

Identity in the Empire Borderlands: A Comparative Account of Ukrainian and Belarusian Nationalism

Ciara McGarry

Ukraine and Belarus are similar in a number of respects; however, they differ greatly in terms of the strength of their respective national movements. This essay argues that this difference may be attributed to a) Ukraine's comparatively richer historical repository from which national myths are drawn and b) historical policies taken by Austria-Hungary and tsarist Russia, and later by Soviet authorities, which have facilitated the development of the Ukrainian language and the association of Catholicism as a Ukrainian religion in western Ukraine, but prevented the association of language and religion with a Belarusian national identity in western Belarus. This paper concludes by examining western Belarus' limited contribution to Belarusian nationalism, and attributes this largely to 'Belarusisation' policies adopted by the Catholic Church. Both western Ukraine and western Belarus are culturally and historically distinct from their respective eastern counterparts, which are more Russified; however, only western Ukraine has succeeded in cultivating a viable nationalist movement. Despite this peculiarity, no notable works compare western Ukraine and western Belarus in terms of their contributions to their respective nationalist movements. This essay serves to fill this gap.

INTRODUCTION

In December 1991, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics collapsed, leaving in its wake fifteen newly independent republics. In the final years of the Soviet Union's existence, rising nationalism swept across the USSR at the republic-level, leading to highly nationalist independence movements in many of the former SSRs; however, the degree of nationalist mobilisation and support varied significantly across republics. Ukraine, for instance, was characterised by strong nationalist mobilisation and Ukrainian independence was widely supported at the time of the collapse (Beissinger 2002, pp. 190–198). In contrast, Belarusian nationalism has been described as 'undeveloped,' 'weak,' and, in certain accounts, 'nonexistent' (Pershái 2010, p. 381).

Indeed, both during and in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse, pro-independence nationalist sentiments were significantly stronger in Ukraine than in Belarus. Despite this, Ukraine and Belarus are similar in numerous ways: together, the nations formed the so-called 'Slavic core' of the Soviet Union, being the most culturally, historically, ethnically, and linguistically similar to Russia, the most dominant Soviet republic (Armstrong 1998, p. 238), thus constituting the tripartite 'all-Russian' people according to Russian nationalists (Plokhyy 2005, pp. 3–4). Ukraine and Belarus' similarities and shared connection to Russia raise an important question: why did nationalism thrive in Ukraine and fall short in Belarus?

To address this question, this essay will begin with a brief discussion of competing theories of nationalism. It will then consider a pluralist account of national identities that comprise both the process of 'mythologisation', which serves to consolidate and strengthen nationalist sentiments, and the development of ethnic characteristics (namely language and religion) that provide the basis of a national identity. Ultimately, it will argue that Ukraine has stronger nationalism than Belarus due to a) Ukraine's comparatively richer historical repository from which national myths are drawn and b) historical circumstances that have facilitated the development of the Ukrainian language and the association of

Catholicism as a Ukrainian religion in western Ukraine, whereas different historical circumstances prevented the association of language and religion with a Belarusian national identity in western Belarus. The final section of this essay will then argue that Catholic-majority western Belarus also played a limited role in supporting Belarusian nationalism relative to the rest of the country, despite the aforementioned historical reasons that hindered nationalist mobilisation in Belarus.

Additionally, it is important to note that the comparison between Ukrainian and Belarusian nationalism is relatively uncommon.¹ There are numerous explanations of the durability and strength of Ukrainian nationalism, as well as many historical accounts of the Ukrainian nationalist movement over time (see Armstrong 1995; Kuzio 2001; Magocsi 2002); indeed, one may reasonably argue that Ukraine is somewhat overrepresented in the nationalism literature, particularly amongst eastern European specialists. In contrast, English-language scholars on Belarus are rare, and even rarer are Belarusian nationalism experts (Pershái 2010, p. 380), which in part explains the notable absence of comparative accounts of Ukrainian and Belarusian nationalism. To the author's knowledge, no notable works have been written comparing western Ukraine and western Belarus in terms of their contributions to their respective nationalist movements, despite both regions being historically and culturally distinct from their eastern counterparts and possessing identities clearly distinct from ethnic Russians. This paper thus serves to fill this gap.

