National Identity in Ukraine: Impact of Euromaidan and the War

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*Abstract*

The essay examines the impact of the Euromaidan protests and the subsequent Russian aggression on Ukrainian national identity. It demonstrates that national identity has become more salient *vis-à-vis* other territorial and non-territorial identities. At the same time, the very meaning of belonging to the Ukrainian nation has changed, as manifested first and foremost in increased alienation from Russia and the greater embrace of Ukrainian nationalism. Although popular perceptions are by no means uniform across the country, the main dividing line has shifted eastwards and now lies between the Donbas and the adjacent east-southern regions.

ONE OF THE MOST NOTEWORTHY CONSEQUENCES OF THE RECENT events in Ukraine is a dramatic change in Ukrainian national identity. In various media one can regularly encounter assertions of individuals’ increased self-identification as Ukrainian, greater pride in being a citizen of the Ukrainian state, stronger attachment to symbols of nationhood, enhanced solidarity with compatriots, increased readiness to defend Ukraine or work for Ukraine, and increased confidence in the people’s power to change the country for the better. Most speak of their own experiences or those of people around them, while some generalise individual changes and assert a greater consolidation of the Ukrainian nation or even the ‘birth’ of a nation out of people supposedly lacking in national consciousness. The reverse side of this consolidation of Ukrainianness is a sense of alienation from or even enmity towards Russia, which is targeted primarily at the state but sometimes also at the people, who, it is believed, overwhelmingly support the state’s aggressive policy towards Ukraine.

These changes are attributed to the Euromaidan protests and subsequent Russian aggression against Ukraine which started with the annexation of Crimea and continues with the war in the Donbas. Some argue that the consolidation of national identity is primarily the result of the war, while the readiness to contribute to democratic change originated in the social mobilisation against the authoritarian regime. For example, journalist-turned-politician

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Mustafa Nayyem argued that ‘the most important, if not the only result of the Maidan has become the political class’ fear of society’, while ‘an unprecedented rise of patriotic feelings, a conscious national identification’ and other positive changes of the post-Maidan year result primarily from the war.[1](#_bookmark1) Others believe that the national transformation and consolidation started on the Maidan itself, in a readiness to defend the common cause and support other people fighting for it; people who came to be perceived as Ukrainians rather than merely fellow protesters. Thus, journalist Fedir Sivtsov has described how he became a nationalist after a riot police attack on the Maidan in December 2013: ‘When I looked around and instead of the empty place saw an endless stream of people—Ukrainians who were not indifferent to the fate of their compatriots’.[2](#_bookmark2) As with many other such revelations, this post was written by a Russian speaker who proudly asserted his Ukrainian identity which he viewed not as linked to ethnic origin or language use but rather as based on free choice, a predominant view among participants in the Maidan and in the subsequent defence of the country.

How representative are these views? Although differing in their preferred language, place of residence and social status, most of the authors of such assertions belong to the same group of activists and elites (politicians, journalists, Maidan participants, volunteer combatants or aid organisers) whose views are not necessarily typical of the entire population.[3](#_bookmark3) This study is intended to verify activist perceptions on the mass level, that is, to check whether changes in mass views correspond to those asserted by the activists and elites. By comparing the data of two nationwide surveys that were conducted in September 2014 and February 2012, respectively, I examine changes in popular views for the period encompassing the Euromaidan protests and an early stage of the war. In addition, focus group discussions conducted in February and March 2015 in different regions of Ukraine reveal nuances in and motivations behind certain preferences.

