

Comparison of Wars in Bosnia and Ukraine

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SUMMARY

The ongoing war in Ukraine creates a context in which biased and unverified reports cause bewilderment among the audiences. This research article helps to better understand Russia's war against Ukraine, specifically its causes, nature, and human rights violations, by comparing it with an identical yet older and better-known case—the Bosnian War. This paper compares and analyses both conflicts through two paradigms of International Relations and both Political Science and Sociology, bringing attention to details that might be left uncovered. Comparative case study analysis, narrative analysis, and quantitative and qualitative content analysis methods are used. The study comprises numerical data regarding killings and displacements, major human rights violations that frequently occur during armed conflicts, and speeches of Vladimir Putin and Slobodan Milosevic. It compares and interprets those materials through two theoretical perspectives—constructivism and ethnic nationalism. The research finds the immense role ethnic and national identity play in the current conflict, and how the key actors contribute to it.

Keywords: ethnic, national, identity, ethnonationalism, Russia-Ukraine War, Vladimir Putin, NATO, Bosnian War



Comparison of Wars in Bosnia and Ukraine Through Constructivist and Ethno-Nationalist Views

Whenever military conflicts arise, human rights are first to be compromised. Following the Second World War, which was provoked by extreme nationalist ideologies, Europe has been overwhelmed with several armed disputes, revolving around nationalism and ethnocentrism. The primary example is the Yugoslav Wars which consisted of five conflicts and lasted between 1991 and 2001; the Bosnian War was the most devastating one in terms of human rights abuses (United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, 2017). Despite the hopes that the region will become more peaceful, Russia's commencement of the "special military operation" in Ukraine, in February 2022, has once again raised academic and public concerns about the security and stability in Europe, human rights abuses, possible outcomes of the conflict and the future of Ukrainian and Russian peoples. I decided to find out the causes and nature of human rights violations—an inevitable consequence—in the Russia-Ukraine War and compare it with a similar, but more transparent one in the Balkans—The Bosnian War—because they both share and feature the elements of nationality and ethnicity.

Therefore, comparative analysis of those wars may help us comprehend the overall nature of contemporary territorial and ethnic conflicts (not only in Europe but also in other parts of the world), the role of ethnonational identities, sovereignty, and relationships between human rights abuses and extreme ethnic nationalism. Since there is little comparative research done on the invasions of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Ukraine, not to mention the emphasis on human rights and the role of ethnic/national identities, though both wars have features in common, I am determined not only to elucidate them by using analogical reasoning but also interpret by applying theoretical frameworks, designed to explain such a critical phenomenon as ethnic conflict. In this paper, I compare the Russia-Ukraine War and the Bosnian War to find similarities and differences and apply ethnic nationalism and constructivism to attempt to uncover the possible causes and nature of the two conflicts.

In the next chapter, I provide a definition of human rights, elaborate on chosen theoretical frameworks, constructivism, and ethnic nationalism, explain why those particular concepts and theories are the most befitting of the topic, and list primary and secondary materials related to each case. Then, I elaborate on the methods and tools I utilized during the research process and conclude. Finally, I analyze and interpret materials, using theories and backing some findings with secondary materials, and discuss results.

Literature Review

Defining Human Rights

One cannot argue that human rights are violated unless those rights are properly defined. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, human rights are norms that aspire to protect people from abuses of various forms. The theory consists of daring assumptions, such



as the universality or objectivity of human rights (Nickel, 2019). However, what are those rights? There is certainly a difference of opinions on human rights definition because they can be perceived as legal, moral, often subjective, or divine property. My aim is not to touch upon any philosophical, ethical, or religious claims but to remain within the scope of political science and international relations. Therefore, the best clarification can be derived from an international-level declaration or document; I bring forth the foundational text of such an ambiguous term as human rights—the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 (United Nations, 2022). It is a legal document, with 30 articles in total, and it features the most relevant one to my topic—Article 3: “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and the security of person” (United Nations, 1948). Notwithstanding that, it raises the following questions: what about the context of war? Are combatants not allowed to kill their enemies?

