

THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND SOME OF THE REPERCUSSIONS REGARDING THE MINORITY RIGHTS OF RUSSIANS

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Abstract: The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine is often considered a watershed moment in international relations due to widely being perceived as having brought about a significant restructuring when it comes to the rules-based liberal international order. In addition to the extremely damaging impacts, mainly in terms of the human capital factor from the standpoint of Ukraine, across a multitude of different spheres, Russia's decision to resort to force and flagrantly violate the sovereignty of a fellow member of the international community with a shared cultural heritage, may also have a profoundly negative effect and undo certain gains when it comes to minority rights in Europe, especially in the case of ethnic Russians, with the country's ability to secure the rights of its co-ethnics increasingly subject to question marks in Central Asia and also within its own borders. The paper employs qualitative methodology, which is based on the synthesis and analysis of a vast collection of primary and secondary sources that touch upon issues pertinent to the disciplines of international relations, political science, sociology, and nationalism studies. Following a literature review, in which it examines certain underlying assumptions pertaining to the advancements of minority rights in Europe as well as in regions that are part of the continent's immediate neighborhood, it formulates a three-pronged thesis. Firstly, it contends that Russia's actions in Ukraine have contributed to a more assimilationist approach to the integration of minority groups in certain European countries such as Latvia, especially in the case of ethnic Russians, in part due to the feelings of vulnerability engendered by the invasion and the tendency to regard them as a fifth column. Secondly, the war has been a contributing factor to making Russia's relations with many of the Central Asian countries unusually complicated, which is likely to have negative effects with reference to the ethnic Russians residing within these countries. Thirdly, the war may prove to be a destabilizing force within Russia itself and once it eventually comes to an end, there could be a worsening with regard to the plight for the members of the Russian ethnic group residing within those republics where they represent a de facto minority group, for instance in Chechnya and Tuva, where ethnic tensions have boiled over in the past. In essence, the article posits that even though Putin has referred to the importance of protecting the rights of his external kin group as part of his rationale for starting the war, Russia's actions in Ukraine may turn out to have a larger than expected blowback effect in terms of minority rights, with ethnic Russians being the primary group to be negatively affected, remarkably also within the territory of their own homeland.

Keywords: Russia, Vladimir Putin, Latvia, Central Asia, minority rights

1. INTRODUCTION

For many sovereign states around the world, an often emotive issue that is intrinsically connected to the internal constitutional order and certain domestic legal provisions, concerns the status as well as the treatment of national minorities. In previous eras the decision as to whether a country should decide to adopt a strictly assimilationist approach, place a premium on a high degree of accommodation, even allowing for some degree of self-government and institutional pluralism, or implement policies that fall somewhere in the middle, was to a large extent viewed as a matter that could be left to the discretion of individual states. However, after the Cold War, the international community, as evidenced for example by the UN and EU activities in this field, has played an increasingly important role in shaping minority-related policies within countries, giving the green light for certain models of integration while firmly discouraging others. (Kymlicka, 2008) In particular, the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in the breaking out of ethnic conflicts involving national minorities in countries occupying the post-communist space, which was viewed as a stumbling block to their transition to liberal democracy, prompting different European organizations to come up with norms and standards providing guidance as to the best practices in terms of dealing with minority issues. One notable divergence between Western and Eastern Europe is connected to the securitization and desecuritization of state-minority relations. (Ibid) The notion of securitization is tied to the growing acceptance of the salience of non-military means of instability, which encourages the framing and depiction of various objects, such as social groups, as sources of threat to a country's national security. (Klicperova-Baker et al., 2026) In the Western countries, national minorities as well as indigenous people are as a rule not appraised by members of the titular ethnic group as likely to undermine the state and try to collaborate with an adversarial power, which means that demands for certain minority rights that may include a desire for self-government are more often treated as part of the normal *modus operandi* of politics. At various points during the 20th century countries such as Belgium, Denmark, and Italy were reluctant to provide comprehensive rights to their ethnic German minorities,

