

NATIONAL SECURITY EFFECTS OF UKRAINE'S FAILURE TO MANAGE ITS MINORITY ETHNIC POPULATION AND A RECOMMENDATION FOR DECENTRALIZATION

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ABSTRACT

Ukraine's national security and even its existence as an independent state have been at constant risk since its independence in the 1990s. This is due to intense pressure from both the Russian Federation, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, to remain in its sphere of influence, as well as from potential Western allies to become a geopolitical partner for the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO). After Russia's invasion in early 2022, however, the question of the state's national security has evolved beyond pure military defense, as secessionist movements within the contested Donbas region gained power through Russian support. Previous research has shown that secessionist support is highly manipulated by the Kremlin and ethnic conflict between Ukrainians and Russians living in Ukraine is manufactured. Although the largest point of contention between the two groups, language, is territorial, nationalist loyalties to Ukraine remain strong among its Russian-speaking citizens. This paper investigates how Ukraine could accommodate Russian speakers in its eastern border areas in order to maintain its territorial integrity as a sovereign state and thus, to effectively resist the Russian Federation's political influence in this region and ongoing annexation attempts. It then looks at the case of Latvian management of ethnic difference through assimilation and domination and argues that this strategy would not best fit the Ukrainian case. Instead, it offers a decentralized approach better suited for the unique geopolitical pressures Ukraine is currently subject to.

Key Words: Ukraine, Russia, Latvia, Security, Decentralization, Donbas, Ethnic Conflict, Nationalism, Language, Secession, Assimilation, Domination

INTRODUCTION

At the forefront of most modern conflicts one finds historical tensions rooted in histories of disagreements between governments. Post Ukrainian independence, after the fall of the Soviet Union, evolved a 'Ukrainianess' that was inherently tied to a rejection of the Sovietization and Russification of the past (Mitchnik, 2019). Generations of individuals who had grown up under Soviet rule now had the opportunity to build their own identity as Ukrainians. With several Presidential administrations now behind them, Ukraine has, thus far, maintained a civic nationalism that has been able to withstand revolution, annexation, and invasion. The current situation in Ukraine is dire, with previously insinuated tensions between Ukraine and Russia reaching a boiling point after the invasion by the Putin regime into Ukraine in early February 2022. Thousands of Ukrainians have died at the hands of Russian soldiers and cities have been traded back and forth between the two countries as the invasion drags out of its second winter. The justification of the invasion is rooted in a Kremlin based narrative that Moscow must protect its ethnic kin in a foreign state led by a Nazi regime (Eras, 2022). This narrative, born of discriminatory policy in Ukraine, has been the primary propaganda tool of the Putin regime to maintain the support of the Russian people as well as the immensely controversial support of the separatist Donbas region of Ukraine (Mitchnik, 2019; Eras, 2022). As a result, the Russian invasion has focused on areas of high Russian ethnic and Russophone density; these regions also conveniently sit on the border of the Russian Federation.

The Donetsk and Luhansk regions, which make up the area known colloquially as the Donbas, have been the dominant battlegrounds of Russification and Ukrainification (Mitchnik, 2019). The region is primarily composed of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers who occupy the region as well as the public administrative sectors of the area. As the war progresses, questions have arisen to determine

what could have been done to reduce the influence of Russophones and Russian ethnics within the region, since they are considered to have given Russia the authority and proclaimed legitimacy it required to pursue an invasion policy. There are also strategies and informational campaigns in place to reduce the overall effect the Russian narrative has had on not only the Russian citizenry but the entire world. Touching upon the progressive ideology of freedom from discrimination, the capitalization of Moscow upon the delicate nature of the Donbas is even more dangerous. This paper will argue Ukraine must properly accommodate its Russophone and Russian ethnic citizens in order to ensure its own national safety and security as an independent state. The failure of previous assimilation and domination tactics and a case study of the extreme domination of the Latvian government against Russian ethnics will demonstrate the harm previous ethnic management has had on Ukraine. This paper will then also present a proposed solution of decentralization in order to resolve the tensions between the Donbas and Ukraine.

