

The Making of a Nation-state: Unification of National Identity in Post Independent Ukraine

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Abstract: The paper explicates the hard-won unity of Ukrainian national identity. Contrary to the concerted determination that Ukrainians displayed in the war with Russia, Ukrainian's national identity was fragmented in most of its post-independent history. It reviewed a wide range of polls, surveys, and literature in history and Ukrainian politics with special focus on the different critical moments of identity change in post-independent Ukraine. The paper found that Ukrainians and Russophones living in this country used to have divergent national imaginations from Ukraine's independence to the Euromaidan revolution in 2014. However, Russia's assertive policy to Ukraine, including the annexation of Crimea and support to the Civil War in Donbas since 2014, drove Ukrainians of all linguistic and cultural backgrounds to gradually put down their divisions and unify again as a nation-state. The identity unification finally completed in the Russo-Ukrainian war that Ukrainian became the predominant national identity of all groups in this country.

Keywords: Ukraine, Russia, identity, nationalism

1. Introduction

It has been over one year since the outbreak of the arduous Russo-Ukrainian war. To many commentators supervise, the asymmetric military and economic strength between the two nations did not lead to an immediate victory of Russia. Nor did Ukrainians, as Putin may expect, resonate with Russia's "denazification" mission, abandon their country "entirely and fully created by Russia", and reembrace the connections between Russian and Ukrainian nations broken in 1991 [1]. While some may ascribe Ukraine's resilience to the unified arm and material support from the West, it is untenable that Ukrainian could withstand the full-scale invasion of Russia without high morale based on a unified sense of identity to the nation and concerted determination to preserve their country. Their determinations are so strong and deeply-rooted that, even in the bleakest time of the war, over eighty percent of Ukrainians believed they could win the war, and three-quarters of them oppose any territorial concession [2].

This article will discuss the question about the now unified Ukrainian national identity, which they overwhelmingly considered prior to any other identities, and as the source of their resistance to Russia's aggression. It will focus on post-independent Ukraine, namely after 1991, when Ukraine gained independence from the former Soviet Union. The article will show that, contrary to the retrospective belief that an extraordinarily unified Ukrainian identity has been shared by most of its citizens for long, the unification of national identity in Ukraine went through a sluggish and arduous

process. Ukraine's hardship in forming a unified national identity could also have reference value to other countries that are struggling for nation-building and torn up by identity politics.

2. Ukrainian Nationalism Before Independence

Ernest Gellner in his renowned work *Nation and Nationalism* defined nationalism as “primarily a political principle which hold the political and national unit should be congruent” [3]. In short, in Gellner's view, the political objective that nationalists shall pursue can be summarized as “one nation, one country”. The primary role of the country, as a political unit, is to uphold and advance the will of the nation it represents. Although some critiques pointed out that Gellner's definition is too narrow that excludes the space for more pluralistic and value-based civic nationalism, the paper's subsequent discussion will use his definition as references [4]. It is because the “one nation, one country” definition fits Ukraine's context quite well as it can explicate the nature of Ukrainian nationalist sentiment on the one hand and the tremendous obstacles it faced in the past to construct Ukraine as a nation-state.

From a historical perspective, Ukrainian nationalism is neither a fabricated myth nor a deliberate product by Russians, as Putin argued. Like many other nationalism variations in Eastern Europe and even the world, it has deep cultural and social base and was then rediscovered by nationalist intellectuals and activists in the 19th and 20th centuries [5]. The rediscovering process involved various cultural symbols, well-designed historical narratives, and was reinforced by arts and literature products from nationalists [6]. In Ukraine's context, her early nationalists stressed Ukrainians' Cossack origin, unique language, traditions, and shared experience of suffering under empirical forces nearby, like Poland, Lithuania, Hungary, and Russia [5]. All the regional powers mentioned have been regarded as “the other” of Ukraine at different historical stages whose influence should be eliminated. Therefore, the Ukrainian nationalist movement has been popular and widely circulated far before it became an independent country in 1991 [5].

