

Roots and Features of Modern Ukrainian National Identity and Nationalism

Written by Denys Kiryukhin

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DENYS KIRYUKHIN, MAR 19 2015

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Ukrainian nationalism traces its origins back to the middle of the 19th century. It was developed after national movements had already appeared in the countries of Eastern Europe, and it owes much to their influence. Until the beginning of the 20th century, the history of Ukrainian national movement is mostly the history of the struggle of three projects of (Ukrainian) national identity, each of them in its own way determining the outlines and the principles of the relations between Ukraine and Russia.

Historically, the first project was one of Pan-Slavic identity. Within its scope, Ukraine and Russia were parts of the common Slavic world, i.e. special cultural, religious, and national commonality of the people of Eastern Europe, which was also considered, in the long term, as a potential political community. Shortly afterwards, the project of special Ukrainian ethno-cultural identity developed, different and opposed to Russian identity, with Ukraine and Russia seen as different national communities. Finally, in many ways as a reaction to the development of Ukrainian ethnic nationalism and under the impact of the development of Russian nationalism, a third project was formed – the project of the 'Little Russian' identity. Within its scope, Ukraine, on a par with Belorussia, was considered to be a part of the All-Russian national project based on the idea of common political history of Russia (Great Russia), Ukraine (Little Russia), including Galicia (Red Russia), and Belorussia (White Russia), all of them originating from the Middle Ages Kievan Rus' and sharing common religion (Orthodox Christian) and language (Old Church Slavonic).

Due to several reasons, mostly of political nature, the Pan-Slavism project was never able to consolidate, and by the beginning of the 20th century, the two other major identity strategies were gradually formed. First, the Little Russian one, which had been long promoted by the government of the Russian Empire. It enjoyed the support of some part of the intelligentsia of both central and western Ukraine – the latter even formed religious and ideological movement of 'Russophiles' ('Moskophiles'), which lost its influence after World War I. Thus, in the long run, the propagation of the Little Russian identity proved to be ineffective – some investigators, like Russian historian Aleksey Miller, relate it to the weakness of the compulsory assimilation mechanisms that the Russian Empire had at its disposal in the 19th century.

The second identity project can be referred to as the 'Ukrainian proper'. Eventually it was ethno-cultural identity that became prevalent in the Ukrainian national project, and national politics conducted in the USSR played quite a role in its formation. Interestingly, for a long time (up to the 20th century), ideologists of the national movement hesitated to set out the project of an independent Ukrainian state. The necessity of Ukraine's independence was, for the first time, theoretically substantiated not on nationalist but on Marxist (or even national-Marxist) grounds by social-democrat Yulian Bachinski in his book *Ukraina Irredenta*, published in 1895.

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Soviet National Politics

Contemporary Ukrainian nationalism is a heterogeneous phenomenon. As in the case of other national movements, it has both radical-extremist and liberal currents present in it. All of them were formed over a long period, including during the USSR times. On the surface, it might seem as if Ukrainian nationalism was developed during the seventy-year Soviet period only as an underground movement. It is worth recalling that, for many years after the end of World War II in western regions of the Soviet Union, Ukraine nationalists still waged guerrilla warfare against the Soviets. This constitutes a mythology that has played a large part in the formation of contemporary national identity. However, it was by no means the basis for the process of the formation of Ukrainian national self-consciousness during the Soviet period; rather, it was Soviet national politics that played the crucial part.

As Rogers Brubaker has aptly noted, 'although antinationalist, and of course brutally repressive in all kinds of ways, the Soviet regime was anything but antinational' (Brubaker, 2004, p. 53). It used to harshly crush all forms of unofficial class and ethno-political mobilisation of the population, as well as nationalism as political ideology (within the framework of the struggle with 'bourgeois nationalism'), but, at the same time, it still promoted practices of shaping the ethno-national identity of its citizens. Such a situation is explainable, as by the beginning of the 20th century, many national movements within the Russian Empire had developed, and the formation of the USSR republics just by national criteria was the response by the Soviet powers to the aspirations of those movements. In many cases, the USSR government had actively promoted the development of the national identity of its citizens, in particular when it was underdeveloped. The best example is the politics of compulsory Ukrainisation carried out in Ukraine in the 1920s.