REVOLUTIONS AND RUSSOPHONES: WHY THE DONBAS MATTERS

Known as the melting pot of Ukraine, the Donbas region was a key congregational point for refugees who were fleeing persecution after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Mitchnik, 2019). The region industrialized quickly as people started careers in the mining industry and Russophones and Ukrainophones coexisted as nationalism was built alongside de-Russification and de-Sovietification. Ukraine's primary goal at this time was to build an identity that broke away from the previous dominance of the Soviet Union. The rejection of Russia and Russian identity was bottom-up and while Russophones were highly condensed within the Donbas region they were immediately categorized as a minority (Kulyk cited in Mitchnik, 2019: 439). The Donbas region sits on the Eastern side of Ukraine, bordering the Russian Federation, and is composed of 30% ethnic Russians and an additional 11% of individuals who identify as both Russian and Ukrainian (Giuliano, 2018). Identity in Ukraine is built upon language, either Russian or

Ukrainian, as the dominant categorizing feature of both groups (Aliyev, 2019). Aliyev (2019: 1203) adds that distinctive ethnic identities collapsed after Soviet influence on the region vanished and language was the only distinction that remained. This is why the linguistic composition of the Donbas region matters for the ethnic management attempted within the region, because all attempts by the Ukrainian government to undermine the secession movement were linguistic in nature (Giuliano, 2018).

Post-independence Ukraine was building a national identity around the Ukrainian language and populations of Russian speakers directly limited that mission. Olexi et. al. (2019: 686) define the Ukrainian identity as follows: "Ukrainian ethnicity is best understood in terms of four distinct dimensions that overlap only partly: individual language preference, language embeddedness, ethnolinguistic identity and nationality". As such, Ukrainian as a language was the primary method by which Ukraine was hoping to rebuild itself, even though most of the population opted to speak Russian after the original break from the USSR (Mitchnik, 2019). Viewed as a fifth column due to Russia's overinvolvement in post-Soviet Ukraine, Russian minorities were an unwelcome but populous reality in the Donbas. Keeping Russian as their primary language was seen as a threat to the developing Ukrainian identity. This has resulted in a secession movement building within the region in which rebels have attested that a majority of those living in the Donbas would be in favor of seceding from Ukraine (Olexi et. al., 2019). This information is fabricated, as a majority of those in the Donbas do not support a separatist movement in Ukraine and identify themselves as Russian speaking Ukrainians, not Russians living in Ukraine (Mitchnik, 2019: 436). In fact, according to a survey done by Elise Giuliano (2018: 165), only 29% of those in the Donbas were strongly in favor of secession with only 45% of the previously mentioned 29% being those of Russian ethnicity or Russophones. This is a distinct difference when looking at the issue of the secessionist movement, as Ukrainian patriotism clashes directly with Russian primary speakers as an identity is developed in the

heart of the country. As such, there are questions remaining as to how to resolve an issue of secession that does not have majority support of the public.

With a lack of majority support for secession in the Donbas and an ongoing Ukrainian identity being tied to Ukrainianness, why would the state of Ukraine see any reason to manage the ethnic diversity of its Russian population? The answer, of course, lies in the fact that Russia is a constant militaristic and aggressive threat to Ukrainian sovereignty and the presence of Russian minorities as a fifth column group has no reason to fade (Eras, 2022). Ukraine has already experienced two revolutions within its brief existence as an independent country, both aiming to unseat Russian puppet leaders. The Euromaidan and Orange Revolutions ultimately resulted in a lack of both political stability and true Ukrainian identity for a majority of the country to lean on (Aliyev, 2019). The Russian Federation's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, a single region away from the Donbas, also provided no comfort to the average Ukrainian. As such, the policies put in place by the Ukrainian state to limit Russian language usage and to dominate the minority population threatening secession is not an uncommon government response to tensions between two bipolar groups. However, by leaning upon these management techniques, Ukraine has unintentionally offered its adversary its clearest pathway to legitimacy as a kin-state for Russophones and Russian ethnics (Mitchnik, 2019).

