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Nationalism and Its Challenges to Democratic Governance

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Chapter Outline

In an essay posted on the Kremlin's website in July 2021, titled "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," Russian president Vladimir Putin denied the existence of a Ukrainian nation.[1] This was not the first time Putin had publicly expressed his desire to bring Ukraine back under Moscow's rule. Yet the timing and venue of the essay gained new significance when Russian tanks crossed into Ukraine on February 24, 2022, launching a full-scale invasion. Since then, Ukrainians have fought relentlessly against Russian aggression, and Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy has emphasized that the war is not only about the future of Ukraine but about the future of democracy in Europe, facing the threat of Russian-style authoritarianism. The conflict became emblematic of the

broader tensions facing Central and East Europe, where nationalism often collides with the ideals of democracy and self-governance.

This chapter evaluates the challenges nationalism poses to democratic governance in Central and East Europe (CEE). We define **nationalism** as the desire by a self-identified group of people for sovereign self-rule in a particular territory. In theory, nationalism is easily compatible with democracy. Yet it is also compatible with authoritarianism, because nationalism does not provide ideological content or prescription regarding the political regime that should be in place in a **nation-state**, where the political boundaries of a state coincide with the collective identity of the people living within those boundaries. Nationalism aims for **national sovereignty**—in other words, for "self-government" for a "nation" on a "national territory" or "homeland." This is a powerful idea that mobilizes people in all regions of the world to see themselves as "nations" and fight for "their own" sovereign states. Yet there is a deep tension between nationalism and democracy, because each component of the seemingly straightforward idea of national sovereignty is continuously contested—peacefully or violently, within and across existing state borders. Who belongs to a "nation" and under what terms? Where exactly are the boundaries of a national "homeland"? What counts as "self-determination," and what kind of government does it require? Wherever political actors articulate responses to these questions, their answers invariably reflect a certain interpretation of history, a certain conception of what binds people together and what separates them, and a certain understanding of what good government means.

For nation-building, historical evidence is less important than the degree to which the writing of history can foster a sense of shared history and purpose. To express this idea, "national myth" is the term often used to describe national stories. In many instances, the national myth contains stories about ethnic competition over territory, invoking memories of past ethnic dominance and subordination, which continue to influence current state- and nation-building processes. Yet not all ethnic groups engage in national competition. A key difference between **ethnic and national groups** is that although ethnic groups aim to reproduce particular cultures, only national groups claim self-government rights on a particular territory.[2] Some national myths are more successful than others in accommodating cultural diversity. It matters how ethnicity becomes politicized in nation-building. Nationhood built primarily on shared political traditions and beliefs in a common creed about the purpose of political community (often branded as **civic nationalism**) is potentially more inclusive than **ethnic nationalism**, which requires members of the nation to share a culture defined by particular set of ethnic markers (such as language, race, or religion) and practices (such as holidays and customs around food and marriage).

State centers around the world have been engaged in nation-building since the emergence and global spread of the territorial nation-state model. This model promotes the pursuit of congruence between the territorial and cultural boundaries of a nation.[3] In Europe, this pursuit in earlier centuries involved aggressive efforts to change territorial boundaries to include external ethnic kin, assimilate internal "others," eliminate nonconforming groups to "purify" the nation, or encourage them to repatriate to other countries. Such methods caused brutal ethnic cleansings during World War II and forced

population movements thereafter. But by the 1950s, such means of nation-state creation became unacceptable in the Western part of the continent. The primary motivation behind the post–World War II European integration process was to create incentives for sustainable peace through economic interdependence and increased social interaction across nation-states. As the communist regimes began collapsing in CEE, interest in regional peace and security motivated the creation of the European Union in 1992 and its "Eastern Expansion" to postcommunist states. Political developments of the last three decades show that the appeal of nationalism coexists with interest in democratic government across the continent. Yet, the experiences of CEE reveal key reasons why the relationship between nationalism and democracy remains fraught with tension.

In the pages that follow, we provide a brief overview of the evolution of nationalism in CEE prior to the 1990s. We then consider the implications of ethnic demography (e.g., the size and distribution of ethnic groups) for majoritarian nation-building and democratic governance in ~~what we (unartfully) call~~ postcommunist CEE. "**Majoritarian nation-building**" refers to the process by which a dominant ethnic group in a state uses state institutions and policies to create a national identity in its own image. We discuss the roughly three and a half decades since communism collapsed in two parts. In the first, we discuss how national majorities and minorities struggled to assert sovereignty in their new or reconstituted states and political systems. For most countries, this period lasted roughly until the country entered the EU as a democratic state. In some countries (all emerging from the former Soviet or Yugoslav federations), however, the struggle for "national sovereignty" and EU membership continues. In the second, we focus on a contemporary face of nationalism that presents challenges for democracy in several CEE countries, especially in states that, three decades earlier, were front-runners in the institutionalization of liberal democracy in the region.

Nationalism Before Democratic Competition

Across CEE, the legacies of the previous decades and the challenges of the post-1990 period that followed made societies vulnerable to *ethnic* nationalism. Societies in this region have experienced border changes three times within three generations: at the ends of World War I, World War II, and the Cold War. Most of the time, border changes were associated with devastation: war, mass violence, and forced population movements. This was the norm in 1918 and 1945 and during the collapse of the Yugoslav state in the 1990s. After each border change, large parts of societies became traumatized. Conflicting collective memories of victimization hindered the creation of shared narratives of nationhood, without which successful nation-building became extremely difficult.

It was not coincidental that the communist elites who assumed power with Soviet help after World War II in this region made ambitious efforts to replace competing ethnic

narratives with the internationalist ideology of "Marxism-Leninism." That war provided an unprecedented display of the devastation that ethnic nationalism can cause. The first generation of communist leaders, itself disproportionately from ethnic minority backgrounds, relied on supranational political discourse to transcend differences in ethnicity and race in postwar countries. The three ethnofederations—the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia—are the clearest examples of this. All three countries tried to bridge ethnic differences by creating "federal" identities—Soviet, Czechoslovak, and Yugoslav—to which any citizen, in principle, could belong. Despite this initial emphasis on internationalism, however, in practice ethnic nationalism remained a key organizing principle during the communist period.[4] In the three ethnofederations, major ethnic groups were awarded their own substate units. The Soviet Union served as a model with its fifteen ethnic republics (including Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, etc., "Soviet socialist republics"). Six similar ethnic republics were created in Yugoslavia and two in Czechoslovakia. In unitary states, such as Bulgaria, Poland, and Romania, state institutions reinforced the dominance of a majority ethnicity, but in some places minority nationalisms also survived.

Once the communist regimes began collapsing in 1989, all three ethnofederations fell apart along nationalist lines. This is understandable. As discussed above, these states had been organized along ethnic lines that formed the basis for nationalist opposition to the federal system. Ethnonationalism manifested itself powerfully in claims for independence and rearrangement of political borders across the region. In contrast to the border changes that followed the First and Second World Wars, however, the rearrangement at the end of the Cold War was peaceful across the former Soviet bloc (i.e., the Soviet Union and its regional allies). Ethnic nationalism generated war only in the former Yugoslavia. By the mid-1990s, the political map of postcommunist CEE included twelve newly created or re-created states, with only five states continuing within the same borders. The leaders of all states chose **majoritarian systems**, which created political, economic, or social advantages for those belonging to the majority ethnic group.[5] Yet postcommunist governments faced major challenges in satisfying desires to build liberal capitalist democracies in majoritarian nation-states. Moreover, most of these governments were asserting national sovereignty while simultaneously demonstrating keen interest in joining a transnational institution (the European Union or EU) that required them to give up significant elements of sovereignty. The way governments addressed these conflicting challenges revealed the continuing salience of ethnic nationalism. Efforts to design and implement democratic institutions and practices during the three decades of transformation were shaped ~~significantly~~ by patterns of ethnic demography. But it was not ethnic demography itself that "caused" democratic governance to succeed or fail in some place at some time. Rather, it was the **politics of ethnic demography**, in other words, the way political actors employed ethnicity in designing and implementing political and economic systems, that influenced ~~shaped~~ the relationship between nationalism and democracy in each case.

