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Ukraine and the Questions of Boundaries and Nationalities

GREG SIMONS

The development in Crimea and the rest of Ukraine this winter and spring came as a surprise to many Europeans. The prospect of a conflict within Europe with Russia as a part after two decades of successful politics of détente had not been foreseen, and certainly not directly after the Winter Olympic Games in nearby Sochi, at the rim between Caucasus and the Black Sea. Still, Ukraine’s history, magnitude, location, economic hardships, ethnic composition and Soviet heritage will have to be counted among the factors behind the developments in recent years. In this article, Greg Simons of the Centre for Russian Studies in Uppsala discusses specifically the ethnic dimension of Ukraine’s most recent history. Looking at language politics and the debates around what has been termed “forced Ukrainisation” against primarily the Russian-speaking population, Simons analyses how Ukrainian symbolic identity developed from a predominantly civic identity at the time of independence to a divided, ethnically highlighted debate today.

The article was written in March 2014.

The current problems in Ukraine, from the perspective of ethnicity and identity, can be traced back to a long and complex series of historical interactions. There are a number of different paths that can be interwoven, increasing the level of sensitivity and volatility of the situation. A gradual increase in symbolic identity politics has been observed, moving away from the more civic form of Ukrainian identity at the moment of independence, which increased after the Orange Revolution under President Viktor Yushchenko. The threats and counter-threats to identity make the social environment much more responsive to ethnic mobilisation, opening the path for social disruption through inter-ethnic discord. This brief article only takes into account some of the more recent events, while the history of events goes much further back in time.

Ukraine was subjected to harsh repressive measures during the Soviet era, especially under Stalin, when efforts were made to eradicate any emerging form of Ukrainisation. In the period from 1 January 1935 until 22 June 1941, it is estimated that a total of 19,840,000 people were arrested (of which 7 million were shot and many others perished in Gulags; 2 million were shot in the Stalinist Purges and a further 5 million perished in what is known as the Great Famine). The legacy of such a brutal regime of repression is significantly influential even today. The brutal repression in Ukraine was part of The Katyn Operation Order #00447, which was signed on July 30, 1937. Aleksandr Uspeisky, the Ukrainian People’s Commissar of the Interior stated that “all Ukrainian Poles and Germans were engaged in spying and subversion and that 75–80 per cent of Ukrainians were bourgeois nationalists.” This implies an ethnic dimension to the Great Terror in Ukraine, as in many other parts of the Soviet Union.

In the wake of the August 1991 coup – which was an attempt to topple the Gorbachev administration by a group of conservative communists – the dissolution of the Soviet Union soon followed. In December 1991 a referendum was held in the Ukrainian SSR regarding independence from the Soviet Union. Of those who voted, 90 per cent voted for independence. In the Crimean region, however, where ethnic Russians constitute a majority of the population, 54 per cent voted for independence. Even in the more Russified parts of Ukraine, situated in the east, some 80 per cent still voted to secede from the Soviet Union.

According to a 1989 census, the ethnic population of Ukraine at the time consisted of 75% Ukrainians, some 21% Russians (approximately 11 million), 500,000 Jews, 440,000 Belarusians, 234,000 Bulgarians, 219,000 Poles, 163,000 Hungarians, and 135,000 Romanians within a total population of over 37 million people. Therefore, there seems to be potential for ethnic mobilisation on certain issues, especially by the ethnic Russian segment of the population. The subsequent census was conducted on December 5, 2001. According to the data, Ukraine’s population then stood at approximately 48.5 million people, of which 77.8% (37.5 million) were ethnic Ukrainians and 17.3% (8.3 million) were ethnic Russians. This shows a significant drop in the ethnic Russian segment of the Ukrainian population between 1989 and 2001.

