Europeanism
or Nationalism?

On Nation-Building in Europe and Ukraine

Giovanni Savino

Abstract

Strange as it may seem, Ukraine could serve as a model for Europe where disintegration sentiments are growing and new approaches are needed to cope with them. But so far Ukraine has been demonstrating the opposite— readiness to repeat the mistakes Europe made before. The article explores the historical roots of reflections on nations and nationalism in the 19th century, with a focus on Giuseppe Mazzini. His view that "the nation is above all" sent an important message to radical movements in Eastern Europe in the early 20th century as a version of integral nationalism preached by Ukrainian thinker Dmitry Dontsov and the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists. The experience of Soviet *korenizatsia* (indigenization) in Ukraine and the example of South Tyrolian autonomy in Italy show that the practices of nation-building and federalism produce different and often successful results. However, in the modern European Union faced with such acute conflicts as those in Catalonia and Ukraine these experiences have so far not been used for their resolution.

Key words: Nationalism, nation, korenizatsia (indigenization), Europe, Ukraine, Mazzini, Dontsov

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Four years after the Euromaidan, interest in Ukraine has waned in EU countries. Naturally, in the modern world swept daily by huge flows of information and numerous events society's attention cannot be riveted on the same facts all the time, but the EU has adopted a number of important political and economic decisions in connection with the Ukraine crisis, including sanctions against Russia.

What Europe thinks about Ukraine now and what is in store for that country in the next several decades? Where is the nation-building process going in Ukraine and how can it be studied through the lens of European experience? These questions are quite important for Ukraine and we think for Europe, too, where anti-integration tendencies are gaining momentum. The purpose of this article is to show the historical roots of the "religion of the nation" in modern Eastern Europe and analyze its consequences.

Benedict Anderson's remark that "nationness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time" (Anderson, 2001) remains relevant for many countries, not only Ukraine, and identifies one of the problems facing the modern world. The question is, when and why nationalism "starts to hate" (Porter, 2000), becomes fierce, and necessitates a discussion.

GIUSEPPE MAZZINI'S RELIGION

Modern European states have different nation-building experiences due to different historical, social, and cultural contexts. The 19th century was a crucial period for all European national movements, with the term 'nation' taking center stage in political discourse, even though each case had its own peculiarities.

In Italy, Giuseppe Mazzini, a patriot and republican, played an important role in the nation-building process. Until his last days this brilliant theoretician remained an irreconcilable opponent of the Savoy monarchy that consolidated the country in 1861. As Italian historian Roberto Vivarelli noted in his work "Italia 1861," Mazzini's idea of a nation, where politics has turned into a religion and a nation has become part of a larger ethnic whole for the revival of mankind, prevailed in united Italy even though its authorities persecuted Mazzini. Such a

quasi-religious outlook provided the basis for a theory that regarded a nation state as an organic whole which is above everybody and everything else. Mazzini wrote in 1871 that a nation was not a mere territory that would become stronger by expanding, or an agglomeration of people who spoke the same language and lived under the rule of one leader, but an organic whole in terms of tasks and qualities, alive with its own faith and tradition, strong and distinct from others due to its special ability to complete a secondary mission cursorily related to the universal one (Mazzini, Recchia and Urbinati, 2016).

Simon Levis Sullam believes that Mazzini's views provided the basis for "the religion of the nation." In his opinion, Mazzini was the first to have tried to transform nationalism into a system of convictions and beliefs that could encompass the entire political space until a new national community was formed (Levis Sullam, 2015). This sacralization of the nation also has its roots in Mazzini's relationship with members of the Polish national movement of the 1830s. The Messianic perception of Poland as a martyr of Europe played a fundamental role in founding the religion of the nation.

Mazzini also formulated the notion of 'duty' (*dovere*) to the nation. In his work "The Duties of Man" (*Dei doveri dell'uomo*), he proves that the priority task of the state is to cultivate in its citizens the sense of duty that will lead to continuous self-perfection in virtue, readiness to sacrifice oneself, and actual strength of mind. This doctrine has no room for a free choice or democracy. It is not accidental that Mazzini opposed the French Revolution as harmful. Socialist intellectual Alessandro Levi argues that Mazzini did not theorize but looked for a new authority rather than new freedoms. The specific nature of his political philosophy stems not from the doctrine of law or individual guarantees against political and religious power but, on the contrary, from the passionate and continuous search for the principle that stands above this law.

Mazzini's nation is not an elite society of citizens, nor is it a source of sovereign power as Emmanuel Joseph Sieyes suggested. It is because of his proclivity for authoritarianism that Mazzini's ideas were generally viewed as a harbinger of fascism. Giovanni Gentile, the leading

philosopher of the Mussolini regime, regarded him as the greatest and true prophet of *Risorgimento*. It was this fascist philosopher who noted that the sacralization of a nation was the reason for the glorification of the state (Levis Sullam, 2015).

