

Europe and the Ukrainian Civic National Identity

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The Revolution of Dignity in February 2014 strengthened the shift of Ukrainian society towards the EU, which was presented as a geopolitical and civilisational choice. This choice is strongly intertwined with the ongoing Ukrainian nation and state rebuilding process based on civic credentials. The EU policy towards Ukraine should be much more aware of a close correlation between these two fundamental processes and their complexities.

According to many opinion polls the support of Ukrainian society for accession to the EU increased considerably after the Revolution of Dignity – even though the process had started after the Orange Revolution in 2004 - and reached the highest ever level in autumn 2014. The rise of support for the accession to the EU could be explained by the impact of Euromaydan and the defensive war against the Russian aggression. On the other hand, the loss of the most pro-Russian regions (parts of Donbass, the Crimea) also contributed to the pro-European shift of Ukrainian society. In autumn 2014 around 60 percent of Ukrainians endorsed their country's accession to the EU whereas 15 percent were against. Afterwards the European orientation weakened slightly because of the disillusion of those Ukrainians who expected an acceleration of the integration process immediately after the Revolution of Dignity. But the decline has stopped and seems reversible in more favourable conditions. Since 2015 in many opinion polls the proportion of supporters and opponents of the EU integration has remained on a similar level, namely more than 50 percent in favour of vs. more than 25 percent against EU accession. By comparison, according to the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in 2005 around 33 percent of Ukrainians supported the accession of the country to the EU and almost 40 percent were against. At the same time, a positive attitude towards the accession to the Eurasian Union under Russia's leadership decreased dramatically and currently enjoys the support of only 15 percent of Ukrainians (55 percent against).

On the other hand, Ukraine remains regionally deeply divided between west, centre, east and south, though these cultural cleavages have decreased substantially in recent years. Although these regions are internally diverse it may be said that the west and to a lesser degree the centre have a clear pro-EU orientation. Meanwhile the south and the east are deeply divided on that issue. In the opinion polls (for instance, powered by Rating Group) concerning a possible EU membership referendum around 40-45 percent of Ukrainians in these parts of the country would vote 'yes' and less than 40 percent 'no'. Unfortunately, the strongest rejection of the EU integration exists in large cities such as Odessa and Kharkiv, where about 50 percent of voters do not endorse membership and only 30 percent give the green light. On the other hand, the difference between south and east on the one hand and centre and west on the other will probably gradually soften. Young Ukrainians are particularly strong supporters of EU integration and the regional divergences among them are considerably less prominent. The turnout in elections, the scale of engagement in the revolution and the reaction to war confirmed that the west and centre distinguish themselves by a definitely stronger level of social activism than the rest of the country. In the long-term perspective, higher fertility rates and longer life expectancy as well as a younger average age will make the leadership of the west and centre in Ukraine even more prominent and by default may entrench a pro-European orientation of the country.

Nation re-building

The 'European shift' of Ukrainian society is inconceivable without a nation rebuilding process taking place in the country. This process is based on the rejection of the totalitarian Soviet legacy mixed with a Russian imperial identity. Recent opinion polls show a considerable strengthening of self-identification of people as Ukrainians and of identification with Ukrainian culture and language, especially among young people. At the same time a democratic state based on the rule of law gained the status of a key value for Ukrainian national identity. Its central position stems from the fact that it must be defended against Russian authoritarianism and military aggression and had to be built almost from scratch after the Revolution of Dignity.

The rallying of Ukrainian citizens of various ethnic and religious origins behind the common state idea has become the precondition of its survival. The citizen-oriented emerging Ukrainian national identity fits well into the EU model of civic nationalism which accepts religious and ethnic diversity. In fact, the Ukrainian nation-building process contradicts a widespread stereotype, popular in the West implying that Eastern Europe is haunted by an ethnic, exclusive nationalism. In a comprehensive sociological research published by the Pew Research Survey in Spring 2017, more than half of Ukrainians endorsed the statement: 'It is better for us if society consists of people from different nationalities, religions and cultures', whereas 35 percent preferred the opinion that 'it is better for us if society consists of people from the same nationality, and who have the same religion and culture.' Moreover, Ukrainians distinguished themselves in contradiction to central Europeans by a massive and unequivocal willingness to accept Jews, Muslims and Roma as citizens of their country. The difference was enormous in the case of Muslims. The openness of Ukrainians towards other ethnicities and religions does not constrain itself to declarations. Jews, Crimean Tatars, Armenians, Georgians and Muslims from the former Soviet Union are greatly overrepresented in the business, political and cultural elites of the country. To name just a few examples: Prime Minister Volodymyr Groysman is a practicing Jew; Rinat Akhmetov, Kazan Tatar, is the richest man in the country; Jamala, a Crimean Tatar singer won the Eurovision contest for Ukraine in 2016 and Serhiy Nigoyan, the first protestor killed by special police forces on Maydan on 22 January 2014 on the anniversary of Ukrainian Independence and became a hero of the 'Heavenly Hundred' (the official name for people who were killed during the Revolution of Dignity), was Armenian.