Asserting National Sovereignty After 1990

The collapse of communist regimes across the region made self-government tangible, and the majority and minority groups that articulated competing notions of self-government rights were national groups that defined "nation" on the basis of ethnic markers—most commonly language and culture, and in some cases religion. But the states emerging from the post–Cold War rearrangement did not fulfill the nationalist longing for congruence between the boundaries of state and "nation." Although CEE states became ethnically majoritarian, most still incorporate sizable ethnic minority populations, and many include at least one "national" minority population that has organized to claim self-government rights. As majority political actors in state centers designed institutions for their version of national sovereignty, the presence of such minorities was often framed as a threat to state stability and national security. This "**securitization**" of the presence of ethnic minority populations became predominant in newly created or reconstituted states. Securitization became especially acute in relation to minorities that had potentially activist **kin-states** in the region—that is, states in which their ethnic kin compose a dominant majority. Due to the frequency of border changes and reversals of ethnic hierarchies in this region, most sizable minority populations have kin-states. Among the ethnic minorities targeted as sources of "threat to the nation," Jews and Roma are exceptions in that they have no kin-states in the neighborhood that might be suspected of supporting separatist goals of their kin.

Differences in ethnic demography create different challenges for majoritarian nationalists in state centers that aim for national congruence. Most CEE states include a **titular nation** (e.g., Romanians in Romania or Latvians in Latvia) plus national minorities who seek some degree of political self-determination (e.g., ethnic Hungarians in Romania, ethnic Russians in Latvia, ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia). Some states have no sizable national minorities that claim self-government (e.g., the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland). But nationalism in some of these states (e.g., Hungary, Poland) is complicated by the presence of sizable ethnic kin populations in neighboring countries. It adds to the complexity of this mismatch between territorial and cultural notions of nationhood that many states in the region are both home states and kin-states. Romania, for instance, is the home state of a sizable Hungarian minority (in absolute numbers one of the largest national minorities in the region), and it also conducts kin-state politics in relation to ethnic Romanians in Moldova. The states in the region that is closest to nation-states are the Czech Republic, where the vast majority of citizens are ethnic Czechs, and Slovenia, where the vast majority of citizens are ethnic Slovenes, and the small number of minorities present no national claims.

Ethnonationalism and the Collapse of Multinational States

The nationalist movements that pursued state formation in the 1990s emerged in the three <AQ1>these dissolving federal states was ethnically diverse, <AQ1>only a limited number of groups defined themselves in national terms and claimed rights to national self-government. In each case, the titular groups of substate administrative units were most likely to claim such rights. These were Serbs, Slovenians, Macedonians, Montenegrins, and Croatians in former Yugoslavia; Czechs and Slovaks in former Czechoslovakia; and Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, and Ukrainians in the former Soviet Union. Those engaged in state formation had to answer the following questions: What would be the physical boundaries of the successor states? What would "the nation" mean within those boundaries? Who belonged to the new political community and under what terms? And what should happen to those who did not belong? In all cases, the political elites who led the movements for national independence played an important role in shaping the debates about these questions. In Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, nationalist claims and territorial changes were managed peacefully and even democratically. In Yugoslavia, however, democratic forms of parliamentary debate and party competition were unable to contain national conflicts, and these conflicts escalated into devastating wars.

The difference between the peaceful breakups of Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union and the violent breakup of Yugoslavia demonstrates the political importance of both ethnic demography and elite choices. It is tempting to dismiss the peaceful Czechoslovak "Velvet Divorce" as a lucky fluke. After all, the Czechoslovak dissolution involved only two titular ethnic groups, Czechs and Slovaks, who had no territorial claims against each other. As the former ethnofederation's substate borders became state borders, no significant Czech minority remained on the Slovak side, nor a significant Slovak minority on the Czech side. Moreover, no ethnic minorities challenged the breakup because Czechoslovakia's German minority was expelled and its Hungarian minority was significantly reduced after World War II. The circumstances were thus ideal for a peaceful parting of the ways. Yet the creation of independent Czech and Slovak states was an outcome negotiated among the political leaders of the two parts of the federation, with only limited public support.[6] This was not the case with Russians in the Soviet Union and the Serbs in Yugoslavia, where independence claims from nondominant republics had massive public support, and state dissolution left substantial Russian-speaking or Serbian diasporas in multiple successor states. So why did the Soviet federation end peacefully in 1991 while Yugoslavia's dissolution triggered devastating wars?

The difference between the Soviet and Yugoslav breakups can be attributed to the decision of the Soviet elites to peacefully dissolve the federation, whereas the Yugoslav elite—dominated by Serbians—decided to hold things together by force. Unlike the Soviet leadership under Boris Yeltsin, the Yugoslav leadership under Slobodan Milošević was unwilling to countenance Yugoslavia's peaceful breakup. Milošević was both leader of

Yugoslavia and a Serb nationalist. As republics declared independence, ethnic enclaves within breakaway republics, such as Serbs in Croatia and Croatians and Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina, rejected the republics' independence. In response, Milošević sent in the Yugoslav army to "support" his ethnic Serb compatriots. The resulting ethnic cleansing derailed not only the prospects for Yugoslav democracy, already derailed by ethnic nationalist movements, but also the prospects for democracy in most Yugoslav successor states. It is noteworthy that Slovenia, largely untouched by war, democratized and entered the EU along with other Central European states in 2004. Croatia is the only other former Yugoslav republic that has become ~~became~~ an EU member state (in 2013). As the two cases below illustrate, the creation of stable, sovereign, and democratic successor states remains fraught, especially where national myths continue to be used by political actors for conflicting purposes, and international actors are unable or unwilling to facilitate broadly legitimate outcomes.

Sovereignty Delayed in Kosovo

The Serbian government's refusal to recognize the independence of Kosovo reveals the difficulty of achieving sovereignty when a former federation's dominant group claims ownership over a territory as a central piece of their national myth, despite the efforts of powerful international mediators.

Before 1989, Kosovo was an autonomous part of the Serbian republic of Yugoslavia that, despite its majority Albanian population, never gained ethnic republic status. Furthermore, in 1989 the Milošević government revoked Kosovo's autonomy. Albanians were systematically excluded from political and economic power, and their means of cultural reproduction (such as education in the Albanian language) were virtually eliminated from state-sponsored institutions. Albanian members of the Kosovo Assembly articulated the Kosovar Albanians' right to self-determination as early as 1990. In September 1991, they organized a referendum in which an overwhelming majority of Kosovars (99.8 percent) voted for independence.