3. Dilemma of Identity: Ukraine at the Crossroad (1991-2014)

However, for Ukrainian nationalists, their mission of establishing a purified Ukrainian nation with the same language, culture, and most importantly, identity was yet to fulfill even when Ukraine successfully seceded from the Soviet Union on August 24, 1991. To their chagrin, a unified identity did not appear automatically with the establishment of the country. Many ethnic Russian migrants immigrated to Ukrainian current territory during more than 70 years of Soviet rule, constituting more than twenty percent of the Ukrainian overall population [7]. Besides, the Ukrainian language, which now became the official language of this country, was discouraged, and excluded from the textbooks of the Soviet era, while Russian language was promoted by authorities as a necessity for educated people [5]. As a result, nearly half of the Ukrainian population were Russophones, including many who are ethnically Ukrainian. Demographically, the ethnic Russians and Russophone population concentrated in Eastern and Southern Ukraine while, Ukrainian speakers constituted an overwhelming majority of the population in Western and Central Ukraine [7].

The divergence of ethnicity and language soon became the source of division as Ukrainian and Russian linguistic groups found it hard to reconcile their imaginations to the country. For Ukrainians, Russia was “the other” of their national imagination that historically brutally ruled Ukraine, ruthlessly repressed their expression of Ukrainian identity, and forcefully assimilated Ukrainians into their empirical aspiration [8]. On the other hand, Russophones' imagination is quite different. Many of them have warm feelings for the Soviet Union, have a lukewarm impression of the newly established Ukraine, and regard themselves as being alienated by the rising nationalism [7,8].

As a result of the divergent imagination, Ukraine found itself in an ambiguous position between Russia and the West. After the Cold War ended, Eastern European countries that used to live under the power shadow of the Soviet Union began to embrace the West and abandon weakened Russia [9]. Both European Union and NATO expanded eastward in at unprecedented speed that provided a lucrative alternative power balance for Ukrainians other than Russia. Western Ukrainians, who are the most nationalist group of the Ukrainian population, considered it a natural choice for their country, indisputably as part of Europe in history and identity, to join the EU and NATO and leave away from Russia's power circle. However, Russophone Ukrainians were suspected of the options [9]. From their perspective, the bond between Ukraine and Russia, in all aspects, from culture and language to politics and economy, was unbroken even though the Soviet Union no longer existed [7,8]. Therefore, they vehemently opposed Ukraine to embrace the West and instead advocated for advancing connections with Russia.

Time did not cure the division but only made it bitterer. After the presidency of Leonid Kravchuk and Leonid Kuchma, who attempted but then failed to deliver economic reform, alleviate identity conflicts, and find an appropriate position for Ukraine internationally, identity division became the pivotal issue on Ukrainian political stage. Multiple studies have revealed the intricacy and bitterness of this issue. Until 2006, 13 percent of Ukrainians still believed they were citizens of the former USSR, a country that has disappeared for 15 years; 43 percent of respondents (mostly Russophones) believed they were primarily a citizen of their living regions instead of Ukraine, while only 41 percent of people considered themselves as Ukrainian citizens above all [7]. Furthermore, Andrew Wilson found that over 27 percent of Ukrainians were dual identity, namely thought of themselves as both Russian and Ukrainian, and over 50 percent of respondents were nostalgic about the Soviet Union, considered its dissolution as either a great misfortune or an unnatural break in Eastern Slavic people's unity [10].

