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Populism Spreads East: The Effects of Nationalism in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine

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Populism Spreads East: The Effects of Nationalism in post-Euromaidan Ukraine

By Major Paul Aldaya
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Background: Ukraine's nation-building project

For centuries, a debate over the historical significance regarding the ownership of Kyiv has created animated diatribes, spurred antagonistic myths, and fueled hatred amongst ancient friends. The dispute also led to attempts by Ukrainian nationalists to sever historically binding ties with the Russian Empire. Under the Soviet Union, the idea of a Ukrainian national identity continued to inspire individuals, including the controversial World War II-era figure Stepan Bandera, to create far-reaching movements aimed at gaining independence from Moscow. Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union, however, just over a quarter of a century ago, the former capital of the great Kievan Rus' has endured numerous protests, two revolutions, and near constant political turmoil. While other factors have undoubtedly contributed to the unrest, disagreements regarding a collective national identity continue to remain at the forefront of the struggle to create a unified post-independence Ukraine.

The recent events of Euromaidan and subsequent war in the Donbas have reignited a vicious debate over Ukraine regarding its ability to create a sovereign nation under the internationally recognized notion of self-determination and without interference from external actors.¹ Key to the fulfillment of this goal finally being recognized, both domestically as well as internationally, has been the establishment of a collective national identity, based on a common history, culture, and language (Wilson, 1997; Riabchuk, 2012). To successfully create a shared national identity, "it took the ideological innovation of modern nationalism to assimilate all social strata into the Ukrainian body politic and several generations of nationalist intellectuals to transform a disunited population into a single nation" (Yekelchuk, 2007, p.8). Contrary to nationalist beliefs, however, the idea of a "political nation" already existed before the notion of a purely "ethnic state." Ignoring this historical fact, radical right-wing groups have stressed the

importance of Ukrainian ethnic superiority as fundamental to establishing the Ukrainian state. Conversely, Russian nationalists, predominantly in Eastern Ukraine, have argued that maintaining continued cultural, social, and political ties with the Russian Federation should take precedence over any other future relationships. Thus, in the midst of Ukraine's efforts towards post-Soviet nation building, both supporters and antagonists alike have used nationalism to further their respective agendas, either towards building or preventing the existence of a truly sovereign Ukrainian state.

This paper explores the extent to which nationalism has permeated the social and political realms in Ukraine, and examines how susceptible Ukraine is to a corresponding increase in populist sentiments. This research focuses on the impact of various right-wing organizations within the context of the Euromaidan revolution. Specifically, it investigates whether the nationalist organizations Pravy Sektor, Svoboda Party, and the Azov Battalion improved their overall standing among Ukrainian citizens or simply created more angst by participating in the protests. Public perception will serve as the bellwether regarding the level to which nationalism has become more widely accepted in Ukraine and whether the “minority faith” of Ukrainian nationalism has moved from the fringes of society to a more mainstream position.

Ukrainian nationalism: Adhering to the theoretical template or charting a new course?

The very categories ‘Russian’ and ‘Ukrainian’, as designators of putatively distinct ethnocultural nationalities, are deeply problematic in the Ukrainian context.

(Brubaker, 1998, p. 297)

From Nationalism to Populism

The idea of nationalism continues to elicit strong feelings of emotion throughout the globe. From a liberal western perspective, however, scholars have often misconstrued the pervasiveness of such emotion, associating nationalism in the 21st century with ethnic violence, xenophobic rhetoric, and racial epithets espoused by radical far-right organizations. Nationalism describes the *others* “over there” who “battle to form new nations,” while *we* in the economically

and morally superior West opt to describe similar fervent expressions as “patriotism, loyalty, or societal identification” (Billig, 1995, p. 16). Especially poignant after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, nationalism throughout the late 20th and early 21st century was often dichotomized geographically as “good” nationalism exhibited by NATO countries or “bad,” specifically referring to Eastern Europe (including Ukraine) (von Hagen, 1995). Moreover, for the ethno-centric nationalist associated with the *others*, no choice exists in terms of a person’s national identity: “a man must have a nationality as he must have a nose and two ears” (Gellner, 1983, p. 6). Thus, the allegedly mandated nature of ethnicity adds to a stereotypical narrative in which nationalism creates an “imagined community” of ethnically similar groups (Anderson, 1983). In turn, the exaggeration of ethnic differences provides an opportunity for far right-wing nationalists to recreate historical myths in attempts to build ethnically-pure nations.