To respond, I must refer to International Humanitarian Law and its core—the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols. Those laws are also called the “rules of war,” which limit unnecessary violence during armed conflicts. To elaborate, they protect non-combatants, such as aid workers, civilians, and medics, as well as those no longer able to combat, such as war prisoners and wounded. Accordingly, the laws prohibit targeting those groups regardless of their race, nationality, political stance, and religion (International Committee of the Red Cross, n.d.). As the emphasis of mine is only on civilian casualties and displacements, let us look at what the documents affirm: according to Additional Protocol I, Articles 51 and Article 57 relatively, “innocent civilians must be kept outside hostilities as far as possible and enjoy general protection against danger arising from hostilities” and “do everything feasible to verify that the objectives to be attacked are neither civilians nor civilian objects” (The International Committee of the Red Cross, 1977). Displacements are also linked to those articles because, as per the definition given by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (n.d.), it is when people “have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence as a result of or to avoid the effects of events or situations such as armed conflict, generalized violence, human rights abuses,” as well as “have been forcibly removed from their homes, evicted or relocated;” apparently it is an unlawful practice under international law (pp. 164-165).

Theoretical Framework: Constructivism

To make sense of what was or is happening, it is vital to have a paradigm. Constructivism is one of the key theories not only in International Relations but also in Political Science and Sociology. I chose this theory as well as an approach, for it is within social sciences and offers an explanation of actors’ behavior and interactions by emphasizing their identity and norms. Through socialization—interaction with others and continuous exposure to certain things—actors subjectively construct concepts. Consequently, what an entity perceives, for example, as an interest or danger is its construct, and it does not apply to others’ perceptions (Pevehouse and Goldstein, 2016, pp. 92-93). For instance, the United States considers Russia a rival and Israel an ally, though both of them have nuclear weapons and thus are equal (more or less)



security threats to other state actors. In contrast, Iran considers the former an ally and the latter an enemy. The US and Iran perceive threats differently; according to constructivism, it is due to authorities' varying identities and backgrounds, that help them construct or reconstruct the understanding of a threat and friend.

The main reasons I chose constructivism are because of its flexibility as well as its relevant propositions. Laura Yeghiazaryan (2008), in her research paper, published in the Political Science Department, at California State Polytechnic University, tested and compared three ethnic conflict theories, and concluded that constructivism, however, combined with instrumentalism, is "the best way of explaining the causes of ethnic conflicts" (p. 46). However, since instrumentalism is less relevant to International Relations and Political Science, I went with constructivism. According to Yeghiazaryan, constructivists argue that ethnicity and other similar concepts are socially constructed—fabricated or re-fabricated based on people's norms and principles—and that ethnic identities are just variable subjective experiences (pp. 48-49). It is a well-fitting theory for the two wars, for they have a strong relationship with clashing perspectives on specific national identities.

Theoretical Framework: Ethnic Nationalism

Another theoretical framework I use to analyze and interpret the two cases is nationalism. Indeed, it has played a key role in major inter-state conflicts and human rights violations for centuries. As mentioned before, the conflicts in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Ukraine have elements of ethnicity and nation, and, therefore, this broad theory also fits well. Although there is no consensus on its definition, commonalities are certainly present. Montserrat Guibernau, a researcher with PhD in Social and Political Theory (Paterson, 2017), defines it as "the sentiment of belonging to a community whose members have the will to decide upon their common political destiny" (Guibernau, 1996, p. 47). Another definition of nationalism is found at Oxford: Blackwell—a doctrine invented in Europe with the assumption that humans are naturally divided into nations and supporting the determination of those nations to enjoy their own government, exercise power and organize a society of states (Kedourie, 1993, p. 9). In general, nationalism is an ideology or a theory, emphasizing collective belonging, or an individual attaching oneself to a group or collective body because they share something, and that belief would entitle them to political power and self-determination. Yet, what the 'something' they share is a matter of scholarly dispute, and I will narrow the concept down and present a more specific terminology that corresponds to the elements of the cases—ethnic nationalism.

Ethnicity encompasses culture or biology or both (Hoffman and Graham, 2015, p. 268), and hence ethnic nationalism can be understood as a sense of belonging to a nation, that shares the same cultural traits, or members of which are genetically related. Moreover, the entitlement to political power and independence and belief in superiority over other nations and ethnicities complete its definition. This ideology or concept certainly impacts the behavior of states, groups, and individuals. Since evidence suggests that nationalism had its place in the disaster in Bosnia-Herzegovina, it might be valuable to look at Ukraine through its lens.



