

Fighting the Wrong War | Opinion

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Ukraine will be on the agenda when President [Joe Biden](#) and Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#) meet in Switzerland this week.

Ukraine's security got a boost last month when U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken reaffirmed America's unwavering support for Kyiv's sovereignty. But instead of capitalizing on the U.S. endorsement and strengthening the Ukrainian government's position at home, Kyiv is playing into Putin's hands by implementing discriminatory policies against its own loyal ethnic minority citizens. In so doing, Ukraine risks alienating its closest NATO allies in the region just as it needs them the most.

After the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Ukraine remains under threat. The country is de facto at war with the Kremlin and Russian separatist auxiliaries active within Ukraine, seeking to absorb the country's east and its industrial heartland, Donbas, into Russia.

Negotiating a closer partnership with NATO is in Ukraine's vital interest. It follows that Ukraine should maintain strong ties with NATO members, especially its most natural partners and neighbors, such as Hungary, Poland, or Bulgaria, all of whom experienced Russian expansionism and occupation first-hand and understand Kremlin's threat to Ukraine's sovereignty.

Instead, Ukraine is fighting the wrong war—harassing national minorities and infringing on their rights while it is the Russian-speaking separatists who pose a threat and are the intended target of Kyiv's new anti-minority policies.

In 2017, the Ukrainian Parliament passed a law limiting ethnic minorities' right to use their native language in schools beyond the fourth grade. Two years later, the State Language Law established Ukrainian as the official language; consequently, minority languages, with a few exceptions, are limited to private communication or religious services. A campaign of intimidation against minority groups further exacerbated the situation.



A woman walks past a wall painted in the colors of the Ukrainian flag in Kyiv, on April 20, 2019. SERGEI GAPON/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

In a bid to tackle Russian influence in eastern Ukraine, Kyiv cracked down on the rights of all ethnic minorities through legislative means, targeting Bulgarians, Greeks, Hungarians, Poles and Romanians, all loyal to Ukraine. Consequently, several central European NATO members protested against the new discriminatory laws.

The strongest reaction came from Hungary—primarily protecting the interests of some 150,000 ethnic Hungarians in western Ukraine—deciding to block top-level political talks between NATO and Kyiv until minority rights are restored. In response, Hungary was accused by foreign policy experts of helping Putin undermine NATO's unity and blocking Ukraine's integration with the West.

But it is Ukraine, not Hungary, that is inadvertently advancing Putin's plans by imposing discriminatory laws on ethnic minorities. Kyiv achieves the result that Russia wants: keeping tensions high, staging provocations and dividing Ukrainians along ethnic lines. As revealed by the Security Service of Ukraine in mid-May, the latest anti-Hungarian provocations in Transcarpathia were ordered by Russian provocateurs, not by Ukrainian nationalists.

The Biden administration is turning a blind eye and trivializing minority rights issues in eastern Europe, even though Russia has a history of using ethnic minorities to excuse territorial aggression and conquest. When Biden served as vice president, Russia annexed Crimea. Eastern Ukraine seems next.

But Ukraine isn't helping. By violating the rights of all minorities, it is alienating virtually every NATO member who joined the alliance after the fall of communism in Europe. It is also undermining its own moral case for sovereignty—free Ukraine does not protect the rights of minorities so how can Ukraine ask Western support for its sovereignty when it denies its own citizens their rights?

It is up to Ukraine to solve this contradiction by ending its discriminatory policies. The Ukrainian parliament could amend existing legislation exempting from the scope of the law any official languages of the European Union. This would be welcomed by Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Poland and Romania, while it would still allow Ukraine to protect itself against Russian influence.

The enemy is at the gates—and it will remain, looking for new territories to conquer. For Ukraine, it should be a time of national unity, not of tribal division. Kyiv should start focusing on the real threat in the East—Russia—and the backing of the entire NATO alliance for its continued independence.

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The views expressed in this article are the writer's own.