Promulgating the binary of *civic* versus *ethnic* nationalism, scholars themselves have contributed to the oversimplification of the false dichotomy between *us* and *others*. Without fully investigating each historical case of nationalism, early theorists attempted to generalize findings to fit largely predetermined templates. Largely credited with initially popularizing this model of two distinct forms of nationalism, Hans Kohn (1946) found that the manifestations of each type of nationalism were largely geographically based. In essence, Western nations were purportedly more democratic in their path towards statehood and leaned on civic nationalism while Asian and Eastern Europeans were overwhelmingly authoritarian in pursuing nationhood, thus more closely aligning with ethnic nationalism (Kohn, 1946). While many scholars since Kohn have forcefully criticized his argument as short sighted and inaccurate (Brown, 2000; Kuzio, 2002; Shulman, 2002; Brubaker, 2004), the prevailing notion of civic patriotism in the West and ethnic-based nationalism in the east has continued to factor into public perception well into the 21st century.² This research on right-wing nationalists in Ukraine intends to indicate how this biased concept continues to blur the lines between patriotism and nationalism. Effectively, the constant negative stereotypes associated with Eastern European nationalism may have played a role in thus far preventing Ukraine from establishing herself as a unified, peaceful, and economically prosperous nation.

In addition to intellectuals creating a false dichotomy between good and bad nationalism, Western elites have similarly misrepresented and exaggerated the relationship between nationalism and violence. Too often, they appear inclined to use nationalism as a scapegoat, citing ethnic allegiances as the cause of conflict between groups of people, regardless of the underlying origins of the dispute. As David Laitin (1998) warned, “today, we [actors and analysts alike] are no longer blind *to* ethnicity, but we may be blinded *by* it. Our ethnic bias in framing may lead us to overestimate the incidence of ethnic violence by unjustifiably seeing ethnicity at work everywhere and thereby artifactually multiplying instances of ‘ethnic violence’” (Laitin, 1998, p. 428). Similarly, scholars tend to concentrate on isolated instances of ethnic violence, such as what occurred in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, to create excessively broad predictions for future conflicts (Brubaker, 1998, p. 282). Although nationalism is deeply emotional and evokes strong feelings of disdain towards certain *others*, “only when social organizations manage to ‘translate’ these macro-narratives into a micro-reality (is) nationalist violence likely to occur” (Malešević, 2013, p. 116). Similar circumstances may have caused at least part of the violence during the Euromaidan. This research seeks to discover whether ethnic differences or some other factor led to the initiation of violence, largely spurred on by right-wing Ukrainian nationalist organizations.

To overcome biased perceptions such as the relationship between nationalism and violence, one should attempt to look past the elite-driven narrative and seek to uncover the root causes nationalistic-infused fervor. Neither the rhetoric espoused by the leaders of nationalist organizations nor the scholarly perceptions of such rhetoric are able to fully encompass the reasons why relatively moderate citizens tacitly support such movements. Rather than the oversimplified method of grouping people according to ethnicity, it is necessary to go beyond generalized classifications in order to examine the “possible divergence between the interests of leaders and those of their putative constituents” (Brubaker, 2004, p. 19). Moreover, scholars should not easily dismiss the public level of indifference towards such leaders and their ethnically-driven narratives. Rather, they must dutifully examine this indifference in order to “better understand the limits of nationalization and thereby challenge the nationalist narratives, categories, and frameworks that have traditionally dominated the historiography of eastern

Europe” (Zahra, 2010, p. 94). This paper examines this topic, within the context of post-Euromaidan Ukraine, while providing a better understanding of the concept of “national indifference” through a contemporary case study.

Scholars of nationalist movements have also incorporated the salience of language as fundamental to building a unique national identity. Since language acts as a discursive method to translates feelings, beliefs, and emotions among communities, individual attachment to a particular titular language has the potential to evoke passionate reactions. As Anderson (1983) argued, “nothing connects us affectively to the dead more than language” (p. 132). Along this same line of thinking, language historically has been used to unite as well as divide ethnically similar populations under the auspices of nationalism (Seton-Watson, 1977; Kellas, 1991; Malešević, 2013). Nonetheless, difference in languages between groups does not necessarily incite conflict. Ukraine offers an extremely relevant case study in this regard, forcing the research to dig beyond the nationalist rhetoric of elites in order to further investigate the resonance of linguistic divides at the individual level.

Despite its connotation as largely a 20th century phenomenon, nationalism in Europe has returned to the forefront of international political studies. Over the past decade, analysts have noted an uptick in nationalist sentiments playing out across the continent. Despite the fact that the European Union seemingly created increased cooperation among various ethnicities, the debate over ethnic divides has reached a tipping point, largely unforeseen and unexpected after the immediate shock from the dissolution of the Soviet Union subsided. One of the main reasons for this unexpected occurrence are the “political uncertainties and threats – real or perceived,” correlating with increased support for nationalist movements (Harris, 2016, 243). Additionally, while the initial integration into the EU supposedly negated the need for extreme right and left parties, the process of integration itself actually brought about the unintended consequence of allowing “would-be nationalists to fashion their national and nationalist agendas in ways that could appear (or be made to appear) *European*” (Fox & Vermeersch, 2010, p. 343-4). The process of integration and the resulting “threats,” have armed neo-fascist nationalists with a basis by which to intensify violence towards targeted minorities. Since right-wing nationalist

organizations (e.g. Svoboda party) in Ukraine have prior associations with such neo-fascists throughout Europe, my research examined threats of violence towards minorities and how these threats factored in to the overall public sentiment towards nationalists.