The Russian minority

The ethnic Russian population in Ukraine has been the cause for some concern, regarding the potential to rally them for political purposes. However, as demonstrated by the vote for independence in 1991, there seems to be little cohesion amongst this group, which is predominantly...
found in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea. It has been argued by some that there are a number of reasons which have drained the potential for rebellion:

Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine do not possess a uniform identity conducive to ethnic mobilisation. Rather, linguistic, ethnic, and religious identities overlap unevenly, creating cross-cutting cleavages and a basis for pluralism. These regions have also retained important powers over their economic assets and are able to pursue relations with regions of Russia, especially on economic matters, without raising directly the question of the ethno-nationalist context of state power.7

There has been some divergence on the assumption that national groups in Ukraine do not possess the power or the will for ethnic mobilisation. Different versions of whether ethnic mobilisation can or cannot be achieved appear in the press, most clearly seen between the Ukrainian and Russian press. An article appeared in RIA Novosti (the Russian state news agency) during the summer of 2006 which warned of a potential territorial split because of a divergence between the national politics of the Orange Coalition and a significant proportion of eastern Ukraine:

About one-third of Ukraine’s population considers Russian its native tongue, but the figure is about 85% in the Crimea, more than 60% in the Lugansk and Donetsk regions, and about 50% in the Kharkov, Zaporizhzhya, and Odessa regions. The southeastern regions are strongly critical of the Euro-Atlantic bent in Ukraine’s policy, and are keen on promoting close, friendly relations with Russia.8

Here the author makes her case for the Russian minority, based on the number of areas in Ukraine where they constitute a local majority. Also evident is the criticism aimed at the pro-Western stance of the Orange government, namely the preference for Euro-Atlantic rather than Russian priorities in new international relations. The article even calls for a Russian intervention to create more 'ideal' circumstances in which the Orange government would consider the views of the eastern parts of the country:

Geopolitically, Russia should create a situation where the pro-Western Ukrainian government would have to take into account the interests of the eastern parts of the country. As of now, the 'Orange' authorities only represent the views of the western Lviv, Ternopil and Ivano-Frankivsk regions and are completely out of touch with the eastern regions.

But this situation would not benefit Moscow. When Putin spoke about strengthening of Ukraine’s territorial integrity, he referred to the risks of the growing ideological divide, which would have unpredictable consequences for Ukrainian unity.9

The message of the article is that the pro-Western policy which the Orange coalition is “forcing” upon the country is effectively alienating a sizeable proportion of the population. And in doing this, the possibility of territorial division is raised. This fits with the motivating factors for ethnic mobilisation, which did not exist in the 1990s.

However, there usually exists a second side to a story, which in this case is from the Ukrainian perspective. One such commentary appeared in the newspaper Kyiv Post in August 2007. The story covered the issue of ethnic relations in Ukraine and the memory of the Soviet years. It opens with the quote: “If you want to defeat an enemy, then bring up his children.” It vividly describes the Soviet epoch as a “kind of civil war for Ukraine.” Great effort is put forth detailing the rewriting of history by the Soviet system. But the author also adds that, just as under the total regime of Nazi Germany, there will always be ordinary people who reset the system. The author remains optimistic, assured that Ukraine will pull away from its Soviet past and create its own identity:

Everything that was Ukrainian in the system was rather incidental to it. But, thankfully, nobody calls Ukraine the Ukrainian SSR anymore. This name is seen now as even more fictitious than other Soviet myths. It only exists in post-Soviet memory. There is only the former USSR, without much mention of Ukraine as a distinct part of it.

We must recognise the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic as a false otherland, which replaced and served as a substitute for our true Motherland — an independent Ukraine. The half-truth Soviet Ukraine is an absolute lie. In fact, by rebuilding our consciousness, we can rebuild our nation.

Now, we have a Ukrainian state. Despite its Soviet era, which has not been fully digested by Ukrainian history, Ukraine will be an independent country free of its colonial past.10

In regard to the minorities’ issue, the author states that minorities are as much victims of the Soviet era as Ukraine itself, as it was not free will that brought them to the country. The general tone of the article, though, is upbeat and optimistic about Ukraine’s ability to shake the relics of the Soviet past and to forge a new and independent Ukrainian state free from foreign interference. There has been a tendency to frame history into simplistic versions, polarizing the oppressor and its victims.

