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Nicholas Hayes

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, [nhayes@csbsju.edu](mailto:nhayes@csbsju.edu)*

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# MINNPOST

## In Ukraine, both sides go feral

By **Nick Hayes** | 03/05/14



REUTERS/Alexei Druzhinin/RIA Novosti/Kremlin

Russian President Vladimir Putin chairing a Russian government meeting in the Novo-Ogaryovo residence outside Moscow on Wednesday.

**SARAJEVO, Bosnia-Herzegovina** — As the crisis in Ukraine has unfolded, I have followed the events from a city that knows the price of ethnic and nationalist conflict in post-Cold War Eastern Europe — Sarajevo.

This town lives in the past. From its perspective, the media coverage of events in Ukraine and Russia read like a familiar script: Well-armed, uniformed and “volunteer” militias appear on the scene to defend national compatriots who have found themselves in the post-Cold War era suddenly a threatened minority within the boundaries of a new country. A powerful protector across the border vows that it will protect its own. Nationalist fervor inflames the media coverage. A war looms.

A similar script played out in Bosnia more than 20 years ago. This week, a small cast of characters left over from the Bosnian version have come out as among the few international supporters of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s tactics in Ukraine. On Monday, Serbs mounted a demonstration in support

of the Russians in the western Bosnian city of Banja Luka. Its population today is a product of Serbian sponsored ethnic cleansing in the 1990s that changed this once ethnically diverse city into a virtually all-Serbian enclave. The demonstrators picked up the rhetoric of Russian demonstrators in the Crimea pledging to fight “the continuation of Nazi policies in Ukraine.” Similar demonstrations are planned for Belgrade and Montenegro.

In the Ukrainian crisis today, both sides have gone feral.

## Key law revoked

The new government in Kiev acts as if it wants to feed the testosterone of Russian nationalism. Kiev has pleaded for NATO intervention and promised to take steps to accelerate its eventual membership in the alliance. Despite criticism from EU nations, the new government has revoked a crucially important law that allowed for the use of both Ukrainian and Russian as official languages and was indispensable to ethnic peace in the Russian-speaking regions of eastern Ukraine.

Above all else, the leadership in Kiev has failed to distance itself from its former allies in the street demonstrations among the ultra-right nationalists and, especially, the neo-Nazi Svoboda (Freedom) Party. The fourth largest party in the country, Svoboda has marched with banners in praise of Stepan Bandera (1909-59), a Nazi collaborator in WWII, and laced its public rhetoric with anti-Semitism, discrimination against the Roma and threats of violence.

## Putin's conduct

Putin's conduct seems to demonstrate the truth of his remark in 2006 that “there is no such thing as a former KGB agent.” In his press conference Tuesday, he still insists that the heavily armed and uniformed militia in Crimea are only local “volunteers,” not Russian troops. His justification for the intervention — that he was responding to a written request by ousted Ukrainian President Anatoly Yanukovich for Russian military intervention — invites comparisons to Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev's rationale for the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

Although Putin continues to refer to Yanukovich as the “legitimate” president of Ukraine, the Russian president in Tuesday's press conference appeared to have thrown him under the bus of political expediency. As **Roger Cohen pointed out in a commentary** for The New York Times, the most effective argument against Putin's actions in Ukraine would be to quote back to him his own words that he published last September in The Times: “preserving law and order in today's complex and turbulent world is one of the few ways to keep international relations from sliding into chaos.”

The media and punditry ridiculed an earlier U.S. president for offering what in retrospect was very

prudent advice. Speaking in Kiev on Aug. 1, 1991 — the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union — President George H. W. Bush warned of the dangers of “suicidal nationalism.” Within a year, the wars of the former Yugoslavia validated his warning of what dangers lay ahead in in post-Cold War Eastern Europe.

Kiev and Moscow are indulging today in nationalist rhetoric that sounds unnervingly similar to the build-up to the tragic Balkan conflict of the 1990s.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



#### **Nick Hayes**

Nick Hayes is a professor of history who holds the university chair in critical thinking at Saint John's University in Collegeville, Minn.

MinnPost | 900 6th Avenue SE | Minneapolis, MN 55414 | 612.455.6950

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