*Ukrainian identity before* *Euromaidan*

Similarly to other perceptions of people as members of certain collectivities, national identity has been conceptualised on both individual and collective levels, that is, both as individuals’ attachment to their perceived nation and as the nation’s supposedly distinct organisation. Moreover, national identity can pertain to either an ethnic (cultural) or civic (political) community, both of which are routinely referred to as nations, particularly in the West (Smith 1991; Parekh 1995). Many scholars bemoan the widespread confusion in elite and popular discourse of what they view as conceptually different aspects of nationhood. On the one hand, Bhikhu Parekh has argued that while a political community is a ‘territorially concentrated group of people bound together by their acceptance of a common mode of conducting their affairs’, many discussions ‘look for the identity of a political community … in the cultural or ethnocultural characteristics that are supposed to be common to all its members’ (Parekh 1994, pp. 501–2). That is, such discussions confuse the features of the nation that are collectively enacted by its members and individual features that the members have in common. On the other hand, Alfonso Alfonsi has emphasised that ‘citizenship (belonging to a political collectivity) and nationality (inclusion in a cultural community) are not co-terminous’, although they ‘have always been seen as synonymous in the empirical reality of the European countries’ (Alfonsi 1997, pp. 53–4). However, such attempts at conceptual disentanglement do not prevent those discussing national identity from bringing together different elements which they believe contribute to the specific character of the nation under discussion. This is all the more so because people’s acceptance of a common mode of behaviour is facilitated by and, at the same time, contributes to the commonality of their cultural characteristics, so that the supposedly political community has a certain ethnocultural basis (Kuzio 2002). Rather than trying to change the way people think about the nation, scholars should aim at discerning different aspects in that thinking and explaining their interaction.

The confusion of ethnic and civic dimensions of nationhood is particularly characteristic of thinking and speaking about the titular nations of certain states or autonomous units, that is, cultural communities constituting a core of eponymous political collectivities. As long as (would-be) Ukrainians did not have their ‘own’ independent state, they perceived their national distinction solely in cultural terms, with references to a particular religion, language, place of residence (which distinguished them from outsiders speaking or believing differently) or, with the spread of organic concepts of ethnicity, biological origin. During the Soviet decades, nationhood was institutionalised on both personal and territorial levels, that is, through the ascription of ethnonational identity (‘nationality’) to every person and the establishment of autonomous political units as national homelands of nations whose members were defined by this supposedly unchangeable identity (Brubaker 1994). Although this double institutionalisation made Ukrainian identity national rather than merely ethnic (Hrytsenko 1998, p. 153), membership of the nation seemed to be perceived primarily in ethnocultural rather than civic terms, due to both the social salience of personal ‘nationality’ and a lack of clear political distinctiveness of the Ukrainian republic from other constituent

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units of the USSR. Unfortunately, the scarcity of sociological studies of this sensitive topic in the USSR does not allow us persuasively to demonstrate the relative strength of these competing identifications.

With the establishment of an independent state, Ukrainian identity started gaining in salience and shifting toward civic content, while its ethnocultural basis was gradually acquiring elements that had been suppressed by the Soviet regime as ‘nationalistic’. However, the salience and especially the content of this identity were strongly contested, reflecting not only inherited dissimilarities between particular groups of the population but also new disagreements inculcated by political and cultural elites, some of which promoted the formerly suppressed version and others adhered to the one inherited from Soviet times (Pirie 1996; Kuzio 2001). People disagreed even on how the national collectivity is to be defined, that is, whether it should comprise the entire population or only its ethnically Ukrainian part. Not only was it hard for many to switch from an ethnic to a civic definition of nationhood but also heated debate on how members of the Ukrainian nation should think and behave contributed to disagreement on who could be full-fledged members of the nation. The two aspects of identity content—the criterion of membership and the view of members’ appropriate behaviour—were often confused even in scholarly works, all the more so because the authors referred to surveys using different terms with dissimilar connotations. Certainly, these aspects are closely connected as the predominant view of the appropriate behaviour determines the chances of belonging for certain ‘peripheral’ groups (ethnic, linguistic, religious and other minorities). Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish analytically between them since it may be easier for putative members of a nation to agree on common membership than on common beliefs and policies.

