Received: 1 May 2022 | Accepted: 15 June 2022

DOI: 10.1111/nana.12876

THEMED SECTION

WILEY

Putin, national self-determination and political independence in the twenty-first century

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Abstract

This contribution focuses on the right of nations to self-determination after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It suggests that sovereignty and territorial integrity are not as secure as once thought. A number of articles and statements issued by Vladimir Putin are analysed to identify nationalist themes which he uses to reject Ukraine's right to exist outside the Russian state. Key themes include a primordial account of national origins, the conflation of state and nation, and a refusal to recognise a right to self-determination of territories that had once been part of Russia. Putin's nationalism draws on imperial nationalism, state nationalism, revanchism and majoritarianism to underwrite his claims. Such views are widespread among established states, contributing to the instability of the contemporary world. It is argued that a reconfiguration of the relationship between state and nation is long overdue, as is the inflexible nature of territorial integrity.

KEYWORDS

Primordialism, Putin, Self-Determination, State Nationalism, Russian Nationalism, Ukraine

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The right to national self-determination, involving political independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, has always been problematic (Miller, 2020). Though a much sought-after status, the circumstances for achieving it are fairly rare especially when the demand is made unilaterally. By the early 2020s, there are approximately 200 sovereign states in the world. Most have achieved sovereign status as a result of the collapse of empires (Austria–Hungary; The Soviet Union): decolonisation from imperial systems (India; Indonesia) or the breakup of multinational states (Yugoslavia; Czechoslovakia). Very occasionally, nations will achieve statehood outside these circumstances (Ireland 1921; South Sudan 2011; East Timor 1999).

As a consequence, a new geo-political world order was established on the basis of state sovereignty and territorial integrity. The United Nations reinforced this consensus through a series of resolutions (Cassese, 1995; Griffith, 2014). However, autonomist and secessionist demands continue to be made, sometimes successfully. Most wars since 1945 have involved conflict between those asserting the right to self-determination and states denying it (Toft, 2012). One of the destabilising features of the post-imperial/post-colonial world was the imposition of the principle of *uti possidetis* in respect of borders and territories. This principle paid no attention to the national, ethnic or religious composition of the territory (Costa, 2003). Furthermore, great powers continued to impose their political will on other states both directly and indirectly, similar to imperial and colonial powers in the past. States may have appeared more secure than was the case historically, but outside of some privileged regions, this was more apparent than real. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, its annexation of Crimea and persistent threats to former Soviet republics constitute the most direct twenty-first century threat to this consensus.

Nationalism provides the most important justification for seeking or maintaining self-determination. It identifies the group that seeks independence, providing an internally consistent argument based on history, territory, language and culture (Breuilly, 1993; Gellner, 1983). Nationalism also provides the justification for opposing secession and political independence by defending the existing state. Less attention has been paid to state and majority nationalisms, which are often hiding in clear sight. A central feature is that they assume that state boundaries, national identity and political culture are 'natural' Kolstø, 2019; Cetrà & Brown Swann, 2020: 1–7).

Historically, political independence has been extremely difficult to achieve or maintain. Prior to 1945, sovereignty could be maintained if a state was militarily strong or benefitted from the protection of a military alliance (Fabry, 2010). Furthermore, the great powers consistently opposed self-determination, except under unusual circumstances. There has been a systemic bias against secession, which has been reinforced in the post-imperial and post-colonial world (Ker-Lindsay, 2013). Most states are prepared to use military force to subdue autonomist or secessionist movements. Alternative and non-violent solutions are rarely considered, or when they are it is usually too little too late (Cederman et al., 2015; Heraclides, 1997). The Russian invasion of Ukraine is not qualitatively different from the actions of Serbia against Kosovo or Sudan against Southern Sudan.

Russian nationalism denies Ukraine's right to exist and is closely related to revanchism and imperial nationalism (Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2018). Vladimir Putin has drawn on a diverse range of sources over nearly two decades to formulate an explicit nationalist narrative. Putin (2012) rejects ethnic and secessionist nationalism but embraces state and majoritarian nationalism established on imperial and ethnic foundations (Putin, 2014, 2021a, 2021b). He is committed to national assimilation, insisting that the Czarist empire not only incorporated disparate peoples but also integrated them into Russian culture. For Putin (2012), Russia is an exceptional 'historical state' because it:

> is a polyethnic civilization, sealed by the Russian cultural core. And this choice was confirmed by the Russian people time after time - and not by plebiscites and referendums, but by blood. Throughout its millennial history.

