Political Independence after the Invasion of Ukraine

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In this blog, Brian Girvin (University of Glasgow) discusses the status of political independence after the invasion of Ukraine. The blog focuses on two themes. The first assesses Vladimir Putin’s essay ‘On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians’, which denies that Ukraine has had or can have an independent existence. While many of Putin’s claims are contentious, they highlight nationalist presuppositions that are widely held in Russia and elsewhere.

The second theme focuses on the consequences of the invasion through the lens of nationalism. It argues that Putin adopts perennialist assumptions to justify his position. This draws attention to his use of majoritarian state (dominant) nationalism to promote a form of imperial nationalism. Consequently, political independence is now more insecure, which is leading to the re-militarisation of Europe. The prospect of ‘nuclear nationalism’ is now greater, as is the challenge to the existing international order.

Political independence, involving state sovereignty and territorial integrity, is a much sought-after objective. Many are prepared to die to achieve it, while most of the wars since 1945 have involved conflict between those asserting the right to national self-determination and those who deny it. However, what is often not acknowledged is that many are also prepared to kill to deny political independence to a nation demanding self-determination. Most states are prepared to use military force to subdue autonomist or secessionist movements. What is also notable and rarely remarked is that most of the violence has its origin in the actions of the state rather than that of the secessionists. Alternative and non-violent solutions are rarely considered or when they are it is too late.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is slightly different, as Vladimir Putin’s aim is to extinguish the independence of an existing member of the United Nations. Putin’s justification for invading Ukraine was clearly spelt out in a long and tendentious article ‘On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians’, published in July 2021.
it he reaffirmed his position that ‘Russians were one people – a single whole’, which includes Ukraine and Belarus. It provides important insights into his thinking and the full text can be read here: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181

Putin makes the case that Ukraine can only be considered sovereign when it is part of Russia:

Our spiritual, human and civilizational ties formed for centuries and have their origins in the same sources, they have been hardened by common trials, achievements and victories. Our kinship has been transmitted from generation to generation. It is in the hearts and memory of people living in modern Russia and Ukraine, in the blood ties that unite millions of our families.

Historians of nationalist movements will identify the component parts of this claim. It emphasises ideas common to many nationalist movements, including a shared past, a common territory and a spiritual essence within the nation. All nationalisms provide national narratives that draw on a carefully selected history. Putin is no different here, citing national origins in Ancient Rus and Kyiv as the spiritual centre of not only Russia but Ukraine and Belarus. Putin emphasises the essential unity of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, while Ukrainian nationalists highlights a different origin story, emphasising a distinctive Ukrainian past and present.

When considering these questions and the contending claims, it is important to distinguish between nationalists who are in control of a state (dominant and usually a majority) and sub-state nationalists who occupy a territory within a state. State dominant nationalism routinely rejects autonomous or secessionists claims by sub-state nations, often denying their national identity and rejecting even moderate demands for self-determination (even well short of secession). Putin’s nationalism is the state (dominant) variety, resting as it does on a particular historical narrative. What Putin shares with other dominant nationalists is an insistence on territorial integrity and a refusal to acknowledge equality among the nations that share the territory. For dominant nationalists there can be no right to self-determination. [1]

In common with most nationalists, Putin carefully cheery picks his history to stress
elements of continuity, shared values and political integration. His claim is that there is a shared national culture in terms of territory, language, economic relations, rulers and the orthodox religion. He stresses that Russia and Ukraine occupy ‘essentially the same historical and spiritual space.’ Any divisions that appear are short term and attributable to external agents seeking to ‘pit the parts of a single people against one another’, and undermine this essential unity. The implication here is that this common national culture is ancient (at least 1000 years old) and has been maintained intact despite invasion, aggression and division. This nation (state) is considered special because it is not a product of the modern world, but has its origins in historical processes that are much older and deeply entrenched in faith, soil and culture.