After efforts to achieve independence through peaceful civil disobedience failed, the National Movement for the Liberation of Kosovo (KLA) began a series of violent attacks against Serb police officers and civilians in Kosovo. Serbian authorities responded with a massive offensive in July 1998, forcing the KLA to withdraw into the hills. The Serbs then began ruthless and systematic ethnic cleansing. Approximately seven hundred thousand ethnic Albanian civilians from Kosovo were expelled from their villages and forced to flee to Albania or Macedonia. Despite international intervention, including two months of massive NATO bombings against military and industrial targets ~~also~~ in Serbia, the Serbian government refused to agree to Kosovo's independence. In June 1999, a peace agreement achieved Serbian withdrawal from Kosovo, but guaranteed the continued territorial integrity of Yugoslavia (Serbia-Montenegro), including the province of Kosovo, which was placed under UN administration. Following the collapse of internationally facilitated negotiations and the publication of a UN report calling for the independence of Kosovo[7]

(albeit under international supervision), the Kosovo Assembly adopted a unilateral proclamation of independence on February 17, 2008. Recognized by 104 UN member states, including all G7 countries, Kosovo's independence remains challenged by Serbia and unrecognized by three EU states with sizable territorially based minorities. Tensions decreased following an EU-brokered deal in April 2013 that recognized Serb majority areas of Kosovo as autonomous at the municipal level. Yet Kosovo suffers from weak state capacity and Serbia's support for Kosovo Serbs' resistance to Kosovo's authority. International organizations continue to exert significant power there.

Democracy Undermined in North Macedonia

An externally negotiated arrangement helped prevent the escalation of ethnic violence in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. In 1991, Macedonian leaders declared independence after a referendum showed overwhelming support (96 percent with ~~in a~~ 76 percent turnout). With nationalist wars nearby, the first democratically elected Macedonian leaders faced significant challenges: internally from a large Albanian minority that sought increased group rights, and externally from Greece, which opposed the name Macedonia, also the name of Greece's largest region. The UN admitted the new state in 1993 under the provisional name "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia."

International mediation involving European and US actors helped prevent a 2001 internal conflict with Albanian paramilitaries from escalating into another post-Yugoslav war. The Ohrid Framework Agreement, signed in August 2001, resulted in constitutional amendments to guarantee the Albanian minority equitable political representation. This included veto power in parliament, decentralization, the redrawing of municipal boundaries, and institutional rights to enable minority cultural reproduction and peaceful coexistence.

Although the Ohrid Agreement helped prevent further violence, its legitimacy became a major source of internal conflict. Majoritarian nationalists increasingly criticized concessions to Albanians. Since 2001, this conflict among Macedonians has shaped the state's politics. After winning the 2006 elections, majoritarian nationalist leader Nikola Gruevski institutionalized a national myth linking the Macedonian nation-state to Alexander the Great, a figure also significant in Greek nationalism. This conflict contributed to a Greek veto in 2008 against Macedonia's NATO and EU accession, generating popular resentment and expanding Gruevski's electoral base. The government fueled nationalist sentiments with large-scale investments, including an eight-story statue of Alexander the Great. Meanwhile, Gruevski's party, the VMRO-DPMNE, undermined democratic institutions, shifting the country toward autocratization and complicating nation-building and relations with the Albanian minority. After EU mediation on corruption investigations and elections, a multiethnic coalition in late 2016 led by Social Democrats defeated Gruevski's nationalists, returning the country to democratic politics. They negotiated with

Greece to change the country's name to North Macedonia, unblocking the EU accession process. Following the name change in 2019, Bulgaria blocked EU accession, this time over a demand that North Macedonia change its constitution to include Bulgarians among North Macedonia's founding peoples, part of a larger dispute about national identity.[8] Popular disappointment over the blocked EU accession and the Social Democratic government's failure to deliver justice and combat corruption and organized crime boosted electoral support for VMRO-DPMNE. Formerly led by Gruevski, who fled to Hungary to avoid prosecution, the party returned to power in 2024, raising concerns about the country's democratic future.

Photo 4.1. The eight-story-high statue of Alexander the Great on Macedonia Square in Skopje was erected during the Gruevski government and unveiled on September 8, 2011, on the twenty-year anniversary of the country's independence from Yugoslavia. Ognen Vangelov.

Broader Influence of the EU Accession Process

The EU accession process was important in moderating the demands of both majority nationalists and minority groups. It incentivized peaceful contestation over violence and set norms for minority protection that governments at least had to pretend to respect if they wanted to become EU members. The "Copenhagen criteria" for EU accession, adopted by the European Council in 1993, included a requirement that states guarantee "respect for and protection of minorities."[9] During the first round of the EU's "Eastern Enlargement," which lasted until the accession of ten CEE countries to the EU from 2004 to 2007, European organizations had an unprecedented degree of influence on political decision-making in candidate states. The term "EU conditionality" is widely used for the tools European actors employed to ensure that the institutions, policies, and practices in aspiring member states became compatible with EU norms.

EU actors worked together with other European institutions to achieve this goal. In the domain of minority protection, the EU's main partner institutions were the Council of Europe (CoE) and the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM), an organ of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The HCNM, mandated to work for interethnic peace and security by identifying ethnic conflict and actively seeking to resolve tensions that might endanger peace, became the most visible European actor engaged in persuading governments to adopt, ratify, and implement European norms of minority protection. These norms were set forth in documents that were adopted by European institutions in the 1990s, reflecting how the transformations taking place in CEE and the needs for interethnic peace in that region impacted the development of European minority rights law.

The 1990s have often been described as "the decade of minority protection" in Europe due to the high degree of consensus on Europe-wide norms, reflected in an unusually high level of activism in drafting and adopting European documents. Among these, the 1992 European Charter of Regional and Minority Languages (ECRML) and the 1995 Framework Convention for National Minorities (FCNM) are considered the most significant, and their acceptance became an informally accepted precondition for EU accession. OSCE recommendations also became important building blocks of an emerging European minority rights regime. This includes the 2008 Bolzano/Bozen Recommendations on National Minorities in Inter-State Relations, which focus on peaceful cross-border relations between kin-states and external kin populations.[10] The **Europeanization** process, which means both the enlargement of the EU and the diffusion of European norms and practices, also expanded opportunities for minority actors to find new arenas for activism and build alliances externally, in both kin-states and in the European Parliament. Transnational activism, however, also complicated minority actors' ability to forge domestic alliances with majority actors in their home states, where nationalist parties routinely framed minorities' external activism as a threat to state stability.

The Persistence of Nationalism in Different Forms

Nationalism has been a significant aspect of politics in postcommunist CEE, where calls for national self-determination coincided with a strong desire to join Western transnational institutions, both the EU and the security community (NATO). The ability of governments to lead states into these institutions became a source of popular support and governmental legitimacy. Meanwhile, nationalism took different forms as differently situated political actors mobilized people for competing national interests. The typology below highlights four significant types of nationalism that coexist within the EU, sometimes complementing and at other times competing with one another, depending on the time and place: majoritarian, substate, trans-sovereign, and protectionist (Table 4.1). This typology focuses on the central goals of nationalist strategy pursued by nationalist actors in various environments, regardless of the political regime in place, whether democratic or nondemocratic.

Table 4.1. Typology of Nationalisms That Coexist in the European Union and Candidate States

Type of nationalism	Main objective	Examples in CEE
Majoritarian	Create and maintain a nation-state in which political and cultural boundaries coincide, usually through policies that prioritize and advance a dominant culture (e.g., language, religion)	Most states in the region (Bosnia-Herzegovina is an exception)
Substate	Create self-government institutions (territorial or nonterritorial) for maintaining a nondominant (usually minority) culture	Albanians in North Macedonia; Hungarians in Romania, Slovakia, Serbia; Russian speakers in Ukraine; Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo
Trans-sovereign	Create formal cross-border institutions to link people that belong to a shared culture but live in separate states	Albanians (across Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia); Croatians (across Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia); Hungarians (across Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Ukraine); Romanians (across Romania, Hungary, Moldova, Serbia, Ukraine)
Protectionist	Protect dominant national culture in face of immigration/social change	Most states in the region to different degrees

Based on the typology of nationalist strategies developed by Zsuzsa Csergő and James M. Goldgeier, "National-ist Strategies and European Integration," *Perspectives on Politics* 2, no. 1 (2004): 23.