perceiving them as naturally gravitating towards Germany. However, once Germany became firmly anchored within the Western camp, to a large extent courtesy of its membership in NATO and the EU, the links of the ethnic German minorities to their kin state came to be perceived as immaterial and epiphenomenal. (Kymlicka, 2008) In contrast, in post-communist Europe national or homeland minorities are frequently viewed as potentially becoming Trojan horses, which inevitably contributes to a highly securitized climate of inter-ethnic relations. (Alijeva, 2026) This is in part due to the majority ethnic groups in these sovereign states retaining memories pertaining to historical oppression, often at the hands of particular minority groups whose descendants currently have a visible presence in their countries, as for example in the case of the Baltic states vis-à-vis their Russian minorities. As mentioned by the then OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities Max van der Stoep in 1995, demands for territorial autonomy were faced with “maximal resistance” in the states of the post-communist region, which meant that a more pragmatic approach prioritizing modest forms of minority rights had to be adopted. (Kymlicka, 2008) Still, the European Union (EU), courtesy of various conditionality mechanisms and the linking of EU membership to the satisfaction of the Copenhagen criteria - has been a crucial facilitator with regard to the introduction of enhanced protections of minority rights in countries such as the three Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), encouraging them to bring about amendments with regard to restrictive citizenship and language laws as well as electoral participation. (Schulze, 2018) While prior to 2022, a number of issues persisted and the effectiveness of EU conditionality in the post-accession period has been contested, (Carpinelli, 2019) with countries such as Latvia and Estonia characterized as reluctant minimal reformers with regard to minority protection, there is hardly any doubt that minorities in the Baltic states would have been in a worse off situation without the Europeanization-related impulses (Schulze, 2018) and the EU is viewed as a contributor to the desecuritization of the relations between majority groups and minority groups in terms of kin state politics. (Kværnø & Rasmussen, 2005) In any case, the justifications for the launching of Russia’s war, in addition to the perceived risks to Russian security due to Ukraine’s potential NATO membership, have also prominently touched upon the ethnic minority angle, (Csörgő et al., 2025) with Russian president Vladimir Putin making references to the supposedly grave threats faced by Russian speakers in Ukraine, even accusing the Ukrainian authorities of [committing genocide](#) against the Russian-speaking population of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. (Fisher, 2022) However, the nature of the Russian rhetoric, which could be depicted as an unwise weaponization of minority grievances, as well as the corresponding actions of the Russian war machine that are in staunch violation of international law appear quite likely to cause setbacks in terms of the protection of minority rights across Europe and Central Asia, in particular with regard to the ethnic Russians themselves. On 23 May 2022 the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities emphasized that the references to minority protection as a pretext for the war in Ukraine were unacceptable. (Council of Europe, 2022) Notably, Ukraine (and Moldova, another sovereign state that was as early as 2022 speculated to be the potential next target of Russian aggression) have been considered to be among the most proactive Eastern Partnership countries when it comes to protecting the rights of national minorities. (Lutsyshyn & Sokolovsky, 2023)

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper relies exclusively on qualitative research, attempting to analyse and integrate the findings from many secondary sources of information, while always remaining careful to properly appraise the research rigor and reliability of any primary studies under consideration, (Chong & Plonsky, 2021) laying the groundwork in terms of coming up with novel interpretations with regard to the subject matter in question. The literature review occupies a large part of the introduction and is intended to provide a springboard for the section of the article that offers the evidence supporting the author’s contentions and includes the main insights. Given the stated purpose of the paper, the focus remains mainly on the minority rights issues, especially those concerning ethnic Russians, and the relevant transformations in this realm as a result of the Ukraine war. Accordingly, the article does not prioritize the adoption of a comparative perspective, while still being conscious of the large differences with regard to the political, social, and cultural contexts between the Baltic region of Europe and Central Asia.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the media landscape in Latvia has increasingly played a role in the securitization of identity boundaries between ethnic groups. (Schulze & Pupcenoks, 2025) However, since the major escalation of the war in February 2022, there have also been drastic changes in terms of the enactment of far-reaching policies, mainly concerning the language rights of ethnic Russians. On 22 September 2022, the Latvian government adopted amendments with regard to the immigration law, which introduced the requirement (with a few exceptions, such as those related to age and health) that the approximately 20,000 residents without Latvian citizenship who were the holders of Russian or Belarusian

