Some Lessons from the Post-Soviet Era and the Russo-Ukrainian War for the Study of Nationalism

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Russia's war against Ukraine reveals how some of the widely shared normative and ethical assumptions in the study of nationalism can produce inaccurate characterizations of empirical reality, questionable normative assessments, and bad policy recommendations. While these ethical challenges existed long before the Russian invasion and affected the study of nationalism in general and in the broader post-Soviet region specifically, the war has brought them into stark relief. This essay reviews these challenges in the context of post-Soviet nationalism, with a particular focus on Ukraine, and proposes a way to address them.

Scholars of nationalism debate the relative merits of "ethnic" vs. "civic" nationalism and the question of whether public policy that bears the markers of "ethnic nationalism" and reinforces a "nationalist" identity can ever be justified and assessed positively in normative terms. Preference for civic nationalism over ethnic nationalism in the scholarship makes an affirmative answer unlikely, but this essay will argue that the preference for civic over ethnic nationalism usually relies on abstract assumptions and arguments that do not take into account the

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historical and empirical contexts in which policies actually arise. Such theorizing can lead to problematic claims and conclusions. One such problematic claim is the persistent labeling of nationalism in the non-Russian post-Soviet states as an undesirable ethnic nationalism, when a different label—carrying more positive connotations, such as affirmative action or decolonial nationalism—may be warranted. Another problem stemming from abstract theorizing about types of nationalism has been the failure to recognize how a neoimperial agenda promoted by Russia has often cast itself as a normatively desirable civic alternative to purportedly ethnic nationalism. Finally, there is also a risk of drawing a false equivalency between what the Russian and the Ukrainian states are doing during the war if Ukrainization policies adopted by the Ukrainian government after the start of Russia's aggression and Russia's policies aimed at eradicating Ukrainian identity on the occupied territories are seen as just two versions of ethnic nationalism.

These problems are enabled by unclear criteria for ethnic and civic nationalism, and by theorizing about "good" or "bad" nationalism that largely focuses on the formal content of policies. This essay posits that, methodologically, theorizing about good or bad nationalism needs to scrutinize through the ethical lens additional factors; namely, the sociopolitical *realities* proponents and opponents of particular nationalist policies seek to establish or undo; the *methods* used to bring desired reality into being; and the *constraints* on employing normatively problematic methods that state actors face (or do not face). Such theorizing is only possible when grounded in detailed local knowledge. Conclusions reached by such theorizing may not be universally applicable, but in application to specific cases they will be more ethically defensible and able to produce better policy recommendations.

"Good" and "Bad" Nationalisms: Promises and Pitfalls of the Ethnic-Civic Nationalism Framework

The sociopolitical literature on nationalism has long debated the question of whether nationalism is a good or a bad force, including whether nationalism is an ally or enemy of democracy. On the one hand, nationalism has been blamed for engendering both world wars, genocides, armed aggressions, and conflicts in multicultural societies by pitting cultural groups against each other. Its pivotal role in catastrophic events of twentieth-century European history underpins the negative assessment of nationalism. As one study concluded, the literature overall sees nationalism "largely as a problem to be overcome."[1]

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At the same time, there is the recognition that nationalism has played a positive role, enabling both democracy and individual rights. Historically, during the American and French revolutions, nationalism was a mobilizing force channeling people's power against autocratic rulers and empires. During decolonization, anti-colonial movements harnessed the force of nationalism. Nationalist mobilization also aided the collapse of communist dictatorships and the fall of Soviet communism. Nationalism can also enable democracy by creating a community—a *demos* that is necessary for a democratic polity to exist—and generate feelings of communal solidarity and trust, which, in turn, facilitate social redistribution and the welfare state.

All in all, nationalism "can be used to energize various political projects,"[2] which raises the question of what types of nationalism are compatible with liberalism and democracy. Much of the debate over good and bad nationalism centers on the definition of concepts such as nationalism, patriotism, and the various types of nationalism. Distinguishing between civic and ethnic nationalism and classifying civic nationalism as good and ethnic nationalism as bad, on the face of it, presents a solution: democracy can be reconciled with civic nationalism, which is broadly inclusive and centers on political principles, while ethnic nationalism, where criteria for inclusion are immutable and narrow, such as ethnicity, religion, and language, needs to be condemned. But upon closer examination this distinction is anything but crisp, which generates the problems outlined in the introduction: inaccurate characterizations of empirical reality, questionable normative assessments, and bad policy recommendations.