The concept of kin-state relations between both ethnic groups and their viewed homeland is not a new concept in political studies; however, the weaponization of this kinship in the context of the Donbas is new. A kin-state, according to Udrea and Smith (2021: 67), is a state that has interests in co-ethnics abroad due to a shared sense of ethnicity and nationhood. This can then translate to a productive relationship between the two states in which the rights of minority populations are well accommodated (Udrea and Smith, 2021). Brubaker (1996) refers to this process in his landmark novel, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, as Transborder Nationalism. This form of nationalism is at its most dangerous when the views of the home state, for the

sake of this paper, Ukraine, conflict with the interests of the kin-state abroad. The fundamental interest of Ukraine is to continue a nationalization process in which the Ukrainian identity deviates from previously held Soviet ties. As Udrea and Smith (2021) argue, there is no issue with transborder nationalism as long as both the home-state and the kin-state are in agreement about how to best accommodate a minority group; it is when this agreement is not present that the home state's sovereignty is threatened. Therefore, Ukraine finds itself in a position where its territorial integrity and sovereignty are at odds with its management of its Russian-speaking and ethnic Russian citizens. In particular, this paper will focus directly upon the attachment of Ukrainian citizens to the Russian language as a key distinguisher of ethnic difference (Cheskin and Kachuyevski, 2019). The following section of this paper will describe Ukraine's attempts at ethnic management and explore why these methods have been a generalized failure for both Ukrainian identity development and for its own national security.

UKRAINE'S ETHNIC MANAGEMENT EFFORTS

Ukraine has made several efforts to manage its Russophone population, particularly since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Eras (2022: 16) remarks in their work on ethnic responsibility in East Ukraine, that the divisions and laws in place are not about civic or ethnic identity but about linguistic groups. These language groups have only been further divided by the presence of war, especially as the main aggressor is the kin-state of one side of the conflict (Olexi et. al., 2019). Alongside the secessionist movement is the invasion executed by Russia, pairing together to appear as an existential collective threat to the very existence of the Ukrainian state. The secessionist rebels have claimed that the Ukrainian state has engaged in deprivation of the region in order to dominate the Donbas and its Russophones (Olexi et. al., 2019). This method of deprivation used by Ukraine against the Donbas region consists in the extensive reallocation of

Donbas funds in a method of payments to other Ukrainian regions. Ukraine's regions are economically diverse, with several regions struggling to bolster their economies whilst other regions being incredibly lucrative (Giuliano, 2018). However, balancing out the economy over the entire state territory is not the only benefit the central government derives from pulling regional profits from the Donbas. By limiting the amount of funds that the Donbas has access to, the Ukrainian government limits this region's ability to fund secessionist movements as well as to engage in institutional development in order to bolster its own state-like structures (Giuliano, 2018).

Deprivation to dominate is not the only method that Ukraine has attempted to use to engage in ethnic management. Another tactic utilized by Ukraine on the Donbas has been assimilation, specifically through limiting Russian language use. In order to continue the development of a Ukrainian national identity, Ukrainian has become the official language of the state and the use of Russian has been limited. This is because Ukraine is attempting to build the Ukrainian identity as the core state-building nation, a group in which a single ethnic group has full control of a state as defined by Brubaker's triadic nexus (Brubaker, 1996). Brubaker describes what is occurring in Ukraine as a Nationalizing nationalism, in which a Core Nation assumes official cultural and ethnic ownership of the territorial state and claims its totality for that Core Nation (Brubaker, 1996: 5). The reason this is important for the Ukrainian case is that by attempting to build its own nationhood and reinforcing Ukrainian as the language of the rightful owners of the state, the Ukrainian state impedes the Russian Federation's goal of reinforcing its ties of kinship with Russian-speakers in Ukraine. By limiting the use of the Russian language, Ukraine has thus already engaged in some form of assimilation which forces those ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers living in the state to prioritize Ukrainian over their native Russian. In the education system, this linguistic assimilation effort is even more distinctive. Olexi et. al.'s (2019) work on identity and war describes this process succinctly through citing Stebelsky, who writes that:

"...the number of secondary school students studying in Russian was 96 percent in Donetsk and 93 percent in Luhansk oblasts (though in independent Ukraine it considerably decreased: to 50 percent and 46 percent correspondingly in the 2013-2014 academic year)" (Stebelsky cited in Olexi et. al.: 687).

