This paper is connected to a collection of essays on nation building in the 15 post-soviet states that I am editing for Cambridge University Press with Ray Taras. Initially we assumed that in the 25 years since they achieved independence the “nationalizing state” (Brubaker 1996) was at work, filling those Soviet-crafted territories with new national content.

However, while there has been some conventional nation-building in language policy, citizenship laws, and the symbolic trappings of nationhood, it is clear that the nations being “built” are hybrid, fluid entities with multiple dimensions and multiple interpretations. Each country is struggling to insert itself into various, often competing international alliances and influences, and have ambiguous and unresolved relationships with their Soviet past. They face heterogeneous populations, and are uncertain how to deal with ethnic minorities within their borders – assimilate, tolerate, ignore, expel, etc. Many of them try to marry their national project with the European project.

Migration and fear of demographic decline are an important common theme.

State-building is more important than nation-building in most of these countries. On the spectrum of approaches towards nationalism, instrumentalism seems the most relevant. In most cases ruling elites have captured the nation-building process and use it to mobilize support and build loyalty. These campaigns tend to be sporadic and event-driven, an example of what Hutchinson (2005) calls “episodic” nationalism. Hence we are not seeing nation-building so much as identity management and regime maintenance.