THEORIES OF NATIONALISM

Numerous influential scholars have advanced differing conceptions of nations and nationalism. For instance, in *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), Ernest Gellner argues that the nation is a product of industrialisation. Novel industries and technological advances resulted in a reorganisation of society, which necessitated a workforce with a common language and culture so as to communicate and work effectively. Individuals that possess a common language and culture, and

¹ For notable exceptions, see Smith et al. (1998) and Wilson (1997)

recognise these commonalities, therefore form a nation. On this, Gellner writes, '[a] mere category of persons (say, occupants of a given territory, or speakers of a given language, for example) becomes a nation if and when the members of the category firmly recognise certain mutual rights and duties to each other in virtue of their shared membership of it' (Gellner 1983, p. 7). To Gellner, nationalism is the result of the desire to politically perpetuate and protect a national culture and language. Gellner, therefore, is a modernist, and rejects primordial or perennial conceptions of nationhood or nationalism.

Like Gellner, Benedict Anderson is a modernist. In *Imagined Communities* (1983), Anderson underscores the role of print capitalism, which coincided with industrialisation, in creating a common language, and thus the development of a national identity. Anderson writes that the printing, publication, and dissemination of holy texts, newspapers, and novels served to homogenise dialects and vernaculars to create a common language by standardising said language and reducing the rate of change thereof. Consequently, and similar to Gellner, Anderson asserts that a nation exists through the recognition of commonalities. Anderson further suggests that a nation is 'an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign' (Anderson 1983, p. 5). By this, Anderson means that a member of any particular nation cannot know each of his compatriots personally, but can imagine their existence and understand that they possess commonalities, and, as such, forms a nation in his imagination. Crucially, Anderson rejects Gellner's assertion that nations are falsified societal necessities, but rather argues that the act of imagining communities effectively creates, rather than falsifies, nations.

Anthony D. Smith differs from both Gellner and Anderson in that he rejects a purely modernist definition of a nation, and instead argues that a nation exists not through the commonalities shared between members, but rather through sharing a common historical memory. Smith argues that nations are preceded by premodern 'ethnie'—that is, 'named human populations with shared ancestry myths, histories and cultures, having an association with a specific territory, and a sense of solidarity' (Smith 1986, p. 32). As such, nations are not solely the product of industrialisation. Collective identity and shared historical memory establish a sense of continuity from premodern ethnie to a modern-day people, and thus create a nation: '[c]ollective cultural identity refers not to a uniformity of elements over generations but to a sense of continuity on the part of successive generations of a given cultural unit of population, to shared memories of earlier events and periods in the history of that unit' (Smith 1991, p. 25). In short, a nation defines and identifies itself by tracing its origins to an ancestral community. Based on this conception of nations, Smith underscores the significance of historical myths and symbols as well as collective memories and traditions in differentiating a particular culture, and thus assisting in the formation of a particular national identity.

This paper defines nationalism broadly, in the context of Ukraine and Belarus during and in the wake of the Soviet collapse, as any sentiments or actions that assert Ukrainian and Belarusian society as distinct from that of Russia, in an effort to gain and/or justify

independent statehood from the Soviet Union. This definition does not reject nor accept either Gellner, Anderson, or Smith's conceptions of nations and nationalism; rather, it assumes that these accounts are not mutually exclusive. It may be the case that nationalist mobilisation often operates along the ethnic lines identified by Smith, but that the imperatives of modernisation necessitate the systematisation of language, as argued by Gellner. In this way, it is possible that all these accounts offer important insights. This paper's discussion of the importance of national historiography and mythologisation is informed by Smith's conception of nations as possessing a collective historical memory. This paper's later discussion of certain policies that contributed to the development of Ukrainian and Belarusian languages and homogenisation of culture, including religious identity, draws on the ideas of both Gellner and Anderson, who discuss the way in which the homogenisation of culture and language contribute to the development of a national identity. Beyond this, this paper does not attempt to argue in favour of any particular account of nationalism.