The distinction between ethnic and civic nationalism was introduced by Hans Kohn.[3] It remains a widely used framework in nationalism literature, but it has also been criticized due to its normative biases and theoretical limitations. Kohn's study cast Eastern Europe as having a bad and illiberal "ethnic" nationalism and Western Europe as a good and liberal "civic" one. The normative bias and West-centeredness of this designation have been criticized by some scholars,[4] and critical rethinking about Western states as models of civic nationalism has taken place. Scholars have noted, for example, that France's vaunted civic nationalism went hand in hand with imperialism toward Algeria and Haiti,[5] and that "a rhetoric of civic nationalism . . . can mask underlying commitment to a particularistic cultural or racial definition of what counts as a 'proper' or good citizenship."[6] About the United States, another quintessential example of a state that practices civic nationalism, some scholars have argued that, just like other nations,

Americans are united primarily by birth and inheritance because "the principles of the Constitution are not just liberal principles but (for Americans) 'our' principles, handed down to us by our forefathers, biological or adopted."[7] Others have pointed out that in the United States, there has not been one civic view of the American nation but "multiple traditions" and competing understandings of the American nation, "blending liberal, republican, and ascriptive elements in different combinations."[8]

In addition to implicit East-West bias, another problem with the ethnic-civic dichotomy is a lack of clarity about what *specific* policies or identity conceptions justify the placement of states into an ethnic or civic nationalist camp, respectively. The ethnic-civic distinction is easy to make on the extremes, but much harder when—as is usually the case—state policies combine ethnic and civic measures. For example, most post-Soviet states adopted "zero-option" citizenship rules, whereby all Soviet citizens who were permanent residents on their territories at the time of independence were granted citizenship in the new state, but most also elevated the status of the language of a titular ethnic group, seeking to undo the consequences of Soviet-era Russification. Dubbed as "nationalizing states,"[9] they landed in the ethnic-nationalist basket, and not much effort was spent on pondering if this was an empirically accurate, theoretically sound, and normatively defensible designation.

Because of the East-West bias and unclear criteria of the ethnic and civic designations, similar policies were labeled ethnic nationalism when pursued by the postcommunist states, but civic nationalism when pursued by Western states. For instance, France is often touted as an exemplar of civic nationalism, but French civic nationalism is closely tied to language. When the French state insists on the use of French as the language of the state and a marker of integration, it is considered a civic policy, but when the same type of policy is pursued by Estonia, Ukraine, or Azerbaijan, for example, it is typically labeled as ethnic nationalism. Assigning similar policies different labels perpetuated an East-West bias, hypocrisy, and double standard, in which postcommunist states were more often accused of discriminatory language policy than their Western counterparts.[10] Implicitly if not explicitly, the East is cast as democratically and even civilizationally inferior.

Recent critical rethinking about Western states as models of civic nationalism was not accompanied by a comparable rethinking of the association of the postcommunist states with "bad ethnic" nationalism, even though some evidence from

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the post-Soviet region challenges the designation of ethnic nationalism as uniformly "bad" and incompatible with democracy. For instance, the Baltic states, the only post-USSR regimes that are consistently democratic, pursued several "nationalizing policies"[11] that can be characterized as ethnic. Governments of these states passed laws strengthening the language and culture of the titular group and undoing the Soviet-era privileged position of Russians and the Russian language. Estonia and Latvia even denied automatic citizenship to those who arrived during Soviet occupation, mostly ethnic Russians and other nontitular Russian speakers. For its part, Ukraine has been ranked as fully democratic only during the tenure of Viktor Yushchenko from 2005–2010, which was also the time when it was commonly considered to have its most nationalistic government.

The correlation between ethnic nationalism and democracy illustrated by the Baltic states' democratic success and Ukraine's achievement of full democratic status under Yushchenko is empirically intriguing; but, with few exceptions,[12] it has been rarely acknowledged that ethnic nationalism could facilitate the transition to democratic statehood. The assumption that nationalizing policies and democracy were related only by a "conflicting logic"[13] remained the dominant view. The example of the Baltic states and Ukraine under Yushchenko could have served as a springboard for theorizing conditions under which nationalism can enable or undermine democracy. Instead, the Baltic states' democratic success has been frequently diminished by labeling them "ethnic democracies."[14] Similarly, Yushchenko is rarely credited for facilitating democracy but is commonly criticized for pursuing cultural policies guided by ethnic Ukrainian nationalism, such as undoing the Soviet mnemonic legacy in the characterization of Holodomor, the 1932–1933 killer famine in Ukraine, and of the World War II–era Ukrainian nationalist guerilla movement.[15]