It is not just in the education sector that the use of the Russian language has been limited. Within civil society itself there was pressure upon Russian speakers to switch over to Ukrainian, since Ukrainians dominated not only official institutions like the armed forces, but also informal civil society environments. Mitchnik (2019: 423) interviewed several Russian speakers in his article on identity shifts within Ukraine, one of whom stated:

"The Ukrainian language became almost 'number one', and next to it nothing should prevail. I know people who used to talk and write in Russian and they flipped. They started writing in Ukrainian, trying to talk in Ukrainian. For them, for many in our city, the Ukrainian language became a super-language."

Despite this enforced assimilative conversion of Russian speakers, there is still a fierce patriotism for Ukraine instead of Russia in the Donbas. In fact, many Russian speakers believe the two languages can coexist despite the aggressive ethnic management techniques of Ukraine (Aliyev, 2019: 1221). If this is true, why is the Ukrainian state still adamant on assimilation and domination?

That is where the Russian Federation's impact comes into the picture. The Kremlin has observed the partial successes of Ukraine's domination and assimilation techniques and has viewed an opportunity to approach Russians, specifically in the Donbas, as a kin state (Mitchnik, 2019). Russia has deliberately woven Ukraine's ethnic management tactics into its narrative to justify its invasion despite the fact that the trauma of Crimea's annexation in 2014 is what had turned Ukraine towards aggressive ethnic management originally. This has only exacerbated the intense tensions between the groups as well as the fifth column mentality which

serves neither Ukrainians nor Russian ethnics. Eras (2022) cites Jackson in stating that “stereotypes stem from real or perceived conflicts and competition over scarce resources” (Jackson cited in Eras 2022:, 4). Ukraine, upon watching Russia invade from the east, had full reason to believe that secessionists in the Donbas as well as other Russophones and Russian ethnics were adversaries of their state, especially in light of the profitable nature of the Donbas alongside the annexation of Crimea just a few years prior. This thus brings up the question as to what Ukraine was meant to do about its Russian population in order to protect its national security. The Ukrainian state's attempt to dominate and assimilate its Russian population resulted in a twisting of the narrative by Russia as a kin state of the minority population of Ukraine. The natural impulse would be to learn from Latvia, another post-Soviet state with ethnic management strategies for a Russian minority; however, as the following section of this paper will show, to do so would be a drastic mistake for Ukraine.

LATVIA'S ETHNIC MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES AND ITS LACK OF EFFECTIVENESS IN EAST UKRAINE

Firstly, an explanation is necessary as to why turning focus to Latvia is beneficial to our understanding of the Ukrainian situation. Latvia, like Ukraine, is a state that reclaimed its independence in 1991 from the USSR and found itself with a significant Russian minority within its newly drawn borders (Karklins, 2021). Latvia's Russian population makes up 24.7% of their population and is largely condensed on its Eastern border (Karklins, 2021, 456). Like Ukraine, Latvia also approached de-Russification and the building of a new identity through a regulation of language. Part of the original strategy involved a citizen and non-citizen agreement in which those who had no familial ties to Latvia were de-naturalized. This resulted in 6-11% of all Latvians (and Estonians who also utilized this policy in neighboring Estonia) not being citizens of the state (Ekmanis, 2020). While technically a voluntary arrangement, the policy resulted in mass migrations back to Russia by ethnic Russians and Russophones as well as a disproportionate elderly population whose members do not hold full citizen status (Ekmanis, 2020).