UKRAINIAN AND BELARUSIAN MYTHOLOGISATION

Due to its longer history of independent political existence, Ukraine has a richer historical repository from which to create national myths, which strengthens independence-minded nationalist sentiments in Ukraine. Ukraine's first iteration as an independent state may be traced back to the Cossack Hetmanate, which existed from 1648 to the 1780s (Kohut 1986, pp. 561–562). The Cossack Hetmanate came into being after an uprising led by Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and ultimately controlled most of present-day Ukraine (Kohut 1986, p. 561). Throughout its existence, it developed several judicial and fiscal institutions as well as its own system of government and military organisation (Kohut 1986, pp. 561–562).

Ukraine's former existence as an independent state (i.e., the Cossack Hetmanate) has informed and strengthened its national myths. The popularisation and development of Ukrainian national myths are often attributed to Mykhailo Hrushevsky, who is considered 'the greatest of Ukrainian historians' (Prymak 1987, p. 3); indeed, according to Smith et al., '[t]he "Hrushevskyi school" has been the single most powerful influence on modern Ukrainian historiography' (Smith et al. 1998, p. 28). Hrushevsky's historical account demonstrated the continuity of the Ukrainian state from the Kievan Rus', a premodern state, to modern-day Ukraine, and heavily emphasised the Cossack Hetmanate as a manifestation of Ukrainian statehood (Ploky 2011, p. 118).

Hrushevsky's work has been highly influential in the Ukrainian nationalist movement (Prymak 1987, p. 6). To this day, myths regarding the Hetmanate are frequently incorporated into nationalist narratives and politics, thus contributing greatly to the strength and durability of nationalist sentiments in Ukraine (Ploky 2005, pp. 207–211). According to Anthony D. Smith's ethno-symbolism approach, Hrushevsky's historical account contributed to the development of myths and symbols related to the Cossack Hetmanate, which remain important to Ukrainian national identity to this day.

Belarus, on the other hand, suffers from a lack of national myths informed by history and, as a result, its nationalist movement is considerably weaker. Belarus cannot reliably claim to have ever controlled an autonomous polity, but rather, has experienced waves of imperial domination by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the Russian empire. Most Belarusian myths that claim historical continuity or a pre-existing political existence reconstruct the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as an 'ersatz Belarusian polity' (Smith et al. 1998, p. 25) by asserting that a distinct Belarusian culture and identity were pronounced under Lithuanian rule. As Smith et al. (1998, p. 25) write, this myth hinges upon the claim that a Belarusian identity 'supposedly survived both dynastic... and eventual political union with Poland'. Therefore, Belarus effectively has no legacy of autonomous Belarusian state-like structures or political institutions, as is the case in Ukraine.

At this point, one may raise an objection by arguing that there is a question of reverse causality: why is it that Ukraine has a richer history of political existence? Does the existence of the Cossack Hetmanate, an ethnic Ukrainian polity, not imply that a more unified Ukrainian movement existed prior to the Hetmanate's establishment? The Cossack Hetmanate is therefore the incorrect 'starting point' of Ukraine's political existence.

In response to this objection, it is important to clarify that no particular historical event (in this case, the existence of the Cossack Hetmanate) has any direct bearing on the present-day Ukrainian national movement; rather, it is the mythologisation thereof around which Ukrainian nationalists mobilise. In this case, mythologisation refers to the idealised reconstruction of historical events through historical writing and political actions such that said events become national myths. In other words, one may attribute the consolidation of a Ukrainian nation to several events throughout history; this is, however, unimportant and perhaps inaccurate: Ukraine's existence as an independent polity has been interrupted, leading to the eventual erosion of any sustained, continuous national identity (Rudnytsky 1963, p. 201; p. 211). Notably, Ukrainian national identity has had to be reinvented following these periods of imperial domination (Prizel 1998, p. 301). It is therefore no particular historical event that 'began' the existence of a Ukrainian nation; it is only the way in which historical events are reconstructed and remembered in the present moment that contributes to modern-day nationalist sentiments, because it is through this mythology that Ukraine justifies its return to independence and historical existence as a distinct nation (Smith et al. 1998, p. 26). It is indeed the case that Ukraine has a richer history of political existence than Belarus, but this is not why Ukraine has a stronger nationalist movement—it is the successful mythologisation of this historical political existence that has strengthened nationalist sentiments.