Mazzini's ideals suggested a hypothesis of European, Christian brotherhood, which was a far cry from the reality of fascist politics in the 1930s-1940s. But the idea of international brotherhood contained an element of competition between nations. This is reflected in Mazzini's article "Italy and Poland" where he says that the Poles' task in united Germany and restored Hungary was to free the north and spread civilization (*incivilire*) among Slavic peoples.

A special place in Mazzini's outlook was occupied by Catholic and martyr nations, signifying a sort of acceptance of the old *antemurale Christianitatis* (the stronghold of Christianity). Other Slavic peoples remained "savage" in wait for civilization, the main idea of which can be called (West-)Eurocentric. We can view the *antemurale* as mutatis mutandis, as was often the case in the 20th (and 21st) century.

EASTERN EUROPE, UKRAINE, AND WHEN NATIONALISM STARTS TO HATE

Italy was not an integral state for a long time and for this reason had regional and other differences, which still remain in its dialects and languages. And yet, a new, united, state could only exist as one, single nation in blood and speech, as Italian poet and novelist Alessandro Manzoni wrote in his ode "March 1821." But this motto could not provide Italian society in the post-unitary state with a stable and democratic way of development for all social strata and groups. Faith in a united and indivisible nation caused the southern issue (*questione meridionale*), that is, the problem of development and quality of life in southern regions, and barred whole categories of nationals from participating in the state-building efforts. These divisions were among major factors behind the Italian system crisis and the victory of fascism in 1922.

What does all this have to do with Eastern Europe and Ukraine? The point is that both the religion of the nation and the monoethnic

model were actively used, and still are used, for nation-building purposes. Dutch sociologist Paul Blokker described this as "meeting the West." One the one hand, it made it possible to accept the ideas that upheld openness in a traditional society and such related notions as progress, rationalism, tolerance, and democracy. But these notions were not the only ones that had come from the West: nationalism also had a significant influence on local intellectuals. There also was "romantic" nationalism which hardly had anything in common with liberal views about the nation. Having absorbed these ideas, they began to view "self-understanding" and self-identity as the basis of historical conscience. As a result, traditional society's calls for openness, on the contrary, made society clam up around the idea of national community.

British historian and diplomat (from a Jewish family in Galicia) Lewis Namier drew an analogy with Ulster in Ireland (Mazzini, 1861) in order to explain the multiethnic and multi-confessional composition of Eastern Europe where the nationalities question cannot be considered solved despite two centuries of different and horrible conflicts. The presence of ethnic minorities in all states in the region is a fact of life and approaches similar to Mazzini's religion of the nation only complicated peaceful resolution of disagreements. Failure to acknowledge the multiethnic composition of the region after World War I caused a deep crisis in Poland, where conflicts with ethnic minorities started immediately after the restoration of the state in 1918. The idea of turning Ukrainians, Byelorussians and Lithuanians into Poles, often by limiting their rights, prevailed in Polish society. As American historian Aviel Roshwald has noted, these ideas of eternal historical borders of a territory (he calls them frozen moments) were central to post-war Poland's policy (Roshwald, 2005).

British Prime Minister David Llyod George commented on ethnic disagreements in Eastern Europe by saying that great powers had liberated the Poles, Czechoslovaks, and Yugoslavs, and having come from a small nation himself, he felt the deepest appreciation for nations struggling for their independence, but felt despair when he saw that they were more imperialistic than the great nations were. The League

of Nation' efforts to address the issue of ethnic minorities in Eastern Europe proved futile, and the rise of nationalism in the 1930s was one of the main reasons for the tragedies of World War II.

Mazzini, romanticism, and the religion of the nation—ideas originating in the West—revealed their dark sides in Eastern Europe. Another historical experience—the emergence and development of fascism in Italy (followed by National Socialism in Germany)—affected the evolvement of integral nationalism. Dmitry Dontsov, a leading intellectual and political advocate of the Ukrainian national movement, stated the tasks of integral nationalism. They served as the main guiding principles in building a new "cleansed" society amid the growing conflict between the Poles and Ukrainians as ethnic communities became increasingly self-isolated. Dontsov's version of integral nationalism is still quite relevant for understanding why the tendency towards assimilation of "aliens" and hatred for them still exist in present-day Ukraine.