As independence receded in time, Latvia started to increasingly adapt its human rights and citizenship policies to those of the EU, which it wished to join, and adopted other, less harsh, management techniques that were similar to Ukraine's. Its education system remains similar to the Ukrainian system, in which a single language is picked for each school but minority language schools are not limited (Karklins, 2021). Instead of assimilation, Latvia opted for integration techniques of the Latvian and Russian languages; for example, mixed marriage is fairly common with 20% of Latvians being in a mixed marriage (Karklins, 2021). The Latvian example has also had a high degree of success as Latvian is the most common language amongst Latvian youth; therefore, if the standard for identity in the post-Soviet east is based on language, then Latvian identity development is well on its way (Karklins, 2021). The state has achieved what Ekmanis (2020: 492-494) has called ‘banal integration’ which “reflects a social cohesion among individuals that is so much part of everyday life, it is barely quantifiable; it goes unnoticed by the society which lives it.”

Most notably for this essay's case study, the city of Daugavpils in the Southeast of Latvia has a highly condensed Russian population where, instead of Latvian, Russian is the dominant language (Ekmanis, 2020). Banal integration has not been achieved here, Russian kinship is high and support for Russia's foreign affairs elsewhere in the world also garners far stronger support here than it does anywhere else in the country (Karklins, 2021). Vast majorities of the schools teach exclusively in Russian and the city holds the moniker ‘Little Russia’. Even though there are regulations in place to operate in Latvian due to the cultural regulations set in place by the government, the city has Russian cinemas and patrons default to Russian upon entering a storefront. Even the approximately 20% of residents who identify as ethnically Latvia speak in Russian as a default (Ekmanis, 2020). This is, in effect, Latvia's equivalent of the Donbas and while the city attests that it is loyal to Latvia, the Latvian establishment has fair evidence to believe that these Russian speakers

also fit the 'fifth column' categorization that molds them into a Russian threat. In a referendum held on whether or not to make Russian a second state language, the city was highly in favor (85%) while the referendum was fervently rejected by the rest of Latvia at 75% (Ekmanis, 2020; Karklins, 2021). Voter turnout for the entirety of Latvia was 72%, some of the highest turnout Latvia has ever seen (Karklins, 2021) That 85% figure is drastically important because the percentage of ethnic Russians is lower in Daugavpils than 85% - meaning that ethnic Latvians were voting in favor of the referendum as well (Ekmanis, 2020). Another key factor to note is that there is no secessionist movement brewing or existing in Daugavpils. Thus, why has Russia not preyed on Latvia and Daugavpils as it has on Crimea and the Donbas? Why should Ukraine not view Latvia as an example and attempt to remold its own system in order to achieve Ukrainian 'banal integration'?

There are a couple answers to these questions. The first, most obvious answer, is that Latvia has remained untouched because it is a NATO and EU member (Karklins, 2021). The West's influence on this former Soviet territory blocks Russian operatives' ability to undertake a disinformation campaign as they did in the Donbas to promote a secessionist movement (Mitchnik, 2019). As such, Ukraine does not have the luxury of initiating integration and assimilation policies without international response. Furthermore, since there is already a secessionist movement under way and the use of the Russian language remains prevalent in Ukraine, its education system cannot be built in the same way as Latvia's. In Latvia, due to migration and population changes many Latvian parents have placed their children in Russian language schools because there is availability (Karklins, 2021). The reason that this is acceptable is because Latvian is already solidified as the dominant language; however, Ukrainian has not yet achieved this level of dominance in Ukraine. Lastly, Latvia's ethnic minorities are better represented within state governance with a proportional representation system that allows ethnic political parties to represent the Russian minority (Karklins, 2021). The status of governance in Ukraine has been inconsistent in Ukraine's thirty years of

independence due to Russian interference and revolutions; thus there has been no opportunity for the political sphere to be a place of cohesion and unity for both Ukrainophones and Russophones (Giuliano, 2018). More so, the support for Russian to be the second state language of Ukraine is very high, but to hold a referendum on such a topic would give further legitimacy to the Kremlin's narrative that Russians are being discriminated against in Ukraine. With a secession movement still ongoing, what is the alternative for Kyiv, if not the Latvian method?