It is therefore clear that Ukraine has a richer political history than Belarus, which informs Ukraine's relatively stronger national myths, and, through its mythologisation, strengthens nationalist sentiments. This distinction between Ukraine and Belarus is significant and, in part, explains the different levels of nationalist mobilisation during and in the wake of the Soviet collapse in Ukraine and Belarus. As Anthony D. Smith argues,

national identity is constructed through the development of myths, symbols, and traditions that connect a modern-day nation to a premodern community. It is clear that Hrushevsky has successfully mythologised certain events in Ukraine's history despite this historical discontinuity of the Ukrainian nation, and these national myths and symbols continue to bolster Ukrainian nationalism. Belarus, on the other hand, has not undergone a successful mythologisation process, and has thus failed to develop a collective identity based on the historical, continuous existence of the Belarusian nation.

The above argument, however, is incomplete in that nationalist mobilisation may be strengthened through the development, promotion, and dissemination of national myths, but a national identity most often also comprises distinct ethnic characteristics and commonalities, such as language and religion. In other words, although the process of mythologisation is important to the consolidation of nationalism, there must exist a concept of a nation in order to ascribe a history to said nation and encourage mobilisation around that shared memory. To be clear, I do not argue that the development of distinct ethnic characteristics, such as language and religion, necessarily caused or directly preempted the mythologisation process, but rather that these distinct and separate processes coexist in order to cultivate a successful nationalist movement. Both Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson emphasise the importance of commonalities, particularly language in the case of the latter, to the creation of a nation and in strengthening nationalist sentiments.

LANGUAGE POLICIES IN WESTERN UKRAINE AND BELARUS

I will now turn to the role of language and religion, with a focus on the westernmost regions of both Ukraine and Belarus, to explain varying nationalist mobilisation. One plausible explanation for the strength and durability of Ukrainian nationalism points to the importance of western Ukraine as a regional stronghold for anti-Russian, pro-Ukrainian nationalism (see Magocsi 2002). Western Ukraine is predominantly Catholic and Ukrainian-speaking (Liber 1998, p. 191), and is thus culturally and historically distinct from eastern Ukraine, which tends to be Russian-speaking, Orthodox Christian, and more closely tied to Russia proper (Marples 2012, p. 50). In addition, western Ukraine only became a part of the Soviet Union following the Soviets' victory in World War II (Halavach 2022, p. 476), and was therefore subjected to Sovietisation and oppressive Soviet rule for forty years, rather than seventy. Due to its outsized role in contributing to Ukrainian nationalism, western Ukraine has often been referred to as the nation's 'Piedmont' (see Magocsi 2002) and as a '[b]astion of Ukrainianism' (Subtelny 2000, p. 307).

Belarus similarly possesses a westernmost region with a distinct religious identity—the majority of Belarusians in its Grodno oblast are Catholic, rather than Orthodox Christian. In 2000, 52.9 percent of Belarusians identified as Orthodox Christians and 10.7 percent identified as Catholic compared to 68.9 and 8.8 percent of Ukrainians respectively (Johnson & Grim 2022). The majority of Belarusian Catholics are concentrated in western Belarus, along the Polish border, as is the case in Ukraine. This region, like its

Ukrainian counterpart, was only incorporated into the USSR after World War II (Halavach 2022, p. 476). These undeniable similarities between western Belarus and western Ukraine thus raise further questions: why did a historically and culturally distinct western region succeed in cultivating a successful nationalist movement in Ukraine, but fail to do so in Belarus? And despite its overall failure in cultivating a successful Belarusian nationalist movement, to what extent, if at all, has western Belarus contributed to Belarusian nationalism relative to the rest of the country?

To address these questions, this paper will consider historical explanations for the varyingly successful cultivation of a national identity by contrasting policies adopted by Austria-Hungary, tsarist Russia, and later the Soviet regime toward the western regions of Ukraine and Belarus that have affected the development of a national identity in said regions.