Majoritarian nationalism aims to achieve and maintain a territorially sovereign and culturally homogeneous nation-state. In other words, majoritarian nationalism seeks coherence between political and cultural boundaries in an independent state, usually by increasing the population ratio belonging to the dominant culture (e.g., language, religion). Most state centers around the world have adopted this type of nationalism since the end of formal empires. (Alternatives are multinational or pluralistic forms of nation-building, with constitutionally entrenched institutions that accommodate multiple national groups within their borders.)

Substate nationalism is the political strategy of groups that define their nationhood as culturally different from the state's mainstream (or dominant) culture but do not claim an independent state (through secession). Instead, they claim some form of institutionalized self-government, typically either territorial or cultural autonomy, that enables them to maintain and reproduce that culture. Throughout Europe, these groups organize on behalf of "homeland communities" that have a lengthy history (and associated historiography, geography, literature, art, etc.) linking them to the territory in the state within which they reside.

Trans-sovereign nationalism is a type of nationalism that does not pursue a traditional nation-state through border changes or the repatriation of ethnic kin but instead aims to sustain common cultural "nationhood" across existing state borders.[11] "Divided nationhood" is a term used in the literature for describing situations where populations with a shared sense of national belonging, together with associated collective memories and cultural repertoires, have been territorially separated by shifting borders. Most ethnic and national minorities in CEE live in such situations, including Russians in the Baltic states; Hungarians in Romania, Slovakia, Croatia, and Serbia; Poles in Lithuania; and Serbs and Croats in the Yugoslav successor states.

Protectionist nationalism focuses on protecting the dominant nation from newcomers who might introduce unwelcome changes. This type of nationalism involves strategies that keep ethnic "others" from entering the "national" space and usually favors immigration policies that differentiate between co-ethnic and other categories of potential entrants. Protectionist nationalism has been more prevalent in immigrant recipient countries, but has also emerged as a significant element of nationalist political discourse in CEE in the context of the so-called refugee and migrant crisis beginning in 2015, in which millions of non-European, non-Christian people sought asylum in Europe.

The next section highlights how these four types of nationalism have complicated democratization efforts, providing case summaries that illustrate their contribution to diverse political paths and outcomes in the region since 1990.

Majoritarian Nationalism and Its Internal Challenges

The collapse of the multinational federations in the early 1990s might have been expected to bring about greater congruence in the region between state and ethnic borders, but it did

Photo 4.2. Demonstrators against refugees and immigrants in Warsaw, Poland, organized by the National Radical Camp and Korwin party in April 2016. Wiola Wiaderek, Shutterstock.

not work out that way. Of the ten new CEE states that emerged from these federations—the Czech Republic and Slovakia (from Czechoslovakia); Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (from the Soviet Union); and Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, the Republic of North Macedonia, Slovenia, and the newly reconstituted Federal Republic of Yugoslavia consisting of Serbia and Montenegro (from Yugoslavia)—all but the Czech Republic and Slovenia resembled Bulgaria and Romania as states where there is a mismatch between territorial and ethnic borders. Majoritarian nationalism had to contend with national minorities that sought some form of group rights and participation in the new democratic governments.

This situation created its own challenges for democracy even as most of these countries were democratizing in preparation for possible entry into the European Union. First, at least during the first decade or so of postcommunism, majoritarian nationalists in state centers sought to exclude minorities (as well as their potential allies in the majority opposition) from political power. In most states, minority representatives were not invited to join governing coalitions that decided on the fundamentals of state reconstruction and regime change, nor were they consulted in a meaningful way about legislation that affected minority populations. Minority inclusion in governmental decision-making became institutionalized only in the three post-Yugoslav states where external actors directly

intervened in state design to end or prevent major interethnic violence (in Bosnia-Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo).

Second, although all potential entrants to the European Union recognized the individual rights of minority group members to speak their languages and engage in their cultural practices, there was an intense (though peaceful) struggle over what, if any, *group rights* minorities should have. The difference between individual rights and group rights is subtle, but crucial. No minority individual in postcommunist CEE was prevented by the government from speaking their mother tongue, eating their native cuisine, or engaging in their cultural practices. Instead, the fight was over what official status, if any, minority cultures should have. The main issue was the primary cultural marker, language. Do minorities have a right to be educated in their own language? Do minorities have a right to interact with government—the post office, the courts, local officials—in their own languages, or must they use the majority language? Should markings in public spaces be only in the majority language or in both majority and minority languages? There were fights over everything that had to do with asserting majoritarian dominance in areas of sovereignty and cultural reproduction.[12]

Third, what in most countries would be considered purely domestic matters, such as administrative territorial reorganizations, sometimes escalated into international political issues due to increased international attention to interethnic conflict in post–Cold War Europe. Minority parties and advocacy groups used the opportunities provided by democratization and regional realignment toward NATO and the EU. They appealed to external actors in kin-states, European institutions, the United States, or the UN to influence domestic legislation. Transnational lobbying helped to prevent the escalation of conflict and resulted in more accommodative minority policies in several instances, even in the case of Russian minorities in Estonia and Latvia that were largely disenfranchised and seen as "fifth columns" of a kin-state unbound by Western transnational institutions. The two cases below illustrate these challenges in two types of majoritarian nation-building: (a) in the reestablished Baltic states emerging from Soviet dissolution; and (b) in the new Slovak state created after the Czechoslovak "Velvet Divorce."

Case 1: Reestablishing Majority Dominance in the Baltic States

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania regained independence without significant border disputes, largely along the territorial boundaries in place before these states' forcible annexation to the Soviet Union in 1940. Majoritarian nation-building, however, involved a great deal of political rancor in these states. The politics of ethnic demography became salient, after a dramatic decrease in the relative share and status of Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian ethnic groups under Soviet occupation. Due to large-scale deportation campaigns against the native population, the emigration of large numbers of Baltic peoples to the West, the massive influx of Russian-speakers, and "Russification" policies across state institutions, Russian became the predominant language in the public domain, especially in urban centers.

After 1991, there was a strong sense among Baltic populations that democratization should bring them national justice. Baltic governments adopted harsh policies to establish national dominance over the institutions of the new states. To start, each of the three Baltic governments adopted citizenship and language policies that established the dominance of the titular language in the state, incentivized large numbers of Russian speakers (or Russophones) to leave, and prevented those who remained from participating in the design of new political systems.[13] These strategies were most aggressive in Latvia, where the ratio of the Russophone population compared to the native population was the highest, and they were most moderate in Lithuania, where the ratio of the Russian minority was the lowest. In Lithuania, with some exceptions, residents who had lived in the republic before 1991 could obtain citizenship simply by applying. In Estonia and Latvia, only citizens of the interwar Estonian and Latvian states before Soviet annexation in 1940 and their descendants had an automatic right to citizenship. Citizenship laws required other residents to pass a language proficiency test in order to become citizens of the reestablished states, even though during the Soviet era hardly any Russian school taught Estonian or Latvian. As a result, roughly a third of the population of Estonia and Latvia was excluded from citizenship. Citizenship laws also disadvantaged ethnic Russians in public sector employment and the distribution of resources. The 1991 Latvian privatization law, for instance, excluded noncitizens. In Estonia, property restitution similarly discriminated against Russians.