Along with an increase in far-right extremism, Europe since the end of the Soviet Union also witnessed a rise in moderately successful populist movements and associated political candidates. Despite the fact that none were elected to high-level government positions such as prime minister, the rise in popularity among these “political outsiders” nonetheless reflected a new “wave” of populism. As the “standard political response to financial crisis,” populist movements have the ability to adopt either right or left-wing platforms, depending on the disposition of targeted audiences (Ferguson, 2012). This phenomenon allows them to maintain “ideological flexibility and pragmatism” to appeal to both right-wing nationalists as well as proponents of more leftist leaning economic programs (Kuzio, 2010, p. 9) Accordingly, populist supporters are viewed as “highly chameleonic” and generally apolitical, only venturing into politics when “threatened by crisis.” (Taggart, 2004, p. 278) Nonetheless, the oversimplified classification disregards the fact that some “radical right-wing populist parties” have actually increased in popularity between election cycles and in some examples, “radical right-wing voters appear to have developed strong loyalties, identifying themselves and their interests with the radical populist Right and its programs” (Betz, 1994, 63). Based on its current political and economic uncertainty, Ukraine offers an extremely relevant case study to examine whether a similar populist movement under the guise of right-wing nationalism has the potential to gain momentum in the post-Euromaidan era.

The Case of Ukraine

Often seen by Western scholars as an ideological battle between pro-Russian enthusiasts in the East and pro-Ukrainian patriots in the West, Ukraine appears to exist as two ethnically diverse nations, geographically separated by the Dnieper River.³ This has led some to call for the civic division of Ukraine to allow for regional self-determination and prevent further

violence. The rift, however, is vastly exaggerated and primarily a product of historical myths that have been furthered by elites for political gain (Kuzio, 2015; Riabchuk, 2012; Yekelchuk, 2015). In attempting to debunk both forms of radical ethnic-based nationalism (pro-Russian/Soviet and pro-Ukrainian), Wilson (2009) has introduced a nuanced *deconstructivist* methodology to account for these historical exaggerations. Nonetheless, the fact that the myth has given credence to separatist movements in the Donbas as well as Crimea confirms both the existence as well as the importance of nationalist beliefs and rhetoric in the ongoing struggle for Ukrainian independence.

The geographical divide between eastern and western Ukraine, has similarly been used as an argument for the corresponding difference between pro-Ukrainian nationalists in the West and more Russian-aligned *Russophones* in the East. Based on the perceived divide, some analysts and politicians in the international community have proposed the notion of changing the international boundaries of Ukraine, allowing not only Donetsk and Crimea to “return” to Russia, but also other oblasts as well. Once again, this is an oversimplification of the ground truth, as various Ukrainian and Western scholars alike argue against this. Riabchuk (2012) states that there is no longer a Russian versus Ukrainian struggle for national identity, but rather dueling Ukrainian identities between those who favor EU integration and so-called “Little Russians” or “Creoles,” who prefer the historical ties with Russia (p. 444). In fact, “the fracturing of Ukraine goes beyond an east-west dichotomy and creates national and linguistic divides that are far more blurred than the national allegiances that are assumed to follow linguistic lines” (Wanner, 1998, p. xxvi). Diverging from the discussion of language, culture, and ethnic identity altogether, the divide could also be argued in socio-economic terms, between highly educated Ukrainians with international business aspirations and working class citizens who are unable to benefit from a more liberalized economy (Musiyezdov, 2014). Nonetheless, the constant promulgation of an east-west divide combined with the “language question,” both largely fueled by right-wing Ukrainian nationalists, give cause for moderates to worry.

Yet, possibly more worrisome is the unifying effect of the Euromaidan protests in late 2013 through 2014. While most within Ukraine viewed such actions as a display of solidarity

against internal government corruption and undue political influence from foreign actors, far-right groups were prominently displayed in the midst of the protests. The phrase “Glory to Ukraine, Glory to the heroes,” previously reserved for nationalist gatherings, became a rallying cry for the democratically based, pro-EU movement. Moreover the national anthem and proud displaying of the Ukrainian flag “created an impression that everybody was undergoing the same patriotic transformation” (Kulyk, 2014, p. 111). Thus, despite the aforementioned geographical and ideological divide in the country, the Russian incursion and subsequent annexation of the Crimea perhaps “unintentionally spread Ukrainian patriotism into Russian-speaking East and South Ukraine because those who previously held ambivalent, passive, and mixed identities had to choose sides during a crisis” (Kuzio, 2015, p. 164). One prominent example occurred in Dnipropetrovsk, as citizens in the historically Russian-leaning city conducted multiple organized marches in support of the Euromaidan movement (Tsenzor.net, 2014). While right-wing nationalists did not inspire these emotions from millions of Ukrainians, they nonetheless represented strong feelings of patriotic fervor along with the desire to become more active participants in forming a new national identity.