In the latter days of the Austro-Hungarian empire, the Ukrainian language became more widely used in public spheres, educational institutions, and publications, thus contributing to the consolidation of a distinct national identity. In 1848, the Austro-Hungarian Constitutional Charter granted the 'inviolability of nationality and language' to all nationalities within the empire, and the 'unhindered development of all nationalities' (quoted in Moser 2018, p. 91). As a result, the Ukrainian language became equal in status to other Central and Eastern European languages used in Austria-Hungary, including German. In the following decades, laws related to the promotion and development of national languages became increasingly liberal; Austro-Hungarian authorities engaged in and encouraged the promotion and development of the Ukrainian language (Moser 2018, p. 95). Perhaps most notably, schools in Ukrainian-majority areas began implementing Ukrainian language classes and soon thereafter adopted Ukrainian as the principal language of instruction (Moser 2018, p. 97). Simultaneously, Ukrainian publications and periodicals began to be published en masse, along with literary and academic works in the Ukrainian language (Himka 1993, p. 8). It is crucial to note that such lax policies regarding the Ukrainian language only existed in present-day Ukraine's westernmost regions, as they were under Austro-Hungarian rule, whereas eastern Ukraine was under tsarist Russian rule.

In contrast, western Belarus was subject to the Russian Empire's stricter policies on language, and the Belarusian language was consequently neither developed nor systematically disseminated as was the case in western Ukraine. After 1863, Moscow passed decrees that prohibited the use of the Belarusian language in educational establishments, promoted the Russian language in Catholic religious settings, as well as restricted the publication of books in Belarusian (Weeks 2006, p. 38). According to Nelly Bekus, the Russian Empire's policies toward the Belarusian language, as well as its Russification policies in general, were 'aimed at a complete elimination of Belarusianness and transformation of Belarusian lands into western Russian ones' (Bekus 2010, p. 151). Belarusian, as a language, therefore declined in use to the point of only being spoken by ethnic Belarusians in rural villages, whereas more educated and urban individuals disproportionately spoke Russian and were, as a result, less likely to

identify with a Belarusian national identity (Marples 2012, pp. 50–51).

The lack of publication and dissemination of texts in Belarusian significantly hindered the development and standardisation of the language and, by extension, the development of a Belarusian national identity, as discussed by Benedict Anderson, compared to the relatively laxer policies taken by Austria-Hungary in the case of western Ukraine. This phenomenon was exacerbated by Belarus' low levels of industrialisation relative to other areas of the former Russian Empire, including Ukraine (Marples 2012, p. 11). According to Ernest Gellner, industrialisation is crucial to the development of commonalities such as language, which contribute to the creation of a national identity.

These historical language policies greatly affect the nationalist movements in western Ukraine and western Belarus respectively. Western Ukraine comprises Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians (Liber 1998, p. 191), whereas the vast majority of Belarusians speak Russian, including those in western Belarus (Marples 2012, p. 50). Lucan Way notes that the promotion of the Ukrainian language in Austria-Hungary directly contributed to the strength of support for Ukrainian nationalism (Way 2015, p. 46), whereas, David Marples writes, 'for Belarus, national development without the native language, especially under the shadow of a much larger Slavic neighbour with a lengthy historical tradition as an empire, was virtually impossible' (Marples 2012, p. 52). It is therefore clear that national language use contributed significantly to the construction of a national identity and thus the strength and durability of nationalist sentiments.

ETHNIC HOMOGENISATION IN WESTERN UKRAINE AND BELARUS

This paper will now argue that western Ukraine serves as a regional stronghold of nationalism in Ukraine not only due to a stronger sense of linguistic national identity, but also due to its relatively ethnically homogenous nature; western Belarus, on the other hand, is hindered by its significant Polish minority in terms of nationalist mobilisation. The existence of a Polish minority in western Belarus has rendered Catholicism a less useful ethnic characteristic with which to construct a Belarusian national identity in opposition to the dominant Russian-affiliated Orthodox identity. Specifically, this paper will discuss the disparate approaches taken by the Soviet Union in dealing with the Polish population in western Ukraine and western Belarus upon their incorporation into the USSR, and will argue that the resultant ethnic makeup in these territories impacts religion as an ethnic identifier, which in turn affects the strength of nationalist sentiments and viability of nationalist mobilisation therein.