Crimea

Crimea has been a prickly issue for Ukraine. In 1783 Catherine the Great annexed Crimea and it remained a part of Russia until 1954. Ethnic Russians constitute the bulk of the population, Ukrainians constitute about 25 per cent and
Muslim Crimean Tatars form 12 per cent.\textsuperscript{11} February 1954 saw the removal of the Crimean Oblast from the Russian SFSR which was then given to the Ukrainian SFSR. This was done on the grounds of Crimea’s geographical juxtaposition vis-à-vis mainland Ukraine, and the economic and communications ties between the regions. There was great emphasis on the brotherly bonds between the peoples of the Soviet Union, and this was intended to be a token of this unity.\textsuperscript{12} This transfer of territory would set the scene for conflict in the wake of the break-up of the Soviet Union. There are a number of Russian politicians and military leaders who regard Crimea as ancient Russian territory and believe that the transfer was illegal as it breached the constitution.

In July 1957, General Secretary of the Communist Party Nikita Khrushchev announced that each country in the socialist sphere had its own special characteristics, or unique customs, which were based upon historical and cultural differences and national traditions.\textsuperscript{13} There were still attempts to create and enforce the stereotype of the Soviet citizen (\textit{Homo Sovieticus}), but here it is acknowledged by the leader of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union that all peoples are not identical and equal. During the collapse of the Soviet Union, these differences were permitted to rise to the surface as there existed no authority that could effectively suppress these aspirations any longer.

The height of tension and conflict between the Crimean region and the Ukrainian authorities materialised quickly. As early as February 1991, the Ukrainian authorities granted autonomous status to Crimea within the framework of the Ukrainian SSR. This escalated after the break-up of the Soviet Union and on May 5, 1992 when the Crimean parliament proclaimed independence (although it remained part of Ukraine). The move was met by a harsh response from Kiev, which implied that Ukraine would go to war in order to keep Crimea part of Ukraine. Since 1995–1996 tensions have somewhat settled but have not disappeared between the local authorities in Crimea and the central authorities in Kiev.\textsuperscript{14} Though, the tensions are not so far under the surface; the recent events have shown that mobilisation of the ethnic Russian population living in Crimea is easily triggered.

Russian influence, i.e. the Russification process of Crimea, is still very strong and perpetuated in society. For instance, only four out of 240 publications produced in Crimea are in Ukrainian, a vast majority of publications being in Russian. It is also a strongly Orthodox area, where many profess to be of the Orthodox faith. The Church with the greatest influence is the Moscow Patriarchate branch of the Russian Orthodox Church (not of the Kievian Patriarchy – which is independent of the Moscow Patriarchate and unrecognized by the other canonical Eastern Orthodox churches). The school system is another indicator of Russianness in the region; 570 of the 583 schools are Russian language schools. Some of the schools are even subordinate to the Russian Ministry of Defence.\textsuperscript{15} These centres of cultural production are most able and likely to continue reproducing Russian culture in Crimea; it is unlikely that under these circumstances a Ukrainian identity can be instituted in an effective manner.

There are efforts to redress this issue on the Crimean peninsula. Under the former Ukrainian President Kuchma, one particular form of "soft" Ukrainianisation policy was implemented. This involved the funding of selected schools and supplying them with superior teachers, equipment and teaching aids, and teaching was conducted in Ukrainian language. Therefore the learning of Ukrainian language was linked with the quality of education offered by these schools in comparison with the Russian language schools. Since the Orange Revolution of 2004, there has been a hardened stance on the issue of teaching Ukrainian, which has been characterised by some in Crimea as "forced Ukrainianisation". Ensuring teaching in Ukrainian is being attempted at a bureaucratic level, through the use of decrees and legislation from Kiev.\textsuperscript{16}

