ESSAY

Ukraine Tries to Build a New Identity

Long in Russia's shadow, the country has rejected ethnic politics in favor of inclusion, economic growth and cultural diversity

Oleh Sentsov on his return to Kyiv from a Russian prison. **PHOTO:** PAVLO GONCHAR/SOPA IMAGES/LIGHTROCKET/GETTY IMAGES

By Yaroslav Trofimov
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When President Volodymyr Zelensky was slated to open the annual Yalta European Strategy conference in Kyiv last month, he yielded the honor to Ukraine's new national hero, filmmaker Oleh Sentsov. Just released from five years in Russian captivity as part of a prisoner swap, Mr. Sentsov brought the audience to tears as he recounted how he had struggled with his jailers to hold on to a prized possession: a plastic jar decorated with Ukraine's blue-and-yellow colors. He ended by holding up the jar, to thunderous applause.

Mr. Sentsov narrated this tale in Russian. Like many other ethnic Russians from Ukraine's Crimea region, Mr. Sentsov—imprisoned for opposing Russia's forced annexation of the peninsula—isn't fluent in the Ukrainian language.

Mr. Zelensky, born to a Russian-speaking Jewish family, noted in his own speech a few minutes later that he, too, had to learn to speak Ukrainian in adulthood. That background didn't prevent him from getting elected in the largest landslide in Ukrainian history, winning 73% of the vote last April.

Under the old Soviet Union's concept of nationalities, which defined Ukrainian-ness by blood rather than by mind-set (and recorded ethnicity on identity cards), neither man would have even qualified as a Ukrainian. In its 28 years of independence, however, Ukraine has moved so decisively in embracing an inclusive, almost American, model of nationhood that the very concept of an "ethnic Ukrainian" has become obsolete in mainstream political life.

That process has accelerated in recent years—as highlighted by Mr. Zelensky's triumph—even though the country has been bruised by a war with Russia and a resulting economic crisis, the kind of circumstances that have ignited ethnic hatreds elsewhere. Ukraine's trajectory stands in contrast to many wealthy Western democracies where "blood and soil" nationalism and anti-immigrant feelings have surged in the same period as a potent new force. Instead of splitting Ukraine along ethnic lines, the loss of Crimea and the ongoing conflict in the eastern region of Donbas—where Russia has fostered separatist statelets in the name of protecting Russian-speakers' rights since 2014—have had the opposite effect of strengthening unity in the rest of the country.

The lively Kyiv food market opened recently in a famous former factory, Arsenal. **PHOTO:** OKSANA PARAFENIUK FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

"To be a Ukrainian you don't have to be an ethnic Ukrainian. You have to be the one who cares about Ukraine becoming a successful country and about the Ukrainian people living in dignity," said Daria Kaleniuk, executive director of the Anticorruption Action Center, a nongovernment group.

President Donald Trump's demand that Mr. Zelensky investigate alleged corruption by Democratic candidate Joe Biden's son has thrust Ukraine into the center of American politics and triggered an impeachment inquiry in the House. That unexpected turbulence is hitting the country of 44 million people just as it enters an unusually optimistic period. Ukraine's economy,

which recently began expanding again, posted 4.6% annualized growth in the second quarter of 2019. The currency has become one of the few in the world to strengthen against the dollar.

Ukraine is also currently experiencing a cultural boom, with new globally-minded bands, art centers, film production outlets and fashion design studios sprouting in Kyiv and other big cities. One of Mr. Zelensky's first decisions was to scrap the Independence Day tank parade on Kyiv's main avenue, instead showcasing the country's young musicians—and a different vision of national pride. Alina Pash, a 26-year-old whose eclectic style combines rap, hip-hop and folk, was the starring act. "Maybe it's finally the time for us," she said. "We are realizing that we don't have to wait for a better life anymore, we can make it ourselves."

Ukraine's path toward an inclusive identity dates back to independence in 1991.

It's not just the arts. A growing scene of hip new restaurants, bars and clubs is drawing planeloads of foreign partygoers to Kyiv, attracted by the rising buzz around the city as the "new Berlin." "Ukraine is in some ways the most interesting place in Europe right now," said Vladislav Davidzon, editor of the Odessa Review, a quarterly magazine focusing on Ukrainian culture and politics. "You are watching the creation of a national culture and a national identity in real time."

Ukraine's path toward an inclusive identity dates back to independence in 1991, when—unlike the Baltic states of Latvia and Estonia—it granted citizenship to all of its residents. It also scrapped ethnicity from official documents.

"We decided that ethnicity should not become part of the creation of the state," independent Ukraine's first president, Leonid Kravchuk, said in an interview last week. "This concept of Ukrainian citizenship means we are heading to the civilized world and are seeing the development of the Ukrainian people as part of a world-wide civilizational process. What is important is how the person relates to Ukraine as a state, whether he builds it or destroys it."

For two decades after independence, however, issues of language and identity remained the main dividing line in Ukrainian politics and society. It was only after protests in Maidan Square in 2013-14 against pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych, and the subsequent Russian invasion of Crimea and war in Donbas that the country's politics reshuffled.

"Maidan was not about linguistics, not about the religious confession, not about the ethnos," said Ukrainian philosopher Constantin Sigov, a professor at Kyiv-Mohyla University. "It was about law, about ethos and about civil rights— about a political nation that won't submit to a dictator." The spark that lit the Maidan protests came from a Facebook post by a Ukrainian journalist of Afghan origin, Mustafa Nayyem. The first protester shot dead in clashes with security forces—and now immortalized by a giant mural in central Kyiv—was a son of Armenian immigrants.

Polina Veller, 29, a Kyiv fashion designer, feels her generation is driving a new entrepreneurial dynamic in Ukraine. "My mom's thinking is that the state owes you something." PHOTO: OKSANA PARAFENIUK FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

That's not to say that Ukraine doesn't have far-right extremists. There are several such groups, some of them stemming from volunteer units created to fight against pro-Russia forces in 2014. Judging by the negligible backing they consistently receive in elections, however, these movements have less appeal in Ukraine than in most other European democracies. "The discourse of ethnicity has been completely usurped by the marginal far-right," said Oksana Zabuzhko, a prominent novelist. "And it is very marginal, with half of it stage-set by the FSB," Russia's intelligence agency, she added.

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By empowering the country's new generation, the legacy of Maidan has shifted Ukrainian nationalism—often colored by religious conservatism in the past—in a more liberal direction. Gay pride events in Kyiv, attacked by far-right thugs just a few years ago, are no longer acts of defiance where police outnumber participants. Mr. Zelensky's slate of parliament members includes the country's first black lawmaker.

The country's new parliament, elected in July, also marks a generational shift, with the majority of ruling party legislators in their 20s and 30s. The new prime minister, Oleksiy Honcharuk, is just 35. At his own presentation at the Yalta European Strategy conference, Mr. Honcharuk had to dodge the American moderator's questions on whether his dating life has improved since taking office and whether his mother approved of his job performance.

“The generation of people born in an independent Ukraine is getting a greater and greater political voice,” said lawmaker Oleksandr Korniyenko, deputy head of Mr. Zelensky’s party in parliament. “Those were the first elections where this generation played a decisive role. Until now, our politics was formed by older people who had been shaped by the Soviet Union.”

Kyiv fashion designer Polina Veller says she feels that generation gap daily: “My mom’s thinking is that the state owes you something, and I know that I must count on my own forces.” It’s the Maidan protests, she added, that prompted her to become an entrepreneur and launch her own label. “After Maidan we all understood that we can actually achieve something, and that is stupendous,” she said. “We’re out to conquer the world.”

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