Due to the higher levels of Polish deportations in Soviet Ukraine following World War II, western Ukraine became relatively ethnically homogenous, thus strengthening the sense of national unity and identity amongst its ethnic Ukrainian population. From 1939 to 1941, the Soviet Union occupied and annexed territory from eastern Poland, and later reoccupied said territory in 1945 following German retreat. The Soviets then incorporated said territory into the western regions of the Ukrainian and Belarusian SSRs, as well as the southern region of the Lithuanian SSR (Halavach 2022,

p. 476). The Soviet Union underwent a population swap between Poland and the Ukrainian and Belarusian SSRs from 1944 to 1947: in the end, 872,217 individuals were categorised as ethnically Polish in Ukraine and 789,982 were transported (i.e., deported) to Poland, whereas, in Belarus, 535,284 were considered Polish, but only 231,152 were deported (Halavach 2022, p. 476). In other words, in Ukraine, 91 percent of Poles were deported, but only 43 percent of Poles in Belarus were deported. The stark contrast in the extent of Polish deportations in the case of the Ukrainian SSR and the Belarusian SSR can be attributed to the different approaches taken by and motivations of the Soviet authorities.

In the case of Ukraine, Soviet authorities pursued a strict nationalist policy by expelling as many Poles as possible in a systematic attempt to 'Ukrainianise' the newly incorporated Polish-majority oblasts (Amar 2017, p. 145). Under Nazi occupation, approximately one-fifth of the Polish population in western Ukraine had been killed by Ukrainian forces (Snyder 2008, p. 102). Following the German retreat from eastern Europe and the Soviet reoccupation of western Ukraine, Soviet Ukrainian authorities were therefore highly motivated to deport Poles to avoid further ethnic conflict. Soviet Ukrainian authorities ignored prewar citizenship, and instead only acknowledged one's self-proclaimed ethnicity in an attempt to retain as many ethnic Ukrainians and dispose of as many ethnic Poles as possible, thereby reducing the risk of ethnic conflict (Snyder 2008, p. 102). Following the deportations, only a small minority of Poles remained in western Ukraine, which then nearly entirely comprised ethnic Ukrainians (Amar 2017, p. 143).

In contrast, Soviet Belarusian authorities attempted to block Polish deportations from western Belarus by limiting the number of individuals able to identify as Polish, as they were not motivated to avoid ethnic conflict, but rather to maintain a sufficiently high labour force (Halavach 2022, p. 478). Western Belarus experienced a small influx of Belarusians from Poland; in order to prevent a mass exodus of Poles from western Belarus, Soviet authorities designated all those who had been born within Belarusian borders as Belarusian, ignoring those who self-identified as Polish (Halavach 2022, p. 480). This is in stark contrast to the Ukrainian case, in which self-identified Poles were often removed to Poland. In Soviet Belarus, only Poles who were able to show the correct documentation were designated as Polish and thus eligible to be transported to Poland (Halavach 2022, p. 479). This requirement was difficult to meet given that many Belarusian residents had lost their official documentation whilst under Nazi occupation. In the limited number of cases in which Poles were able to prove their Polish identity, Belarusian authorities often destroyed their documents and refused their transportation to Poland: '[t]he documents could be declared insufficient, fake, or simply torn apart by a bureaucrat in the commission. The practice of destroying certificates of Polish nationality was systematic' (Halavach 2022, p. 481). This approach taken by the Soviet Belarusian authorities in terms of deporting Poles means that, to this day, western Belarus maintains a significant Polish minority, whereas ethnic Poles are a very small minority in present-day western Ukraine despite its proximity to Poland proper. Only following the population swaps did

western Ukraine obtain this relative ethnic homogeneity.

The consequences of the different approaches taken by Soviet Ukrainian and Belarusian authorities in the Polish deportations on the strength of contemporary nationalist sentiments are two-fold: ethnic heterogeneity as is the case in western Belarus not only a) renders mobilisation more difficult, but also b) dilutes the value of a Catholic religious identity as a distinct ethnic characteristic against the Moscow-affiliated Orthodox identity in Belarus. Needless to say, ethnic Poles in western Belarus are less likely to support Belarusian nationalism and/or mobilise in support thereof. In western Ukraine, on the other hand, nearly the entirety of the population is united in their ethnicity, and its logistical capacity for mobilisation is therefore stronger.