Can theorists of nationalism do better than the ethnic-civic nationalism framework? Existing problems with the "bad ethnic"–"good civic" nationalism conception led some scholars to argue that civic nationalism is altogether a myth[16] and does not exist as an empirical reality since most state nationalisms are a mix of traditions and measures that fall somewhere on the continuum between ethnic and civic ideal endpoints. In a similar vein, another recent study advocated replacing the ethnic-civic binary with the concept of ascriptiveness and categorizing nationalisms as falling along the continuum of being more or less ascriptive.[17] However, as long as a typology sees nationalism as falling into good and bad varieties, while it remains unclear what specific mix of policies crosses the threshold

between these varieties, the ethics of such a typology will remain problematic. This essay suggests that a way forward lies in grounding ethical theorizing about good and bad nationalism in detailed empirical knowledge of the realities being theorized about. Below, I suggest specific ways such theorizing could be done and apply it to the example of Ukraine. Before doing so, I briefly outline how what I propose resonates with recommendations made by other scholars and speaks to an ongoing debate among political theorists.

Theorizing Nationalism from the Ground Up: Advantages and How To Do It

Scholars of nationalism acknowledge that "it is not fruitful" to talk about nationalism "in terms of highly generalized notions of ethnicity, culture, identity or difference."[18] With regard to the postcommunist region, as one scholar put it, we "badly need to 'scale down' to discern crucial processes at the intersection of ethnicity and democratization that global measurements will never reveal."[19] This recommendation links to the debate within political theory between the theorists of nationalism who advocate theorizing from principle to application vs. the theorists advocating theorizing from particular to general. This difference was highlighted in a review symposium on Joseph Carens's book *The Ethics of Immigration*.[20] In response to his critics, in particular Arash Abizadeh, Carens pointed out that the crux of their disagreement is "in the way we want to do political theory."[21] Abizadeh, according to Carens, "is only interested in what justice requires fundamentally, not in an understanding of justice that might emerge against a background of limiting presuppositions or one that might help to guide practice, given existing normative views and political constraints."[22] Carens sees his book as "political theory from the ground up."[23] He describes the general idea behind his approach as "start[ing] from the current practices, concrete problems, and real debates. The task is then to see whether there is a rationale for the practices that have been or can be articulated and whether that rationale will stand up to scrutiny."[24] A particularly relevant element of Carens's method for the approach I propose in this essay is his call to utilize what he refers to as "the real world presupposition,"[25] meaning that reasoning about what policies are more and less ethically desirable would take into account not only general "highest ideals" but also factors such as "particular histories, established institutions, [and] the distribution of power."[26]

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How political theorists should resolve the debate over what method is preferable for their intellectual work is not for this author to say. However, for empirical social science studying nationalism in the postcommunist region, applying ground-up theorizing about good and bad nationalisms and about the (in)compatibility between nationalism and democratization would generate more empirically accurate and ethically defensible analysis about nationalism in the region and its good and bad manifestations. Using evidence from the formerly Soviet region, especially from Ukraine before and during the Russian invasion, the following section illustrates how and why.

Beyond the "Bad Ethnic" vs. "Good Civic" Nationalism Dichotomy in the Post-Soviet Region: Advantages of Theorizing "from the Ground Up" and Expanding the Ethical Lens

For studies of the post-Soviet region (and arguably of the postimperial setting more generally), ambiguity about the criteria of civic vs. ethnic nationalism has generated several problems. One such problem is ignoring the legacies of imperialism and being too accommodating of neoimperialism that cloaks itself in the mantle of civic nationalism. Policies aimed at undoing colonial and imperial legacies and elevating the status of ethnocultural groups marginalized during the imperial period—through measures such as language policies, citizenship rules, and historical memory policies—are frequently labeled "ethnic nationalism." The agenda opposing such ethnic nationalism is readily seen as civic, and thus normatively more desirable. But on closer examination, this agenda may be (neo)imperial—seeking to maintain the colonial-era political and cultural status quo that "nationalists" seek to undo, and even, as Russia's war against Ukraine illustrates most clearly, to restore imperial control by force. When the (neo)imperialist agenda is perceived as less nationalistic than the agenda seeking to undo imperial legacies, we are at risk of being too accommodating of imperialism and blind to the oppression and aggression that are intrinsic to the imperialist agenda.

