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 other territorial and nonterritorial 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 eastsouthern 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 selfidentification 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 peoples 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 states 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, journalistturnedpolitician

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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 postMaidan year result primarily from the war.1 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 peopleUkrainians who were not indifferent to the fate of their compatriots.2 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 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 nations 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. 5012). 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 coterminous, although they have always been seen as synonymous in the empirical reality of the European countries (Alfonsi 1997, pp. 534). 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 peoples 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 (wouldbe) 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

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 fullfledged members of the nation. The two aspects of identity contentthe criterion of membership and the view of members appropriate behaviourwere 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.