Reviewing Numerical Data

The theories/paradigms shall be applied to the following case-related materials I collected. Easy-to-compare and the most comprehensive type of human rights abuse materials are numerical data, and, therefore, the first primary sources I considered were in the form of statistics. Concerning the first conflict, I found an article, in the archives of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), that estimates casualties during the Bosnian War. The ICTY was established by the UN Security Council in 1993 to try war criminals in the Yugoslav Wars (About the ICTY, n.d.). The article was written by two authors—Jan Zwierzchowski and Ewa Tabeau. The former was a research assistant at the Institute of Statistics and Demography of the Warsaw School of Economics in Poland, who was later employed in the Demographic Unit, the Office of the Prosecutor, in the ICTY. The latter is a senior researcher and project leader of the Demographic Unit, OTP, ICTY (Zwierzchowski and Tabeau, 2010, p. 1). To summarise the material, in total, more than 100,000 people died, including 36,000 civilians (approximately 80% males and 20% females) and 68,000 militaries, 95% of whom were males (p. 17).

On the other hand, the war in Ukraine has not ended yet, and, hence, statistical data may vary and be obscure, unverified, and biased, depending on the source. Additionally, there has not been enough time for scholars to process the phenomenon and form a consensus in terms of its interpretation, so the understanding of what is going on in that conflict dwindles further. Also, there is research done regarding biases in media coverage of the Russia-Ukraine War, demonstrating active manipulative politics. A study published at Södertörn University revealed that Western media coverage (e.g. BBC and CNN), particularly, of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict involves sensationalism, manipulation, selective framing, and “us versus them narratives,” contributing to the escalation of the conflict rather than resolution and peacebuilding; it is also known as war journalism. What is more, the author of the paper concludes that Western media outlets “demonize” and “dehumanize” the Russian side and marginalize Russians’ position, while heroizing Ukrainians, ignoring possible war crimes committed by them and normalizing the role of neo-Nazi entities because they are opposing, to Russia, forces (Fisher, 2023, p. 92). Of course, in no way does it mean that Russian media outlets are objective and unbiased. The point is that, if we consider all the mentioned concerns collectively, it becomes apparent that anyone may struggle, if not find it impossible, to orient oneself in the flow of information during the war times.

Notwithstanding that, I managed to get one source regarding civilian casualties in Ukraine, based on two criteria: 1) a provider of data must be a non-state or non-profit organization, so it has little to no self-interests and agenda to make biased reports; 2) the primary objective of a data-provider is to monitor and report human rights violations. Accordingly, I selected a report by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). There are not as many details as in the previous death toll, such as to which ethnic/national group victims belonged and military casualties on both sides. Therefore, I included other reports regarding military losses, though none of them is 100% accurate and reliable. An investigation by



journalists at Meduza and Mediazona shows that “roughly 47,000” Russian soldiers have died (Bring out your dead, 2023), yet neither of these outlets focuses on Ukrainian military casualties. However, according to U.S. officials’ assessment, 35,000-42,500 Russian soldiers had been killed and 150,500-177,000 had been injured. According to Russian officials, there were only 6,000 casualties since the beginning of the war (Vlahos, 2023), and the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine estimates the “total combat losses of the enemy” at around 234,480 (The total combat losses, 2023). Although Ukraine does not reveal the casualty rate of Ukrainian soldiers for strategic reasons, recently the president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, updated the death figure in response to Russia’s quotation of “inflated figures,” stating that 31,000 Ukrainian soldiers were killed in total. Notwithstanding that, US officials stated that killed Ukrainian soldiers amounted to about 70,000 and wounded ones—120,000 (Armstrong, 2024). After gathering all of these pieces of data about military casualties, I decided not to include them in my research because of such inconsistencies; the only reason I mentioned them is to demonstrate that estimates are, indeed, contradictory to each other yet publicly available.

The next source encompasses the rate of displaced people in two cases at the same time. The UNHCR, a refugee agency, established by the General Assembly in 1950, protects individuals who flee conflicts and persecution (UNHCR, n.d.). The figure for displaced people due to the conflict in Bosnia amounted to more than 2 million (Returns to Bosnia and Hercegovina, 2004), while the war in Ukraine has led to the displacement of 3.7 million (About the Crisis in Ukraine, n.d.). Yet, how the number of displaced persons in Ukraine is higher than in Bosnia, although the latter was much more atrocious and bloodier? In the fourth chapter, I endeavor to explain such disparities along with the analysis of other sources.