Putin adopts what historians usually describe as a perennialist account of nationalism and national identity. Perennialists highlight the historic origins of the nation in pre-modern times, conflating state and nation, as does Putin when he invokes ‘Ancient Rus’ as the largest state in Europe at the time. Similar claims have been made for England, Serbia and Denmark, among others. This emphasis on the pre-modern origin of the nation and its continuity over long periods of time reinforces the nationalist view that their nation survives despite the vicissitudes of history. While historians and political scientists may reject perennialism, these claims are widespread among nationalists in many parts of the world. Irish nationalists claim they are the oldest nation in Europe (though there is considerable competition for this honour), while Chinese nationalists emphasise the distinctive character of the nation’s 3,000-year-old history.

Putin’s discussion conflates state and nation, concluding that the expansion of the Russian state to include the territory of Ukraine was motivated by ‘the common faith, shared cultural traditions, and – I would like to emphasize it once again – language similarity.’ Thus, by the seventeenth century Russia and Ukraine were not only members of one state (a not unusual feature of imperial states), but were also one people. Accordingly, there was ‘no historical basis’ for a distinctive Ukrainian people or nation separate from Russia. Putin argues instead that the idea of Ukraine as a separate nation was a concoction of Poland and others to divide the nation. Putin shares this view with many dominant (majoritarian) nationalists that campaigns for self-determination are an attempt to divide and rule a united people. He blames Lenin
and the Bolsheviks for inventing the Ukrainian status as a nation, condemning the political architecture of the Soviet Union in respect of its constituent republics. For him these internal borders were never state borders but administrative ones.

For Putin, the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the declaration of independence by Ukraine and other territories essentially robbed Russia of its sovereign territory. He furthermore rejects the notion that a Ukrainian national identity exists. He asserts that an unrepresentative elite are forcibly assimilating the majority into a political community they do not wish to be associated with. This forced assimilation is ‘comparable in its consequences to the use of weapons of mass destruction against us’ (emphasis mine). On more than one occasion he has termed Ukraine policies as ‘genocidal’, comparing them with those of Nazi Germany. Moreover, he considers Ukraine to be a puppet regime put in place by western anti-Russian forces. The outcome for him is that it does not matter who is in power in Kyiv, the real masters of the situation are western anti-Russian states. Accordingly, Ukraine has no right to exist as an independent state.

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Reading Putin’s fascinating article provides extensive evidence for the continuing salience of nationalism in international relations as well as in domestic political culture. That Putin is prepared to wage war in support of his views reinforces the significance of nationalism for him, but also for the rest of Europe. It suggests that his concerns are more than security, as his denial of Ukrainian nationality or statehood is not required to achieve his ends. At the time of writing, it is also clear that the majority of Russians endorse his invasion. Thus, my country right or wrong takes priority over moral or legal issues when nationalist goals are in question. The reaction of the majority of Ukrainians, the populations of the Baltic states and Poland adds weight to this continuing salience when state sovereignty is threatened.

As already indicated, there is little here that cannot be found in various nationalist world views in Europe and elsewhere. However, it is worth examining some of the presuppositions in Putin’s exegesis to illuminate some attributes of dominant (majoritarian) state nationalism in the twenty first century. One general contention is
that political independence remains precarious, even in the twenty first century. The success of the anti-colonial movement in the second half of the twentieth century increased the number of independent states exponentially. Moreover, state sovereignty and independence seemed more secure than at any time in history. The widespread opposition to the American invasion of Iraq and the failures of the Soviet Union and the United States in Afghanistan reinforced the consensus that sovereignty and territorial integrity were fundamental values in the post-colonial world. Even those states that supported the independence of Kosovo insisted that this was an exceptional case which did not invalidate the general principle. This consensus is now in question as a consequence of Russian intervention in Chechnya, the war with Georgia, the annexation of Crimea, active support for secessionists in Ukraine and the invasion itself. It is also clear that Belarus is now a Russian client state, as may prove to be the case with other former Soviet republics.

If the principle of sovereignty and territorial integrity has been weakened, so has the impact and influence of international law in this respect. There are no enforcement mechanisms available that would allow a decision of the International Court of Justice to be applied. Indeed, Russia has boycotted this forum which, though conservative, reflected the post-colonial consensus in a legal manner. Another consequence is likely to be the replacement of a quasi-legal international order with one based on the principle that ‘might is right’. This marks a return to an earlier age, when military success legitimised outcomes, as proved to be the case with the partition of Poland and the Congress of Vienna.

