Understanding the Nuances of Nationalism in Eastern Europe: The Importance of Historical and Cultural Context in Modern Politics

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There exist striking and nuanced differences between the forms of nationalism that exist in Western nations and Eastern Europe; as a result, those living in Western nations must take great caution in understanding those nuances to accurately assess the role that nationalism has played and continues to play in Eastern European identity, culture, and politics. Vastly different historical roles, struggles, and circumstances have led to a divide where, if we do not understand these differences, we may too quickly adopt a particular view on the political happenings of a nation – reducing their history to our own, and disregarding their struggle. This is especially relevant in the context of Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine, where reductionist and often misleading analysis is constantly found in Western news and social media, hindering the understanding necessary for public outcry and support in the independence and sovereignty of Ukraine and the Ukrainian people.

Historical and contemporary analysis of Western power and influence, and, in turn, the popular worldview accepted by those living under these Western powers, reveals a deep misunderstanding of Eastern European governance, tradition, and way of life. Eastern European nations were often not subject to self-governance, and in response have had to actively fight for preservation of culture and identity. Western powers, many of which were nations that ruled over or heavily influenced some of those Eastern European nations, have not been subject to such a demand. It is further essential to understand that nationalism, in the modern sense, is in part a byproduct of the Enlightenment. The ideals of the Enlightenment, and in part nationalism,

began to diffuse outside of the Western world in the centuries that followed its peak in the mid- to late- 18th century. As Enlightenment principles spread to Eastern Europe, some ideologies and beliefs did not diffuse as readily as others; due in part to religious and linguistic differences, the uptake of the new philosophies that emerged as a result of the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the Scientific Revolution did not have as quick of an uptake in Eastern Europe, especially in the Muslim controlled Balkans and to a lesser extent the Orthodox world. This is not to say that many great philosophers, scientists, and thinkers did not emerge from these nations—but rather that the West held a cultural hegemony over these newly emerged academic pursuits. It was around this time that political world powers, and in particular Germany and later the United States, began classifying the collective struggles of Eastern European nations in the perspective of the nationalism that existed in their own nations – a practice that continues to this day. There is a fundamental difference between the nationalism observed in Western nations and the nationalism observed in Eastern Europe: nationalism that stems from oppression is not the same as nationalism that stems from oppressor nations.

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Lands dominated by a nobility, such as Bohemia, Croatia, Moravia, Silesia, Poland-Lithuania, Hungary, Transylvania, and Ukraine, were not subject to 'national rulers' but rather foreign princes who were hostile towards the local cultures that made up their protectorate. As was the case with the forced Germanization of Bohemia by the Habsburgs, many nations were forced to assimilate and abandon public use of their language and expression of culture in exchange for protection (e.g., from Turkish aggression), economic relief, or in fear of conquest. The national identity that existed in Eastern Europe came from a fluid, familial form of nationalism. Estate, class, profession, language, and religion were the primary motivators for this Eastern European form of 'nationalism', forming an individual pride for the nation. To contrast this, many of the forms of nationalism that began to form in France, Germany, the United States, and Russia (although not a Western nation) began as a way to strengthen the nation and to construct dominance and cultural hegemony over others nations and peoples, finding ideological roots in sovereignty, national exceptionalism, and patriotism.

A number of national revivals in these ethnic conglomerate nations, such as the one seen in Hungary following Joseph II's 1784 decree to make German the official language of the Austrian controlled lands of the Habsburgs, became more prevalent as we entered the 19th century. Similar revivals to protest Habsburg Germanization were seen soon after in Serbia, Croatia, Romania, and Slovakia where active strongholds of language and culture began to emerge. This created a unique form of Eastern European nationalism in which many of the nations that may be considered part of 'Central Europe' began to center their identities around

a shared, and often suppressed language and culture. While this is seen in Hungary, Romania, and the Balkans, due to the partitions of Poland-Lithuania a unique ethnolinguistic push can be seen because of the Germanization and Russification that were so prevalent during the 19th century. The resulting ethnolinguistic model of a nation is unique to this region of Europe, while in the West the use of French in Belgium and Switzerland as well as the use of German in Austria, Switzerland, and Luxembourg do not define these nations as French or German. Similarly, the coexistence and use of both Russian and Belarusian in Belarus demonstrates a similar, albeit slightly different, view on the making of the nation. It seems as if this ethnolinguistic relationship has not disseminated to those Eastern European nations that have lived under the control of others nations and instead the pluricentric language ('plurizentrische Sprache') model is a direct product of the security of a nation. The language reforms, forced Germanization or Russification, and departure from the prominent local culture forced local populations to accept great risk, up to and often including death, to preserve their culture. The lengths at which the Polish people are willing to go to maintain their identity may best be summarized in the words of the national anthem of Poland ('Mazurek Dąbrowskiego'), adapted from Józef Wybicki's 1797 text, in the lyrics "Poland has not yet perished, so long as we still live"('Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła, Kiedy my żyjemy.') Like the Polish, many of the people of Eastern Europe have and continue to hold a tenacity to maintain their identity and culture despite the challenges put before them.