Reviewing Speeches

Knowing what state officials say and think is not less significant than knowing what was or is happening on the battlefields. To understand what caused the emergence of those wars, I must look into leaders’ minds. There is an importance in words spoken because they might reveal and manifest their perspective and motives. An early-2024 viral interview with Vladimir Putin, conducted by an American journalist Tucker Carlson, was a must-include material because it is fresh and, considering the mainstream Western position against the Russian president and the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, it is both controversial and intriguing. They primarily discussed the Russia-Ukraine War, its underlying causes, and possible outcomes, helping us grasp the world outlook of the Russian leader. Later I explain several key moments of their exchange through the application of the theories and, of course, compare it with the interviews with Slobodan Milosevic, a former president of Serbia.

In contrast, there is an overwhelmingly high amount of evidence that Milosevic was an extreme nationalist, and, that is why, I do not focus on evaluating his speeches. Instead, I will allocate more effort and time to the interview with Putin and use secondary sources of other academics, analyzing the Serbian leader’s words. One research paper I summarize was published at Lund University, the Department of History, delving into the historical utilization of



ethnic nationalism by Slobodan Milosevic and exploring his speeches given at Kosovo Polje in 1987 and the Gazimestan Monument at Kosovo field in 1989. In case readers doubt the credibility of the first source, I present the second paper, written by Professor Christina M. Morus and published at Routledge. She argues that historical allusions and nationalistic rhetoric used by Milosevic led to the normalization of ethnic violence in the former Yugoslavia.

Methodology

Since the war in Ukraine is an ongoing, and thus less researched case, there is no scholarly consensus in understanding its nature, causes, and potential outcomes. Therefore, the first tool I used was analogical reasoning—making conclusions about a new situation based on resemblances it has with a known one (Shabo, 2024). That is why, this entire research is based on comparing two events in one region. To elaborate, the Bosnian War—a well-researched and the most human-disastrous military conflict in Europe since World War 2—was driven by ethnocentrism and nationalism. The current war in Ukraine seems to involve the same elements and concepts, and, as I thoroughly discuss in the next chapter, Russian leaders view the Ukrainian national identity differently from Ukrainians. Those views regarding nationality and ethnicity affect authorities' decision-making and foreign policies and indirectly cause the use of military force. Interestingly, it resembles the Bosnian War in certain ways: one group aspired to sovereignty and their own state, based on their subjective view about nationality/ethnicity, whereas another one sought to unite states based on their view of nationality/ethnicity. By conducting such comparisons with a clearer case, we can understand better a more ambiguous one—the Russia-Ukraine War.

In terms of methodology of research, I mixed two methods—quantitative and more importantly qualitative research—because I conduct both numerical data analysis and content and narrative analyses; contents shall be interpreted primarily through frameworks of constructivism and ethnic nationalism. All the listed sources in the Literature Review section shall be evaluated, compared, and contrasted in the following chapter.

Analysis, Results, and Discussion

Although I analyze statistics and interviews in separate sub-chapters, I ought to admit they do have astonishing interconnectedness and mutual reinforcement. In order not to confuse a reader with regard to the sources, I keep the contents close to each other or repeatedly mention them. As an example, one source will be timely referred to while analyzing another.

Numerical Data Analysis: Religious Identity & Sexes

To begin with casualties, the first article, in the ICTY archives, estimates, as it was previously mentioned, 100,000+ deaths, 36% of whom were civilians, and the rest were militaries, and the majority of whom were males. What is more, about 58,000 killed were Muslims (Bosniaks), including those in the Srebrenica Genocide, 7,543 Croats, and over 19,000 were Serbs, including 6,000 civilian men and 1,000 women (Zwierzchowski and Tabeau, 2010, p. 17). I mentioned the



Serbian group as well because they are all blindly antagonized by some. There were also non-combatants among them who fell victim to the brutality of either Croats or Bosnians, although Serbs were the main aggressors. The second source, from the OHCHR, remarks that 10,500 civilians were killed in Ukraine, including 500+ children, and about 20,000 injured, including about 1,000 children. However, there is no information about which ethnic or national group the victims belonged to.