However, debate exists about whether there is in fact a situation of "forced Ukrainianisation" on the Crimean peninsula. One camp says yes, which is demonstrated by a June 2009 poll of Crimean residents conducted by the Kiev-based Razumkov Centre: 85.3 per cent of respondents believed that there were elements of "forced Ukrainianisation" within the local population of Crimea, which seems to be the view at the population level. A different view is held by bureaucrats. Georgiy Kusniov, director of educational research at the International Renaissance Foundation states that Ukrainianisation is only a myth perpetuated by populist politics:

\textbf{When they speak of forced Ukrainianisation, they point to some decrees of the central government that were never implemented in Crimea, since the Kiev-based Ministry of Education has no direct jurisdiction over Crimean education. [...] As a rule, directives from Kiev on "Ukrainianisation" were never fulfilled. [...] There is no real state policy directed from Kiev toward the Crimean educational sphere. It is mostly wishful thinking, decrees, and an endless stream of paper.} \textsuperscript{17}

Although Kusniov argues a good point, he also misses a significant feature of this conflict, which is based upon perception and driven by emotional argumentation. Failure to either recognise this aspect or ignore it could prove problematic because, doing so means not addressing the issues or concerns of the Crimean public, regardless of whether these concerns are real or not. They need to be treated as if they are real, even if they are not, as otherwise there will be a lack of mutual understanding and communication on this divisive issue.
The Crimean Tartar

The Crimean question is further complicated by the Tartar question. Crimea was occupied by the Nazis during the Second World War. Subsequently, Stalin accused the Tartars of collaborating with them. As a result, Tartars were deported en masse to Siberia and Central Asia in 1944 when Crimea was retaken. A great number of those deported did not survive (as many as 40 per cent died in the first couple of years of deportation). On 5 September 1967 the Soviet authorities announced a decree that exonerated the Crimean Tartar of wrongdoing and opened the possibility of their return. In practical terms, a return was not possible until the late 1980s. When the Soviet Union collapsed, they were permitted to return, and approximately 250,000 did so. However, they currently suffer from substandard housing and high unemployment. The issue of the allocation of land to the Tartars is also highly contentious, which has resulted in tension and protests over land rights. Of the 250,000 returnees, there are some 100,000 who have not qualified for Ukrainian citizenship. These people are currently demanding a special exemption to allow them to vote in parliamentary and local elections. The Republic of Crimea Rada has addressed some of these issues. They passed a new bill that included other groups that were exiled (including Germans and Greeks) which would give these people rights identical to Ukrainian citizens.

A number of obstacles have obstructed the citizenship issue; for example, some countries require a fee to relinquish existing citizenship. Uzbekistan previously charged $100 for this service. Economic conditions in Crimea make this difficult as monthly income can be as low as $10 in some instances, and 64,000 of 136,000 Tartar adults are unemployed. In September 1998 a bilateral agreement was reached between Ukraine and Uzbekistan on this question. As a result some 80,000 Crimean Tartars from Uzbekistan were granted Ukrainian citizenship. The problem remains with Crimean Tartar from other CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) countries. There are still approximately 90,000 Crimean Tartars who do not possess Ukrainian citizenship. On the surface the problem of citizenship seems to be a bureaucratic one.

At present, the number of Crimean Tartars living in Crimea is around 300,000. In 1995 it was estimated that 400,000 to 600,000 Crimean Tartars would return. The actual figure of returnees is around 50,000 to 60,000. However, the Tartar segment of the population, considering both natural growth and immigration, is the fastest growing ethnic group. So, it is possible that in the next 15–20 years the demographic balance will change significantly. An alarmist report has predicted a radicalisation of the Tartar community. Scenarios have been created and range from a “Ukrainian Switzerland” to a "Ukrainian Kosovo" model.

This is due to ethnic groups’ reactions to what they see as the “Ukrainisation” of society. It is a defensive reaction, which is aimed at protecting and preserving cultural uniqueness. The increasing use of ethnic identity as a key marker in Ukraine means that the different ethnic groups, which are eventually defined as “Others”, become defensive and more open to calls for mobilisation in defence of their identity.