The crisis first broke out in 2004 when Viktor Yanukovych, a pro-Russian political figure of the Party of Region, declared himself as the victor of the presidential election. Opposition parties, whose bases were in Western and Central Ukraine, accused the election of being rigged with rampant voting fraud and refused to concede. Then a massive social movement broke out calling for fair elections and anti-corruption and finally pushed the court to nullify the election result [11]. The opposition candidate, Yushchenko, won the election in the re-run. However, the new pro-West government soon failed into corruption and internal conflict crises. Yanukovych then ran again in the 2010 presidential election and claimed victory. It is noticeable that he could only win by getting over 80 percent of the vote in Donetsk and Luhansk (known as Donbas region) and Crimea Oblast, while merely getting less than 10 percent of the vote in some oblasts of Western Ukraine [12].

During his presidency, Yanukovych was increasingly criticized for his pro-Russia stance and authoritarian behavior. The anguish of Ukrainians finally erupted when Yanukovych suddenly declared he would no longer sign an association agreement with the EU but instead accepted a trade deal from Russia. Pro-EU and anti-Yanukovych protests, later known as Euromaidan, erupted everywhere in Ukraine, mainly in the Central and Western regions [11]. Yanukovych then ordered the police to squelch protesters in Independence Square of Kyiv with harsh measures. The ignited Ukrainian nationalists then turned to more violent means to fight against Yanukovych regime, and the parliament also gradually withdrew its support to the president [11]. The bloodiest clash occurred on February 20th, 2014, when nearly 100 protesters were killed in police actions dealing with the subsequent protests. Even though, Yanukovych still enjoyed much support from Southern and Eastern regions and many anti-protests held by Russophones erupted. At the zenith of the conflict, Yanukovych finally agreed to sign a deal with the opposition but then fled to Russia [11].

4. Unification of Identity: The Belated Rebirth of a Nation-state (2014-2022)

Although Ukrainian nationalists reached their goal of overthrowing Yanukovich regime, what did not achieve in Euromaidan protest was the reconciliation of national identity. At the late stage of Euromaidan, public opinions on the legitimacy of this movement were still very split: a vast majority of Central and Western Ukrainians supported the protest, while a similarly vast majority of Russophones in Eastern and Southern Ukraine did not support that [13]. Violent counter-protests in Southern and Eastern regions was another sign that Ukrainians and Russophones were still far from reaching an agreement on their imagination of Ukraine, especially whether it should be sided with Russia or with the West [13]. However, the climax of the identity conflict was also the beginning of reconciliation, but it was not because Russophones had been more willing to accept Ukrainians' idea of closer connections with Europe and the West. Instead, the reconciliation started from Russia's assertiveness.

Russia's strategy, as widely agreed by scholars, was to make use of identity cleavages of Ukraine to prevent it from reorienting to the West. Some arguments even pushed forward and argued that Russia aimed to make sure Ukraine would remain its own sphere of influence. After Yanukovich fled from Ukraine and then got removed from his post, Russia decided to intervene. It first condemned the removal of Yanukovich as an illegitimate coup, then dispatched forces to seize control of strategic sites of Crimea, and formally annexed Crimea into the Russia Federation on March 16 [14]. Meanwhile, militant groups in the Donbas region also started to rebel against the new government in Kyiv. Russia initially denied its involvement, but more evidence proved that it actively supported rebels in that region both in material and propaganda [14].

The political crisis, Russian annexation of Crimea, and War in Donbas became the turning point of national reconciliation. For Ukrainian nationalists, Russia's assertiveness only reinforced their belief that Russia has always been "the other" of the Ukrainian nation, but for many Russophone Ukrainians, it was the starting point when they turned back to Russia and reexamined their identity. A survey conducted immediately after the Russia-backed referendum in Crimea found that nearly 70 percent of Ukrainians rejected the referendum's legitimacy. The most noticeable part of the survey is that a plurality of respondents living in Southern regions also joined the vast majority of Middle and Western Ukrainians in opposing Russia's annexation [15]. Moreover, a clear majority of respondents in Eastern and Southern Ukraine rejected Russia's claim that its troop advanced to Ukrainian territory in order to protect Russian-speaking citizens [15]. For many Russian-speaking Ukrainians who used to have a positive on Russia and even be nostalgic for the Soviet Union, Russia's increasing assertiveness could be a reminder to them that they must make a choice between two sides. Although they may share the similar language and part of the culture with Russians in the Soviet era, but now they are under two nation states with divergent interests and ambitions. While an increasingly aggressive Russia seemed no longer possible to be the country that saved their nostalgia, Russian-speaking Ukrainians were then more willing to rethink their identity and reconsider their position in a unified Ukrainian nation based on that.