A large part in the process of the development of national self-consciousness was played by population censuses. As Juliette Cadiot demonstrates in her book *Laboratory of Empire: Russia/USSR, 1860-1940* (Cadiot, 2007), the USSR government used the institutionalisation of ethnicity (nationality) as a tool for registering and monitoring the population, and for the spatial configuration of the power; and after much debate between Soviet ethnographers, it was 'native language' that was chosen as the major criterion for determining affiliation to a nation. The attention focused on language is in no way accidental. In contrast with Western Europe, where the formation of nations was either concurrent to the establishment of states or was related to their modernisation, the nations of Central and Eastern Europe were formed, as a rule, within empires (Austro-Hungarian or Russian), and thus at first they were defined mostly by cultural aspects: language, religion, and common history (Puhle, 2008, pp. 162-183). By the time of the formation of the USSR, national languages and national cultures were already parts of everyday practices and background knowledge, owing to which language was able to appear for the respondents of censuses as one of the most coherent criteria of their national self-identity.

We have to note that national politics in the USSR were fundamentally ambivalent. Practices of ethno-cultural identity were combined with the ideology of the formation of a special identity – the new 'Soviet person'. But in spite of all official declarations regarding the new communality of 'the Soviet people' having been formed in the USSR, the Soviet government was engaged in the systemic development of national cultures and national intelligentsia in the republics (together with promoting Russian national-cultural tradition as the principal representative of the Soviet culture).

Particularly, at the end of the 1950s, the training of national personnel for jobs in the system of state administration and economics was launched in Soviet republics: 'through a system of perks and "national recruitment" to colleges, local ethno-elite has been nurtured, its representatives earmarking in time managerial positions and prestigious social niches' (Nojenko, 2007, pp. 246). Thus, in many ways due to Soviet national politics, the political and geographical space we now call 'post-Soviet' experienced the formation and consolidation of the practice of dividing the people into social groups based on their ethno-national background. That also explains why, by the end of the 1980s, sociological studies in the USSR discovered tendencies to replace old socio-cultural identities (professional affiliation, social statuses, etc.) with ethnic identity. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, not only in the former Soviet republics, but in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe as well – for example, in Romania or in the republics of former Yugoslavia – the ideology of nationalism fashioned as ethnicity exerted significant (and in many cases crucial) influence on political practices.

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After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, identity problems turned out to be more important than the problem of establishing democratic institutions. It is clearly evident from the discourse prevalent amongst the Ukrainian national intelligentsia since the proclamation of independence, which has been focused on debates about self-determination between the West and the East, national memory and history, religion, and culture – but not human rights. Describing the situation in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of the Soviet Union, Timothy Garton Ash points out that in the 1990s it became almost a rule: the more ethnically diverse a post-Communist country, the higher the probability it would go the nationalist-authoritarian, and not liberal-democratic, way (Hnatiuk, 2005, pp. 277). The British author explains it by ethno-national homogeneity used to facilitate the carrying out of democratic transformations. However, the experience of many countries (Hungary, for example) testifies that ethno-cultural homogeneity is not a guarantee of democratic development. Rather, the degree of cultural homogeneity determines the degree of authoritarianism that will accompany the consolidation of nationalism – the more heterogeneous the society in its cultural aspect, the more force needs to be applied to realise a ‘national project’ – and, correspondingly, the more authoritarian the nationalism would be. Thus, Ash is obviously wrong on that, but what he grasps is precisely that many post-Soviet societies are oriented towards the realisation of nationalistic, and not necessarily democratic, projects.

Ukraine has been no exception. State politics since the proclamation of Ukraine’s independence were, with a different degree of intensity, always aimed at the consolidation of the homogeneity in culture and language of the dominance of Ukrainian cultural traditions and, at the same time, at accentuating ethno-cultural differences between Ukraine and Russia. Russia served as ‘the other’ here, and contemporary Ukrainian national identity has been mostly constituted in opposition to it.