Putin believes his position is morally justified; not surprisingly given his case discussed above. However, it is the use of military force to achieve his ends that marks the most significant shift in global politics. Other states will take note that military power can achieve political objectives and may be tempted to take action when previously they were more cautious. State’s will now have to recognise that sovereignty can ultimately only be secured with military deterrents. The European Union has been especially complacent in this respect; its default position has been that virtually every issue can be negotiated in good faith. Defence spending has been relatively low, while resources have been concentrated on social and welfare spending. The prospect of war has changed this benign approach to international relations. Most dramatically, Germany has abandoned its cautious diplomatic strategy
and is now increasing its defence spending significantly. Remilitarisation of Europe is likely to be one of the key consequences of this crisis. The Baltic states are especially vulnerable to Russian expansionism. Given their size, they would not be able to defend themselves without the active support of the EU and NATO. This places them in a more advantageous position than Ukraine, but an enhanced military presence on their borders will now be required.

Nor should the adoption of nuclear nationalism be ruled out. North Korea has used its nuclear programme as both an offensive and defensive tactic in a hostile environment. Would Russia have contemplated invading Ukraine if it still had a nuclear deterrent? General Charles De Gaulle once remarked that no state could consider itself great without a nuclear capacity. This might be amended to claim that no state can be fully independent without a nuclear deterrent.

Another consideration is the significance of globalisation, interdependency and economic integration in preventing war. Liberals have made the claim since the nineteenth century that free-trade and economic interdependency prevents conflicts between states. More recently, Thomas Friedman extended this to claim that there had never been a war between states when each had a McDonald’s franchise. These are variants on the democratic peace but without the complex conditions that the latter theory applies. What this fails to appreciate is that conflict is rarely about resources or at least not primarily. Even resource conflicts have non-economic origins. The liberal view is correct in so far as open economic systems allow for free movement between states. In these conditions a state may not have to go to war to obtain resources, as was once the case. Yet this is only one side of the equation, the other is the centrality of nationalist goals that are not achievable through, trade, treaty or negotiation. China’s threat to Taiwan and Russia’s invasion cannot be satisfactorily explained in economic terms but can through the lens of nationalist presuppositions about ethnicity, territory and history. There is a rationality here, but it is not one that liberal economics recognises, as it presupposes those decisions are based on economically efficient outcomes. The rationality involved is based on a more complex and political range of decisions. One possible outcome is the fracturing of the global economic system that has dominated since the 1990s. There is likely to be greater emphasis on regional cooperation and self-sufficiency. The EU is now committed to self-sufficiency in energy and may also prioritise security over
globalisation in the future (Covid had already shifted opinion on long-distance supply chains).

Nationalism remains the most salient world view for most people in most states. It is possible for nationalism to be banal if not benign, but it can also be authoritarian if not totalitarian in its expansionist objectives. Putin’s justification for invasion is nationalistic, as is the response of most Ukrainians. Similar, if less violent, world views are at play in Brexit and in the standoff between the Spanish state and Catalonia. The crisis also shows us that ideas are important; nationalist ideas more than most. Thus, approaching this crisis through the lens of nationalism can provide important insights into Putin’s world view and his motivation.

Putin’s world view is very similar to many irredentist claims made by dominant nationalist against neighbouring states or against sub-state nationalities. Historic ties are emphasised but current political opinion is ignored. Opposition to the claims are always in bad faith (often part of a conspiracy theory) while the nationalist cause is righteous and legitimate. This is also a perennialist conception of nationalism. If the nation is ‘ancient’ and the state can demonstrate institutional continuity, it is possible for dominant nationalism to insist that a single nation inhabits the state’s territory. This is a very static model of both nationhood and statehood and excludes historical change and political dynamics.

