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# The Rise of Nationalism in a Country Fighting for Its Life



By February 2022, nationalism in Ukraine had undergone a profound transformation. Faced with the existential threat from Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukrainians rallied around symbols once considered divisive.

The phrase "Slava Ukraini!" (Glory to Ukraine)—historically associated with Stepan Bandera, one of the most known figures of the Ukrainian nationalist movement—resonated not just in Kyiv and Lviv but also in south-eastern regions, where Bandera had long been viewed with scepticism.

Suddenly, it was on the lips of politicians, diplomats, and ordinary citizens in cities like Mykolaiv and Kherson, places where such slogans had rarely been embraced before.

For decades, Russian propaganda vilified Bandera, **amplifying** his brief cooperation with Nazi Germany and portraying him as the epitome of brutality.

This narrative resonated not only in Russia but also in Poland and Israel, where Bandera remains a controversial historical figure. But when Russian missiles rained down on Ukrainian cities, "Slava Ukraini!" became a rallying cry for resistance and national survival.

A similar shift occurred with language. Speaking Ukrainian became an expression of loyalty and defiance, a rejection of Russian imperialism—not only politically, but also culturally.

Russia had long used its culture as a propaganda tool, using its literature, music, and even ballet to justify expansionism.

One of the most striking examples is Sergei Polunin, the internationally acclaimed ballet dancer born in Kherson, who renounced his Ukrainian roots, **tattooed** Vladimir Putin's face on his chest, and openly supported Russia's war effort.

While Russian bombs were falling on Ukrainian cities, Polunin toured Russia and raised funds for the invading army. In this context,

Ukraine's rejection of Russian culture is hardly surprising.

## A break from the colonial past

Even more controversial, however, is the attempt to suppress the Russian language itself. Even though a significant portion of the population, including Volodymyr Zelenskyy, speaks Russian, its presence in public life is declining.

Monuments are being **dismantled**, and Russian-language books are increasingly restricted. While many see these actions as a necessary break from the colonial past, others fear that they risk alienating citizens who grew up bilingual, especially in regions where Russian has historically been the dominant language.

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For most Ukrainians, nationalism is not about aggression; it is about survival. A post-Soviet country that inherited the weight of Soviet propaganda, Ukraine has struggled to define its own narrative. But nationalism, when fuelled by war, can veer into extremism.

The collective pain and anger of a nation under siege have emboldened populist rhetoric, making nationalism feel not just necessary, but noble.

Few accusations today carry more weight than labelling someone as pro-Russian, and in some western regions, the mere mention of Russian elicits outrage. Yet on the battlefield, Ukrainian and Russian-speaking soldiers fight side by side.

## War dominates the airwaves

In cultural spaces, war dominates the airwaves. Ukrainian radio is filled with anti-Russian anthems and war-themed songs.

Comedians build entire careers on mocking Russia. Politicians invoke nationalist fervour in preparation for the inevitable post-war elections.

These nationalist statements primarily revolve around the idea of defeating Russia, rejecting peace talks as “capitulation,” fostering hatred towards Russians, and promoting an exaggerated perception of Ukrainians as a superior nation. Anyone advocating otherwise risks being labelled a traitor.

Calls to send draft dodgers to the front lines and mobilise everyone are common, as well as the shaming of refugees—particularly those abroad.

This is not entirely new. Over the past decade, Ukrainian politics has been shaped by two presidents—Petro Poroshenko and Volodymyr Zelenskyy—who both came to power promising peace but ultimately embraced nationalism.

Poroshenko, elected in the wake of Russia’s annexation of Crimea, once vowed to end the war in two weeks. Instead, by 2017-2018, his rhetoric had hardened.

### Zelenskyy's political evolution reflects not ideology but necessity

His administration identified Ukraine’s progress by Russia’s failures, alienating voters who sought a leader willing to negotiate. In 2019, Zelenskyy emerged as that alternative—a Russian-speaking centrist who promised dialogue with Putin.

Now, Zelenskyy finds himself in a familiar position. He speaks only Ukrainian in public, promotes the Ukrainian Orthodox Church while shutting down its pro-Russian counterpart, and champions a strong military—adopting much of Poroshenko’s former rhetoric. Yet Zelenskyy is neither a nationalist nor a practicing Christian. His political evolution reflects not ideology but necessity.

## Political parties are not driven by ideology but by personalities

Despite the war-driven nationalist surge, far-right parties have never gained real traction in Ukraine. Even during the Revolution of Dignity and Russia’s 2014 invasion, nationalist parties failed to secure more than 2% of the vote—far below the 5% threshold needed for parliamentary representation.

Svoboda, the last nationalist party to enter parliament, lost its seats in 2014. Today, nationalists are among the first to test the political waters, but their reach remains limited.



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Take Iryna Farion, a nationalist politician who stirred controversy in 2023 by claiming that Russian-speaking Ukrainian soldiers were not true Ukrainians. Her comments provoked such an outcry that the Ukrainian Parliament’s Commissioner for Human Rights referred the matter to the Security Service of Ukraine. When Farion was killed in the summer of 2024, her legacy was one of division rather than political success.

Even among nationalist leaders, there is a growing recognition that absolutist rhetoric has its limits. Andriy Biletsky, the former commander of Azov and current leader of the 3rd Separate Assault Brigade, recently surprised many by arguing that a ceasefire should not be dismissed outright.

He warned against “anarchy,” “endless war,” and the toxic competition over “who fought the most” or “who is the biggest hero.” The remarks, uncharacteristic for a figure long associated with hard-line nationalism, quickly gained traction.

While Biletsky’s political ambitions remain uncertain—his current polling hovers around 3%—his shift in tone reflects a broader reality: Ukrainian voters, while patriotic, are historically pragmatic.

Unlike in many European countries, Ukrainian political parties are not driven by ideology but by personalities. This gives the system a degree of flexibility—allowing leaders to adapt to changing circumstances—but it also means that nationalist rhetoric surges in times of crisis.

While war has undoubtedly strengthened nationalist sentiment, history suggests that, when given a choice, Ukrainian voters lean towards centrism.

The challenge ahead will be navigating the fine line between preserving national identity and ensuring that nationalism does not consume the very democracy it seeks to defend.