The policy of *korenizatsia* to strengthen Ukrainian identity in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic was quite popular among people in the 1920s. The principle of affirmative action, closely studied by Terry Martin, was at work. For example, while Donstov viewed Soviet power as a reincarnation of Russian imperialism, Ukraine was opening schools and institutes where the teaching was conducted in Ukrainian. The Ukrainian language became not only a subject of discussion among Bolsheviks in the region but a means of training a new generation of leaders (Martin, 2002). It was not just a linguistic but a cultural issue as borne out by the use of patriotic poet Taras Shevchenko's personality as a prophet of the new Soviet Ukraine. But such nation-building experiments in the Soviet Union, sometimes not without utopianism, did not follow the principles of integral nationalism but defied the distinctive and sacred nature of the nation. The *korenizatsia* project left no chance for the supremacy of one nation over another, and Dontsov's followers could hardly like this.

The Ukrainian ideologist, who in his young years was a social-democratic activist, regarded the struggle against Russia and Russianness not only as the main goal of the Ukrainian national

movement, but, as Alexander Zaitsev has noted, as "a collective ideal or national idea of the Ukrainian people" (Zaitsev, 2011).

While briefly expounding on the basic principles of this ideal, Dontsov says that "this position is dictated by our historical traditions, our geographical location and the special historical role we are destined to play." Donstov knew about intellectual projects of German ultra-right ideologists such as Karl Haushofer, who regarded geographical determinism (and social Darwinism) as forces that determined the aggressive interpretation of geopolitics. Dontsov considered Ukraine's geographical position the main factor of its anti-Russian stance, which turned it into "a theater of constant struggle, political and cultural, between two worlds: Byzantine-Tatar-Moscow and Roman-European. It has fallen off the latter politically but has never lost touch with it culturally."

Strange as it may seem, Donstov saw Ukraine as part of Europe and its frontier (not periphery). If we take the European Union, whose current values reportedly underlie the Ukrainian project, Dontsov's ideas appear to be far from reality; his words that "unity with Europe under any circumstances and at any cost is a categorical imperative of our foreign policy" remind one of another project, namely the New European Order, an idea that appeared in the rhetoric of Italian and especially Germany fascists in the 1930s. Ultra-radical integral nationalism is not at odds with the European intellectual tradition. Dontsov presented his anti-Russian positions (not only anti-Soviet but anti-Russian) as one of the palingenetic motives behind the Ukrainian national cause.

The reality of World War II showed that the idea of nation-building where the nation and race are placed above everything else ruins millions of lives. The sacralization of the nation eventually destroyed Eastern Europe; national fanaticism was ready to fight and kill in pursuit of its own purposes even before the war. Proof of that can be found in the Ten Commandments of the Ukrainian Nationalist and some other publications issued in the 1930s. For example, Section 12 in the "44 Rules of Life for the Ukrainian Nationalist" says: "You should know that it is better to honor God with the help of the Nation and in the name of

the Nation through virtuous love for Ukraine and the harsh morality of the fighter and creator of free state life" (Kostyrko, 2009).

FEDERALISM, EUROPEANISM, AND NATION-BUILDING: WHAT ARE THE LESSONS?

In 1990, immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall, quite unexpected for many Sovietologists, and the rapid disintegration of the Soviet Union, a book was published, which claimed to explain events that had constituted the foundation of the superpower for a brief period of time. "The Soviet Disunion" was translated into many languages. Its authors—*Radio Liberty* journalists Bogdan Nahaylo and Victor Swoboda—stated that ethnic contradictions had ruined the Soviet experience (Nahaylo and Svoboda, 1990). True, the nationalities issue and ethnic conflicts played a big role in the late Soviet period, but the authors of the book failed to notice what American historian Richard Pipes had said in 1954 in his work "The Formation of the Soviet Union." He analyzed the complex and heterogeneous process of the Soviet Union's formation, paying much attention to ethnic republics. Pipes stressed that the possibility to secede from the Soviet Union could have provoked sharp and unexpected turns (Pipes, 1954). For some reason this aspect of the Soviet experience was rarely studied thoroughly enough. All discussions on the Soviet Union often boiled down to the conclusion that the system was monolithic. While there are several hundred works explaining in detail the heterogeneous and diverse nature of the Soviet Union (and the Russian Empire), Soviet "federalism" was not discussed for quite a long time. Clearly, the term 'federalism' should be used very carefully to explain Soviet realities, but it is worth mentioning that at certain points during the 70-year-long Soviet experiment some of its practices and theories could be described as federal.

Apart from *korenizatsia* in the 1920s-1930s, there were also other experiences, especially those connected with the interests of local elites. The creation of local ethnic councils in cities and villages, the introduction of alphabets and grammars, and measures to encourage the development of ethnic cultures—all this happened in the 1920s

when constant and fierce interethnic conflicts were raging in many European countries. In Soviet Byelorussia there were 93 ethnic councils (40 Polish, 24 Jewish, 15 Russian, six Ukrainian, five Latvian, two German, and one Lithuanian) in 1933. At the same time Poland was carrying out so-called pacification which left no room for the autonomy of ethnic minorities.