AN ARGUMENT FOR DECENTRALIZATION

In order to ensure national security and proper ethnic management in Ukraine's East, a proper concession in order to satisfy both the Donbas region and appease the Ukrainian general public would be to decentralize the state's unitary government (Olexi et. al., 2019). This hypothetical proposal of federalism remains an ongoing debate within Ukraine itself, but also faces several roadblocks. As such, this proposal is presented as a normative and optimal solution for a deeply complex issue. To begin with, a contextual explanation is provided as to why decentralization is still a favorable option despite the clear obstacles it faces, to be followed by an outline of the direct benefits of decentralization as a whole. The ongoing issue with decentralization is that the current constitution of Ukraine does not permit decentralization (Olexi et. al, 2019). However, since the Euromaidan revolution, potential amendments to the constitution have been floated politically. Olexi et. al. (2019: 696) explain that the decentralization amendments would allow some self-governance to non-government-controlled areas (NGCA), an amendment recommended by Western allies. The amendment is also supported by 61% of the public, according to a nationwide public opinion survey done through Democratic Initiatives, though the issue is deeply controversial and requires two thirds support in order to pass (Democratic Initiative Foundation in Olexi et. al, 2019: 696). Beyond being supported by the majority of the public, there are

several other benefits to decentralization for Ukraine's ethnic management issue.

The most beneficial aspect of decentralization is appeasing the separatist movement in the Donbas. Some federalist and power sharing scholars do argue that decentralizing a state with a secessionist movement tilts further advantages and power to secessionists as it gives them a taste of independence (Roeder, 2009). This is a valid criticism; however, one must recall the fact that the secession option is not as popular in Ukraine's Donbas region as Russia claims it is. Survey data from the region continues to show that Russians in the Donbas have no interest in secession and many feel that the movement has been capitalized upon by Russia (Aliyev, 2019; Mitchnick 2019). Without the Kremlin's influence and resource backing, secessionists in the Donbas would lack popular support as well, since they would not be able to garner enough resources on their own given Ukraine's deprivation tactics. However, there is a vast amount of support for decentralization which would allow the Donbas to control aspects of its self-government as well as utilize Russian - its dominant language (Mitchnik, 2019). This patriotism that remains within Russian speaking Ukrainian citizens has created a popular mentality in the region that recognizes Russia as a kin state but rejects the Putin regime. Many Russian ethnics attest that the two language groups can live in harmony and that the Ukrainian patriotism they feel constitutes a separate identity from their Russian speaking identity (Mitchnik, 2019). This identity shift is attributed to partial ethnic defection, but also shows civic responsibility from Russian ethnics who also identify as patriotic Ukrainian citizens (Aliyev, 2019) There is no widespread desire of Donbas residents to secede and as a result, the worry that a majority of Donbas Russian speakers would opt to secede once given regional power holds no weight. There is already a secessionist movement ongoing and had Russophones held such separatist motivations, they already had an opportunity to side with the secessionists (Mitchnik, 2019).

Furthermore, this decentralization tactic would also improve the strength of the country as a whole, as Romanova and Umland (2019: 2) write in their work on decentralization:

"Ukraine's decentralisation seeks to strengthen local governance via the unification of weak municipalities into larger territorial communities that are able to better provide basic public services and foster local development; fundamentally reform the territorial division of the state; and increase regional and sub-regional self-government via the introduction of executive committees appointed by elected councils."