Despite these exclusionary minority policies, the challenge that Russophones presented to these reconstituted states was relatively weak. The situation of these Russophone minorities differed significantly from that of Russians living as a large regionally concentrated population in eastern Ukraine—a large post-Soviet state with a unique set of historical and contemporary links to Russia and the European Union. Russophones had no national myth or common "homeland" narrative linking them to the Baltic countries that could have become the grounds for national sovereignty claims.[14] Russophone political actors contested exclusionary laws through electoral politics, relying on their strength in municipal governments, and occasionally lobbying external actors (e.g., European institutions) to pressure governments to adopt more minority-friendly policies.

External involvement in majoritarian nation-building and minority accommodation in the restored Baltic states differed from the situations described earlier in post-Yugoslav cases. The peaceful and fast resolution of the so-called alien crisis in Estonia illustrates the contrast. Russian activists, in response to the Aliens Act adopted in 1993, which reinforced fears of expulsion among Estonia's Russophone population, claimed territorial autonomy in the northeastern region of Estonia, where Russophones compose local majorities. Although advocating for the rights of Russophones rhetorically, the Yeltsin government was more interested in regional peace than in the reassertion of Russian geopolitical power. Substantial European mediation (by the OSCE's HCNM), combined with NATO and US involvement, helped to deescalate the crisis. Most Russophones remained excluded from citizenship for a long time, but the Estonian government agreed to moderate naturalization requirements and accelerate the implementation of naturalization laws. Estonia also enabled permanent residents to vote (if not run for office) in local elections, which provided

Russian minority members a higher degree of participation rights than those enjoyed by their counterparts in Latvia.

At the same time, obtaining protection from future Russian reannexation by joining NATO and the EU were inextricable parts of national sovereignty for these states.[15] Employing the powerful leverage that these motivations provided, European institutions—especially the OSCE's HCNM, the CoE, and the EU—applied strong pressure on the Baltic governments to adopt more inclusive citizenship laws and more pluralistic educational and language policies that complied with "European norms." After 1998, the Estonian and Latvian governments began adopting amendments to their citizenship laws that made the naturalization of "nonhistoric" minorities easier. International pressure was less successful in influencing them to liberalize their language policies. Language legislation in both states followed the logic of traditional majoritarian nationalism, aiming to establish language dominance in key institutions of government and cultural reproduction. In majority-Russophone settings, however, restrictions were moderately implemented until the heightening of securitization toward Russophones as a result of Russia's irredentist attack on Ukraine. The 2014 annexation of Crimea, followed by the 2022 full-scale war, significantly increased threat perceptions in the Baltic countries, leading to harsher limitations on Russian language rights.

Case 2: Building a New Nation-State in Slovakia

A key question for the political elites who negotiated Slovak independence was whether a traditional "nation-state" could materialize on a territory that incorporated a relatively large, geographically concentrated, and politically well-organized historic Hungarian community. During the first period of independence (1992–1998), the Slovak parties in power, under the leadership of Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar, opted for majoritarian nationalist policies.[16] Aiming to suppress Hungarian minority claims for substate autonomy, they sought Slovak majority control over institutions of government and cultural reproduction. A restrictive language law in 1995 strengthened the status of the standardized Slovak language against dialects and excluded minority languages from the spheres considered most important for the reproduction of national cultures (e.g., education, media). Hungarian minority parties forcefully challenged these policies, pressing for a pluralist Slovak state. They asked for the recognition of Slovakia's historic Hungarian minority concentrated in the southern region of Slovakia as a state-constituting entity. They claimed either substate territorial or cultural self-government at various times, but language rights were always central in their claims.

Majority-minority conflicts over these questions marked the first decade of Slovak state formation, but these conflicts unfolded in democratic channels. Hungarian minority elites found allies among Slovak elites in democratic opposition to the Mečiar government, which used nationalist discourse to justify its policies of increasing centralized control over society. Slovak and Hungarian parties in opposition formed a strategic alliance that defeated the Mečiar government in 1998, returning Slovakia on the path toward democratic consolidation and EU accession. Although debates about minority self-government and language rights continued, the prospect of EU membership, and the engagement of

European actors interested in facilitating Slovakia's accession, provided incentives for peaceful negotiation. The resulting legislation preserved the predominance of the majority language regardless of ethnic demography on the ground, but it also expanded minority-language rights.[17]

Once Slovakia became a member state, the pre-accession leverage of European institutions was lost. Since then, minority rights have been "up for grabs" in party politics. Until 2020, Hungarian parties regularly obtained sufficient votes to pass the 5 percent threshold in parliamentary elections, and they were also regularly included in coalition governments. The presence of these minority parliamentarians, however, did not prevent backlash in Slovak minority policy. Legislation adopted in 2009 reintroduced language restrictions and denied ethnic Hungarians the possibility to acquire dual (Slovak and Hungarian) citizenship. The failure of minority parties to negotiate effectively with Slovak political leaders weakened their electoral support. After 2010, a large segment of the Hungarian minority electorate placed its trust in an interethnic Slovak-Hungarian party called "Bridge." This party was also part of governmental coalitions for a decade, until it fell out of parliament together with its Slovak political allies in 2020. Since then, no Hungarian ethnic or interethnic party has passed the parliamentary threshold, leaving Slovakia's large Hungarian minority without direct political representation in the state center, where minority policy is decided.

Substate Nationalism: Hungarians in Romania

Similar contestations in Romania provide a useful comparative perspective on how ethnic majoritarian nation-building was countered by minority substate nationalism. Postcommunist transformation in Romania unfolded within pre-1989 state borders. The new constitution adopted an ethnic concept of Romanian nationhood, and Romanian became the only official language. Laws on public administration and education were in some ways more restrictive of minority-language rights than their precedents. These restrictions mobilized the Hungarian minority electorate to lend overwhelming support for the minority political organization that emerged in December 1989 to represent Romania's 1.6 million Hungarian population. This organization claimed rights to institutions they considered key for the reproduction and development of a minority national culture. The prospects of NATO and EU membership contributed to majority willingness to accommodate claims for minority language rights in education and official communication where minorities comprise a significant population share. Accommodation occurred gradually, as an outcome of strategic negotiations between moderate majority parties and the Hungarian umbrella party in the state center.[18] Although Romania was considered a "laggard" in democratic consolidation and EU accession (admitted together with Bulgaria in 2007), post-accession Romanian governments remained more supportive of minority-friendly policies than their Slovak counterparts. For Hungarian minority actors, however, the question of whether they can hold their electorate together and navigate in Romania's volatile political environment remains open.