passports, had to pass a language test in order to be able to continue residing in Latvia after September 2023. (Ibid) The Ministry of the Interior justified the measure by referring to the need to strengthen Latvian national security. The law was somewhat relaxed in September 2023 – the examinees who took the test and were not successful could also request a temporary residence permit, so that they could set aside time to prepare to retake it, but these new requirements have nonetheless continued to be regarded as overly rigorous by many Russophones. The first six expulsion orders were issued in March 2024 (Ibid) and over 800 Russian citizens were ordered to leave by the autumn of 2025, (Kravchuk, 2025) with reports of many individuals deciding to emigrate voluntarily. The Latvian parliament has also implemented strict measures to reduce the use of the Russian language, passing legislation to phase out instruction in Russian across the entire educational system, completing the transition to Latvian-only teaching in public schools in September 2025. (Liu, 2026) Furthermore, the National Electronic Mass Media Council of Latvia (NEPLP) *has blocked Russian TV channels from broadcasting in Latvia*. According to Latvia's National Security Concept, which was passed in 2023, content produced by public media must be in Latvian or "languages belonging to the European cultural space", from which Russian is excluded. (Ross, 2023) On 30 March 2026, in a landmark ruling, *the country's* Constitutional Court stated that the national public broadcaster retains the right, but could by no means be legally be required to produce a specific portion of its content in minority languages. (Popilnichenko, 2026) The broadcast bans in the context of the new language rules have also affected pro-Latvian and anti-Kremlin public media outlets, with the popular Latvian Radio 4 (lr4) ceasing independent broadcast operations on 1 January 2026 due to its use of the Russian language rather than issues with the actual political content. In addition to the changing legal and cultural environment, perceptions of ill-treatment among Russophones have also become more common. (The Economist, 2026) According to a 2023 survey by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung foundation, 37 percent of Russian speakers in Latvia claimed that the attitude of Latvian speakers towards them had significantly changed for the worse since the war in Ukraine, an increase of 17 percentage points in comparison to the previous year. (Yanos, 2025) Latvia's ethnic Russian minority constitutes a larger share of the population than in any other country in the EU and these sweeping reforms testify to an important paradigm shift, arguably reflecting the logic of the integrated threat theory, with Latvian authorities viewing Russophones, especially those who are not well-integrated, as representing realistic threats (in terms of a likelihood to destabilize the country by encouraging the Russian state to interfere, potentially through limited military means) as well as perceiving them as symbolic threats (posing challenges to the country's cultural values). (Rozmann, 2025) In Latvian politician and minority rights activist Boris Tsilevitch's opinion, Russia has to a large extent destroyed the Council of Europe's system for protecting minorities because of elevating the security factor to one of paramount importance. (Kugel, 2026) No matter whether these types of restrictions could be considered reasonable or not, the end result is that since 2022 the minority rights regime in Latvia has entered an era of unprecedented adversity by virtually every measure, with some activists warning of domino effects with regard to them providing a blueprint for other European countries, (Kascian, 2024) criticizing the EU's tame reaction to such regulations constraining the rights of minorities, especially given that the European Commission is already considered to be on shaky grounds in terms of the protections offered to national and linguistic minorities due to rejecting the *Minority SafePack Initiative (MSPI)* in 2021. (Tárnok, 2026) In any case, the political dimension often trumps the legal and moral considerations - with Russia increasingly considered to be rogue state by the other European countries, it essentially lacks the credibility and political leverage to convincingly argue the case for its co-ethnics residing within the EU and any ethnic Russians who are suspected of even tenuous links with officials representing the Russian government are likely to discover that any sympathy for their predicament will be in short supply.

Some similar issues, though of a slightly different manifestation, have emerged or are about to emerge in Central Asia in relation to the situation of ethnic Russians. Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, concerns regarding Russia's intentions have increased among regular citizens and politicians in Central Asia, with Russia's soft power in the region beginning to rapidly dissipate. Also, after the Crocus City Hall attack on 22 March 2024, perpetrated by four terrorists associated with Islamic State – Khorasan Province, Russia has intensified its mass raids against migrant workers from Central Asia, with the State Duma passing numerous laws restricting their rights. Even the acquisition of Russian citizenship has not been a panacea, with some of the new citizens forced to actively participate in the Russian war effort in Ukraine. (Ibragimova, 2025) Moreover, a number of well-publicized instances of xenophobia against Central Asian migrants, involving the unlawful use of force, have seen Central Asian governments adopt a sterner tone when speaking to Russian officials as well as display a willingness to engage in reciprocal actions. (Pannier, 2026) For instance, following a beating suffered by Kyrgyz nationals in April 2025 at a Moscow bathhouse at the hands of Russian security forces, the Kyrgyz authorities detained four people, including an employee of Russia's foreign aid and cultural exchange agency Rossotrudnichestvo, accusing them of recruiting Kyrgyz nationals to fight in Ukraine. (Ibragimova, 2025) In the aftermath of a xenophobic outburst against an Uzbek taxi driver in August 2025 in Khimki, Moscow Oblast, Uzbekistani Parliament members began