By engaging in this decentralization process where sub-regional and municipal governance structures are prioritized, Kyiv would allow the Donbas to represent its own interests concerning its economic affairs, which directly addresses the issue of potential deprivation (Olexi et. al, 2019). Romanova and Umland (2019: 105) also argue that decentralization would secure the southern and eastern regions of the country despite secession threats and previous attempts of ethnic management. They argue that given the amount of decentralization based on the previous federalist structures proposed to the Ukrainian public, enough checks and balances would be put in place to remove any possibility of a true secessionist movement taking hold of a future regional government (Romanova & Umland, 2019). Part of the reason for this is that the Donbas would then be blended with other regions of Ukraine, becoming a new type of Amalgamated Territorial Community (ATC) and the region would not be dominated by purely Russian speakers (Romanova & Umland, 2019). These strategies are less aggressive than previously attempted military actions to settle the secessionist movement; instead, they recognize the desires of the secessionist movement without providing sufficient regional power to allow this movement to accumulate sufficient authority and legitimacy to secede without the influence and help of Russia (Romanova & Umland, 2019).

The last key advantages for Kyiv derived from decentralization would be to both weaken the Russian Federation's influence on Ukrainian internal ethnic management, as well as to strategically position Ukraine closer to its Western allies

(Romanova & Umland, 2019). The Kremlin's tactic in the east of Ukraine is known as coercive diplomacy; it truly picked up after decentralization debates began post the Euromaidan revolution in 2014 (Alim, 2020). Russia has invested a lot of funds and work into strengthening the Donbas secessionist movements. Aligning with Roeder's (2009) argument that decentralization would cause the secessionist movement to grow, Russia would view decentralization as a concession from Ukraine to Russian claims for regional dominance. However, as previously shown, such a decentralization would be beneficial to Ukraine's government structure and ethnic management of Russophones (Olexi et. al., 2019). Should Ukraine balance the Russian Federation's kinship claims with Russians in Ukraine by appeasing the interests of Russophones and secessionists in the Donbas, Ukraine would then optically appear to be compromising with the Putin regime. In practice, however, such a policy would significantly appeal to Russophone Ukrainian patriotic sentiments. More so, decentralization is also a policy recommendation of Ukraine's Western allies, who argue that a revised governmental structure comprising additional self-governing regions would produce the kind of social stability existent in federal states like the United States, Germany, and Switzerland (Alim, 2020). As Ukraine has also been leveraging its alliances aiming at obtaining economic and security protections between the West and Russia, it should be noted that this middle of the road option appeases both major stakeholders in Ukraine's ethnic management. Ukraine would also position itself in a safer position by accommodating both parties and appeasing both sides of its ongoing internal conflict.

There are critics of pluri-national federalist states who argue that should a state decentralize power, there are no hopes of the state maintaining its territorial unity. As mentioned above, Roeder (2009: 207) maintains that a secessionist movement given an inch will take a mile. He argues that a civic nationalism can never replace an ethnic nationalism—meaning that, if Roeder is correct, Russophones will never identify as Ukrainian citizens. However, the survey data provided by Mitchnik (2019) makes it clear that both a Ukrainian national identity and Russophone linguistic identity are

salient markers for Donbas residents. Therefore, if both these identities are simultaneously present within an individual, then why would this not continue to be the case at the regional level in a plurinational federation? This is the argument of McGarry and O'Leary (2009), who choose to highlight the Canadian case as a successful pluri-national federation. They attribute this success to power-sharing mechanisms, in which ethnic minorities have both entrenched protections and governance responsibilities in order to ensure the respect of their own rights. This is the case in Canada, where the Francophone minority was given self-government and autonomy powers as well as guaranteed representation at the federal level (McGarry and O'Leary, 2009). Furthermore, with Ukraine's continued commitment to democratic practices through Nationalization, McGarry and O'Leary (2009) argue that a federal state where democracy is in place will always be stronger than a pseudo-federal country where federalism would be used as a false promise of autonomy. This was indeed for Ukraine itself, while it was under Soviet rule. Thus, a decentralized approach to governance for Kyiv would not only constitute a resolution to the Russian kin-state interests in Ukraine, but also provide it with a far more long term path towards stability and security as a sovereign state.