For example, when asked in a 1998 survey, ‘What makes someone a Ukrainian?’, a plurality of respondents preferred a purely subjective understanding, ‘consciousness of oneself as a Ukrainian’, while two smaller groups indicated the apparently objective but very different criteria, namely ethnic (‘Ukrainian ancestors’) and civic (Ukrainian citizenship). At the same time, in response to the question whether Ukraine should be ‘a state of the Ukrainian nation’ or ‘a state without ethnic designation’, just about a half of respondents indicated one of these polar options, with a considerable preference for the latter, while more than a third chose something in between (Wilson 2002). Another survey (conducted in 2001) seemed to demonstrate a clear preference for a civic definition of the Ukrainian community as the majority of respondents chose ‘coexistence and equal rights in the framework of one state’ as the main factor that ‘unites or could unite the people of Ukraine into a single community’, leaving far behind various ethnocultural designations. Moreover, civic characteristics such as respect for the Ukrainian state’s institutions and laws, its citizenship and the perception of Ukraine as one’s homeland scored much higher than language, ethnic origin or religion on the list of qualities that are ‘most important for considering a person to be a real member of Ukrainian society’ (Shulman 2004). Based on these responses, Stephen Shulman concluded that ‘civic national identity in Ukraine seems to be substantially stronger than ethnic national identity’, whatever the specific content of the latter (Shulman 2004, p. 53). However, the apparent preference for civic identity may have to do with the researcher’s use of terms such as ‘the people of Ukraine’ and ‘Ukrainian society’ which have a clearly civic connotation, unlike ‘a Ukrainian’ and ‘the Ukrainian nation’ that were used in the 1998 survey. While members of different groups mostly agreed that equal rights and obligations were the main factor uniting

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all the people of Ukraine, given obvious ethnocultural differences between them, they did not necessarily accept all of these people into their nation or considered such an exclusive ‘nation’ a less important community than the inclusive ‘people’. Actually, Shulman’s own comparative study of elite perceptions in two big Ukrainian cities, L’viv in the west and Donets’k in the southeast, revealed that elites in each city view people in the other (or rather the region it belongs to) less than positively. Moreover, Donets’kites felt much better about Russians in Russia than about Ukrainians in western Ukraine, a clear indication of a weakness of civic national identity as a country-wide ‘sense of togetherness and belonging’ (Shulman 1999,

p. 1015), which the new state’s institutions had yet to engender.

While Shulman examined the strength of national identity which he related to the perceived cultural distance between constituent ethnic groups and the manner of inter-group interaction, several other studies sought to assess its salience *vis-à-vis* other identities that putative members of the Ukrainian nation may have. Despite using different designations of national identity, these studies revealed a gradual, but by no means uniform increase in salience. Scholars asking the respondents to indicate their primary self-designation among those related to territorial entities of different scale, from local to global, found that ‘a citizen of Ukraine’ had become the most salient of such designations. A 1997 survey indicated roughly equal preferences for the national and the subnational level, the latter combining identifications with the locality and region of residence (Stehnii & Churylov 1998, p. 45).[5](#_bookmark5) By 2006, national identity clearly overshadowed subnational identities (Besters-Dilger 2009, p. 389). At the same time, differences between regional groups in their identity preferences became even more pronounced, with the salience of national identity decreasing rather consistently from west to southeast.[6](#_bookmark6) In contrast, a longitudinal study of the post-Soviet identification processes in L’viv and Donets’k examined the salience of not only territorial identities but also those defined by other characteristics such as gender, religion, occupation and ideology. It revealed that the (rather ambiguous) identity as ‘a Ukrainian’ was one of the most salient in both cities but it mattered much more in the former than in the latter. While L’vivites consistently manifested it as much more salient than any other identity except for the local one, in Donets’k Ukrainian identity was much less pronounced than local identity and roughly equal in salience to those defined by gender and social status (Hrytsak 2007).

The above and other studies demonstrated that ethnocultural elements of the national identity content were more strongly contested than civic ones, that is, particular regional and ethnolinguistic groups differed more in their views of the former than of the latter. For example, L’viv respondents in the L’viv–Donets’k study tended to evaluate positively those historical events and personalities associated with the nationalist narrative of Ukraine’s history which emphasises its orientation towards independence, while Donets’k residents supported primarily those phenomena featured in the East Slavic narrative which views Ukrainians as closely linked to Russians (Sereda 2007).[7](#_bookmark7) Shulman (2002) made a similar distinction between what he called Ethnic Ukrainian and East Slavic versions of national identity, the former based on the titular language and culture and the latter on the supposedly common culture

5In view of their strong attachment to the locality and region, it is remarkable that in that study the Donbas respondents predominantly identified as citizens of Ukraine (Stehnii & Churylov 1998, p. 45).