The continuing widespread use of ‘nation-state’ in the literature reinforces the conflation between state and nation. This conflation has affected most parts of the world since the French Revolution, creating political instability and in many cases ethnic cleansing. It is important here to reconsider the relationship between state, territory and the nation. Historically, expansionist states such as England, Russia and France acquired territory through war, marriage and treaty. Little consideration was given to the ethno-religious-linguistic composition of the inhabitants of these territories. Coercion and repression controlled the subject populations. However, with the impact of nationalism, democracy and modernity, it became clear that while imperial territorial constructs may be states they are not nation states.
This continuing conflation between state and nation means that if a section of the ‘people’ deny that they are part of the nation but live in the state and territory, this contention leads to coercion, assimilation, expulsion or secession. The Ukrainian crisis asks us to focus again on the multi-ethnic (or national) status of most states. If that is recognised by the international system (which it currently does not), it might be possible to address the complex nature of territory, statehood and nationality in contested regions. I do not consider that this will be easy, especially when war is involved, but creative thinking on the matter is required. This problem is not limited to Russia and Ukraine; similar pressures and considerations are present in reasonably stable liberal democracies such as Canada, Spain and the UK. Canada and the UK have responded to this challenge in a creative and fairly open fashion, though not without considerable controversy. Elsewhere, states such as China, India and Sri Lanka have employed overwhelming force to assert the majority nationalism’s dominance over sub-state nations seeking autonomy if not independence.

Another feature that nationalism brings to this discussion is the concept of ‘imperial nationalism’. At first sight this may appear incongruous. The conventional historiography considers nationalism and empire to be opposites and this view has considerable validity. From the Eighteenth century, nationalism has challenged imperial claims to control peoples and territory. Yet, there is a growing literature on the emergence of an imperial nationalism in the nineteenth century, which recognises an ethnic core at the heart of the imperial system and a dominant nationalist discourse that is popularly based and which actively defends the system.

Putin is not seeking to restore the Soviet Union, though he is attracted by its authoritarian and centralising attributes. His aim is to restore a version of Czarist Russia appropriate to the twenty first century. In contrast to Czarism, Putin’s imperial ambitions are grounded in a majoritarian nationalism that conceives of a single nation-state incorporating Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. This conception could also include the former Soviet republics that became independent in the 1990s, as Putin implicitly denies their sovereign status.

There is a wider issue at stake in this discussion, which involves the status of nations within multi-national states. The current consensus is that secession is only legitimate when the existing state accepts the institutional outcome. Serbia and other states
refuse to accept that Kosovo is a legitimate state, whereas the UK government agreed to accept the outcome of the referendum on independence in Scotland. Most states are closer to Serbia’s position than the UK’s. What most share is the principle that territorial integrity is a primary value in international relations, even when a section of the people demonstrate that they do not wish to remain within the state (Kosovo or Taiwan or indeed Crimea). What Putin’s apologetics share with the consensus is the implicit claim that if a region has been historically integrated into the state, it cannot subsequently secede by appealing to the right of nations to self-determination. This remains a widely shared view, as the evidence to the International Court of Justice on Kosovo demonstrates. Applying this view would have entailed that Ireland did not have the right to political independence after a majority of the Irish electorate voted for a party whose main platform was independence. Britain waged war on Ireland. International law and some theologians sustained Britain’s right to do so. It might be asked how we might respond to a region that historically accepted citizenship of the state, but whose population now wishes to vote on whether or not to secede.

Utilising a nationalist lens to assess this crisis and more general problems will not provide all the answers to Ukraine or other conflicts where national identity is at the heart of the problem. However, bringing the nation more clearly into focus and distinguishing between state and nation for analytical reasons can provide a better picture. It is also necessary to recognise that nationalism continues to appeal at an emotional level, in a fashion that has major political consequences. By bringing the nation back in and respecting the answer we get to questions will also confront the imperial model of political rule that Putin has used to justify his aggression against an independent state.

[1] Daniel Cetrà and Coree Brown Swan, ‘State and Majority Nationalism in Plurinational States: Responding to Challenges from Below’, Nationalism and Ethnic Politics 26: 1 (2020), 1-7 for an introduction to these themes. This is a special issue on the question of majority nationalism.
Stefan Berger and Alexei Miller (Eds.), *Nationalizing Empires* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2015) for a comprehensive discussion of this topic.

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