Whether or not this patriotic fervor will contribute to a rise in right-wing leaning populism in Ukraine is an important question here. As Taras Kuzio (2010) referred to in his seminal work on post-independence populist movement in Ukraine, “everyday politics, and establishment parties, particularly in young democracies such as Ukraine, find it difficult to deal with crisis conditions that may emerge” (p. 11). By contrast, populists throughout Europe have become experts in attaching a certain level of “urgency and an importance to their message,” which has afforded them unprecedented political success over the last two decades (Taggart, 2004, 275). Drawing on these contemporary examples, this paper examines the level to which Ukraine is susceptible to similar manifestations of populist movements.

Analysis

The ideology of radical Ukrainian nationalism with its cult of a strong leader and subjugation of individual will to the interests of an ethnic nation belongs to the past.

(Yekelchuk, 2015, p. 56)

Whether a real political player or a convenient media tool, the Ukrainian far right speaks to some of the very real fears of the population as a whole. A regularly threatened national identity creates fertile ground for the growth of nationalism.

(Khromeychuk 2015, p. 143)

Nationalism since Independence.

Recognizing potential for political gains in post-Soviet Ukraine, politicians used ethnic and language-based policies to their advantages, effectively widening the gap between Eastern and Western Ukraine. While Russian-speaking Ukrainians (*Russophones*) in the East saw themselves as adhering to a cultural identity “complementary to their Ukrainian identity,” nationalist politicians advocated for “de-Russification” in order to establish a completely independent Ukraine (Arel, 1995). This led to the enactment of various language policies, effectively reducing Russian to a minority language of common “language of the peoples of Ukraine” in official government documents.⁴ However, as less than 50 percent of Ukrainian children studied in Ukrainian-language schools by 1989, Russian remained widely used despite its official downgrade (Wilson, 1997, p. 21). Essentially, Ukraine was merely attempting to establish an official national language, something the state felt it “owed” to ethnic Ukrainians after decades of secondary status (Yekelchuk, 2015, p. 71). This dynamic was even more pronounced in areas west of the Dnieper River, where various independence attempts were made well before 1991.

While the topic of language diversity continues to emit emotional responses, it is nonetheless an exaggeration to assume language and ethnicity dominate political allegiances.

Based on polls conducted in the late 2000s, regional and social identity were more important than language affiliation in being able to predict the answers to politically-charged questions (Hrytsak, 2009). Moreover, indications from various self-identifying *Russophones* who took part in Euromaidan stated that their main argument against imposing Ukrainian as the national language was pragmatic in nature, rather than ideologically based (Kulyk, 2016; Kolgusheva, 2013). Thus, while the majority of Ukrainians did not see the language question as intrinsically tied to their cultural values and beliefs, nationalists on both sides used this issue as a means to highlight the importance of their respective causes.

Additionally, after the fall of the Soviet Union, nationalist groups demanded both the removal of all Soviet symbols and replacement with Ukrainian symbols. This sentiment was especially noticeable in Western Ukraine, where the destruction of Soviet monuments began even before Ukraine officially declared independence in 1991. In L'viv for example, a monument to the 19th century Ukrainian poet and political activist Taras Shevchenko was placed not far from where Lenin's statue had previously stood. Rather than taking the place of Lenin however, the erection of Shevchenko's statue had been delayed for years by the Soviet bureaucracy, likely due to L'viv's historical association with nationalist movements (Chernetsky, 2017). Taking into account the emotional attachment to such monuments, Wanner (1998) explained the replacement of monuments as a collective attempt to create a "simplified" past. She added, "by sliding in a new ideology, a refashioned cultural hero and father figure of the nation, the past is made desirable and one's own again" (Wanner, 1998, p. 186). However, such oversimplified rewriting of past experiences also allowed nationalists to further promulgate their anti-Soviet message. As opposed to Eastern Ukrainians, who expressed varying degrees of nostalgia and a common desire to remain culturally tied to Russia, nationalists in the western portion of the country created new symbols of collective memory and sought to rid their cities of anything tied to the Soviet era.

In addition to replacing Soviet symbols and monuments, nationalists attempted to reassert their preferred historical narratives through newly rewritten textbooks as a means to inculcate the youth during early education. Albeit unwittingly, the attempt of contemporary Ukrainian

historians to rewrite the country's Soviet-infused past also aided nationalists in endeavoring to use history to tell their own version of the past. The reestablishment of a Ukrainian culture was an attempt to encourage individuality while at the same time creating a new nation. However, this attempt to develop a new nation and culture through education, while allowing the choice to become "something other than Soviet," allowed for various other interpretations as well, including those of radical nationalists (Wanner, 1998, p. 82). The potential for confusion has led some to call for the establishment of new "nationalist myths," which would effectively create a renewed "national consciousness" and help bridge the "psychological" divide between Eastern and Western Ukraine (Kokodnyak, 2000).