The Trans-Sovereign Nationalism of Kin-States

Since the beginning of postcommunist restructuring, a growing interest emerged in kin-states to develop cross-border relations with external kin populations. The constitutions of several states, including Albania, Croatia, Hungary, and North Macedonia, contain commitments to care for the well-being of kin living abroad. Many governments, such as in Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovenia, and Slovakia, adopted legislation to provide benefits to ethnic kin living abroad. Although the constitutional clauses and benefit laws adopted in kin-states differ in their specific content (ranging from cultural and economic benefits to nonresidential citizenship), their common characteristic is that they support the preservation of a shared national identity and foster a relationship between a kin-state and those outside its borders who define themselves in some sense as co-nationals.[19]

Kin-State Support as a Double-Edged Sword: Hungary and Its External Kin

The Hungarian state's nation-building strategy after 1990 is a robust example of trans-sovereign nationalism in the region. Close to three million ethnic Hungarians live in Hungary's neighboring states, one of the largest historically settled minority populations in Europe. Meanwhile, the population of Hungary has declined steadily since the 1980s. After 1990, the democratically elected leaders of Hungary were keen on strengthening ties with Hungarians living in neighboring states, but they were aware that territorial revisionism was an unacceptable proposition if they wanted to join an integrated Europe. Instead of pressing for border changes, they created a network of institutions that link Hungarians living in neighboring countries to Hungary while encouraging them to remain "in their homeland" and, in effect, withstand assimilation where they reside. To complement these cross-border institutions, the Hungarian government expressed support both for EU membership for Hungary and its neighbors and for Hungarian minority demands for local and institutional autonomy in their home states. According to the logic of these policies, if Hungary and all its neighbors became EU members and the EU provided a supranational, decentralized structure for strong regional institutions, then Hungarians could live as though no political borders separated them.

Although the "virtualization of borders" appeared attractive to many Hungarians, the idea found little appeal among majority political parties in neighboring countries. Seven states neighboring Hungary include ethnic Hungarian populations, and five of these states were newly established after the collapse of communist federations. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the majority national elites in both newly created and consolidating national states were deeply reluctant to weaken their sovereignty and accommodate multiple nation-building processes in their territories. Thus, Hungarian efforts to unilaterally "virtualize" borders triggered tensions between Hungary and its neighbors, particularly those engaged in establishing newly gained independence.

The adoption in June 2001 of the Law Concerning Hungarians Living in Neighboring Countries (commonly known as the Hungarian Status Law)—which defined all ethnic Hungarians as part of the same cultural nation and on this basis offered a number of educational, cultural, and even economic benefits to those living in neighboring states—triggered significant attention from policy-makers in the region, European institution officials, and scholars of nationalism.[20] The governments of Romania and Slovakia, the two states with the largest Hungarian populations, expressed concern that the legislation weakened their exclusive sovereignty over ethnic Hungarian citizens and discriminated against majority nationals in neighboring countries. Although these neighboring governments themselves had adopted similar policies toward their own ethnic kin abroad, controversy over the Hungarian Status Law brought Hungary's relations with these neighbors to a dangerous low point. The fact that all these governments were keenly interested in EU membership eventually helped them compromise. Hungary signed a bilateral agreement with Romania and altered the language of the law in response to European pressure in 2003.

Yet the controversy over the Hungarian Status Law foreshadowed the challenges of reconciling European integration with the continuing power of divergent and competing national aspirations. By the end of the 2000s, trans-sovereign nationalism became "normalized" as part of the set of nationalist strategies described earlier, employed in varying combinations by state centers and substate political actors. After 2010, the Orbán regime intensified Hungary's kin-state activism by granting nonresident citizenship and voting rights to former citizens and their descendants abroad and increasing subsidies for Hungarian minority institutions. While these measures sparked limited international controversy, they further deepened polarization in Hungarian society regarding the regime's cross-border expansion of its political support base.

Protectionist Nationalism

Espoused on both the left and right sides of the political spectrum, protectionist nationalism in CEE differs in important ways from the majoritarian nationalism we have thus far discussed. First and foremost, it redefines the "enemy" from being the local politicized national minority group (e.g., ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia or ethnic Poles in Lithuania) to non-Europeans of a different religion, as well as their liberal allies at home, in the EU, and elsewhere. Second, the "threat" is no longer the challenge to majority cultural dominance from minority autonomy, but instead the attack on "Christian-national traditions" posed by Muslims. The refugee and migrant crisis is a prime example of how politics can make strange bedfellows. On one side of the debate stood nationalists from across CEE, who are normally at loggerheads with each other, and a minority of other politicians who thought opposition to migrants was a winning political strategy. On the other side stood their largely liberal and left-wing opponents, Brussels, and other proponents of liberal policies, such as the Hungarian-American ~~Jewish~~ philanthropist George Soros.

Democracy and Its Discontents: Nationalist Responses

The entry of most CEE states into the EU beginning in 2004 was a watershed for the region. It rewarded a decade and a half or more of often-painful efforts to transform the formerly communist states into free market liberal democracies that respect individual freedoms and human rights, a precondition for EU entry. It recognized the region's rightful place in "Europe" after nearly half a century of separation behind the Iron Curtain. CEE populations were overwhelmingly in favor of joining the EU and taking advantage of opportunities for travel and work. For the first time ever, much of Europe was free and undivided.

At the same time, however, EU membership loosened constraints on the behavior of parties, elites, and governments in the region. In the relationship between nationalism and democracy, EU membership brought some unforeseen changes. If liberal democracy had to gain primacy during the pre-EU accession period, then once EU membership was achieved by a large number of CEE states in the wave of the EU's Eastern Enlargement project (2004–2007), the commitment to liberal democracy weakened, and nationalism evolved and strengthened.

Democratic commitments weakened due to a confluence of factors. First, those commitments were probably never as deep as they were made to appear during the period of EU conditionality. Although all CEE states made the requisite reforms to create liberal democratic market economies, normative commitments to the resulting institutions remained weaker. Second, after accession, Brussels moved on to other problems, such as corruption, and lost interest in overseeing further political developments in the domain of minority protection beyond funding to help the Roma population. Third, even if Brussels had maintained its oversight, the penalties to CEE for deviating from liberal democracy were considerably fewer post-accession than pre-accession. The West European political elites who created and initially sustained the EU were so convinced of the superiority of liberal democracy that they neglected to incorporate a formal procedure for ejecting countries that no longer met EU standards. The penalties for deviation are not trivial; they include freezing a member state's voting privileges and withholding funds to assist economic development. But even these require unanimous approval from all the other member states. In practice, ~~the~~ EU institutions weakly enforced the democratic norms they advocated during the pre-accession period, signaling to political actors in the rest of the region that less democracy and more nationalism were in fact acceptable, so long as states maintained peace in the region.

Three international crises gave nationalists (and other opponents of liberal democracy) throughout the region further ammunition with which to advance their agendas. The first was the global financial crisis of 2008–2009, which halted several years of sustained economic growth and caused great hardship throughout the region. Mass conflation of democracy with prosperity in CEE meant that nationalists and other critics of the economic and political reforms could effectively attack incumbent politicians and claim that they had

been right all along about the dangers of adopting liberal systems. When market capitalism was introduced after 1989, mass publics in the region imagined that once the tribulations of the transition were over, their countries would eventually become as rich and democratic as Germany or Sweden. Like true believers who are mugged by reality, the financial crisis disabused people of this illusion. This made populations more open to radical solutions.

The second crisis was the mass influx of refugees fleeing conflict and hardship in the Middle East and beyond in 2015. The overwhelming majority of refugees sought asylum in Germany, Sweden, and elsewhere in Western Europe. Many CEE (and also West European) political elites nonetheless were able to instrumentalize the crisis. They encouraged popular antimigrant sentiment with inflammatory rhetoric and attempted to position themselves as defenders of "Christian national traditions" against foreign Muslim "invaders." They could do this for three reasons. First, although the migrants did not intend to stay in CEE, many traversed through it to reach their destinations. The sight of thousands of migrants crossing borders made the perceived threat concrete rather than merely theoretical. Second, the EU wanted its member states to share the burden of settling the migrants, so quotas were instituted. The obligations of CEE were relatively small (in the low thousands of migrants), but elite opposition was able to portray this as a Brussels diktat that went against the will of the people. Third, these countries had very limited experience with immigration. Migration had been a normal feature of life in the region for centuries before communism, resulting in a multiethnic demography that became forcibly altered by the violence of the Holocaust and forced population movements during and after World War II. During the communist period, these countries were sources of out-migration, a trend that accelerated after the collapse of communism. Lack of experience with immigrant integration remains a significant legacy of communism in CEE, and it makes these societies highly vulnerable to protectionist nationalism.