public criticism of the Russian government for the abuse of migrants. Tajikistan has openly warned its citizens to avoid travelling to Russia, with Central Asian states increasingly encouraging their nationals to seek out alternative job options in other countries. (Ibid) Also, while still an important *lingua franca*, the Russian language has been steadily losing ground in Central Asia. (Pannier, 2025) In April 2025, when [Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov remarked](#) that the Uzbek Grieving Mother memorial had inscriptions in Uzbek and English but was lacking Russian ones, this diplomatic blunder caused quite a bit of controversy in Uzbekistan, (Blank, 2026) vividly exemplifying how the language issue is becoming even more sensitive in Central Asian countries, with many advocacy campaigns increasingly promoting the Turkic languages at the expense of Russian. In neighboring Kyrgyzstan, the new legal requirements from 2023 pertaining to the promotion of the Kyrgyz language as the primary medium of instruction in the public sector, which have mandated for civil servants, prosecutors, and other officials to become proficient in Kyrgyz, have resulted in a number of Russian-speaking employees to vacate their jobs. (EU Reporter, 2024) After Kazakhstan decided to rename a few railway stations into Kazakh in January 2024, Russian television news presenter and deputy director of Gazprom Media Tina Kandelaki stated that Russian was “slowly but surely being pushed out on the state level”, cautioning that akin to the Latvia situation, such seemingly cosmetic changes could snowball into measures like the closing of Russian schools and even deportations of ethnic Russians who are not conversant in the local language. (Kumenov, 2024) While such pronouncements appear apocalyptic, have been viewed by many Kazakhs as the equivalent of making mountains out of molehills and are to a large extent intended to curry favor with nationalistically inclined domestic audiences in Russia, Kazakhstan, since the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, has been characterized as a poster child of linguistic decolonization and the acceleration of nation-building processes. (Auyezova, 2023) The Putin presidential administration may also increasingly have to come to grips with the reality that Russia has few, if any, options to reverse the trends when it comes to the de-Russification of Central Asia. On the one hand, it cannot really make credible military threats due to being bogged down in the Ukrainian conflict and the awareness that conducting a “special military operation” in a Central Asian country is likely to be met with strong Chinese disapproval. On the other hand, Russia’s economic leverage continues to dwindle while, as mentioned above, its soft power in Central Asia has seen significantly better days. It is worth keeping in mind that the Kremlin has in previous years not appeared to be overly concerned regarding the Russian language’s diminished standing in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan (Pannier, 2025). It has also frequently been inconsistent and not always overly assertive in its use of the (Russian) minority card, as evidenced by Turkmenistan’s 2003 decision to unilaterally terminate a dual citizenship agreement in Russia to the detriment of the Russian diaspora in the country (with Putin at the time facing criticism in the national media for not being sufficiently tough in standing up for the interests of ethnic Russians) (Radhakrishnan, 2003) and the Putin government’s cultivation of strong ties with Kyrgyz president Sadyr Japarov (in the early) 2020s, a politician who has dabbled with strongly ethnonationalist rhetoric and has been accused of inciting violence against minority groups such as ethnic Uzbeks. (Mamo, 2021) Moscow’s defense of the Chinese treatment of the Muslim Uyghur community (Miles, 2019) is also unlikely to be helpful in terms of conveying an image of a great power that is genuinely committed to the protection of minority rights. In that regard, since 2022 Russia has been pressuring Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to take action against Russian dissidents, with Kazakhstan arresting at least seven Russian opposition supporters between 2022 and 2024, (VOA News, 2024) which is another way in which Russia only boxes itself into a corner by creating the impression that its complaints about the human and minority rights of its co-ethnics residing abroad are a little more than a charade. In essence, given Russia’s downturn in relations with Central Asian countries and the war in Ukraine engendering perceptions of vulnerability in the region in relation to the potential role of Russians as a fifth column, there are already indications that the screws are being tightened in relation to ethnic minorities, akin to the Latvia scenario, with the ones likely to bear the brunt of the consequences being the Russophones residing there, while the Russian authorities have only a paucity of options at their disposal to help ameliorate their situation.