Over the last decade, Ukraine has adopted various "memorial" laws, intended to venerate historical tragedies on the national level. Foremost among these is the solemn remembrance of the Holodomor, the famine of 1932-33 in which millions of Ukrainians starved to death. While veneration of past calamities is a standard aspect of any nation-building effort, overemphasis can amplify divisions and allow dictation of remembrances by "one segment of society to the detriment of others" (Kasyanov, 2016). Moreover, as David Marples (2007) alludes to in his exhaustive study of contemporary Ukrainian texts, the 21st century narrative espoused by many new historical texts is at risk of becoming equally as subjective as was the Soviet version of 20th century events. Specifically in regards to World War II, the common "narrative rejects completely the former Soviet version of the war and accepts much, if not all, of the narrative that perceives the OUN and UPA as heroes and freedom fighters" (ibid, p. 264). While not entirely disregarding minorities in these texts, contemporary historians in Ukraine nonetheless focus heavily on ethnic Ukrainians and their respective exploits. By doing so, well-intentioned historians run the risk of ostracizing ethnic Jews, Russians, and other citizens of Ukraine, while further spreading the divisive narrative of right-wing Ukrainian nationalists.

Despite the near automatic association between modern Ukrainian "Banderites" and mid-20th century Nazis, the connection between post-independence Ukrainian nationalism and fascism of the 1930s is overstated. The comparison is often based on the prominence of OUN symbols at nationalist-type gatherings. In many ways, however, celebration of the anti-Soviet

OUN and its World War II era leader, Stepan Bandera, has become largely commercial in nature. This commercialization is especially prevalent in L'viv, where the restaurant Kryivka (literally meaning *hideout* in Ukrainian) is just one of many ways in which “ultra-nationalists ideologues” have attempted to “popularize and disseminate their narrative to the youth” (Rudling, 2013, p. 233). Rather than being an educational experience for disillusioned youth, however, Kryivka has become known as a tourist destination, with the number of Russian visitors allegedly far outnumbering any local clientele (Chernetsky, 2017). In the same vein, images of Bandera often appear sprawled across large banners at local soccer matches, publicly revered as the hero of the far-right soccer fan club “Banderstadt ultras.” While not completely devoid of ethno-centric fervor, such displays are better categorized as attempts to celebrate resistance against Stalin’s regime as opposed to resurrecting the Third Reich in Western Ukraine.

A final aspect of historical nationalism in Ukraine is the ultra right-wing desire to recreate the “Weimar scenario” in modern-day Ukraine. Comparing the events leading to Hitler’s rise in Germany, extreme nationalists predicted that economic collapse, government corruption, and perceived ethnic tensions of the 90’s would lead to a mass revolution in Ukraine. According to the UNA-UNSO leader Oleh Vitovych, the revolution would take place in two distinct phases: “the first is public...and the second is the decisive entry of organized nationalism onto the scene” (Wilson, 1997, pp. 201-202). Removing any doubt regarding the place of ultra right-wing nationalists in this conflict, he stated bluntly: “we are the people of the second wave.” However, the Orange Revolution in 2004 came and went without such an “organized” movement of far-right groups. Rather, it would be the 2013 Euromaidan protests where ultranationalists from Pravy Sector and Svoboda would ultimately attempt (and fail) to fulfill the “Weimar” myth.

A new wave of Populism?

While Ukraine was attempting to build an independent state and a unique national identity, Europe was attempting to stave off far-right efforts to undermine its unification under the auspices of the European Union. The method chosen by most ultranationalist organizations, wary of continued cooperation under an international body, was to create populist parties capable

of gaining seats of power throughout national governments across Europe. Some countries, such as France with Le Pen's Front National party, were unfazed by the surge in support to such parties, due to their respective pockets of strong ethnocentric support. More alarming, however, was the longevity of support populist parties received in countries such as Sweden, where many believed the "marginal phenomenon" of ultranationalism would fade without much fanfare (Wodak, 2015, p. 32). On the contrary, public recognition of the populist Sweden Democrats continued to rise through the early 2000's, eventually allowing the party to cross the 4% threshold required to enter Parliament in 2010. To maintain the momentum, right-wing populists have generally attempted to maintain their distance from the extreme far-right (e.g. neo-fascists, skinheads, etc.), seeking to promote themselves as "democratic alternatives" to mainstream parties (Betz, 1994, p. 108). At the same time, mainstream parties, fearing a loss of votes to rising populist sentiments, attempted to adopt more "nativist" principles, focused on a sense of "cultural or even linguistic *belonging*" (Wodak, 2015, p. 71). In this regard, the populist movement, which closely coincided with the fallout from the dissolution of the Soviet Union has changed the political dynamics in Europe. Rather than gaining large majorities however, populists have forced mainstream parties to adjust their platforms to stave off electoral defeats throughout Central and Western Europe.

Based on the steady integration of former Soviet Union countries into the EU, it is logical to expect similar populist movements throughout these newly independent states. While partly true, distinct differences exist between eastern and western European forms of the populist phenomenon, specifically in how recreation of the past is addressed. As Wodak (2015) discusses, "identity politics form a core of right-wing populist politics: founding myths become revitalized to legitimize the myth of a *pure people* who belong to a clearly defined nation state." In doing so, populists "draw on the past to relive allegedly successful victories and/or previously grand empires" (p. 37). However, in the post-Soviet context, Eastern European countries not only have to deal with the history of World War II, but also Communism and its effects. Thus, populists must integrate both histories in order to create a "collective memory" to serve their interests. Moreover, Western populists are able to disguise their ethnically-based discrimination as necessary due to current security threats, while populists in former Soviet Union countries derive

their ideology from “explicitly xenophobic, anti-Semitic and racist politics of exclusion” (Ibid, p. 185). Acknowledging the differences, one would thus expect a smoother road towards relative success for populists in Western as opposed to Eastern Europe.