The former war was more brutal, based on the number of people killed, and later I explain it. With regards to ethnic groups, why were more Bosniaks killed than Croats? Were they not equal enemies to Serbs? Yes, they were and, according to constructivism, an answer lies in their identity. In other words, Serbian identity is closer to Croats than to Bosnians because of their religion. Both Croats and Serbs are Christians, however, Catholics and Orthodox respectively, while Bosniaks are predominantly Muslims. As Serbs perceived Bosnian Muslims more of aliens than Croats, in addition to Muslims making up 52% of the total population (Bosnia and Herzegovina, n.d.), they were the main targets and, eventually, disproportionately massacred.

Another peculiar feature of interest is related to the ratio of killed males and females. Surprisingly, the data about Ukraine suggests that men account for 60% of the total casualties (TWO-YEAR UPDATE, 2024). Compared to the Bosnian War (80% males to 20% females), a larger portion of women lost their lives during the War in Ukraine. Even though some may be classified as non-identified, in terms of sex, the rate of females killed in Ukraine is higher than in Bosnia-Herzegovina. There are two possible explanations I would like to put forward.

In the first one I use the ethno-nationalist paradigm; Ukrainian media outlets have been promoting Ukrainian nationalism and resistance since the war started. For instance, there is an article published in The Kyiv Independent, covering the history of Ukraine's nationalist movements and the nation's struggle for self-determination. It also includes nationalist rhetoric—for some, it may seem extremist—such as “Ukraine's nationalist heroes” and “their main defining and uniting feature is their unbreakable commitment to the struggle for an independent state” and “you should fight, that you should not accept evil, that you should resist, and you should be strong as steel” (Query, 2023). The point is that the Russian offenses caused and strengthened the spirit of nationalism, courage, and patriotism within Ukrainians, regardless of their sex, and then more females volunteered to fight for their country. The second explanation comes from the constructivist point of view, yet before that let me remind you that Ukraine nowadays is divided into pro-Russian, predominantly in the Eastern part, and pro-Western. The war in Ukraine not only involves military clashes but also identity ones. It quite resembles the times of the Cold War, in which the US and the USSR employed both hard power and soft power (news reports, advertising, cinematography, music, etc.) to gain support and win. Unsurprisingly, the West is now also involved in the conflict in Ukraine but that is another discussion. More importantly, Ukrainians want to be a part of Europe, identify as Europeans, and strive towards Western values, such as liberalism, democracy, and feminism. One obvious proof is the effort of Ukraine to become a member of the European Union



(European Commission, n.d.). Furthermore, the following statistics further prove my point: in 2005, 36% of Ukrainians identified as Europeans, and the percentage escalated to 51% by 2023, whereas identifying with Soviet and Russian cultures dwindled. Ukrainians embracing democracy also rose from 42% to 75% between 2017 and 2023 (Keda, 2024). Coming back to my explanation, more women participated and died in the war in Ukraine than in Bosnia, possibly, due to the influence of feminism and gender equality—properties of the European culture. Perhaps, females volunteering to participate in military operations is an attempt to break traditional views, such as males being the protectors, and replace them with ones that relate to their contemporary European identity.

Numerical Data Analysis: Astonishing Displacement Rates

In terms of the data regarding both conflicts from the UNHCR, I compare the surprising figures for displacement in the Russia-Ukraine War and the Bosnian War. How come surprising? The former was approximately two times as large as the latter. In the Literature Review, I brought up the following question that might cross the reader's mind too—how the number of displaced persons in Ukraine is higher than in Bosnia-Herzegovina, though the latter was much more atrocious and bloodier conflict? Ironically, the answer lies within the question itself; the fact that the Bosnian War was more atrocious and bloodier, that the entire country was in the range of military aggression, that there were factually no safe zones, that Croats and Bosniaks fought the enemy from outside as well as inside (Serbian militias in Bosnia as well as the forces coming from Serbia itself), that residents had more chances to be killed, rather than to lose their place of residence and then stay alive or to simply flee the country. In contrast, the second conflict has not spread to the whole country, Ukrainian citizens are not being invaded by the enemy from all sides, and technically there are safer areas in Ukraine. Hence, people there have more chances/opportunities of surviving, migrating, and getting the status of refugees or internally displaced ones rather than being murdered. Furthermore, Ukraine is backed by Western superpowers, allowing it to effectively respond to Russian military offenses and protect its inhabitants. Such a distinction like the two cases helps us understand the disparity in statistics. On the other hand, there is another nuance that shall be discussed in the next sub-chapter—a significant difference between Putin's and Milosevic's opinions about their enemies. In a nutshell, the Russian President views Ukrainians as a part of the Russian people, and perhaps that explains why the war has not escalated to the brutality level of the Bosnian War, why there have been fewer civilian casualties in Ukraine, according to the source analyzed above, and why victims have had more opportunities to flee the warzone and gain the status of refugees or internally displaced.