Second, and more interestingly, ethnic Belarusian Catholics are less able than Ukrainian Catholics to instrumentalise the religious component of their identity to support a nationalist movement. In the case of western Ukraine, Ukrainian Catholics' national identity is in opposition to Moscow-affiliated Orthodoxy, thus succeeding in strengthening anti-Russian nationalist sentiments. In western Belarus, despite the fact that more Catholics in Belarus identify as ethnically Belarusian than ethnically Polish (Ioffe 2003, 1252), Catholicism is less often associated with 'Belarusian-ness' than with 'Polishness' (Zaprudnik 1993, p. 66; pp. 217–218), rendering Catholicism an ambiguous characteristic rather than a characteristic that contributes to the construction of a distinct Belarusian national identity. As Nelly Bekus writes, 'In Belarus, traditionally, Eastern Orthodoxy is identified—either subconsciously or explicitly—as the Russian faith, while Catholicism is seen as the Polish creed' (Bekus 2010, p. 157). As such, while western Ukraine's Catholic identity strengthens anti-Russian nationalist sentiments, western Belarus' Catholic identity is less viable as a vector for mobilisation due to its association with a Polish identity rather than a Belarusian identity.

Therefore, neither language nor religion are as useful vectors for nationalist mobilisation in western Belarus as they are in western Ukraine due to a) different policies taken by Austria-Hungary and tsarist Russia in promoting national languages and b) different approaches taken by Soviet Ukrainian and Belarusian authorities in deporting Poles following WWII. These two reasons, taken together, partly explain the differing levels of nationalist support in these regions.

CATHOLICISM IN WESTERN BELARUS

This essay will now examine the higher levels of Belarusian nationalism in western Belarus relative to the rest of the country and will attribute this to its majority Catholic population. As previously stated, Catholic Poles are less likely to mobilise in favour of Belarusian nationalism, thus reducing western Belarus' overall capacity to cultivate a successful nationalist movement. This latter section of the essay does not seek to contradict this argument; rather, this paper argues that the existence of a Belarusian Catholic identity, despite its association with Poland, has nevertheless rendered western Belarus more nationalist relative to the rest of Belarus, even if western Belarus is less nationalist relative to western Ukraine.

In the western half of the Catholic-majority Grodno oblast, which borders Poland, most Catholics identify

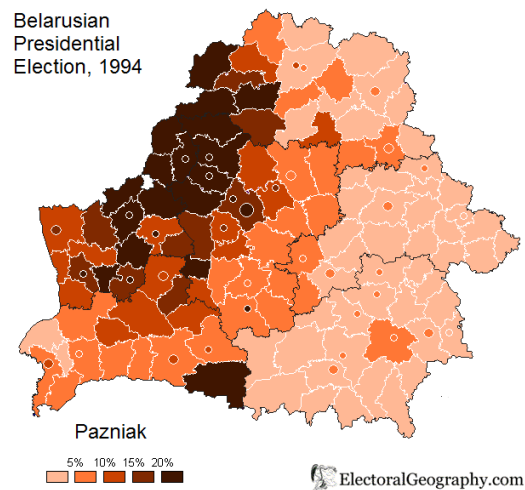


Figure 1 | Percentage of voters in support of Pazniak in the 1994 presidential election. From Kireev (2023).

as Polish, whereas in the eastern half, most Catholics identify as Belarusian (Ioffe 2003, p. 1252). According to Grigory Ioffe, '[i]t is from these Catholic Belarusians that most active Belarusian nationalists recruit' (Ioffe 2003, p. 1252). This observation supports the proposition that western Belarus may indeed be more nationalist relative to the rest of Belarus. For further evidence, one must look no further than the results of the 1994 Belarusian presidential election.

Figure 1 depicts the percentage of voters who cast their ballots in support of Zianon Pazniak, the then-leader of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), widely considered to be the most nationalist candidate. Natalia Leshchenko describes the BPF as 'a wide civic movement for democracy and national revival' (Leshchenko 2004, p. 335), and Lucan Way describes Pazniak as propounding 'highly anti-Russian nationalism' (Way 2015, p. 118).