Specific to Ukraine, populism as a political movement is neither an entirely new nor foreign concept. In fact, most, if not all political parties in post-independent Ukraine have incorporated various degrees of populist arguments into their own respective platforms as a means to appeal to a broader base of constituents. After gaining independence, Ukraine saw the rise of multiple “new right” parties, including the Ukraine National Assembly-Ukraine Self-Defense Force (UNA-UNSO). As “skilled populists,” the party claimed that they would “make Ukraine a great state again,” by protecting the interests of ethnic Ukrainians above all others (Wilson, 1997, p. 78). After the Orange Revolution, President Yushchenko similarly began to increase the patriotic ideology of his Our Ukraine party, thereby moving from the center-right to a more pro-nationalist position (Kuzio, 2010, 9). Despite exhibiting certain populist tendencies, however, Ukrainian parties generally refrained from the more radical aspects of European populism, such as xenophobia and Euroskepticism. Only on the far right or left were such ideas proposed, remaining on the fringes of the political spectrum, with minimal public support (Ibid, 16). That is, until Svoboda’s noticeable improvement in local elections leading up to the 2012 parliamentary election. With its regional victory in Galicia, the potential for right-wing populist success throughout Ukraine became a distinctly possible reality.

Like other populist parties in Europe, who achieved at least moderate levels of success, Svoboda’s party platform closely resembled platforms of Western European populists. Realizing the unique dynamics of Ukrainian politics, however, party leaders keenly altered the right-wing populist model in an effort to increase their attractiveness among potential voters. According to Andreas Umland (2013), Svoboda distinguished themselves from other European right-wing populist parties in four ways: identifying a “real external danger” as opposed to relying on stereotypical scapegoating, concentrating their base of support in one specific geographical area (Galicia), aligning with moderate democrats (Bat’kivshchyna or “Fatherland” Party), and drawing voters with “diverse motives” (p. 88-94). As an ultra right-wing nationalist party,

Svoboda relied mainly on western Ukraine for popular support. In order to gain further traction on the national scene, however, Svoboda delegates refrained from delivering vitriolic messages through official party policies and speeches. Forecasting further successes, Rudling (2013) noted that Svoboda was indeed “making inroads into other regions of Ukraine,” beyond the western portion of the country (p. 248). Thus, on the eve of the 2013 Euromaidan protests, supporters appeared primed to establish Svoboda as a more permanent fixture of Ukrainian politics.

Based on poll data and election results, however, Svoboda lost most of the public support it previously enjoyed in the months leading up to the 2014 emergency parliamentary elections. Additionally, Svoboda’s role in Euromaidan was relegated to a minority status and largely used as a tool of the Russian media in attempts to brand the protestors as extreme radicals. Likewise, scholars who had closely documented Svoboda’s unexpected rise (Umland, 2013; Kuzio, 2010; Shekhovtsov, 2011) accurately predicted that the party’s political success in 2012 would be short lived, as long as Ukraine continued towards economic development, government reforms, and closer alignment with the EU. Shekhovtsov (2015) further explained Svoboda’s success as largely a function of mainstream parties’ attempt to “manipulate” the Ukrainian electorate. Essentially, Svoboda played the role of spoiler in the 2012 elections, as “more powerful political actors” (e.g. Yanukovich) financially supported the party “in order to undermine major competing players, in particular of the mainstream right” (p. 219). Thus, with the ousting of President Yanukovich, the first successful populist party in Ukraine lost both its private benefactor as well as its public enemy. Additionally, with the apparent victory against widespread corruption, the supporters of the Euromaidan as well as Ukraine as a whole, no longer required the political services of such a far-right organization as the Svoboda party.

Nationalism in the Euromaidan and Beyond

Within the context of the Euromaidan, nationalists in Ukraine had the chance to create popular momentum behind their movement by portraying themselves as resolute supporters of the protests. For the most radical right-wing activists however, the Euromaidan represented the initiation of the “Weimar scenario” ultranationalists had longed for since gaining independence

as well as the chance to create an ethnically pure Ukraine. Especially within the Russian media, the latter narrative was exaggerated to generalize all protesters as right-wing nationalists. Anyone who “spoke the Ukrainian language and held Ukrainian national symbols” were automatically branded as “fascists” or “neo-Nazis” (Kuzio, 2015, p. 162). Despite being grossly exaggerated, western media outlets nonetheless perpetuated the false narrative by overstating the impact of Pravy Sector and Svoboda within the protests (Dyczok, 2015). In doing so, the media inadvertently provided ultranationalists an international stage to promote exclusivist ideologies. Consequently, such widespread attention meant Ukrainian politicians and protest organizers could not simply ignore fringe elements from the far right in the hope that they would simply dissipate and fade away.