The third crisis is Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine. Russia's attack on a sovereign neighbor and its denial of Ukrainian nationhood have strengthened majoritarian and protective nationalism across CEE. The 2022 full-scale invasion is an extreme manifestation of the rejection of state dissolution, and the establishment of stable, sovereign, and democratic successor states, by elites in a former ethnofederation. The war against Ukraine was not the first overt Russian aggression against a post-Soviet successor state under the pretext of protecting the Russian nation and the rights of Russian-speaking "compatriots" abroad. Since President Vladimir Putin assumed power in 2000, the Russian government began to advocate and institutionalize a national myth, according to which all Russian speakers belong to one cultural nation, a "Russian world" that is under attack by "the West" and its allies in post-Soviet successor states. Putin's Russia branded itself as a defender of Russian speakers and Russia's allies in the fight against Western expansionism. Putin sent troops into Georgia in 2008 under the pretext of protecting the rights of (mostly Russian-speaking) North Ossetian and Abkhaz minorities. In 2014, Putin forcibly annexed the Crimean Peninsula, a majority Russian-speaking area within sovereign Ukrainian territory. From 2014 until the 2022 invasion, Russia supported an insurgency in areas of eastern Ukraine then inhabited primarily by Russian-speakers. In 2022, Putin's irredentism toward

Ukraine escalated into a full-scale war, framed in terms of a national myth that rejects Ukrainian nationhood and considers Ukraine an integral part of Russia.

Putin's willingness to intervene outside Russia's borders in countries that had once been part of the Soviet Union (and before that, the Russian Empire) strikes fear into the Baltic States and other CEE countries. Estonia and Latvia in particular fear that they, too, might be targeted. Their large Russian-speaking minorities acquired a heightened security dimension. The Baltic response has been to strengthen majoritarian nation-building policies under increased NATO protection. Since the Crimea annexation and especially after the full invasion of Ukraine, NATO has deployed soldiers, weapons, and other equipment in the Baltic states to deter potential Russian aggression. All three Baltic states have continued to restrict Russian-language rights and have instituted policies to limit and control the ability of Russophone minorities to gain effective political representation. These policies have been the most restrictive in Latvia, where dominant elites have demonstrated the highest degrees of "securitization" toward Russophones since the beginning of "re-independence" in the early 1990s.[21] Another consequence of Russia's irredentist war against Ukraine is the emboldening of nationalists in the Balkans who challenge the legitimacy of current state borders—including Serbian leaders who advocate for a "Serbian World," such as Aleksandar Vučić and Milorad Dodik.

Illiberal Attacks on the Democratic State

Political elites across CEE exploit the confluence of forces buffeting liberal democracy in the region—the loss of EU interest in and ability to significantly sanction undemocratic government behavior post-accession, a financial crisis that shook popular confidence in the market system and liberal democracy itself, and a refugee and migrant crisis that brought (or at least threatened to bring) thousands of foreigners into these countries. The result has been increased nationalism and democratic backsliding, though in varying degrees across the region.

The front-runners in this process have been Hungary and to a lesser extent Poland. Although in these countries there are no significant internal national minorities to target, leaders in both countries have nonetheless invoked a "threat to nation" discourse, where the "threat" is "liberalism" and its supporters, broadly understood, rather than neighboring ethnic groups. Both the Fidesz Party since 2010 in Hungary and the PiS Party from 2015–2023 in Poland have sought to overturn the hegemony of the postcommunist liberal state, which in their view has weakened national identity and thwarted the popular will. The details of their attacks on the liberal democratic state, which have put them both at odds not just with the EU and other international institutions but also with their own liberal and leftist oppositions, can be found in the Poland and Hungary country chapters. Here we focus on the nationalist component.

There are three aspects to the nationalist attack on the liberal state. One is liberalism's perceived disdain for conservative values and national traditions. Postcommunist liberal freedoms brought not just the right to speak one's mind and travel but also sexual minority

rights, wide access to abortion, and multiculturalism. These are anathema to those who seek to preserve ethnic nationhood and traditional values. For example, Fidesz and PiS are both opposed to same-sex marriage, child adoption by same-sex couples, and sexual minority rights generally. Politicians from both parties have attacked such minorities in order to win conservative votes. In Poland, where the Roman Catholic Church is a conservative bulwark, PiS and others have demonized sexual minorities as "pedophiles," "sodomites," and a "threat to the nation."[22] In Hungary, Fidesz changed the constitution to outlaw same-sex marriage and establish the family as the basis of the nation. It forbade the ability of transgender people to change the sex listed on their birth certificates. Prominent Fidesz politicians and their allies have expressed opposition to pride parades and various other ~~LGBTQIA~~ movements, have likened adoption by same-sex couples to pedophilia, and in one case openly admitted to being homophobic.

The second is liberalism's fondness for free markets, which immiserate many and ignore national borders. In the quarter century separating the collapse of communism and entry into the EU, the primacy of neoliberal economics across the political spectrum meant that macroeconomic stability came at the expense of social welfare. Governments privatized state-owned businesses, often to foreign interests, or in the case of Hungary, to parties close to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. This cronyism and concomitant corruption have led some to refer to Hungary as a "mafia state."[23] These businesses then cut their costs by throwing people out of work, thus increasing unemployment. Governments cut public services such as mass transportation and health care to balance budgets. Meanwhile, inflation has eroded the standard of living for pensioners and those in low-skilled jobs. Both Fidesz and PiS responded by intervening in the market. Fidesz has sought to regain state control over the economy by, among other things, instituting discriminatory taxes on foreign-owned businesses and restricting foreign investment in so-called strategic sectors, such as energy, finance, transportation, and agriculture. Fidesz has been zealous in regulating businesses, such as taxi service and the sale of tobacco, for the "national interest," and it favors "nation-friendly" policies such as financial incentives to boost Hungary's low birth rate. In Poland, PiS ~~has~~ sought to remedy the ills of the market system with generous welfare benefits. Poland lacks the economic cronyism of Hungary, but is no less concerned with fostering national solidarity. Policies include generous cash subsidies for families that have children and annual bonuses for pensioners, along with a promise to increase the minimum wage.

Finally, nationalists attack the liberal state by removing, or at least attempting to remove, impediments to the ability of the ruling party to implement public policy. One of the distinguishing features of the liberal state introduced after 1989 was the separation of powers. Rather than investing all political power in one institution (as had been the case under communism), reformers spread power over several institutions, such as an elected legislature, an executive branch, and especially an independent and impartial judiciary with the power to declare government actions unconstitutional. The idea, of course, was to put limits on the power of a transitory parliamentary majority or executive to implement illiberal and antidemocratic measures. All would be held accountable by a free press. These rules worked fine for Fidesz and PiS when they were out of power. Once in power, Fidesz

and PiS saw both the judiciary and the press as obstacles to achieving their illiberal policy preferences.

