in April 2015, he was appointed an advisor to Ukraine's military forces. The life of Stepan Bandera has held great inspiration for Dmytro Yarosh. In November 2015, Yarosh broke away from Right Sector to start his own organization, the Governmental Initiative of Yarosh. The anti-LGBT position, distrust with both Europe and Russia, and conservative and neo-Nazi leanings are the essential contours of the Right Sector. Another impactful leader, Andriy Biletsky, also left the group to volunteer with the militia Azov Battalion, the paramilitary wing of the National Corps.

3. Azov Regiment of the National Guard

The Azov Battalion was established as a volunteer brigade in March 2014 to combat pro-Russian separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk. Azov is one of the most successful right-wing groups that have been effective in Ukrainian anti-terrorist operations since 2014. In the recent standoff at Mariupol, it displayed impressive feats of fight and resistance but ultimately surrendered to the Russian military. Azov Regiment veterans expanded the movement to include a political branch, the National Corps, and a paramilitary arm, the National Militia, after it was incorporated into the Ukrainian National Guard as a Special Purposes Regiment. The group leader, Andriy Biletsky, championed nationalist,

anti-immigrant, and extreme-right ideas in Ukraine. In June 2014, the group captured global attention when it recaptured Mariupol from pro-Russia separatists. According to a report released in 2019 by the Soufan Centre, more than 17,000 people from 50 countries, including the United States, have travelled to Ukraine in recent years to fight both for pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian forces (Seldin, 2019). Since the creation of all three groups—the Azov Regiment in 2014, the National Corps in 2016, and the National Militia in 2017—collectively, they are often referred to as the "Azov Movement" (MMP, 2022).

Russian Far-Right Groups

Following the collapse of the USSR, in various post-Soviet spaces, Russia's ethnic minorities stocked nationalism for reintegration with the motherland Russia, such as in Chechnya, Moldova, and Ukraine. In Russia, ultra-right groups are looking forward to the unification of the Russian population in former Soviet spaces with the motherland Russia. According to Aleksandr Dugin, the sovereignty of Ukraine is such a negative phenomenon for Russian geopolitics that, in principle, it can easily provoke an armed conflict. Strategically, Ukraine should be strictly a projection of Moscow in the south and west (Dugin, 2017).

1. Eurasian Youth Union

It's the youth wing of Aleksandr Dugin's Eurasia Party. The Eurasian Youth Union was formed as a reaction to the Orange Revolution. It established its presence in eastern Ukraine and played an important role in training pro-Russian separatists. Due to its vandalism and sabotaging activities in eastern Ukraine, it was banned in 2011. After 2014, the ESM, the Right Wing Conservative Alliance, and other

smaller groups created the Battle for the Donbass coalition, which urged a full-scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine.

2. Russian National Unity (Russkoe Natsional'noe Edinstvo)

Russian National Unity is an anti-Semitic movement. It was founded in 1990 by Aleksandr Barkashov, an Orthodox believer and a former Pamyat' member. The far-right movement played an essential role in the recruitment of the so-called Russia Spring in eastern Ukraine. When the conflict in Donbass erupted, Barkashov became more involved. His son, Petr Barkashov, organized a small armed unit under his command.

3. The Other Russia

It is the successor of the National Bolshevik Party. In the late 1990s, the founder of the party, Eduard Limonov (real name Savenko), was expelled from Crimea for his instigating propaganda of Crimean independence. The group sent around 2,000 members to fight in eastern Ukraine in 2014 and 2015. They even had their own fighting force fighting on the side of the separatists when war broke out in Donbass. It sponsored activities in support of Novorossiia, and its participants took part in the fighting in Donbass by establishing their own military unit, the Interbrigade.

How do Ethnic Conflict Theories Explain Russia and Ukraine's Conflict?

Primordialism

In 2014, the Ukrainian president of Russian ethnicity, Victor Yanukovych, rejected Ukraine's association with the EU and instead showed his leaning towards Russia by accepting \$25 billion worth of assistance. The move sparked the Maidan Revolution in February 2014, in which the scope of demands from signing an association with the EU and anti-corruption drives expanded to the cry for the removal of the president that was actually representing the minority. The protests turned violent, and the role of many Ukrainian far-right groups was visible. Although the issue of association with the EU initially brought the liberal segment onto the street, sooner or later ultranationalist, anticommunist, and far-right groups jumped in to remove the president of the Russian ethnicity. Resultantly, the Maidan revolution toppled the president. However, the wave of violence did not stop there. The pro-Russian segments in Crimea and eastern Ukraine responded equally in solidarity with the ousted Ukrainian president of Russian ethnicity. The protests spread to eastern Ukraine and Crimea, which ultimately led to the breakaway of Crimea from Ukraine. After his removal, Victor Yanukovych fled the country and occasionally appeared for press briefings. This development engendered in Russians the perception of neo-Nazi tendencies in the Ukrainian ethnic group and invoked the memories of WWII. The majority of 60% Russian took part in a controversial referendum in Crimea, and the overwhelming majority decided to be independent and joined Russia the next day. Later it was claimed that Russian forces influenced the referendum. The second loophole is that primordialism does not explain the emerging rift in Russian society over the so-called "special military operation". Put another way, the impression that Putin now has the full support of the Russian public is simply incorrect (Volkov, 2022).

