



# Considering Ukraine's Ethnic Minorities and Their Influence on Russian Foreign Policy

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*Abstract: Transnational Ethnic Alliance Theory at its core posits that the majority ethnic group in one state will come to the defense of its ethnic brethren that are a minority in a neighboring state, if that group is facing discrimination or repression. The actions of political leaders in Moscow, who claimed that they were concerned about the Russian minority in Ukraine, suggest that modifications to this theory are necessary. Intervention will only occur when it is in the self-interest of the neighboring state or in the self-interest of the governing elite of that state. Russian perceptions of threats to Russian national interests originating in the West made the interference in the Ukrainian political system more likely. Similar perceptions of threats from abroad to foreign policy interests for other states, or their leaders, could lead to support for ethnic minorities. The resulting modified Transnational Ethnic Alliance Theory can be used as a tool to predict better and explain foreign interference anywhere that ethnic groups overlap between states.*

While significant research exists on ethnic minorities' integration within a state, particularly in Eastern Europe, research connecting it to foreign policy remains more limited. Most of the research on ethnic minorities in relation to policy is focused solely on domestic politics or human rights violations.<sup>1</sup> The present research seeks to link minority relations within a country to foreign policy with the mother country of the minority. As such, this study examines the Russian minority within Ukraine and how the domestic policy towards that minority affects foreign policy between Ukraine and Russia. This particular case is appropriate, given the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine, but it is not so regionally specific that it could not happen in other parts of the world.

This article's primary focus is on confirming and updating the Transnational Ethnic Alliance Theory as the most accurate way to examine the ethnic minority effect on foreign policy relations and to disprove alternative

<sup>1</sup> Stephen M. Saideman, "Overlooking the Obvious: Bringing International Politics Back into Ethnic Conflict Management," *International Studies Review*, Dec. 2002, pp. 63-86.

theories as possible explanations.<sup>2</sup> Most likely, the findings can be extrapolated to other case studies as well, and is therefore relevant to comparative foreign policy analyses as a whole, not only to situations in Eastern Europe.

### Existing Research in Context

Existing research on the effect of minority relations on foreign policy is very limited. What little analysis there is, while valuable in a general global sense, is not current enough to explain some contemporary situations. Other studies remain focused solely on a particular case (or cases) making the information too specific to be applied elsewhere. There are more general studies that have found general trends among countries. Yet, these studies may not be relevant to the current situation between Russia and Ukraine, especially since they have at times generated different results. Much of the research focused on Russia, moreover, was conducted either before the Soviet Union's fall or shortly thereafter. While these studies yield information that is critical to understanding the basis of this phenomenon in the case of Russia and Ukraine, more recent events must be considered.

Ukraine and Russia are no longer struggling to recover from the collapse of communism and the revision of their whole political and economic systems in order to adapt to a changing world, which was the case when much of the research was conducted. Ukrainian leaders were initially concerned about re-incorporation into Russia, but with the passage of time, they became less concerned about the threat.<sup>3</sup> Earlier research dealt with the fact that Russia lacked a coherent strategy for Ukraine during the latter's first ten years of independence; this lack of policy was partially due to the fact that Russia had not "come to terms" with Ukraine's no longer being under Russian control.<sup>4</sup> Other foreign policy issues, such as relations with the West and integration into the international economy, had more salience. Despite the accuracy of the findings, this situation no longer holds true, especially since the political environment has changed drastically since 2001. Even though new states are often susceptible to domestic ethnic conflict,<sup>5</sup> both Ukraine and Russia were considerably weaker immediately after the breakup of the Soviet Union and much less inclined to make any foreign policy decisions that would have angered the West. Both countries relied on Western Europe and the United States during the significantly costly and unstable period of restructuring, following the

<sup>2</sup> David R. Davis and Will H. Moore, "Ethnicity Matters: Transnational Ethnic Alliances and Foreign Policy Behavior," *International Studies Quarterly*, March 1997, pp. 171-184.

<sup>3</sup> Arkady Moshes, "Russian Ukrainian Rapprochement of 2001: How Viable?" *Security Dialogue*, June 2002, p. 162.

<sup>4</sup> Tor Bukkvoll, "Off the Cuff Politics—Explaining Russia's Lack of a Ukraine Strategy," *Europe-Asia Studies*, July 2001, pp. 1141-1157.

<sup>5</sup> David Carment, Patrick James, and Zeynep Taydas, "The Internationalization of Ethnic Conflict: State, Society, and Synthesis," *International Studies Review*, March 2009, p. 72.

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