A theoretical framework that works from the ground up and is attuned to empirical realities could go a long way toward remedying this problem. Since the perestroika era of the late 1980s, a large number of Russian elites have embraced a (neo)imperial agenda and cloaked it in the mantle of civic nationalism. Language policies in the non-Russian former Soviet states and Russia's

reaction to them serve as an illustration of how different ethical and normative designations can result if one does or does not take into account the full array of empirical complexities around particular policy. Starting in the 1930s, Soviet policies favored Russian as the language of communism and of the common "Soviet people." While the Soviet state never fully abandoned its "nativization" policies initiated under Lenin in the 1920s,[27] it permitted non-Russian minority languages within strictly defined boundaries. For example, it was acceptable to speak a minority language on stage at a state-sponsored cultural festival or to deliver an authorized speech at a party meeting. However, it was not permitted to defend a dissertation in these languages, and insistence on speaking minority languages at a university, in urban workplaces, or even just in public in an urban center were seen as signs of "nationalism," questionable political loyalty, or rural backwardness.

Successive Soviet-era censuses showed that many "passport" Ukrainians and other non-Russians were prepared to shed their "nonprestigious" languages (and, to a lesser extent, also their ethnicity) for social advancement in the Russian-speaking Soviet state.[28] By late in the Soviet era, during the 1970s and 1980s, a social and political reality formed whereby the Russian language became the language of socioeconomic and political advancement, urban modernity, and overall prestige. Importantly, this reality emerged not organically, but as a result of decades of state brutality, famines, executions, imprisonments, deportations of alleged "bourgeois nationalists," and population transfers that changed ethnolinguistic compositions of large regions. How a particular status quo came about should be included in normative theorizing about policies that challenge it—a point to which I will return below.

In this context of accelerating Russification, as prosovereignty movements gained momentum in the non-Russian republics in the late 1980s, these republics began to pass legislation elevating their titular languages. The Soviet government, and later post-Soviet Russia, strenuously opposed these policies. The agenda to preserve the USSR and Soviet-era linguistic, cultural, and political status quo wrapped itself in the mantle of internationalism and civic nationalism, claiming to advance ethically desirable goals such as minority rights and universal rather than particularistic policies. Already in 1989, historian Roman Szporluk pointed out how Russian elites, including many anti-communist liberals, opposed policies elevating the status of minority languages and defended policies that would entrench continued dominance of the Russian language by juxtaposing

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normatively desirable universality with undesirable particularism. Language policies in the non-Russian republics were presented as standing for languages and cultures that were inferior ("local, subordinate, and inessential"), while the then–status quo, where Russian nationality and language held a dominant position, was presented as "embodying and personifying the general and universal," and thus normatively more desirable.[29]

In the sociopolitical reality created by the Soviet-era policies, official bilingualism could not have done other than perpetuated the Soviet-era linguistic status quo where the Russian language held a dominant position while other languages were seen as both unnecessary and inferior, progressively relegated to a "low-culture" status and decreased use. Belarus, where a policy of two state languages was instituted, and the Belarusian language all but disappeared from use, serves as a case in point, illustrating the practical consequences of formal bilingualism in the post-Soviet realities. In the empirical reality of the late Soviet and early post-Soviet era, official monolingualism was undoing colonial legacies of Russification, while official bilingualism was cementing these legacies. The agenda advocated by Russia was thus (neo)imperial, but it cast itself as an ethically desirable alternative to an ethically objectionable ethnic nationalist one.

Awareness of these realities makes the labeling of language policies in the non-Russian former Soviet republics as manifestations of bad ethnic nationalism ethically problematic. Describing these policies instead as a form of anti-imperialism or affirmative action would be more ethically defensible. The attention to the background of ethnic citizenship policies in the Baltics and the memory politics in Ukraine under Yushchenko discussed above could also result in a less critical assessment of these policies. Excluding Soviet-era settlers from automatic citizenship might have been justifiable given that these settlers came with the Soviet occupying forces that destroyed Baltic statehoods. Yushchenko's memory policies—even if problematic in their uncritical treatment of interwar nationalist groups—might have been justifiable in undoing the Soviet-era mnemonic status quo created by the authoritarian Soviet state. A uniformly positive assessment of these and other nationalizing policies will not follow from the proposed methodology. Details of specific policies would need to be examined carefully, and such examinations are likely to produce a debate about what ethical labeling is more appropriate for a given policy. But a debate is better than the mischaracterization of neoimperialism as a normatively superior civic project and anti-imperialism as pejorative ethnic nationalism, and debate could also deepen our

understanding of when and how nationalism could reinforce rather than undermine democracy.