Theory Application and Speech Analysis: Distinguishing Serbian and Russian Nationalism and Their Impact

During the breakup of Yugoslavia and the emergence of multiple sovereign states, Slobodan Milosevic, a former president of Serbia and a catalyst of the serial wars in the Balkans, sought to prevent the disintegration. The research about Milosevic's regime, published at the University of Western Ontario, gives one of the obvious explanations for the Yugoslav Wars:



Milosevic sought to create “greater Serbia,” (Wintrobe, 1999, p. 3) an ethnically pure one (Bogoeva, 2014). He supported various Serbian militias and rebels, that conducted ethnic cleansings, in multiple conflicts in the Balkans and eventually was accused, by the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia, of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. Moreover, he was responsible for the Srebrenica Massacre during the Bosnian War in 1995 (Kenny, 2006). It was one of the biggest humanitarian crises in Europe since WW2, featuring the slaughter of 8,000 Bosnian Muslims in a UN-protected area (Cleverly, 2021). Notwithstanding the explanation remarked by Wintrobe, his research concludes that Milosevic had to stimulate ethnic nationalism to gain back decreasing support and “survive in power” (p. 32). In other words, he initially caused the disastrous events in Bosnia-Herzegovina as well as other parts of Yugoslavia through ethnic nationalist sentiments yet did not or could not control consequential events. Surely, in no way does it justify or excuse him, for he remains one of the main reasons for the Yugoslav Wars. However, does it mean that nationalism was only an opportunistic tool? Perhaps, it was the case, but such a perspective is counted as unconventional, for the popular belief is that Milosevic was a nationalistic figure. Based on the narrative analysis below, I also believe that he was a nationalist, yet it was worth mentioning an opposing view. Even if we take Wintrobe’s inference for granted, nationalism indeed had a major role in the case and was perceived by the Serbian former president as something effective; therefore, it cannot be dismissed.

According to the first secondary source, ‘a Greater Serbia’ was not an exclusive idea of Milosevic but an objective of other Serbian nationalists throughout previous centuries (Didic, 2020, p. 28). At the same time, he victimized their Serbian ancestors, so there would be a reason—revenge—to engage in more military hostilities. Furthermore, Milosevic victimized contemporary Serbs, which was not limited to Serbs of Kosovo, and constructed a narrative that Albanians posed an existential threat and, to prevent it, they had to fight and ethnically cleanse them (p. 27) His speech at the Gazimestan Monument at Kosovo field emphasizes the unification of Serbian soldiers, the importance of their “social relationship” and “comradeship” (p. 12). Let me remind the reader that the speech was delivered a couple of years before the commencement of the Yugoslav Wars; I understand it in a way that the former Serbian leader had started mobilizing or at least preparing them mentally for future battles that he might have already planned or intended. The second source adds that “Milosevic’s use of mythic (historical) allusions and appeals to unity helped him appear to be a rational, pro-Yugoslav leader to the international community” (Morus, 2007, p. 15). Initially, he gained support and fabricated history to “normalize violence” against non-Serbs in the former Yugoslavia (p.16).

To connect similarities, Vladimir Putin also made various historical claims, including in the interview, to supposedly justify his invasion of Ukraine, whilst calling Ukraine “artificial” and supposedly undermining millions of people with Ukrainian national identity (Knott, 2023, p. 47). If we take into account Morus’ research conclusions regarding nationalist rhetoric, combined with mythic discourse, and “transhistorical narratives”—they can form and reform any national identity and fool the international community, scholars, and politicians who are unaware of



specific national history—resulting in the rationalization of violence against particular groups and late realization and intervention of outsiders, we must be extra careful with Putin’s history lectures. The Russian president claiming that Ukraine is an artificial nation is a popular remark from Western entities to demonize Russia, but, following the interview with Tucker Carlson, it becomes clear that the matter is extremely complicated, rather than black and white. However, one thing is for sure: ethnic nationalism played a vital role in the breakout of the war.