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Suppression of the Ukrainian language is an example of such, where Russification and Russian domination of the Ukrainian homeland have been seen for centuries, continuing today with Russia's war on Ukraine. Acts suppressing Ukrainian language and culture can be traced back as far as the 17th century, however Tsar Peter I's actions in 1720 marked a watershed in the suppression and control of Ukrainian language and cultural elements: after expurgating all elements of the Ukrainian language from religious books and seizing those books printed in the Ukrainian language, the laws and decrees passed by the Russian empire became increasingly more aggressive, asserting a cultural and linguistic control over the Ukrainian population. Much like their neighbors, the Ukrainian people did not allow their culture to be stripped away from them. Instead, like many other oppressed Eastern European populations, the Ukrainian people withstood and fought for their identity despite a constant pressure that sought to strip away their national pride. The case of oppression and Russification in Ukraine is unique in the sense that there is a modern and ongoing attempt by Russia to gain control over Ukrainian territories; since Ukraine gained independence in 1991, struggles over

language – especially in the southern and eastern parts of the country, which a re subject to stronger influence by Russia – have exacerbated conflict amongst both Ukrainians and Russians. Further, the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion and attack of Ukraine in February 2022 has led to outbreak of war in Ukraine, where the Ukrainian people continue to fight the occupation and control of Russia in their sovereign territory.

The function of nationalism today in Ukraine should be viewed in the context of those struggles that the Ukrainian people have withstood and fought up until this point; much like Count Kunó Klebelsberg argued for the aim of Hungarian nationalism, "this is the healthy aim of Hungarian nationalism" all of which is the result of "the individual – as well as the nation – not only suffers, but also profits when he passes through a crisis." There exists a constructive function of nationalism for Ukraine during this trying period of time: through passing through this crisis, of which they had no choice but to enter, the identity, strength, and tenacity of the Ukrainian people will be solidified. Through a historically conscious lens this becomes evident, however when viewed purely through Western views of nationalism there is potential for misclassification to arise. Western nations tend to view nationalism as a concept "as archaic, narrow, intolerant, racist, zealous, irrational, uncompromising, a hindrance to the creation of a more globalized world, and an overall danger to the international order."

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Creating additional threats is misleading media and narratives presented by news outlets and personalities in popular culture such as Tucker Carlson and Elon Musk. Carlson, a popular media personality at Fox News, has publicly advanced a narrative that claims the sole purpose for war in Ukraine is to accelerate regime change in Russia, that Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskiy has created a government more controlling and anti-democratic than that of Russia, and that Zelenskiy "is a dictator... a dangerous authoritarian who has used a hundred billion in U.S. tax dollars to erect a one-party police state in Ukraine." Popular figures with cult-like followings, such as Elon Musk, have also advanced misunderstanding and incompetence over the war in Ukraine, going as far as to even profit from the deaths of tens of thousands. Musk, whose Starlink satellite internet provider deployed infrastructure to allow Ukrainians access to internet has since called for Pentagon funding of the service, where use of once present infrastructure has been halted and "Ukrainian troops have reported outages of their Starlink communication devices on the frontline, hindering efforts to liberate territory from Russian forces, according to its officials and soldiers." Additionally,

Musk has publically made proposals for peace between Russia and Ukraine, which has garnered Kremlin support, in Tweets that seemingly ignore Ukrainian history and push pro-Russian narratives to uninformed media consumers. The claims that are made by individuals like Carlson and Musk become significant threats as they push proven misinformation and propaganda – going as far as to even be used by Russian news sources as propaganda to reiterate and show American support for the Russian war in Ukraine. The now misinformed viewers in Western nations experience further division and polarization in their views towards not only the Russian war in Ukraine, but rather in the politics of Eastern Europe as a whole.

For those citizens of Western nations to best understand the importance of nationalism and the role that it plays for Eastern European nations fighting for their very existence—especially in the case of Ukraine today—it might be best to look at the Western nationalism that emerges from those who are usually critical of their own nation when under attack. George Orwell, in defense of his 1941 essay England, your England, sought to express that there are times where one must adjust their priorities: the nation, and only then what kind of nation. To Orwell, there were times where it was inappropriate to dwell on the distinctions and minutiae of national politics and where it was necessary to rather focus on the nation as a whole. Parallels can be drawn in other cases in national tragedy, such as the September 11 attacks in the United States. Heightened nationalism and increased bipartisan collaboration were observed, where political differences and contentions became trivial and an increased sense of national collectivity began to emerge. It becomes clear that nationalism plays a vital role in creating a constructive unity for a nation, and nations in Eastern Europe are not excluded from this fact. This form of constructive nationalism should be supported by Western nations rather than ridiculed, especially since it allows nations to solidify their national identity, sovereignty, and freedoms.

Nationalism in the West and in Eastern Europe have developed in contrasting forms despite both serving important functions particularly in times of national struggle. Eastern European nations have historically struggled with preserving their national identity, primarily to the control and influence of Western, or otherwise oppressive, nations; despite these differing manifestations of nationalism, the nuances of which are greatly ignored by Western nations, there has been a long history of Western nations diminishing and failing to recognize the histories of Eastern Europe, failing to promote true understanding of the struggles that Eastern European nations face in preserving their cultures and autonomy. Such an understanding is fundamental to prevent misinformation and reduction of Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine, much like that which can be seen in Western media today. Ultimately, advancing such understanding of Eastern European history and the role in which nationalism plays in the region will allow for a more informed populace in Western nations, allowing for increased public support in the fight for the independence and sovereignty of nations in Eastern Europe.

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