Developments and divisions since the Orange Revolution

The Orange Revolution in 2004 and the organisation of protests and counter-protests between the Blue and Orange camps was a more vivid expression of the political and ethnic divisions in the country. It was a spectacle of competing narratives – democracy versus authoritarianism, heroes versus villains, West versus East, and creating a new future versus being stuck in the past. Viktor Yushchenko and Julia Tymoshenko won an “Orange victory”, which soon degenerated into in-fighting, dashed the hopes for positive change in Ukrainian political culture. The Ukrainianisation process was accelerated, such as the decision to put the city of Sevastopol under the control of the President of Ukraine. The “villain” of the 2004 events, Viktor Yanukovych, won the 2010 presidential elections, which ultimately were deemed fair by OSCE.

One of the laws passed by Yanukovych in 2012 related to the use of regional languages. In 1991, when Ukraine gained its independence, Ukrainian was the only official language. The law allowed for the official use of minority languages at the regional level (if spoken by a minimum of 10 per cent of the population), including Bulgarian, Hungarian, Romanian and Tatar, in addition to Russian. A similar case exists with the use of Albanian within Macedonia. After the passage of the controversial law, 13 of the 27 regions in Ukraine adopted Russian as a second official language.

The most recent event in the Ukrainian revolution, given the brand Euromaidan, has once more upped the ante with regard to questions pertaining to ethnicity and identity; although, the original reasons for many taking to the streets are legitimate grievances concerning a deeply troubled economy and abysmal governance. Some of the problems with outside understanding and reporting of the events are obvious, such as the notion of Yanukovych being “pro-Russian”, which is a serious misjudgement of his leanings and his relationship with Russia. He had long played the EU and Russia against one another, whilst reaping the rewards of being in office. The cold reception he received by Putin under his current exile, seems to confirm this observation.

One of the events, which were initiated by the interim authorities in the Ukrainian Parliament, was the proposal to scrap the 2012 regional languages law. This caused a foreign
as well as a domestic outcry. The move was denounced by Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania (all with ethnic minorities present in Ukraine) — in addition to Russia. Perhaps as a reaction to this adverse international reception of the bill, Ukraine's acting President Oleksandr Turchynov said that he would not pass the proposal into law until a new bill to protect all languages was passed. However, the damage has been done: Russian speakers are especially wary of the new interim authorities (more so given the lack of representation of Southern and Eastern regions in the government).

This effectively widens the gap in terms of an ethnic and identity divide. For instance, the programme advertised by Soboda very clearly makes this an issue, especially concerning the proposal to identify the ethnicity of citizens on their birth certificates and passports, and to make "Ukrainophile" activities criminal offences. The Russian Ministry of Regional Development has also opened a helpline that Ukrainians can call if they wish to relocate to Russia because they feel unsafe in Ukraine. Around 1,000 calls were received in a two-day period. The problem is further complicated in that there are plenty of cases where ethnic Ukrainians have Russian as a native language. This has the effect of making the process of weeding out signs and expressions of Russianness even more problematic. This causes models and options to be proposed, such as secession (Czechoslovakia and former Soviet Union) or decentralisation (Swiss case emphasized).

This short introduction to the complexities of ethnicity and history, together with its significance for the contemporary events unfolding in Ukraine, is just a brief overview of the state of divisions and tensions. To end this, the reflections of two Ukrainians — Elena Goroshko and Igor Poddubnyi, from Kharkiv — shall be considered. The complexity of history, different ethnicities and the choices or decisions that are being currently made, exert a profound influence upon the political landscape and psychology of the people in Ukraine. Soviet-era notions of nationalities (ethnicity) and identity are being exploited more and more in Ukraine, which serves as some form of benchmark to measure "Ukrainianism", tied to the notion of loyalty to Kyiv and the Ukrainian state. In the process, the formation of Us versus Them is very apparent, which is in the process of threatening the country by widening the existing divisions in society. Therefore, it can be said that the notion of being a Ukrainian has gradually shifted from civic to ethnic notions.

Notes


5. Ibid., p. 88


9. Ibid.


13. Ibid., p. 304.


17. Ibid.


23. Shanghina, "The Demographic Situation in Ukraine."