Awareness of local context is critical for a sound analysis of nationalism. Political theorists of nationalism writing about language policies focus primarily on Western democracies wrestling with immigrants' rights, but the post-Soviet situation was very different. Some political theorists concede that democratic states may require "reasonable tests" of linguistic competence as part of the naturalization process, at the same time arguing that "ideally" this should not be required.[30] However, this theorizing does not easily travel to the post-Soviet context because it focuses on the naturalization of immigrants arriving in stable and long-formed democratic states that have "some official language"[31] established prior. In the post-Soviet environment, states themselves were in the process of being established and the official language debate impinges not just on the rights of future immigrant arrivals, or even just on the linguistic rights of minorities residing in the state, but on the prospects of statehood itself. A contrast between "long-established minority language" entitled to comprehensive protection and "immigrant language" entitled only to "minimal protection"[32] likewise did not easily map onto the post-Soviet realities. In the Baltic states, the debate was precisely over whether Russian speakers were an "indigenous" minority or "immigrants." In Ukraine, centuries of Russification under tsarist and Soviet rule raised questions about Russian-speaking Ukrainians: Are they a "natural" group and must the Ukrainian state maintain the Soviet-era linguistic and political reality, with Russian as a state and de facto dominant language, to accommodate this group? Or can the Ukrainian state legitimately foster Ukrainization (its methods subject to democratic deliberation) to seek reversal of the Soviet-era status quo?

Falling back on a general principle that official multilingualism is more liberal and "civic" than official monolingualism is easy—and post-Soviet states pursuing a one-state language policy were quickly labeled "nationalizing states," while Russia's opposition to language policies in these states was characterized as objecting to "departure from civic nationalism."[33] This approach is hardly satisfying theoretically or normatively, however, because it sidesteps legitimate questions that populations and state elites in the post-Soviet states were debating, ignores Russia's instrumentalization of language policies to keep the social and political status quo, and ignores the connection seen by state elites—in Russia and the non-Russian newly independent states—between state language policy and

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prospects of the newly independent states' political future: free self-government or political resubordination to Russia.

It would take Russia's invasion of Ukraine for the reality of Russian imperial ambitions to become broadly recognized, but Russia's goal of some form of political reintegration of the former Soviet region was there from the time the Soviet state collapsed. The seemingly civic policies Russia wanted its neighbors to pursue, such as dual citizenship and official bilingualism, were instruments of political reintegration. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, until resistance from the newly independent states made it evident that the policy would not succeed, Russia insisted on dual citizenship with the post-Soviet states.[34] Pressuring its neighbors, especially Ukraine, to give Russian the status of second state language has been another constant and high-priority goal of Russia. It was among the demands that Putin put to Ukraine during failed negotiations after the full-scale invasion,[35] but it has been a major point of disagreement in Russia-Ukraine relations from the time Ukraine became independent.[36]

The reason that Russia pushed so hard for official bilingualism and dual citizenship and Ukrainian governments—including those run by Russophone presidents—resisted so consistently was because in the Russian-Ukrainian context these policies were first and foremost not about individual rights but about prospects of political reintegration. Official bilingualism and dual citizenship were tools to dilute the imaginary boundary between the Ukrainian and Russian nations and states, and, by doing so, to advance the goal of the eventual political integration of Ukraine and Russia. Both Ukrainian and Russian elites saw it this way.[37] Russia's current bombing into oblivion of the predominantly Russian-speaking eastern and southern Ukraine cured many (although not all) Western commentators of the delusion that Russia cared about Russian-speaking minorities. That Russia never intended to promote and safeguard actual bilingualism—be it when it comes to its domestic minorities or in Ukraine—is laid bare by many other facts as well. Within Russia under Putin, increasing limitations on the public use and teaching of non-Russian languages are leading to rapid loss of native language proficiency among ethnic minorities. These trends are documented by scholars who now characterize Russia as an "assimilationist nation-state."[38] In occupied Ukraine, Russia is busy eradicating the Ukrainian language, burning Ukrainian books, and any speaker of Ukrainian is at risk of arrest or worse for the mere fact of using the language.[39] When Kyrgyzstan, where Russian has the status of the second state language, announced the requirement for civil servants to be able to speak Kyrgyz for official purposes,

Russia vehemently objected, its foreign minister calling the policy "undemocratic" and "discriminatory."[40] For Russia, official bilingualism was never about actual bilingualism and equality of the two languages; it was about perpetuating the dominance of the Russian language and, by extension, Russia's influence in the former Soviet region.