Even today countries where full rights of ethnic minorities have become part of official and social life lack experience similar to the Soviet *korenizatsia*. And yet some experiments have proved successful. For example, the German-speaking population in Italy's South Tyrol has broad rights on its territory; public servants in Bolzano are required to speak German; and all tax payments go to the regional budget. There is a similar system for the French-speaking population in Valle d'Aosta, but the South Tyrolian experience is much more interesting as it provides an effective way to resolve an acute interethnic conflict. After World War I the Kingdom of Italy acquired not only the Trentino territories, where the majority of people spoke Italian, but also South Tyrol, historically dominated by German culture. Accelerated Italianization started in 1919, but the official policy towards ethnic minorities became more violent and extremist when Mussolini came to power. After the *Anschluss*, Hitler and Mussolini struck a deal to "repatriate" thousands of South Tyrolians who had left their native land and moved to Germany.

This process stopped after 1943 when Berlin took the entire Alpine region under its direct control. Rome and Vienna unsuccessfully negotiated the status of the region after the war, and armed groups of South Tyrolian activists responded to Italy's repressive policy with terrorist acts, which exacerbated the Carabinieri's unlawful actions and at the same time attracted public attention to the conflict. In 1972, an agreement was signed to grant Bolzano a special status. This autonomy is so dear to South Tyrolians that when in 2017 Austria's new foreign minister of the right-wing Freedom Party promised to issue Austrian passports to the region's residents, there was no reaction from them whatsoever.

It would be wrong to think that the Italian authorities' policy has always been so prudent and sensitive to ethnic issues. For example,

the Slovenian minority in Friuli-Venezia Giulia was discriminated against, but the experience of South Tyrol (and Valle d'Aosta) shows that bloodshed and armed conflicts can be avoided. Compromises should not be idealized, of course, for they do not always work, as we can see in today's Spain. The history of the Catalonian movement for independence exposed the Spanish government's weakness in the search for a political and civil response to the crisis. It is all the more surprising, therefore, that the European Union, which always closely watches the rights of ethnic minorities and their violations, did not pay enough attention to the Catalonian issue.

Brussels always shows its weakness and reluctance to interfere when it comes to ethnic conflicts in Europe. When Yugoslavia was falling apart, the European Union did nothing, leaving the Balkans to Washington, as Mark Mazower has noted (Mazower, 2009). In Ukraine, Brussels went no further than issuing a welcoming comment through Gianni Pittella, an Italian MEP of the Democratic Party and Vice-President of the European Parliament, but has stayed away from the Minsk process ever since.

The EU's role appears to be quite dangerous for Ukraine as Brussels' detachment from the conflict in Donbass can be interpreted either as its full support for Kiev or as a complete lack of interest in the future of that country. Ukraine has signed several cooperation agreements with the EU, which allow Ukrainians to stay in EU countries for up to 90 days without a visa, but what's next? What kind of relations does Europe want to establish with Ukraine? While one can understand (but not justify) why none of the European leaders and officials has considered the Soviet experience of indigenization, which proved quite successful in Ukraine, as a possible way to resolve the conflict in Donbass, it is not quite clear why the "South Tyrolian scenario" cannot be offered to the ethnic minorities in Ukraine (apart from the Russian-speaking population, there are Hungarians, Poles, Romanians, Ruthenians, and Czechs living in Western Ukraine). It could guarantee the future of Ukraine as a state for all citizens, where people could feel proud for the success of their fellow countrymen in much the same way Italians do when South Tyrolian athletes win winter sport competitions. No one

ever mentions the fact that an athlete speaks Italian with an accent. This scenario in Ukraine would also mean a calm future for the European Union itself and especially its Eastern European members, with Kiev becoming not a wall but a bridge linking the continent.

There is some "Europeanism of the masses" which differs significantly from Brussels' rituals and views. This type of Europeanism is democratic and opposes xenophobia (surprisingly, after several decades when the word "nationalism" meant death and bloodshed, there are now movements which view a nation as a civil community). Interestingly, when national movements in Scotland and Catalonia demanded independence in 2014 and 2017, they considered themselves part of not just Europe but of the European Union. No one in Catalonia planned to ban Spanish. The referendum in Scotland was conducted in English, and the Scottish National Party uses English as its working language.

"History teaches, but it has no pupils," Italian intellectual Antonio Gramsci wrote more than eighty years ago. There are many problems in the European project such as the issue of memory of the 20th century, and the Ukraine crisis has only made them more acute. It may sound strange, but Ukraine could serve as a model for Europe where disintegration sentiments are growing and new approaches are needed to cope with them. But so far Ukraine has been showing the opposite—readiness to repeat the mistakes Europe made before.

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