After its landslide victory in the 2010 national parliamentary elections, Fidesz was gifted with a supermajority in parliament, giving it the power to change even the constitution without opposition consent. The party used this power with vigor. It successfully packed the Constitutional Court with partisans and ultimately wrote and ratified a new constitution. It muzzled the opposition through administrative chicanery. It denied opposition platforms advertising and broadcasting licenses. It instituted fines for publishing "biased" news, where a Fidesz-controlled commission was charged with determining such bias. Ultimately, Fidesz-friendly outlets dominated TV, radio, and newspaper sources. In Poland, the PiS government after 2015 enjoyed an absolute majority in the parliament and sought to copy the Fidesz example by creating a "Budapest on the Vistula." However, PiS's parliamentary majority, while sufficient to pass ordinary laws, was insufficient to legally rewrite the rules of the game, as Fidesz had in Hungary. Consequently, opposition to PiS's illegal efforts to intimidate and neuter the judiciary has been more successful than opposition in Hungary. Whereas in Hungary Fidesz's changes will endure even should it lose a future election, in Poland, PiS's changes can still be undone if a different party comes to power, which occurred in 2023 in the parliament, if not in the presidency.

With the judiciary and press effectively out of the way, Fidesz set about implementing its nationalist vision, branding itself as a "savior of the nation" and a trailblazer of "illiberal democracy" in Europe. The popular appeal of exclusivist ethnic nationalism was already apparent in the strong showing of the vehemently xenophobic Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik) in the 2009 European Parliament elections, as well as in this party's increasing success among the Hungarian electorate (obtaining parliamentary seats for the first time in the 2010 elections and gaining 20 percent of the votes in 2014). A series of acts adopted by the Orbán government after 2010 codified this ethnic understanding of the nation. An amendment to the citizenship law made it easier for ethnic Hungarians living abroad to become Hungarian citizens and gain nonresident voting rights. The new Hungarian constitution adopted in 2011 included provisions that made members of Hungary's large Roma minority more vulnerable to discrimination. After 2015, the government successfully instrumentalized the refugee and migrant crisis to brand itself as the defender of the nation and of European Christianity. In the same spirit, a set of laws adopted in 2017 undermined those nongovernmental organizations and institutions that represent and encourage critical attitudes about ethnic exclusivism and populist nationalism (e.g., the Central European University of Budapest and human rights nongovernmental organizations).[24]

Notwithstanding the close relationship between nationalism and democratic backsliding in Hungary and Poland, nationalism is neither a necessary nor sufficient cause of such backsliding. In Slovakia and the Baltic states, for example, restrictive minority policies continued (actually worsening in the case of Slovakia[25]) after EU accession, but no nationalist party has achieved the electoral success of Fidesz in Hungary or PiS in Poland, and there has been less of a challenge to the liberal democratic state. In the Czech Republic,

Photo 4.3. Thousands protested in Budapest on April 12, 2017, against legislation targeting civil society organizations and the Central European University. Demonstrators on Heroes' Square formed a heart around the word "civil," signaling the centrality of nongovernmental actors in protecting democracy. Drone Media Studio, Shutterstock.

on the other hand, there was a notable centralization of power under President Andrej Babiš, but without an accompanying discourse on Czech nationalism.

Conclusion: Continuing Tensions Between Nationalism and Democratic Governance

The contemporary political map of CEE was significantly changed through postwar rearrangements involving shifts in state borders and ethnic hierarchies. CEE societies have lived under externally designed regimes that were either imposed (as was communist one-party rule) or adopted by local elites (as was liberal capitalism after 1990). Along the way, competing national aspirations emerged as powerful sources of political mobilization. It was against this backdrop that the end of state socialism triggered the collapse of ethnonational federations and that postcommunist states institutionalized ethnic nation-building. Contrary to the situation after World War II, however, post-1990 international norms did not allow for the physical removal of ethnic "others." Instead, the EU developed an Eastern Enlargement project to incentivize CEE governments to democratize and adopt inclusive policies toward minorities. In exchange for adopting liberal democracy

and tamping down majoritarian and protectionist nationalism, CEE countries could enjoy membership in a union where borders were increasingly meaningless and opportunities for prosperity abounded.

Thirty years after the beginning of historic state and regime transformations, the unrealized hopes of liberal democracy and EU integration make CEE societies vulnerable to political entrepreneurs who use ethnic nationalism to reinforce insecurities and weaken resistance to authoritarian rule. Developments across Europe in the 2010s, such as the strengthening of racist and nativist discourse; ethnic justifications behind Russia's annexation of Crimea, support for secessionists in eastern Ukraine, and the full scale invasion of 2022; the securitization of the presence of Russophones in the Baltic states; and the xenophobic nationalism used by populist political leaders that "lead" democratic backsliding in countries that were former front-runners of democratization are among the most conspicuous manifestations of the way the politics of ethnic demography can undermine democratic governance.

Support for the EU remains strong, and formal democratic structures are in place in much of CEE, but their meanings and applications vary across the region. Moreover, understandings about the scope of democracy diverge within states, in some cases creating deep political cleavages that weaken societies. In many countries, there is backsliding on policies of cultural pluralism and minority accommodation, which has been an important indicator of democratic government in the EU framework. As elsewhere, minority policies in CEE reflect national majorities' support for cultural pluralism, which depends greatly on their sense of security about national sovereignty. Russia's shift to irredentism against Ukraine beginning in 2014 heightened those insecurities in many countries. As we discussed, dominant political actors in several state centers have addressed insecurities by adopting policies of majority cultural dominance, justifying them as necessary for strengthening national unity against internal and external enemies.

Moving forward, the challenge for people in CEE is to build more broadly legitimate forms of democracy that can generate interethnic solidarity and strengthen the sphere of social organizations that can help to hold governments accountable, while also accommodating the complex matrix of nation-building aspirations that characterize this ethnically diverse region.

Study Questions

1. Explain the "Janus-faced" character of nationalism and the way it has influenced postcommunist democratic development in Central and East European countries. In what ways can we say that nation-building policies have been both forward looking and, at the same time, turned to the past?
2. Bearing in mind the significance of preexisting institutions, national composition, and the choices made by political elites, what seems to set apart the violent ethnic

politics of the former Yugoslavia from the largely peaceful evolution of majority-minority conflicts in the rest of Central and East Europe?

3. Most ethnic minorities in Central and East Europe have kin-states in the region, and most governments have enacted legislation to extend various kinds of benefits to ethnic kin living abroad. Discuss the reasons why trans-sovereign nationalism led by kin states is controversial in this region and how it affects the evolution of democratic government and European integration.
4. Democratization and entry into the European Union were supposed to decrease the salience of nationalist competition in Central and East Europe, yet they seem to have had the opposite effect in some countries. What explains this apparent paradox?
5. Liberal democratic backsliding is occurring in many Central and East European countries, but the hardest hit are Hungary and Poland, two relatively prosperous countries that were at the forefront of market and democratic reform in the years after the collapse of communism. How does nationalism figure into this puzzling outcome?

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21 Jennie L. Schulze, *Strategic Frames: Europe, Russia, and Minority Inclusion in Estonia and Latvia* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018); Zsuzsa Csergő, Kristina Kallas, and Tamás Kiss, "Kin-State Intervention and the Securitization-Minority Policy Nexus: Hungarians and Russian-Speakers in Central and Eastern Europe," *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 10 no. 1 (2025). https://academic.oup.com/jogss/article/10/1/ogae035/7848762.
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23 See Bálint Magyar, *Post-Communist Mafia State: The Case of Hungary* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016).
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25 A 2009 language law in Slovakia is interpreted by its opponents as seeking to relegate Hungarian and other minority languages to the private sphere. It concerned the ethnic Hungarian community and caused tensions between Bratislava and Budapest.

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Websites

The Association for the Study of Nationalities: https://nationalities.org/virtual-asn
Freedom House: https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit