

## The problem with rallying around the (Ukrainian) flag

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**Abstract.** This Provocation examines the nationalist discourse that has surrounded international reactions to the Russian invasion and war on Ukraine in 2022. It critiques the use of any kind of nationalism as a way to express solidarity because rallying around any flag is also the act of rallying around the Westphalian state system.

When the Russian military began its latest invasion of Ukrainian territory on February 24, 2022, ordinary people across Europe, the U.S., and several other parts of the world were quick to unfurl Ukrainian flags – both in real life and in the digital realm. Expressions of solidarity for Ukraine echoed across social media platforms with new blue and yellow profile picture frames, badges and hashtags like #StandWithUkraine, and proud accounts of people donating aid, services, and their own labor to help refugees fleeing from the actual or expected attacks on their homes. The Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky quickly became an international hero (Onuch and Hale 2022). Ukrainians themselves also rallied around their land, language, and leaders, affirming their national pride to an unprecedented degree.

Inside and outside Ukraine, physical and nonphysical spaces were also marked by intense anti-Russian messaging, vilifying Russia's longtime autocratic ruler Vladimir Putin, as well as ordinary Russians themselves. At the same time that American and European leaders rallied to impose dramatic new sanctions against Russia, citizens in these places were graffitiiing the revanchist message of "Russians go home!" or "Fuck Putin" on walls and sign-posts, or appending them to celebratory Ukrainian flags in diverse public spaces. I saw many such messages in Germany, where I was living in spring and summer 2022.

But at the end of February 2022, I was doing research at the Dubai World's Fair, EXPO 2020. EXPO is primarily organized around country-specific pavilions, with each country celebrating its identity in a unique fashion (Koch, 2022). Days after the invasion began, the Ukrainian pavilion was swarmed with sticky notes of solidarity (Fig. 1). Most of the thousands of small notes were positive, expressing love, support, strength, courage, and prayers. But alongside these, one could also find notes expressing hatred and animosity toward Putin (Fig. 2). These notes drew on nationalism to celebrate solidarity with Ukraine as something positive and a joyous. But as with the broader international response to the unprovoked Russian aggression, some people saw supporting Ukraine as necessarily being anti-Russian.



**Fig. 1.** Sticky notes covering the walls of the Ukraine pavilion at EXPO 2020 Dubai, and the stand where visitors could write their own messages. March 2022. Source: Author 2022.



**Fig. 2.** The mixed emotional messages of sticky notes written by visitors to the Ukraine pavilion at EXPO 2020 Dubai. March 2022. Source: Author 2022.

The expressions of nationalism that took new shape in response to Russia's 2022 war are not at all new, but reflect a longer history of dualisms of good/evil and us/them in nationalist identity politics. What I found so striking about the Western reactions to the 2022 war was how quickly Russian nationalism was labeled as the evil, backward kind that needed to be combatted, and Ukrainian nationalism was the good, progressive one that needed to be celebrated. By committing acts of violence to "protect" the nation – whether defined as such by the Russian government or the Ukrainian one – soldiers from both countries have been labeled as heroes in their homeland. But where the Ukrainian women and men who joined the military resistance to the 2022 Russian invasion were hailed as *international* heroes in dominant Western media, Russian soldiers have been decried as sadistic aggressors (e.g. Crane, 2022; Fox, 2022).

The international support has been welcome for many Ukrainians, but they have also expressed a degree of puzzlement about why Western leaders and publics expressed such loud support for their national cause – rallying around the Ukrainian flag – in 2022, but not when the Russian government annexed Crimea and began a covert war in Ukraine's eastern territories in 2014. Russian political leaders were quick to cultivate the "rally around the flag" effect for Russian nationalism after the annexation (Goode, 2016; Greene and Robertson, 2022; Hale, 2018), but there was no comparable effect among Ukraine's Western allies – and certainly nothing near what was seen in Spring 2022.

In 2022, the nationalist story of Ukrainian sovereignty under attack clearly achieved a much broader international reach, pulling at the heartstrings of the Western masses in a way that it did not for the annexation of Crimea. Perhaps the emotional response was stronger because Russia's 2022 invasion was so much more brutal, more impactful, more senseless. Or perhaps it was because the Ukrainian leadership and its allies were more savvy with social media – and found a Western public easier to engage through digital platforms (Adams, 2022; Harwell and Lerman, 2022; Specia, 2022). Whatever the reasons, the impulse to rally around the Ukrainian flag in 2022 has led to a stunning amount of financial, military, and humanitarian support and solidarity from Europe and the United States. What seems to be lost in the celebratory flag-waving in support of the Ukrainian victims is that it is still *nationalism*.

It is often tempting for scholars of nationalism to position all nationalisms as "bad," or to declare certain expressions of nationalism as the "good" kind and another as the "bad" one (Koch, forthcoming). Such essentializing moral geographies have a long history in nationalism studies, but the field reached an important turning point in the 1990s. Until that point, researchers typically set violent expressions of "nationalism" in the non-West apart from "patriotism" in the West, which was framed as something positive and laudable (Billig, 1995). But in the wake of the brutal conflicts surrounding the dissolution of Yugoslavia, critical voices in nationalism studies loudly – and successfully – challenged this simplistic divide, showing that "nationalism" is a broad social construct that is mobilized by situated political actors (Billig, 1995; Brubaker, 1995, 1996; Campbell, 1998; Hage, 1996; Todorova, 1997). That is, nationalism does not exist in opposition some kind of good "patriotism" – rather, they are one and the same. The discursive construction of *patriotism* being good and *nationalism* being bad is actually just a moral map built on the sociological forgetting of the violence that gave rise to all nationalisms, as well as the quiet silencing of violent nationalist war-making and state-making of Western countries that are imagined to be morally superior (Billig, 1995; Hage, 1996; Immerwahr, 2019; Mutua, 2001; Wolfe, 2006).

This critique is especially important to remember today because it highlights the theoretical problems with uncritically adopting the signs and symbols of Ukrainian nationalism. All

nationalisms are inherently political discourses that can be used, like a resource, for good or ill. To be sure, there are actors in the refugee support community in the United States or Germany, who are harnessing Ukrainian nationalism to fund-raise to purchase the basic necessities for refugees. But so too are there are actors in the arms industry in both countries, who are delighted at the opportunity to harness Ukrainian nationalism, because they want the big pay-out that comes from new contracts to send weapons to the conflict. This tension of how nationalism is used and by whom highlights the theoretical problem of celebrating Ukrainian nationalism. Simply waving a flag does not solve a crisis. Nor does it create one. But if we fail to ask *who* is waving a flag, we are liable to overlook the violence that doing so might actually facilitate.

And perhaps more troubling from a theoretical standpoint, we must acknowledge that rallying around *any* national flag is an act of rallying around the state system itself. Space does not allow a deeper discussion here, but the dominant Westphalian order is a system built on colonial violence (Bauder and Mueller 2023; Moreton-Robinson, 2015). If critical, radical, and de-/post-/anticolonial scholars want to find ways to think beyond the hegemonic political geography of the state system, expressing solidarity for a people under attack *cannot* legitimately be undertaken through the language and grammar of nationalism. As scholars, we will naturally have personal reactions to events like the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the subsequent war and devastation there. But the intellectual challenge in this moment is less a question of which side is the “right” side. Rather, the true question is how we should be expressing solidarity in a world that continues to be so dominated by territorial states.

When I visited the Ukraine pavilion at EXPO 2022 in Dubai, only one sticky note I read struck me as having the seeds of a less bordered form of solidarity. It read: “Human lives are at stake.” This simple assertion is not a plea to privilege one group’s suffering above another’s, nor does it ignore a person’s suffering. It does not invoke the emotions of love or hate. It instead drops the moralizing baggage attached to the whole nationalist parade of rallying around a flag and demands that we attend to the humanity of those in danger – wherever they may live.

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