The language policy example illustrates the importance of empirically grounded ethical theorizing. It takes knowledge of the history and politics of a region to ascertain what sociopolitical reality official bilingualism and monolingualism would create, which should affect ethical assessments of these policies as good or bad, liberal or illiberal. Policies that upset a status quo evidently discriminate against a group that the status quo benefited, but stating this abstract truism offers no analytical leverage and may be the wrong normative label for a given situation. I do not call here for a wholesale reversal of normative priors. Official bilingualism or multiple citizenship are not universally a form of imperialism, nor are policies privileging a particular linguistic or ethnic group never objectionable. Rather, I contend that analytically and normatively defensible theorizing labeling states and policies with terms that carry positive or pejorative connotations should be grounded in detailed local knowledge—a point that specialists on Ukraine, in particular, have been making forcefully since the start of the war, addressing it not only to scholars of nationalism but to the field of international relations more broadly.[41]

The rest of this essay applies the recommendation to theorize nationalism from the ground up to the Russo-Ukrainian War. I suggest that when scholars theorize nationalism and its empirical manifestations, including state policies, our normative lens should be expanded to scrutinize not only the formal *content* of policies (do they involve some ethnic factor, such as promotion of language or religion, for example, or are they formally civic, such as official multilingualism?) but also the sociopolitical *realities* proponents and opponents of a given policy sought to establish and undo, *methods* by which these realities (preexisting status quo and desired future) come into being, and *constraints* on employing illiberal methods that political actors, in particular state elites, face (or do not face).

The Russo-Ukrainian War and the Study of Nationalism: Applying an Expanded Analytical and Ethical Lens

Theorizing from the bottom up and applying the expanded analytical lens described above to the analysis of the Russo-Ukrainian war makes it easier to

see Russia's claim that it is a force for good—because it is fighting "radical ethnic nationalism" and "Nazism" in Ukraine—as the mockery that it is. Methods with which Russia fights "Ukrainian nationalism" on occupied territories include systematic arrests, torture, executions, and disappearance of all those Russia designates as Ukrainian nationalists, even when the only sign of such nationalism is them speaking Ukrainian or not supporting Russian occupation.[42] Russia's methods to bring forth the reality that it seeks include extreme practices such as state-organized mass "reeducation" of Ukrainian children, including through deportations to Russia,[43] and eradication of all signs of Ukrainian identity from public spaces.[44] The end goal is not a civic democratic Ukrainian state but the destruction of Ukrainian statehood and nationhood, the reeducation or destruction of carriers of a distinct Ukrainian identity, and the establishment of a puppet state and/or incorporation of the conquered territory into an autocratic Russian state.

Without an expanded analytical lens that considers the *goals* and *methods* of nationalizing policies, there is a risk of drawing a false equivalency between what the Russian and Ukrainian states are doing. After the start of Russia's aggression in 2014, Ukraine passed laws to decommunize and de-Russify public spaces; strengthened the status and use of the Ukrainian language in different social spheres, such as the media and the service industry; banned Russian and pro-Russian TV channels; and put under scrutiny the activities of the Russia-affiliated Orthodox church. On the face of it, many of these policies could be seen as illiberal and ethnic. However, in the face of Russia's aggression, such policies are defensive and anti-colonial.[45] Not all may accept this characterization uncritically, and no policies need to be uncritically labeled as good, but examining the *goals* and *methods* of policies that formally may seem comparable is necessary to develop empirically accurate and ethically defensible characterizations of policies—in Ukraine, Russia, and elsewhere.

The fact that Ukraine is a competitive polity that seeks to join the EU, while Russia is a consolidated authoritarian regime that seeks to extend its imperial and authoritarian rule and subjugate Ukraine should have consequences for ethical reasoning, as these differences speak to the presence (or absence) of *constraints* on nationalizing policies, and the nature of the sociopolitical reality, or *goals*, sought by policy actors. The moderating force of the EU human rights and minority protection standards on the candidate countries has been well established.[46] By legislating nationalizing policies in a democratic domestic environment, seeking to join the EU, and agreeing to be bound by the EU standards,

the reality that the Ukrainian government aspires to create would clearly be more inclusive and democratic than the reality that would be created by Russian imperial authoritarianism. Save for resistance by the Ukrainians themselves, the Russian state is facing no constraints on its coercive, identity-erasing policies in occupied Ukraine. In fact, the Russian state now grants immunity for crimes committed "in the interest of the Russian state" in Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine.[47]

In Ukraine, by contrast, even in wartime, EU aspirations moderate the content of "ethnic" policies. Ukraine recently amended the laws on minorities and education, responding to the recommendations of the Venice Commission.[48] Another example where this moderating effect can be observed is religion. Already in 2022, the president articulated the goal of achieving "spiritual independence" from Moscow through placing limitations on the Russia-affiliated Orthodox church[49]—a policy that has broad public support.[50] Such limitations took nearly two years to legislate, however, as the Ukrainian political class was debating its specifics, attuned to the need to strike a difficult but democratically necessary balance between protecting state and national security and respecting religious freedoms. The resulting law, far from instituting a "ban on Orthodoxy," created a procedure making actions against any religious organization subject to extensive judicial review.[51] This left proponents of more radical actions against the church, seen by many as a conduit of Russian influence in Ukraine, unsatisfied, but arguably resulted in a law that is better compliant with international standards. Policies placing limits on human and minority rights need to be "proportional"—a criterion in international law. This is an important but not clear-cut standard, and experts will surely debate if the Ukrainian legislation meets this standard. This essay posits that reasoning about exactly what is and what is not proportional needs to engage with all facts in each case. In the Russo-Ukrainian war, this includes Russia's instrumentalization of language, history, and religion in its quest to subjugate Ukraine.