Consequently, Russian statehood is unique, 'We are a multinational society, but we are one people.' There is 'unity in diversity' as in India, but Russian culture is dominant, shared by all those who live in the state. Putin's

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(2012) state nationalism entails, 'Anyone living in our country should not forget about their faith and ethnicity. But we must first of all be a citizen of Russia and be proud of it. No one has the right to put national and religious features above the laws of the state'.

Putin's concerns (both domestically and geopolitically) go back to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 'loss' of Ukraine, Georgia and other former Soviet Republics (Toal, 2017). For Putin (2005), 'we should acknowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a geopolitical disaster of the century.' Furthermore, this collapse had consequences for the Russian nation, 'it became a genuine drama. Tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory. Moreover, the epidemic of disintegration infected Russia itself.' Putin's resentment and his irredentism is most apparent in the cases of Crimea and Ukraine (Putin, 2014). Not only did Crimea become part of another state, 'Russia realised that is was not simply robbed, it was plundered.' This was 'an outrageous historical injustice' that undermined state continuity and its essential unity. The continuity of the Russian state, its deep roots and its territorial integrity are central to Putin's world view. Although acknowledging that changes have occurred, he insists that the Russian Federation is the institutional embodiment of Russian statehood, including the Soviet Union and the Czarist empire. On Putin's account, Russian statehood has lasted a thousand years (Putin, 2021b).

The refusal to accept the collapse of the Soviet Union reinforces irredentism, as when Putin calls for the restoration of 'historical Russia.' It is not always clear what these boundaries might be, but it is possible to conceive them including the territory of the Czarist empire in 1914. Consequently, Putin (2014) maintains, 'Crimea is our common historical legacy and a very important factor in regional stability. And this stabilising territory should be a part of a strong and stable sovereignty, which today can only be Russian' (my emphasis). He makes a similar case for intervention in Ukraine when he officially recognised the separatist entities in Donbas as sovereign (Putin, 2022), 'We are one people. Kiev is the mother of Russian cities. Ancient Rus is our common source and we cannot live without each other' (my emphasis). In the previous year, Putin (2021b) denied the existence of Ukraine as an independent state, insisting that 'Russians were one people – a single whole,' which includes Ukraine and Belarus. Ukraine can only be sovereign when 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.

Furthermore, adopting orthodoxy (Putin, 2014), 'predetermined the overall basis of culture, civilisation and human values that unite the people of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus.' For Putin (2022) Ukraine is an artificial entity, 'entirely created by Russia or, to be more precise, by Bolshevik, Communist Russia'. He condemns Lenin's commitment to self-determination which he considers to be utopian and anti-Russian. Moreover, Ukraine 'is an inalienable part of our world history, culture and spiritual space'. Accordingly, it is 'common knowledge' that 'Since time immemorial, the people living in the south-west of what has historically been Russian land have called themselves Russians and Orthodox Christians. This was the case before the 17th century, when a portion of this territory re-joined the Russian state, and after'. There is no room in this philosophy for self-determination for sub-state nationalities, because in a crucial sense, their existence is denied.

Majority and imperial nationalism assume that all those who ever lived within the state were Russian (if not ethnically then culturally) and have no rights to determine their future outside the empire/state. Accordingly, Ukraine is not a real state, people or nation, it 'never had stable traditions of real nationhood'. This implies that nations do not exist without states and that nations without states do not have a significant role in the modern world. Ukraine then is an artificial construct, an 'odious' concession to nationalists. Putin asserts that this concession was repeated by the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, with disastrous consequences, between 1989 and 1991. His critique of self-determination echoes the arguments deployed against anti-colonial movements

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by imperial empires such as Britain, but now applied to former Soviet republics. Great powers acquire a special place in the international order and colonies, minor and small states exist at their discretion, a conscious return to the pre-1945 colonial world. (Cobban, 1969).

Nor is Russian statehood or national identity a product of modern nationalism, as many historians would hold. In a public intervention, he corrected a historian who stated that Russian identity was a product of the age of nationalism. He countered that:

> Russian self-awareness began taking shape … from the moment the Russian lands were unified and around the basic moral values that arose around the time of the Baptism of Rus'. Surely the very idea and national consciousness began with the formation of a centralised Russian state. (Pakhaliuk, 2021: 294)

Putin insists that Russia has been and is a major European power, and that this should be acknowledged.

