

Vassilis Petsinis

Echoes of the War in Ukraine: Political Ramifications in the Baltics and the Balkans

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Vassilis Petsinis' newest monograph, published by Palgrave Macmillan in late 2025, is a most welcome addition to the literature on the Balkans and the Baltics, addressing political developments and ramifications in both regions following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Petsinis is a well-established author in the field of area studies, focusing predominantly on ethno-nationalist politics, and has previously published another monograph with Palgrave on cross-regional ethnopolitics in Central and Eastern Europe, comparing the Western Balkans with the Baltic region. Petsinis' latest volume is a continuation of his exploration of this topic, though

in a somewhat different fashion. Hence, his newest book on the political implications of the Russian invasion is partly based on his cross-regional ethnopolitics research, with the author establishing a link to his previous work by focusing on the nexus of ethnonationalist agendas and largely right-wing politics in a changed geopolitical setting.

The volume reads very well, with the text structured into six sections (chapters) followed by an index. Each section comprises several sub-sections (sub-chapters), with the first chapter dedicated to introductory remarks, theoretical and methodological considerations (whereby the author discusses

the rationale behind his case selection), and chapter outlines (where each of the sections to follow is shortly introduced). As Petsinis himself claimed, his work:

aims at relaxing the barriers that exist between researchers and policymaking experts working on different parts of Central and Eastern Europe (in this case, the Baltic States and Southeastern Europe). The ramifications of the war in Ukraine may qualitatively differ from one country to the other and have been highly subject to the domestic specificities inside diverse political contexts. (p. 5)

Indeed, his volume lives up to this claim, filling an important research gap by examining the domestic political arenas of four different states, comparing political actors (parties) and contexts to provide an up-to-date picture of the exact domestic impacts of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In the very beginning of his piece, Petsinis outlines the specificities of the regions he tends to, providing a sound methodological foundation for his analysis. Hence, he focuses on the societies with ‘societal cleavages along ethnic lines’ (see page 7), such as Latvia and Estonia, and, on the other hand, those, such as Serbia and Croatia, with nationalist agendas and ‘various brands of Euroscepticism’ (see page 8). Therefore, his focus is on various ethno-nationalist agendas that have conditioned domestic actors’ responses to the Russia-Ukraine war.

The second chapter of the volume presents the author’s overview of the existing literature, listing the scholarship he engages with. This part of the

volume, very much like his previous work with Palgrave, is a well-written and meticulously researched one, as the author explores different theoretical perspectives, enabling him to support his empirical analysis. Therefore, he draws on the literature on nativism, ethnonationalism, and ethnopolitics as reference points for his analytical stance (see pages 19–21). More than that, he engages with the scholarship on Occidentalism and Euroscepticism, addressing various forms of political opposition to EU membership and linking them, in a broader sense, to right-wing political actors and their ideology (see pages 19–21). Most importantly, the author delves into a conceptual dissection of the terms he uses, showing how multifaceted they are. Hence, he speaks of (see page 34) ‘the broader right, thus paying attention to political origins, evolutionary trajectories, and patterns of active engagement alongside ideology. The boundaries inside this scheme are not fixed, but ‘porous’ and malleable’. It is in this way that Petsinis can correctly identify specific characteristics and changing patterns in the behavior of the political actors in question (i.e. right-wing parties) when considering the local contexts they operate in.

In chapter three, the author discusses Latvia and Estonia, both formerly republics of the Soviet Union and both facing the reality that the Russian state is militarily engaged in Ukraine, which poses a (potential) threat to the Baltic republics, which have been in the EU since 2004. Petsinis focuses on the National Alliance (NA), a Latvian party, and the Estonian Conservative People’s Party (EKRE), a national conservative

party. While NA has become much less anti-systemic over the years, having additionally participated in several government coalitions (which has made it a somewhat typical party of the national conservative right), EKRE has refused to compromise, and, despite a comparatively short spell in a government coalition a few years back, it remained a staunchly anti-establishment party and thus the prime example of a political actor that belongs to the radical right. While comparing these parties to their European counterparts, Petsinis manages to show a peculiarity of sorts, claiming that (see page 71) ‘the internal boundaries within the European “broader right” are, in practice, rather porous and malleable’. Moreover, he transcends the domestic context to underscore the parties’:

vivid preference for ‘global unipolarity’. In other words, the two parties adopted pro-Atlantic stances that revolved around the preponderant status of the US and NATO in the international system as a bulwark against any security threats emanating from Russia. This differentiated EKRE and NA from other parties of the European ‘broader right’ (e.g. FIDESZ, RN, and AfD) and their occasional quests for ‘alternative’ partners in global politics (e.g. Russia) throughout the last decade. Since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, NA appears to insist on NATO’s preponderance as an external provider of regional security for the Baltic States. Meanwhile, EKRE’s adoption of a ‘pro-peace’ platform on the war in Ukraine, as largely

dictated by its anti-establishment and sovereigntist prerogatives, hints, if just implicitly, at a potential change of course regarding the party’s ‘Atlantic-based’ understanding of regional security. (p. 72)