Beyond what was portrayed in the media, the actual role nationalists played in the Euromaidan remains a complex puzzle. The majority of Western and Ukrainian scholars documenting the protests allege that far right-wing organizations were overwhelmingly outnumbered by average citizens and largely comprised of troublemakers and hooligans. Indeed, ultranationalist protestors were unquestionably in the minority, as less than 8 percent of all protestors in January 2014 were affiliated with any official political party whatsoever (Shekhovtsov, 2015, p. 223). Moreover, Pravy Sector did not even exist as an organization until a month into the protests. Up until mid-December, the name was used to merely denote the far right corner of the Maidan, where various right-wing leaning individuals gathered amidst other protestors (Unuch, 2015, pg. 37). Thus, as Umland and Shekhovtsov (2014) noted, “the ideas that the nation has the highest value and that nationalist principles come before the rights and freedoms of individuals are being propagated by the radical nationalist groups whose place in the actual protests as well as in Ukrainian politics more generally is relatively marginal, but nevertheless undeniably visible.”

To support the claim of hooliganism, Anna Chebotariova (2015) points to the initial clashes at the President building in early December as inspired by Pravy Sector, intent on radicalizing the more moderate protestors through violence (p. 173-174). Umland further argues that Svoboda’s overall impact on the revolution was negative, “displaying racist banners in the

occupied Kyiv State Administration Building, attacking journalists, demolishing the Lenin monument, (and) staging a torch-lit march commemorating controversial Ukrainian ultranationalist Stepan Bandera” (Umland, 2013b). Despite feelings of angst towards Soviet symbols, Kyivites were overwhelmingly opposed to both the destruction of the Lenin monument as well as the torchlight procession celebrating the anniversary of Bandera’s birth (Gordonua.com, 2013; Kurkov, 2014). Therefore, the presence of right-wing nationalists during Euromaidan merely served to provide the Russian media with a sliver of truth to further propagate their anti-protest narrative.

Despite the perceived negative impact of far-right groups, however, there are certain aspects of nationalism that were reflected by the majority Euromaidan protestors. Although their numbers were marginal at best, radical organizations undoubtedly had an effect on a number of more moderate protestors. The most obvious sign was the use of the nationalist slogans such as “Glory to Ukraine!”, “Glory to the Nation!”, and “Death to the Enemies!” (Khromeychuk 2015: 142). These same slogans later became “all but mandatory” for inclusion in public speeches given by members of the interim government (February – May 2014), especially those involving “commemorations, addresses to the nation, and other solemn occasions” (Kulyk, 2014, p. 106-107). Perhaps this was partly due to the fact that Svoboda’s own Tyahnybok became one of the most frequent and dynamic speakers during the Euromaidan (Umland & Shekhovtsov, 2014). The image of Bandera was likewise transformed through the protests from a “purveyor of exclusivist, ethno-nationalism” to a “symbol of resistance to the corrupt, Russian-sponsored regime” (Yekelchuk, 2015, p. 107). Despite uneasiness towards the introduction of OUN and UPA flags and insignia during the Euromaidan protests, more liberal or “cosmopolitan” protestors did not unanimously vocalize dissent for such right-wing symbols (Kulyk, 2014, p. 100). Such dissent, they feared would run the risk of splintering the movement and reversing its momentum. Rather than acknowledging these public displays as symbols of exclusive ethnonationalism, the majority of protestors chose instead to recognize the slogans and banners as symbols of a new Ukraine, united in a patriotic protest against corruption and foreign interference in domestic affairs.⁵

Following the Euromaidan, Ukrainian patriotism appeared in various forms throughout the country. After the annexation of Crimea and the initiation of armed conflict in the Donbas, small Russian flags began appearing in supermarkets and department stores, denoting products imported from the “enemy” and therefore unfit for patriots to purchase. From my personal experience, I encountered multiple government officials in the western portion of the country who were unwilling to speak Russian, as this was the language of the “enemy.” Laws were introduced in the Ukrainian parliament representing new vigor for eradicating all Soviet era symbols from the country, including changing street and city names, reconfiguring monuments (e.g. replacing the hammer and sickle on the Motherland monument in Kyiv), and removing the Russian language from all official business (government, education, etc.).

Three years after the Euromaidan protests, right-wing groups continue to make their presence known. In the most recent show of force, thousands of right-wing supporters gathered in Kyiv to commemorate the ousting of former President Yanukovich. Members of Pravy Sektor, Svoboda, and a group aligned with the Azov Battalion organized one of the largest nationalist protests to date, calling on members of the government to take action against corruption and focus on redevelopment efforts (Reuters, 2017). Despite these efforts, public opinion polls conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS, 2016) continue to show an overall lack of support for ultranationalist views. Additionally, the public appears split regarding readiness to support and participate in “mass protest actions” (Obodovska, 2017).⁶ Nonetheless, the Euromaidan protests and subsequent conflict in the Donbas seemingly established a level of patriotism in Ukraine not seen since the events leading up to Ukrainian independence in 1991. Due to their marginal, yet extremely visible participation in the Euromaidan and ensuing conflict in the East, nationalist organizations are arguably playing a “more significant role” in Ukraine since that have at any time since the end of World War II (Ishchenko, 2016). Whether Ukraine can stop nationalist organizations from seizing upon this fervor to further their exclusivist causes remains highly dependent on the successful implementation of the Minsk Agreement as well Ukraine’s further integration with the European Union.