Putin rejects modernist explanations for nationalism, emphasising instead the deep roots and long-term continuity of Russian nationalism. Drawing on the work of Lev Gumilev, he also adopts a primordialist narrative for Russian history (Bassin, 2016; Eltchaninoff, 2018). As a consequence, he mobilises the past to provide a suitable history for his regime. This is not surprising, as nationalists have always sought to control the past through the lens of a nationalist historiography (Coakley, 2004; Pakhaliuk, 2021: 297). The decision by the Supreme Court to repress Memorial in December 2021 was based on a need to control the historical narrative in the context of Stalinism and the Soviet Union. According to a state prosecutor, the work of Memorial 'makes us repent of the Soviet past, instead of remembering its glorious history', suggesting that the organisation was being paid by foreign sources to do so (Economist, 2022). As Coakley (2018: 331) notes the aim of nationalist ideologues is 'a partisan pursuit of the real or supposed origins of their nations that rests on an assertion of historical continuity.' The most tangible expression of this continuity is of course the state; for Putin, the state has 'historical primacy' (Pakhaliuk, 2021: 302). His usable past is nationalist (state), imperial (empire), colonial (expansionist) Russian, Orthodox and conservative. Putin draws upon what one might call 'Greater Russian national historiography' but does so in a way which turns it from history to ideology.

This assessment brings into relief the continuing salience of nationalism for most people in most states. It also identifies the strength of state and majoritarian nationalism and the significance of imperial nationalism and irredentism in the twenty-first century. One conclusion is that political independence is much more precarious since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The post-colonial consensus that all states are equal is now seriously in doubt. Putin does not recognise the sovereignty of the states that seceded from the Soviet Union. The most immediate threat is to Ukraine, but Georgia and Moldova are vulnerable as maybe the Baltic states. Furthermore, there is a continuing tension between sovereignty in international law and the right of nations to self-determination. In effect, the former has priority over the latter, and this is exploited by established states to deny autonomy to sub-state nations. Although Ukraine is not a sub-state nation, Russia acts as if it is by denying its right to exist.

State and majority nationalism conflate state and nation, refusing to acknowledge the equal status of distinct nations within multinational states. Russia is constitutionally a multinational state, but its territory is considered inviolate. The continuing use of 'nation-state', is also questionable as it implies a homogeneity that does not exist in most states. Surprisingly, Putin provides a way out of this impasse. In his defence of the annexation of Crimea, he invoked the 'Kosovo precedent' established when the International Court of Justice found that a declaration of independence was not contrary to international law. Although Putin's use of Kosovo was self-serving, it does expose an important flaw in international law. In Crimea there is evidence that a majority in 2014 wished to be part of Russia, even though international law prohibited this (O'Loughlin & Toal, 2015). The key question here is whether a territory, which was part of a state in the past, usually without being given a choice, has a right to reconsider these arrangements in a democratic age? The default position in international law is that it does not. In effect, the existing state has the power to veto any rearrangements that could lead to secession and the establishment of a new state.

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When given the choice, subject peoples and sub-state nations have frequently voted to leave the existing state (Ireland, 1918–21; South Sudan 2011). The Canadian Supreme Court in the Quebec case judged that although the sub-state nation does not have an absolute right to secede, the existing state does not have an absolute right to deny political independence to a territory where the population has demonstrated its will to do so democratically. The court added that in these circumstances, the state should negotiate in good faith with the secessionist leadership (Supreme Court of Canada, 1998). The most important factors here are the recognition of the sub-state nation as an independent political entity within a state; the public expression of the will of the people in a vote; and the acceptance of the rule of law in respect of the arrangements surrounding the referendum and the subsequent negotiations. If applied to the conflict in Ukraine, this would involve Russian recognition of Ukraine's sovereignty, a referendum in Crimea under international auspices to determine the will of the population and possibly one in the disputed Donbas region to ascertain the population's allegiances and nationality.

If this is the way forward, it is very unlikely that Putin's Russia or Modi's India would accept such a reconfiguration. That should not prevent democratic states from probing this difficult area. One approach might be to establish a Convention on the Right of Nations to Self-Determination under the auspices of the European Union to consider how autonomist and secessionist demands could be met within the framework of the existing state system. The Convention could reconfigure the power relationship between state and nation, identify the contexts where serious consideration of autonomy or secession might be triggered and establish political rules to navigate this difficult terrain. There are very good reasons for maintaining the consensus on sovereignty and territorial integrity, especially in the face of expansionist regimes. However, it has proven to be an inflexible tool for addressing the many claims to self-determination over the past 70 years. An adjustment to the normative foundations of international law is now long overdue.

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How to cite this article: Girvin, B. (2023). Putin, national self-determination and political independence in the twenty-first century. *Nations and Nationalism*, *29*(1), 39–44. https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12876

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