The war in Ukraine may also usher in a change of dynamics when it comes to minority-majority areas (republics of Russia where members of a minority ethnicity - relative to the whole country’s population – make up a majority of the local population) of the Russian Federation. One of the open secrets when it comes to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine is that a disproportionate number of the Russian troops’ recorded casualties are from regions inhabited by large ethnic minority populations, such as Buryatia, Tuva, and Dagestan. (Motyl & Kirichenko, 2025) While the Russian authorities have been somewhat successful in keeping a lid on ethnic tensions within the Russian army as well as quickly quashing open resistance when recruiting from republics or impoverished communities where the titular ethnic group is non-Russian, opposition to the war has been growing, intertwined with increased political activism of ethnic minorities, with indigenous diaspora networks such as the Free Buryatia Foundation attempting to provide information that does not gloss over the horrors of the war, (Kadhum, 2026) protests against the war in Dagestan (the largest of any Russian region), (Motyl & Kirichenko, 2025) and ethnic tensions surfacing in republics

such as Bashkortostan. (Kurmanaev, 2024) In addition to causing long-term negative effects on the civilian economy and exposing double standards in relation to the treatment of ethnic minorities within Russia (Terzyan, 2025) the conflict in Ukraine is also likely to weaken Putin's control over the country's periphery where ethnic Russians are a minority. Chechnya is one such example of a Russian republic, which has been heavily subsidized by Moscow, (Kroeker, 2023) with its head Ramzan Kadyrov allowed virtually free reign inside it due to the selective applications of federal laws, in return for continued loyalty to the federal authorities. However, the war is making it difficult for the Russian authorities to provide the same levels of financial support to Chechnya as before, (Kirichenko & Motyl, 2026) has in some respects (due to many operational failures in Ukraine) been chiseling away at the carefully crafted image of ruthless competence and invincibility of the Kadyrovites (the current ruler of Chechnya's de facto private army), (UAWire, 2025) and given Ramzan Kadyrov's reported ill-health and the young age of Adam Kadyrov (his touted successor, who in August 2023 attracted negative publicity for beating Nikita Zhuravel, an ethnic Russian that had found himself in Chechen custody due to burning a Qur'an) (Kroeker, 2023) may create the ingredients for new bouts of separatism and ethnic tensions in the Chechen Republic, which could worsen the situation for the Russian minority there, which already comprises less than 2% of the population. Tuva is another republic of the Russian federation, where serious inter-ethnic issues have occurred from time to time. In the early 1990s, during the disintegration of the Soviet Union (with some analysts describing the current dynamics in Russia, brought about by the conflict in Ukraine, as almost equivalent to the ones preceding the Soviet collapse), it witnessed severe inter-ethnic tensions, which were accompanied by violence directed against ethnically Russian residents of the republic, sparking a large exodus of Russian speakers from Tuva. (Chernin, 2023) In 2016, Rossiya, a union of Russian-speaking citizens in the republic, sent a letter of complaint to Putin that ethnic Russians in Tuva were facing discrimination, noting how the residents of Tuva only learned Russian as a foreign language in the local schools, and expressing concerns regarding the virtual purging of ethnic Russians from the regional government. They requested that the Russian president intervene and guarantee that the regional authorities would provide equal rights for all Tuvan residents. (Dzutsati, 2016) However, the Kremlin has not been particularly interested in imposing stricter government controls over the isolated republic whose infrastructure is particularly underdeveloped in comparison to that of other regions. With battle-hardened and likely unemployed Tuvan veterans returning to the republic following the eventual conclusion of the war, the persistent ethnic tensions, which are compounded by the low standard of living, the human toll exacted by the war and the migration of rural Tuvanian youth to the cities, such as the capital Kyzyl, where the ethnically Russian population is concentrated, (Chernin, 2023) as well as the Putin regime's preference for a relatively hands-off approach to internal developments in Tuva, the Russian minority may find itself in a particularly vulnerable situation. Somewhat similarly to the early 1990s, in a climate of uncertainty after the conflict in Ukraine is at some point put to a halt, ethnic Russians in Tuva may once again have to contend not only with linguistic discrimination, but with deteriorating conditions when it comes to their personal safety and security as well.

4. CONCLUSION

In many respects Russia's full-scale assault on Ukraine is riddled with contradictions and miscalculations if the justifications for it offered by the Russian authorities are to be taken at face value. While one of the main objectives appears to have been the prevention of further NATO enlargements, especially to the east, Russia's war of aggression was the proximate reason for Finland (on 4 April 2023) and Sweden (on 7 March 2024) becoming full members of the alliance. The other principal aim espoused by the Putin regime – the protection of co-ethnics in Ukraine (and elsewhere) – appears to be far from attainable, not only due to the many casualties suffered by ethnic Russians fighting for the Ukrainian side, but also because of encouraging a hardening of attitudes against ethnic Russian minorities (and accompanying legislative changes targeted at them) in European countries, such as Latvia, in Central Asia, and inside the Russian Federation's own minority-majority republics.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my family as well as all my academic colleagues and co-workers, with a special mention to my friend Dr. Kinga Goodwin, who have consistently encouraged me to think outside the box and discover my true academic interests at my own pace.

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