The Narratives of the Ukrainian Nationalistic Discourse

There are three major narratives that could be singled out of the contemporary Ukrainian nationalistic discourse (on the narrativism of nationalism, see, for example, Bhabha, 1990, pp. 1-7). Of course, it is often not possible to logically trace boundaries between them, especially as, over the years, proponents of one narrative could be seen to gradually drift toward another narrative (as a rule, such a transition takes place along the lines of radicalisation). Nevertheless, the proponents of national discourse themselves are aware of the differences between them. It is no accident that the version of the Ukrainian national project officially asserted just after the proclamation of independence – the first narrative legalised in the Soviet times – was very quickly apprehended by many intellectuals, especially of the younger generation, as inadequate.

We have already mentioned that the Ukrainian national project was developed and maintained by the institutions of the Soviet state within the scope of the politics of establishing ethnic elites in the republics of the Soviet Union. However, it would be false to claim that contemporary Ukrainian nationalism is the exclusive result of the Soviet national politics. It was those elites that came to power in the beginning of the 1990s that also played a role in the process of identity formation. The elite consisted not only of technocrat-managers and representatives of the Communist Party nomenklatura, who soon after the proclamation of independence took all leading positions, but also by scientists, journalists, and artists who defined the practices of symbolic self-representation and the rituals of the Ukrainian state, as well as its ideological policies. The latter, in particular, proceeded from romantic views on the history of the struggle for independence and on the necessity to spread Ukrainian language and culture as a means of saving Ukraine. Thus, the central idea of the first narrative has been the revival of Ukraine and social role of Ukrainian language that became possible after the collapse of the USSR. The first narrative was supported by the Soviet and post-Soviet state power system and has focused on national traditions, culture, and language. Within the framework of this narrative, Russia has been the ‘other’, but probably not the enemy.

However, this ‘official state ideology’ was, for various reasons, unacceptable for many proponents of the national idea. The essence of the complaints has been most accurately expressed by Ukrainian historian Mykola Riabchuk, who drew a parallel between the ideology of ‘Little Russia’ and the ideology of ‘Kuchmism’ (i.e. the state ideology of President Leonid Kuchma). The main accusation against the government from its right-wing ideological opponents was that it was unable to determine and to make the choice between the East and the West. This explains the critical attitude towards President Kuchma’s policy of ‘plural vectors’ in the international arena. Meanwhile, for a number of 1990s intellectuals, that choice was obvious. They had their conception of ‘Ukrainian national project’ shaped by the

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templates of the notions widespread in many countries of Central and Eastern Europe, according to which Russia presents a threat to national and cultural identity of small European nations – one of the most erudite expressions of such notions being Milan Kundera's essay 'The Tragedy of Central Europe'. 'European choice' for this group has been a civilisational one, and the only way to save Ukrainian culture from the destructive influence of totalitarianism – a road back to the Western European humanitarian culture that Ukrainian culture used to belong to.

In many respects, under the influence of Eastern European intellectuals, the second narrative has come to predominate, with questions of civilisational choice and sacrifice stressed. If in the first case Ukraine used to appear as a breakaway part of Russia, then in the second it was an Eastern European country enslaved by Russia. Its people, culture, religion, and language were perceived primarily as victims of a totalitarian regime. That narrative obtained its political expression in the cult of victims of the artificial mass starvation of the 1930s (Holodomor), universally propagated at government level under President Viktor Yushchenko. Thus, the second narrative has been guided by the idea of opposition to Russia and identification with Europe. Moreover, this narrative is connected with the experience of collective tragedy that constitutes the basis for national integration and identity.

Finally, during the 2000s, a third narrative started to emerge, one related to the revival of the radical versions of Ukrainian national movement that first appeared on the historical scene in the course of World War II and a national discourse focused on fighting against the enemy. It is this third narrative that, today, with the armed confrontation taking place in Ukraine, gradually became the most common type of Ukrainian nationalism. At the end of the 1990s, representatives of the new wave of nationally-oriented Ukrainian intelligentsia were becoming more popular. These were primarily cultural figures, notably writers, who, among other things, began to experiment with literary styles and topics, including the question of sexual minorities, and were accused of post-modernism, an ideology that, in the judgement of radical nationalists, represents a threat to Ukrainian culture (Hnatiuk, 2005, p. 219). The radicals, in fact, equated post-modernism with democracy, and opposed both of them.