Constructivist and Instrumentalist

Apart from the apparent desires of the Russian majority in eastern and southern Ukraine to be part of Russia, another element also played a vital role that can be explained by constructivist and instrumentalist approaches to the ethnic conflict. Since Catherine the Great, Crimea and Savastpol have held geostrategic importance for Russia. In 1777, during Empress Catherine's reign, and 1853, during the reign of **Czar Nicholas I**, Russia fought for Crimea. Empress Catherine incorporated Crimea into the Russian empire, whereas in the latter case, Russia was defeated by a coalition of Ottoman, French, and British forces. In the Soviet era, Crimea maintained the Soviet Navy's bases, and it was transferred into the Ukraine in 1954 on administrative bases. After the Soviet implosion in 1991, Ukraine leased the Crimea and Sevastopol to Russia in return for a cut in gas prices. In April 2010, the Kharkove agreement extended the lease period from 2017 to 2042. It was no coincidence that the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014 was concomitant with the removal of Viktor Yanukovych, but a well-calculated geostrategic move designed after the Ukraine's unilateral withdrawal from the agreement. The removal of an ethnic Russian president provoked pro-Russia demonstrations and further charged Russian nationalists on both sides. As instrumentalist is a rational choice approach, the Russian president played his cards perfectly on time by invoking ethnic-based rhetoric for Russia's strategic ends. All the far-right pro-Russian groups that have been fighting against the Ukrainian government since 2014 have received full military, diplomatic, and moral support from Moscow (Nemtsova, 2024).

The Russian government sent its army personnel in disguise as local militias motivated by ethnic identity. The Russian military's involvement was also denied by the Russian president; however, in an interview with a Ukrainian journalist, Putin conceded, "We never said that there weren't people there dealing with certain tasks, including in the military sphere. But

that doesn't mean there are regular Russian forces there. Feel the difference (Oliphant and Sabur, 2015)." On the Ukrainian side, the government also supported and integrated the private militia for its anti-terrorist operations in the eastern Ukraine region. Both sides used propaganda to recreate their identities by invoking specific attributes to mobilize the masses. According to the January 2022 OHCHR report, the total number of people killed in conflict in Ukraine from April 14, 2014, to December 31, 2021, was 14,200–14,400. This included at least 3,404 civilians, an estimated 4,400 Ukrainian forces, and an estimated 6,500 members of armed groups(OHCHR, 2022).

The constructivist shares its insights with the instrumentalist in the case at hand. The ethnic riots have been motivated by the elites' desire to achieve geopolitical goals. So there are no doubts that the geostrategic importance of Eastern Ukraine, Crimea, and Sevastopol for Russia is higher than any consideration of the kinship with ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking people in the Ukraine.

Ukrainian Side

The Ukrainian government also extended its overt and covert support for ultranationalist, far-right, and Neo-Nazi groups for its geopolitical purposes. Although the majority of the Ukrainian people rejected these ultra-far groups both individually and as a united front in the 2019 elections, their followers are openly harassing religious minorities, ethnic minorities, and foreigners in the Ukraine with impunity. Their ultra-conservative position against LGPT rights has several times forced them to attack peace gatherings and sit-ins for LGPT rights and democracy in Ukraine. The integration of the Azove Brigade into the National Guard indicates government reluctance and compulsion when it comes to these organizations. The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense encouraged volunteer military units to organize a resistance effort against Russian-backed separatists in Donbas following the annexation of Crimea in 2014

(Newman, 2014). Many Ukrainian far-right groups and their actions have been condemned by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, and other liberal institutions of human rights. The legalization of a group like Azov before Russia's invasion is a clear indication that the Ukrainian government's support for its political and strategic goals knew no bounds.

Conclusion

The involvement and media coverage of the far-right group in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine grabbed the attention of different societies and served as a vital tool of propaganda for both sides as well. The best explanation of the color of the ethnic conflict between Russia and Ukraine is explained by constructivism and instrumentalism. The Russian government used right-wing groups to foment a separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine, while the Ukrainian government integrated and supported Ukrainian far-right groups for military operations. The interesting aspect is that many far-right, ultranationalist groups were banned both in Russia and Ukraine before 2005. Those banned groups reemerged with other names and moderate motives and found state support for greater geopolitical ends in both countries. Although the stature of their role has fluctuated between extreme coverage and involvement and a marginal say in the outcome of the conflict, they still exert massive influence on the propaganda, recruitment, and fighting side by side with regular forces on both sides of the dividing line.

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