It is in chapter four that the author addresses the case of Croatia, showing how the Yugoslav past and the break-up of Yugoslavia continue to influence and shape the present (right-wing) political spectrum. In that respect, Petsinis analyzes the national conservative party, the Homeland Movement (*Domovinski Pokret*, DP), formed in early 2020 and remaining one of the largest Croatian parties, and its (contentious) relationship to the rest of the right-wing political spectrum in the country. He manages to show how:

several political actors from the Croatian ‘broader right’ sought to draw linkages between the war in Ukraine and the *Domovinski Rat* of the 1990s. Among the older parties of the radical and extreme right, HSP, HČSP, and A-HSP converged along their unconditional support for Ukraine, whereas HSP 1861 prioritized its geopolitical opposition to NATO. (p. 107)

More than that, he speaks of DP having (see page 107) somewhat ‘halted its initial “pro-Ukraine enthusiasm”—including any discursive parallels with the legacies of the “Homeland War”—and firmly shifted towards a sovereigntist direction’. While doing so, he argues that DP ideologically draws on the Yugoslav past, centering on the dissolution of

Yugoslavia and the ‘Homeland War’ of the 1990s. Additionally, he underscores the politics of identity and memory as the main ideological pillars of this right-wing party, which maintains a largely anti-systemic and nationalist stance. This makes the author mention the peculiarity of the Croatian right-wing politics, whose main trait is a specific:

ethno-nationalist matrix with an emphasis on national survival (i.e. the increase of ethnically Croatian birth-rates and the revitalization of the countryside as the symbolic *heimat* of national culture and traditions). As it has been the case with several parties of the ‘broader right’ across Europe, DP’s soft (revisionist and reformist) Eurosceptic platform comprises both a political (sovereigntism and opposition to Eurofederalism) and a socio-cultural (an adamant conviction that Europe must return to its ‘Christian cultural foundations’) component. (pp. 105–106)

Chapter five is where the author continues to deal with the Yugoslav context, focusing on the biggest and most powerful political party in Serbia, Srpska Napredna Stranka (Serbian Progressive Party, SNS), as well as (usually much smaller) political actors of the broader right and their (at times highly antagonistic) relationship to the ruling party. When dealing with the actors of the national conservative, radical right, and/or extreme right over the response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the author argues that:

the mass demonstrations in support of Russia started losing their momentum since the second half of 2023. Moreover, there are no indications that, in the long run, the forces of the radical and extreme right succeeded in maintaining, or augmenting, their public appeal vis-à-vis the SNS-led government either. (p. 148)

Petsinis accurately underlines:

that the war in Ukraine provided the political forces of Serbia’s ‘broader right’ with a temporary ‘common ground’ but not a long-term opportunity structure vis-à-vis the ruling SNS. As it becomes transparent, Russophilia, as a political and public phenomenon in contemporary Serbia, is multifaceted and comprises a political/geopolitical as well as a sociocultural/sociopsychological component. Along these premises, pro-Russian trends in the Serbian politics and society can operate through both a clerical/religious and a secular façade. (p. 151)

In doing so, he claimed that the contemporary Serbian right-wing political spectrum is shaped by Russophilia that is far from a uniform one, for pro-Russian political agendas of, among others, Srpska Radikalna Stranka (Serbian Radical Party, SRS), *Obraz* (Honour), *Srpska Akcija* (Serbian Action), *Naši* (Ours), and *Nacionalno-Demokratska Alternativa* (National-Democratic Alternative), are situation-dependent and fluctuating, being, as the author argued on page 152, ‘highly subject to catalysts such as ideology, the patterns

of engagement among diverse political actors, and the (unpredictable) impact of new groundbreaking developments in domestic politics’.

In chapter six, Petsinis concludes his case by listing the most important findings of his research and highlighting the changes to identity politics that have occurred globally in the post-Ukraine invasion context. He also points to the increased relevance of the pragmatic stance, which often leads the parties of the ‘broader right’ to enter coalitions that serve their current interests rather than their ideological agenda. This makes the author call for more research on these parties and their transformation in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Israel’s military engagement in the Middle East. In addition, he speaks of the need to conduct more research on other political actors’ responses (for instance, left-wing parties), analyzing their attitudes to the changing international environment, where geopolitical considerations based

on various forms of Euroscepticism, Occidentalism, and conservatism appear to trump everything else.

This volume comes at the right time, discussing a highly topical issue. It is written in a language that allows even those not accustomed to political literature to understand the complexities of the problem at hand; hence, it is open to a much wider audience than one might assume at face value. The volume should be regarded as a timely piece that does more than address domestic political ramifications of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in the selected regions, exploring the links to the studies of ethnopolitics, populism, conservatism, behavior of (major) political parties, and subtle nuances of the right-wing politics. In that regard, the book occupies an important position at the intersection of several strains of academic scholarship, and both university students and policy-makers may find it equally useful.

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