6This conclusion is based on my processing of raw data of a nationwide representative survey (2,015 respondents) conducted by the sociological centre Hromadska Dumka in December 2006 within the framework of an international project in which I participated (Besters-Dilger 2009).

7For a discussion of the nationalist and East Slavic historical narratives, see Kulyk (2011, 2014b).

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of Ukrainians and Russians. He argued that the sharply dissimilar views of the ethnocultural basis of national identity in the western and south-eastern parts of Ukraine could explain their different preferences for other elements of the identity content, such as the state’s foreign policy. That is, adherents of ethnic Ukrainian identity stood for breaking political ties with Russia which they viewed as undermining Ukraine’s distinctiveness, while supporters of the East Slavic version insisted on close relations with Russia as a means of preserving the two people’s commonality. Although they did not relate them to national identity, Arel and Khmelko (1996) indicated regionally polarised preferences regarding Ukrainian–Russian relations and the status of the Russian language in Ukraine as the most divisive issue in Ukrainian politics.

Such profound disagreement on the content of national identity stemmed from dissimilar ethnolinguistic profiles and historical trajectories of different regions, but its persistence in independent Ukraine had much to do with political elites’ effort to mobilise the respective constituencies for the defence of their alleged interests. This effort considerably increased during and after the Orange Revolution when the anti-Orange parties sought to defeat their rivals by portraying them as representing the west of Ukraine and hostile to the east and south (Wolczuk 2007). The Orange government’s attempt to strengthen the ethnocultural foundation of national identity which manifested itself in more resolute promotion of the Ukrainian language and the nationalist narrative of Ukraine’s history was met with strong resistance of the anti-Orange opposition. In addition to close ties with Russia and attachment to the Russian language, it sought to distinguish the east-southern regions by a pantheon of heroes from the East Slavic narrative, the worship of whom was to be accompanied by hostility towards Ukrainian nationalist heroes honoured in the west (Kulyk 2009; Zhurzhenko 2013). While the political confrontation drove apart the preferences of the two ‘halves’ of Ukraine regarding these salient issues, the experience of independence and institutional discourses such as education instilled in all regions rather similar views of many less conspicuous ethnocultural aspects of national identity (Kulyk 2014b). Shekhovtsov has argued that although the Orange Revolution claimed to unite all Ukrainian citizens, its allegedly inclusive identity ‘had pronounced exclusionary traits based on the ethno-cultural understanding of membership in this “imagined community”’ (Shekhovtsov 2013, p. 740). However, it seems more appropriate to say that the Orange elites sought to build an inclusive civic identity but put it on a strong Ukrainian ethnocultural basis, which made it problematic for many members of other ethnolinguistic groups to join. At the same time, the Orange government’s promotion of Ukrainian nationalist content that was a taboo under the Soviet regime and was viewed with suspicion by many post-Soviet people shifted the mainstream view of national identity, a shift that Euromaidan could build on.[8](#_bookmark8)

Euromaidan, like the Orange Revolution, was perceived by its participants and sympathisers as a unifying popular protest against the corrupt authoritarian regime, but the regime sought to weaken the protest by presenting it as led by the westerners and hostile to the easterners. Similarly, while Russia justified its intervention in the Crimea and Donbas by its concern for

8A vivid illustration of this shift is a change in popular perceptions of the freat Famine of 1932–1933, or *Holodomor*, which the Orange elites presented as the communist regime’s genocide of the Ukrainian people. After the anti-Orange triumph in the 2010 election this interpretation was questioned and the scale of commemoration of the victims curtailed but this political backlash could ‘hardly negate the new public awareness about the scale of the freat Famine, or devaluate the moral aspects of the Holodomor memory’ (Zhurzhenko 2013, p. 634). the Russian speakers of those and adjacent regions, many members of different linguistic and regional groups viewed it as aggression against the entire Ukrainian people who, accordingly, must unite, resist and make an alliance with the West (Kulyk 2014a; Onuch 2015). The two processes can thus be expected to have caused significant changes both in the salience of national identity and in some aspects of its content, changes that can vary by the region and language of preference. It is these changes that the present study seeks to examine.

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