CONCLUSION

The Russian ethnic minority in Ukraine has established a complex political situation in which the management of language remains paramount to the stability of not just the country itself but also of the entire region. The background of the post-Soviet independence of Ukraine as paired with the history of the Crimean and Donbas regions exemplify the context of how important language remains as an identity marker (Olexi et. al., 2019). More so, investigating the roots of the Donbas secessionist movement and contrasting its importance to the Kremlin as opposed to its importance to actual Russophone and Russian ethnic citizens of Ukraine contextualizes what Ukraine should do to achieve effective and legitimate levels of ethnic management

within the Donbas region and beyond (Giuliano, 2018). There is also the importance of looking outwards and dispelling any misplaced generalizations of Baltic countries' policies. By reviewing the similarities and differences between Ukraine and Latvia, this paper highlighted that while both states attempted to implement very similar methods of assimilation and integration, they would not end up with the same results. Latvia has the luxury of Western protection as well as less physical territory for the taking (Karklins, 2021). The influences of Russia and to a certain extent, the West, on the politics of Ukraine are also important to note in order to examine what the realistic ethnic management possibilities are for the Ukrainian state. Russia is indeed a kin state—Russian ethnics and Russophones do not deny that—but their patriotic commitment to Ukraine continues to hold stronger for them. Ukraine needs therefore to maintain a firmer grip on these sentiments instead of creating in this particular section of its population a deep disdain for the central government in Kyiv.

Decentralization is thus the optimal solution for Ukraine's conflict and ethnic management plans. Not only does it go a long way in appeasing both Russia and the West, it also satisfies Ukraine's own citizens, Russian ethnics and Russophones and Ukrainian ethnics alike (Romanova & Umland, 2019). The decentralization of Ukraine, which could become more feasible in the future after further constitutional review, would result in an amendment to the constitution that would strengthen the Ukrainian identity as a whole. Alim (2020) argues that the Putin regime is the only major roadblock to a cohesive Ukrainian identity and that with proper checks and balances on Russia to ensure Ukrainian security, Ukraine will be able to progress to a time and place where its nationalism would no longer be threatened by the Russian Federation's kin-state appeals to its Russophone citizens. A constitutional amendment enshrining decentralization is also far more likely after the inherent nationalization of the country once the on-going war comes to an end. Any opportunity to keep the Putin regime's troops and agents out of the country after two violations of Ukraine's territorial sovereignty within a decade should be top priority for Kyiv. It is also important to highlight that since Ukrainian is a growing language

within the state, a decentralized Ukraine would allow Ukraine to focus on regions that do not have populous minority groups in order to promote the use of the language, as was done in Latvia (Karklins, 2021). Overall, decentralization would still allow Ukraine to allocate state resources as it sees necessary, whilst adding checks and balances on the Kremlin's influence on its internal politics, and also meeting some of the demands of the minority secessionist groups in the Donbas. Such accommodations could bring long-term state stability for Ukraine for the first time in its three decades of freedom.

Further research is recommended on how to promote decentralization in Ukraine as well as how to design constitutional remedies for restructuring the state through a federalist approach. It could be beneficial to look into other cases comparatively both within the Baltic region and throughout Eastern Europe to ensure common factors could be tied to both neighboring regions. It is also recommended that further research be done on how to balance Russian and Western influence on decentralization. Different types of federalist approaches might be favored by either side and as a result, it is important to understand which form of decentralization would be most beneficial for Ukraine itself. Of course, Ukraine is an independent state which has its own sovereignty, but such sovereignty is fragile with less than half a century of governance behind it (Eras, 2022). Especially with the country's early 2022 invasion by Putin's Russia, there are new considerations that need to be taken into account, as without proper legitimization of Ukraine's nationalism by the international community, the invasion itself will be considered legitimate. However, peace in Ukraine is essential for both ethnic Ukrainians and its Russian minorities, since without peace Ukraine may never get a chance to resolve its own internal minorities' issues and risks seeing Russia's 2014 Crimean annexation strategy be replayed soon in the Donbas region.

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