The advantages of bottom-up theorizing—and the difference in conclusions that would result when such theorizing is or is not applied—are also evident if one examines another key reality in Ukraine accelerated by the war: strengthened cultural "Ukrainianness" in identities, attitudes, and behaviors. In the years since independence, polls have shown a steady decline in the number of self-identified ethnic Russians and, to a lesser extent, of Russian speakers in Ukraine. In 1992, the number of self-identified ethnic Russians stood at 24.2 percent; by 2014 it

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dropped to 10.1 percent.[52] The number of those who regarded their native language as Russian declined from 34.9 percent in 1992 to 30.1 percent by 2014.[53] The start of Russian aggression in 2014, and the subsequent full-scale invasion in 2022, accelerated these trends substantially. As of June 2024, the number of self-identified ethnic Russians dropped to just 2 percent.[54] The number of self-identified Russian-speakers, which had declined only slightly between 1992 and 2013, declined by nearly a third (from 30.1. percent to 20.9 percent) between 2014 and 2021, and after 2022 further declined by half. As of March 2023, just 9.9 percent regarded their native language as Russian.[55] Support for nationalizing policies also rose. Just 3 percent support a two state languages policy, down from 27 percent in 2014.[56] Strong majorities back the removal of monuments and renaming of toponyms linked to Soviet and pre-Soviet Russian imperial rule and the expansion of Ukrainian language use in the public sphere.[57] Some regional differences in opinion remain within Ukraine, but they substantially diminished after 2014, and especially after 2022.[58] And even if one is skeptical of the specific numbers—some percentage of respondents could be giving socially desirable answers and residents of occupied territories are either not surveyed or underrepresented—the general trend itself is not in doubt. The decline in self-identified ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in Ukraine has been ongoing for many years and is well documented.[59] Russia's invasion accelerated this trend but did not create it.

How are these developments best characterized ethically and conceptually? Are we observing an ethically objectionable "assimilation" of minorities or a process that ought to be assessed with positive terminology, such as identity (re)discovery and decolonization? Reasoning from the general principle that looks only at formal markers of the developments (more "ethnic" identities, more "nationalist" attitudes, more "nationalizing" policies) would assess these developments as "ethnic nationalism," ethically objectionable "assimilation," or even "imperialism." If the Soviet state fostered Russification and this was objectionable, assimilationist, and imperialist, is the Ukrainization taking place in post-1991 independent Ukraine similarly assimilationist and imperialist toward Russians and Russian speakers? This argument was made by a critic of the "nationalizing" policies of the Ukrainian state[60] in response to another scholar who has long argued against the characterization of Ukrainian state and nation-building policies as ethnic nationalism.[61]

Reasoning from the general principles could even lead to equating identity changes in Ukraine with what may happen under Russian occupation. If many

who previously thought of themselves as Russians are now reidentifying as Ukrainians in Ukraine, how is this different from the reidentification of formerly self-identified Ukrainians as Russians, which may happen if the occupation lasts? According to abstract reasoning, these are similar phenomena: One can assess both occurrences positively or negatively, but there is no theoretical or ethical basis for distinguishing between the two. This equivalency, however, becomes immediately problematic if one theorizes from the ground up and applies a wider lens that considers methods, goals, and constraints. These, as illustrated above, differ majorly in the pluralistic Ukrainian state and the authoritarian Russian one. Awareness of these differences invites different normative labeling of identity dynamics in Ukraine after the start of Russia's invasion and on the Ukrainian territories under Russian occupation, where the ruling state officially proclaimed Ukrainian identity to be artificial and carries out harsh reprisals against those who express it.