The issue of fighting against the enemy was related to the general disillusionment of the large part of nationally-oriented Ukrainian citizens within the elite, both political and cultural. This narrative reflects the social problems and social struggles in terms of nationalist ideology, hence the cult of national heroes and the idea of ethnocracy. It emphasises the fight for the political and social rights of ethnic Ukrainians against the corrupted government and the oligarchs, and, at the same time, the fight for extending the living space of ethnic Ukrainians who are 'constrained' in their own country. That narrative has recently been subject to certain transformations: the topic of ethnicity has receded into the background, with the topic of fighting the enemy becoming predominant, and because of that it is now not only ethnic Ukrainians who are drawn into that nationalist discourse. The third narrative is a radical expression of the national struggle for recognition and sovereignty against external and internal enemies.

While analysing the structure of nationalist thinking, Patrick Colm Hogan identifies its three narrative forms: heroism, sacrifice, and romanticism (Hogan, 2009, pp. 167-213). Those narrative forms are evident in Ukrainian nationalism as well: the first narrative we mentioned is clearly related to the prevalence of romanticism, the second is that of sacrifice, and the third is that of heroism. It is indicative that Hogan relates the prevalence of heroism to war and conflict.

Russian Language and the Conflict of Identities

The prevalence of nationalist discourse in Ukraine maintained by successive governments gave rise to a number of problems related to the formation of national identity. Although officially the Ukrainian nation is often described as a civil nation, nevertheless, school programmes, the system of state holidays and social rituals, and the symbolic self-representation of the Ukrainian state have invariably included an ethnic component. In most cases, that component is found to be dominant, determining everyday political practices as well. That is why it is no accident that Ukrainian national identity is mostly described as the identity being established on ethno-cultural ground. Neither is it accidental that Ukrainian citizens whose mother tongue is not Ukrainian (first of all, Russian-speaking people) face problems of self-identification and conflicts of identities.

Today in Ukraine, the question of Ukrainian/Russian language is not only and not so much a question related to the

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sphere of culture or the sphere of rights, but a question of politics, a question of the limits of the political community. It is language that has been historically established to serve as the principle marker of Ukrainian national identity. The language in the case of Ukraine is one of those obvious and self-explanatory agents that allow, within the scope of identity politics, to draw the line between 'us' and 'them' – in our case, this first means distinguishing between 'the Ukrainians' and 'the Russians'. At the same time, a proportion of the ethnic Ukrainian population considers Russian to be their native language, and a number of Russian-speaking ethnic Ukrainians still count Ukrainian as their mother tongue. This curious phenomenon deserves some special attention.

The group of Russian-speaking people is heterogeneous, and there are two sub-groups that could be singled out among them (for more details, see Pogrebinskiy, 2010). The first one is the most numerous. It consists of those who treat the Ukrainisation policies of the government extremely negatively and who prefer Russian while watching TV and films, reading papers, and choosing the language of instruction in their children's schools. In other words, it is a group with clear cultural and linguistic identity, the latter having nothing to do with ethnic origins.

The second group is not as numerous; by a rough estimate, it constitutes up to 10% of all Russian-speaking citizens. These are people who are more loyal to the linguistic politics of the government and who are not against their children being enrolled in schools with Ukrainian as the language of instruction. That is to say, for a part of the Russian-speaking population of the country, it is not a problem to give up Russian – or, at least, to allow their children not to be primarily Russian-speaking like themselves. From this perspective, their preference to speak Russian does not coincide with their (ideological) image of a citizen of the Ukrainian state. In other words, they believe that national identity must be based on an ethnic foundation, and ethnicity is in turn considered by them to be related to language. Representatives of such a sub-group of Russian-speaking Ukrainian citizens highly value ethnic identity in their structure of identities, and they are aware of their own deficiency and inadequacy, compared to their representation of ethnic Ukrainians. They experience a conflict between linguistic and ethnic identities.

Conclusion

Today's crisis has significantly exacerbated all these internal contradictions, including those related to the problem of the formation of national Ukrainian identity. A common political project for Ukraine could be the establishment of a united civil political nation. But the elaboration and realisation of such a project is hindered by the resistance of the elites (both political and intellectual) who are not ready and, by and large, not capable of proposing and carrying out that project.

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