In addition, apart from Ukrainians, Russians have lived in Ukraine too, and currently, there are Russian separatists and proxies in Eastern Ukraine that are supported by the Russian government (Vorobyov, 2022). Let us assume that Russia feels entitled to expand geographically, for it sees itself as an authority to all Russian-like peoples. In his speech before the beginning of the War in Ukraine, Putin addressed citizens of Russia and proceeded with ‘our compatriots’ in Ukraine, implying that the borderline of the Russian nation goes beyond the Russian Federation (Melvin, 2022). If ethno-nationalism is applied, we reveal a cause of the wars and, subsequently, human rights violations: two genuinely nationalist leaders of their time with identical objectives—unite Serbian or Russian people, divided by borders, under their rule and prevent the existence of separate sovereign states. To achieve that, the use of military force and the killing of other ethnic/national groups would be necessary.

Notwithstanding such assumptions, his main concern, based on the interview, seems the rising extreme nationalism and closeness of Ukraine to the West. Unsurprisingly, Putin once again called Ukraine an artificial state, based on historical reasons, in the interview with Carlson (Tucker Carlson, 2024, 19:48) yet then debunked all the accusations above:

“Ukrainians are part of the one Russian people. They say, ‘no, we are a separate people.’ Okay, fine. If they consider themselves a separate people, they have the right to do so but not based on Nazism, the Nazi ideology” (58:30).

What does he imply by “Nazi ideology?” Al Jazeera reports (2023), in September, a Nazi veteran was invited to a Canadian parliamentary session, at the House of Commons, attended by President Zelenskyy. The veteran received two ovations and was called a “Ukrainian hero, Canadian hero” for fighting against Russians during World War II. Although the event received public backlash and government officials apologized for honoring him, it is indeed disturbing that they allowed such a thing to happen in the first place; and this is one of many instances. Besides, ironically, Zelenskyy is an ethnic Jew, whose relatives died in the Holocaust. Putin briefly explained that the Nazi man, invited to the Canadian Parliament, served in the SS troops, consisting of Ukrainian nationalists (59:31). When Carlson told him that Nazi Germany and Adolph Hitler are all in the past, Putin remarked that Nazism still lives on to this day within the Ukrainian nation. The main aim of the ‘special military operation’ is denazification or, in other words, uprooting the Nazi ideology from their culture and institutions. Since he argues that, under Western countries’ influence, Ukraine forbade any negotiations with Russia (1:03:01), this whole military campaign seems like Putin’s attempt to force the Ukrainian authorities to



come to the negotiating table and persuade them to alter their culture and elements of their national identity—in a nutshell, to denazify their country at all levels.

Based on Putin's statements about Western countries, primarily the USA, consistently keeping Russia distant, despite his initial willingness to cooperate with them, there is an impression that the West, for unclear reasons, keeps pushing away and antagonizing Russia in the post-Cold War era. At this point, I introduce an argument, brought by an American political scientist John Mearsheimer, explaining the causes of the Ukraine War. He (2022) blamed the United States and its allies for provoking the conflict because, at the 2008 Bucharest NATO Summit, the Bush administration decided to invite Ukraine and Georgia to NATO, a military coalition formed during the Cold War, despite Russia's presence there, its vital security concerns and a prior agreement that NATO would no longer expand in its direction. It was a clear provocation and disregard, for Russia made it explicit that bringing Ukraine into NATO would be crossing the red line (p. 27). As a reaction, the Russian President stationed troops on Ukraine's border to prevent efforts of Ukraine's integration with the West and pressure the US to reconsider its NATO expansionist policy, which was again ignored (p. 21). In the same paper, Mearsheimer also brought pieces of evidence, suggesting that there was no sign or will of Russia to expand geographically and conquer Ukraine before 2008 (p. 22). It does not justify the murdered Ukrainian civilians in the war, yet Western countries have their share of Russia's fault, especially the US.