Conclusion

In his widely cited book on Ukrainian nationalism, Andrew Wilson (1997) claimed that ethnonationalists were in the minority in their attempt to build an ethnically based post-independent Ukraine. However, he warned that either “severe socio-economic crisis or a sharp deterioration in relations with Russia” would have the potential to allow Ukrainian nationalism to “transcend its inherited historical limitations” and gain traction in more mainstream areas of society (Wilson, 1997, p. 201). With the advent of the Euromaidan protests, nationalists received their opportunity to do just that. However, based on public polls and the lack of political success of ultra right-wing candidates, it would appear that nationalists have thus far not been able to mobilize the populace behind reimagined myths of ethno-centrism and an exclusivist national origin. The question now becomes will the invasion of sovereign Ukrainian territory (Crimea and the Donbas) give rise to a new nationalist myth and corresponding shift to the right in Ukrainian politics?

Although nationalism in Ukraine has yet to take any sort of lasting hold on the political and social dynamics of the country, the risk of populist “revolt” must be taken into serious consideration. The newfound patriotism of Ukrainians combined with both external and internal threats to political and economic sovereignty has created an environment ripe for the introduction of a charismatic populist candidate. Once hailed as a reformist candidate, President Poroshenko runs the risk of losing popular support if he fails to show adequate progress in the fight against corruption. Despite progress in some areas, Poroshenko’s government still faces an uphill battle in proving to the Ukrainian people that anti-corruption efforts are more than merely a “theatrical performance for the West” (Vadzhra, 2016). Yushchenko faced similar troubles leading up to the 2010 elections, when his appalling 2.7 percent approval rating effectively made him “the world’s most unpopular leader” (Owens, 2009). Wary of electing another pro-Russian Yanukovich type, today’s Ukrainian electorate may be forced to choose between a pro-EU candidate and a more internally focused nativist. Such a candidate could ride the “populism wave” while incorporating right-wing ideology in order to successfully push for a new Ukrainian way.

While the success of populism on a national level remains far-fetched, it should not be merely regarded as a minor headache that will ultimately take care of itself. The international community, mainly the European Union, must recognize the cultural differences that exist throughout Ukraine. Rather than assuming these divisions will “simply fade away” with a corresponding decrease in the level of government corruption, the West must accept the fact that Ukraine still suffers from a certain level of cultural fragmentation (Petro, 2014). Likewise, Ukraine must continue to reform itself at the highest level of government while also taking further steps to build a culturally and socially unified country. Doing so will not only provide long-term stability, but it will also prevent the rise of ethnocentric nationalism and the potential for a populist revolt, both of which would severely damage the progress Ukraine has made since the Euromaidan.

Author Background

Paul W. Aldaya is a Major in the U.S. Army currently serving as a Eurasian Foreign Area Officer (FAO). He received his BS in international relations from the U.S Military Academy and his MA in Russian, East European, and Eurasian studies from the University of Kansas. He spent 10 months in Ukraine (Sep 2014-Jul 2015) as part of his FAO training, where he worked with various DOD agencies. Before transitioning to FAO, Major Aldaya served in various company and battalion-level positions as an Army aviator, deploying twice to the Middle East.

NOTES

¹ While most would not argue that Ukraine is entitled to its own country, this concept becomes convoluted and more complex when taking into account the annexation of Crimea as well as Russia's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as autonomous states. See Allison, R. (2009), "The Russian case for military intervention in Georgia," *European Security* 18 (2), pp. 186-188.

² For example, the American public largely saw the violence in the Balkans during the 1990s as ethnically based, while the 2003 US invasion of Iraq was overwhelmingly viewed as a patriotic reaction against a foreign threat.

³ Scholars often point to presidential election results in Ukraine over the past two decades to highlight this geographical separation. For instance, pro-EU candidates (Viktor Yushchenko in 2004 and Yulia Tymoshenko in 2010) overwhelmingly won western regions of Ukraine, while pro-Russian Victor Yanukovich carried the east (especially Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv, and Crimea).

⁴ Arel (1995) alludes to the fact that although Russian was the language of preference for 56.2% of Ukrainians, it nonetheless gained minority status, "appearing in alphabetical order after Polish (0.4 percent of the population) and Romanian (0.2 percent)" (p. 175).

⁵ For further discussion of how the reluctance of Euromaidan leaders to break with far-right organizations led to an increase in nationalist influence, see Ishenko, V. (2014). Ukraine has ignored the far right too long – it must wake up to the danger. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/nov/13/ukraine-far-right-fascism-mps>.

⁶ These results still show an increase in public desire to take mass action, as only 37% of respondents were willing to participate in protest actions in February, 2014, during the height of Euromaidan.

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