Attention to context makes the pejorative assimilation frame further unsuitable for Ukraine for yet another reason: the consequences of historical and contemporary realities for the meaning of categories such as "ethnic Ukrainian majority," "ethnic Russian minority," and "Ukrainian speakers" and "Russian speakers." Studies that investigate conditions under which ethnic and linguistic reidentification occurs usually accept the constructivist paradigm that sees ethnocultural groups as socially and politically constructed,[62] but at the same time they face a dilemma: to study "majority"-"minority" relations at a certain point in time, it is necessary to make an implicit if not an explicit assumption that there are bounded cultural minorities and titular majorities. But in cases such as Ukraine where intergroup cultural boundaries are not sharp, the majority-minority binary is problematic. Often, current Russian speakers and even some ethnic Russians were culturally Ukrainian, fully or partly, in the previous generation or even in their lifetime. Have those who previously identified as Russian or Russophone and now declare their Ukrainian ethnic and/or linguistic identity been "assimilated," or have they "discovered" their "ancestral" identity (as a matter of belief, even if not as a matter of fact, depending on the individual's actual family history)? The question of why and how ethnocultural and linguistic identities are evolving in Ukraine is the subject of vibrant research examining individual motivations and sociopolitical drivers behind personal identity choices.[63] My broader point here is that ethical theorizing rooted in empirical knowledge would acknowledge that for many former Russians and Russian speakers we may be

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witnessing not an ethically problematic "minority assimilation" but an identity (re)discovery and personal decolonization driven by one's support for sovereign Ukraine and opposition to Russia's war of imperial conquest.

A broader implication from the Ukrainian case is that assumptions about bounded majority and minority groups that underlie theorizing about nationalizing policies—usually leading to negative assessments of these policies in normative terms for being a form of minority-oppressing ethnic nationalism—can be problematic and not universally applicable. This critique of the minority-majority paradigm admittedly needs to be better developed, but, at the very least, experts on Ukraine positing that in Ukraine we are witnessing not ethnic nationalism and assimilation of minorities but decolonization and identity reclamation should not be dismissed as advocating a nationalist position. When all evidence is carefully weighed, they may be standing on more solid empirical, theoretical, and ethical footing than their critics.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that some of the widely shared normative and ethical priors in the study of nationalism could produce empirically and normatively inaccurate characterizations of forms of nationalism and of state "nationalizing" policies. "Good" nationalism is not an inherent feature of Western states, and similar policies have been labeled as "good civic" in Western states and "bad ethnic" in non-Western states. An agenda that opposes "ethnic" nationalism is not always a desirable "civic" one, even when it presents itself as such, but can be neoimperialism cloaked in a civic mantle. Russia's war on Ukraine has made some of these problems starkly obvious—although, as shown above, they existed before the war and should have drawn more scholarly attention earlier.

What is a way toward a more ethical approach to studying nationalism? This essay advocates for a methodology based on reasoning from the ground up and taking into account not only the content of nationalizing policies but also their broader context: the reality that a particular policy seeks to undo, the reality that proponents and opponents of a given policy seek to establish, the methods by which these realities come into being, and the constraints on employing illiberal methods that political actors face. Rooting theorizing and normative labeling in in-depth empirical knowledge is necessary to assess a phenomenon accurately and avoid normatively problematic characterizations of specific expressions of

nationalism. This in turn would improve teaching about nationalism and use of scholarship to advise policy makers.

Given the centrality of democracy to human welfare, how exactly nationalism and democracy are related today needs to be better theorized. Evidence from the post-Soviet region, including Ukraine, shows that democracy and strong nationalism can be compatible, that civic and cultural identities can strengthen concurrently, and that this process can be accompanied by increased support for democracy.[64] A theory of complementarity of civic and ethnic identities can advance our understanding of when and how nationalism can reinforce democracy. Such a theory can become a better alternative—empirically, theoretically, and ethically—than the seemingly compelling but ultimately wanting bad ethnic-good civic nationalism dichotomy.

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Abstract: This essay argues that Russia's war on Ukraine and the post-Soviet experience, more generally, reveal ethical, empirical, and theoretical problems in the study of nationalism in the region; namely, the tendency to designate anti-colonial, non-Russian nationalism as a "bad" ethnic type and the related tendency to see opposition to it as a "good" civic, nationalist agenda while in reality, the latter agenda can be imperial. Conflation of imperialism with civic nationalism and underappreciation of the democratic potential of non-Russian nationalism are problematic. The essay argues that these problems stem from theorizing about ethnic and civic nationalism that is rooted in abstract principles and does not take into account the empirical realities in which specific policies originate. I suggest that a more ethically and theoretically accurate characterization of types of nationalism as good or bad can be achieved by applying a methodology that takes into account not only formal markers of "ethnic" and "civic" policies but also the realities proponents and opponents of a given policy seek to establish and undo, the methods by which these realities come into being, and the constraints on employing illiberal methods that political actors face.

Keywords: nationalism, ethnic nationalism, civic nationalism, democracy, Ukraine, Russia, Russo-Ukrainian war, postcommunism