At this point, ethnonationalism is unable to explain the situation, revealing a weakness of my approach to the case research, but constructivism can. Putin's and other Russian officials' minds have had their construct: NATO is an existential threat regardless of whether others call it a defensive or offensive alliance. Likewise, I presume that US officials also cannot free themselves from the Cold War mindset and perceive Russia as a threat. The issue seems to persist because of a misunderstanding between two key state actors and their steps, which requires talks and endeavors of active communication. Nonetheless, nothing could explain NATO's post-1990s expansion apart from their obscure mental construct of Russia or simply the hegemonic arrogance of American authorities.

Returning to the interview, his concluding statement draws a clear distinction between Milosevic's nationalist ambitions and Putin's nationalist ambitions if I can call them so:

You know this probably sounds strange given the current situation, but the relations between the two peoples will be rebuilt anyway. It will take a lot of time, but they will heal. (Tucker Carlson, 2024, 2:05:04)

A reasonable person can easily conclude that the Russian president is not as imperialist, nation-centric/ethnocentric, and violent as the mainstream Western media narrates. Verily, we do not and cannot know how truthful or genuine he is, but as a matter of fact, it is not as same as the Yugoslav Wars and Serbian aggression. Based on the analysis, we can debunk the accusations of



Putin's radical nationalism. He also gave an example of how Ukrainian soldiers spoke Russian before being killed and then made an acknowledgment:

"They [Ukrainians] still identify themselves as Russian. What is happening is to a certain extent an element of a civil war. Everyone in the West think that Russian people have been split by hostilities forever. No, they will be reunited. The unity is still there" (2:06:04).

Not only does it remind us that Putin perceives Ukrainians as part of the Russian nation, but it also explains why he is eager to eradicate "Nazism" or, to be more precise, radical racist nationalism of Ukrainians because it hinders such opportunities as cooperation and unity of Ukrainian and Russian nations. Based on that, I consider Slobodan Milosevic's Serbian nationalism as ethnocentric or nation-centric, leading to excessive violence, whereas Vladimir Putin's Russian nationalism is somewhat transethnic-nationalistic, in a sense that it encompasses nations beyond the borders of Russia. Thus, the figure for killed individuals and, overall, the degree of violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina was higher than the one in Ukraine because their causes, however similar at first glance, are distinct in nature. The way Serbian and Russian authorities identify and perceive their opponents or targets differently, logically, leads to different outcomes.

Conclusion

The paper of mine revealed that the degree of brutality in both conflicts is distinct, although there is a resemblance in terms of causes. More people were killed in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992-1995) than in Ukraine (2022-present), yet the more unlikelihood of survival and severity of the Bosnian War meant fewer refugees and internally displaced individuals there but more in Ukraine. In addition, the number of killed females in Ukraine is larger than in Bosnia and Herzegovina, either, because of the influence of European soft power, primarily feminism and gender equality, on the Ukrainian society or the escalated Ukrainian nationalism and patriotism due to certain media propaganda campaigns and historical narratives. Finally, I found that both cases share a similar cause of the conflicts and human rights violations: Vladimir Putin and Slobodan Milosevic, based on their policies and analyzed words, are more or less nationalist leaders, seeking to unify their perceived ethnic/national groups and prevent or minimize their separation into other states. The former leader considers a separated group, Ukrainians, as an artificial nation and part of the Russian people, whereas the latter simply undermines other groups, despite recognizing them as legitimate (separate) national or ethnic groups. However, I would describe Putin's and Milosevic's nationalisms differently—transethnic-nationalism and nation-ethnocentrism. Hence, constructivism explains why more civilians died in the Bosnian War than in the Russia-Ukraine War or, in general, why the first case was significantly bloodier than the second one—Putin sees Ukrainians and Russians as one body and, perhaps, that is why he is relatively more careful with civilian casualties, while Milosevic prioritized his Serbian nation and sought to 'protect' and help them flourish, at the expense of others, in the former Yugoslavia; that led to genocide and ethnic cleansings.



Nevertheless, we ought not to forget that nationalism and identification of themselves and their neighbors are not the only causes. President Putin's subjective, and justifiable, perception of a threat as well as the provocation of the US-led NATO expansion contributed more to the escalation of the conflict in 2022 as well as 2014. Some scholars, such as John Mearsheimer, may argue that inviting Ukraine to NATO was a primary or even the only explanation for Russia's hostility and the Ukraine War, yet I surmise several reasons collectively led to the critical situation we have today, including identity.



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