Although there are several factors that may have contributed to western Belarus' disproportionate support of Pazniak, these electoral results strongly suggest that these Catholic-majority areas possess relatively stronger nationalist tendencies in comparison to the rest of the country, and therefore support Ioffe's assertion.

There are two main causal mechanisms that explain western Belarusian Catholics' relatively stronger nationalist tendencies in comparison to their eastern Orthodox counterparts. First, given the Orthodox Church's historic ties to Moscow, a Catholic identity inherently represents a significant distinction from Russia and ethnic Russianness. Belarusian Catholics may thus feel more inclined to categorise themselves as Belarusians, rather than Russians, and are therefore more likely to harbour Belarusian nationalist sentiments. Second, the Church as an institution may have served to perpetuate nationalist sentiments. On this, Anthony D. Smith notes that 'organised religion supplies much of the personnel and communication channels for the diffusion of ethnic myths and symbols' (Smith 1986, p. 36). It is plausible that the Catholic Church, in opposition to the Russian-controlled Belarusian Orthodox Church, propagated Belarusian national symbols in their sermons and religious messaging. It is difficult

to isolate the cause: the Catholic Church and Catholic officials may take on more nationalist policies and practices, which then influence Belarusian Catholics' political leanings, or Belarusian Catholics' existing political leanings may have influenced the Church's official nationalist stance. Most likely, these are mutually reinforcing explanations.

Nevertheless, by examining the Catholic Church's policies and practices in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse from 1991 until the mid-1990s, it is evident that the Belarusian Catholic Church supported and promoted Belarusian nationalism. In 1991, Kazimierz Świątek became the Archbishop of the Minsk-Mahilyow Archdiocese and later the first Cardinal in independent Belarus. As the leader of the Belarusian Catholic Church, Świątek initiated and led 'the policy of Belarusianisation of Catholicism in Belarus' (Bekus 2018, p. 181). Namely, under Świątek, the Church translated religious texts, prayers, and songs into Belarusian, and began conducting religious services and sermons in the Belarusian language, as well as banning the use of Polish symbols in the Church to further promote Catholicism as a Belarusian religion, rather than one associated solely with Poland (Bekus 2018, p. 194). It is highly plausible that the initiation of these policies in the immediate aftermath of independence led to a higher level of nationalist sentiments amongst western Belarus' Catholic population; at the same time, however, nationalist leanings amongst Catholic Belarusians likely predated the implementation of these policies by the Church and in turn encouraged the Vatican, as well as Świątek, to 'Belarusise' the Catholic Church.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this paper has compared Ukrainian and Belarussian nationalism, drawing on influential theories of nationalism, particularly those of Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, and Anthony D. Smith. This paper argued that Ukraine has stronger national myths and symbols, which continue to reinforce Ukrainian national identity, whereas Belarus' historical repository from which to draw national myths and its attempts at mythologisation are comparatively weaker. It then argued that the publication and dissemination of texts in Ukrainian in western Ukraine under Austro-Hungarian rule strengthened a Ukrainian national identity; in contrast, the lack of such texts, coupled with low levels of industrialisation, hindered the development of a Belarusian national identity in western Belarus. Subsequently, this article argued that different approaches taken by Soviet authorities during the post-war Polish deportations affect the ethnic homogeneity in western Ukraine and western Belarus, and, in the case of the latter, hinder the viability of Catholicism as an ethnic characteristic that is recognisably Belarusian. Finally, the article has concluded that, despite weaknesses in Catholicism as an ethnic Belarusian characteristic, the existence of Catholic institutions and a Catholic identity in western Belarus has nevertheless contributed to nationalist sentiments.

The comparative analysis of Ukrainian and Belarusian nationalism is underrepresented in English-language scholarship; this paper has aimed to fill this gap, but the author urges scholars to produce further comparative works on nationalism in Ukraine and Belarus. In particular, the author highlights the

importance of further investigation into the role of Catholicism as a personal identity and the Catholic Church as an institution on Ukrainian and Belarusian nationalism.

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