Moreover, as a result of Euromaidan, Yanukovich's abrupt flee, and Russia's military intervention, the political spectrum of Ukraine underwent major changes. Pro-Russia forces, led by Yanukovich's Party of Regions, lost much ground and dissolved into several small parties [16]. The fragmented pro-Russian oppositions since then virtually lost the capacity of mass mobilization based on exploiting the identity division of Ukrainians and Russophones, as their loyalty was increasingly questioned amid the deteriorating conflict between Ukraine and Russia. In the 2019 Presidential election, pro-Russia candidates did not advance to the runoff for the first time in Ukrainian history, while the incumbent president Zelensky managed to win a majority of votes in Southern and Eastern Ukraine [17]. The new nationalist and pro-European government then enjoyed the capacity to

implement all measures that could consolidate Ukrainian identity and exclude Russia's influence, like the mandatory enforcement of Ukrainian speaking in all levels of government and educational institutions [14].

Finally, as nation and identity building require symbols and martyrs as the source of unity, the prolonged war in Donbas could play that role [6]. Unlike the previous internal conflicts that were always associated with mobilization in the Ukrainian community and counter-mobilization in the Russophone community, War in Donbas involved both emotionally and materially with almost all Ukrainian nationals. As Russia has clearly manifested its intention to Ukraine by supporting rebels, those who fought in this war were widely respected and seen as national heroes instead of martyrs of a certain ethno-linguistic group. Meanwhile, the conflict also forced Ukraine to come closer to the West and EU and further away from Russia. For many Russian-speaking Ukrainians, as their imagination of a connected Ukraine and Russia was no longer sustainable due to the change of political situation, they turned to embrace reconciliation and adopting Ukrainian identity, and be more willing to develop a sense of community with fellow Ukrainians based on reality instead of Russians based on the nostalgia to the USSR.

5. Final: A Consolidated Nation-state on the War's Debris

The re-orientation of Russophone Ukrainian's identity became clear when Russia launched a full-scale invasion to Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Contrary to Russia's expectation, Ukraine has been a highly consolidated nation-state instead of a fragmented fragile country in the 2000s and early 2010s. It was evidenced in multiple studies that the belief that Ukraine could win the war was overwhelming in all regions, linguistic groups, and ethnicities. More than 85 percent of Ukrainians now consider themselves as above all Ukrainian citizens other than any other identities, while the proportion of people believing they are primarily as Soviet citizens has reduced to almost zero [18]. At this moment, the unification of Ukrainian national identity was finally realized, although with formidable costs, and Ukraine now finally became a nation-state as imagined by its nationalists in the past, "one nation, one country".

6. Conclusion

Therefore, it has been clear that Russia's role is essential in Ukrainian's nation-building. It has been "the other" for Ukrainian nationalists for long but was considered "part of us" by Russophone Ukrainians. However, Russia's assertiveness toward Ukraine after 2014, although it could have made some geopolitical gains, cost Russia's positive image even among pro-Russia Ukrainians. With the rise of hostility, Ukrainians regardless of ethno-linguistic groups started a reconciliation of identity that all ethno-linguistic groups have to accept the fact that Russia and Ukraine are two distinctive nations that have divergent interests and national imaginations. Only then could Ukrainian identity cross the ethnicity and linguistic barrier and widely spread in Russophone groups, but once the identity change occurred, it could be much more powerful than Russia imagined, which prevented it from the easy victory it expected on the battlefield.

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