Russia, Putin and the Soviet Union

The Russian aggression resulted in a radical rise of Ukrainian antipathy towards Putin and - to a lesser degree - towards Russia. In the surveys, Ukrainians associate Russia with dictatorship and imperialism contrary to the Ukrainian political values (liberty, democracy), though Russia's image has slightly improved recently. Moreover, most of Ukrainians differentiate between Russia as a state and ordinary Russians, despite the fact, that the latter have a much more negative attitude towards Ukraine than vice versa. In fact, according to the opinion polls conducted by the Razumkov Centre, almost half of ethnic Ukrainians still perceive Russians as a friendly nation and more than 20 percent of them even believe that they are one nation. This situation constitutes a main challenge to the Ukrainian national identity but also to a pro-European orientation and democratisation because most pro-Russian groups cultivate nostalgia for the totalitarian Soviet regime, revering Joseph Stalin as an efficient statesman (around 25 percent). Moreover, opinion polls show that in the south and east, large sections of society are still indifferent towards or ambivalent about these issues.

A new Ukrainian politics of memory constitutes a key instrument aiming at breaking with the influence of Soviet legacy on Ukrainian society. One of the instruments to achieve this goal is the rehabilitation of the memory about the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) which was established by the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists-Bandera (OUN-Bandera - called after its leader Stepan Bandera) in 1942 and fought for the independence of Ukraine against various Polish groups, Nazi Germany and particularly against the Soviets. The Ukrainian authorities justify their positive approach towards the legacy of UPA by its unequivocal anti-Soviet stance, its heroic fight against Soviet occupation (important in the current time of war) and its absolute support of a separate Ukrainian national identity. The official politics of memory together with grassroots activism of several NGOs contributed to a substantial improvement of the attitude towards UPA among Ukrainians. Currently, according to a Rating Group opinion poll from autumn 2017, almost 55 percent of Ukrainians believe that UPA defended the homeland whereas close to 25 percent do not agree with this opinion (mostly in the south and east).

Immediately after the outbreak of the Revolution of Dignity, Russia launched a massive propaganda campaign against Ukraine accusing it of fascism because of the support for UPA. This narrative gained a certain resonance in the EU. However, the criticism in the EU of the rather uncritical approach of Ukrainian authorities towards UPA cannot be explained only by the influence of Russian propaganda. Indeed, OUN-B at the beginning of the Second World War cooperated with Nazi Germany and many of its members and supporters were involved in massacres of Jews. UPA also committed many war crimes, particularly against Poles, including those which should be recognised as genocide (yet, the Polish side is also responsible for war crimes, even though to a lesser degree). UPA also waged a bloody civil war against other Ukrainian political formations. On the other hand it should be pointed out that UPA's ideology evaluated gradually from an integral nationalism (a soft version of fascism) to an approval of the democratic system and rights of national minorities. UPA also launched a guerilla war against the Nazis. After the World War, it gained a massive support in western Ukraine, becoming one of the largest anti-communist partisan movements in eastern Europe. Many non-Ukrainians from the Soviet nations joined UPA because of its vision of their liberation from Soviet rule (under the motto: 'Freedom for man, Freedom for nations'). UPA members and sympathisers suffered terribly, particularly on the hand of the Soviets. Moreover, the official support for the cult of UPA is often greatly overestimated. For instance, among more than 50 thousand street names which were changed after the Revolution of Dignity, only 0,07% of them were named after Stepan Bandera.

In consequence, the complex legacy of UPA cannot be defined as exclusively negative, to be totally rejected. In the Ukrainian context it would mean surrender to the Russian-Soviet worldview which undermines the national separateness of Ukrainians and in consequence their European identity and democratic credentials. Paradoxically, in sociological surveys there is a very strong correlation within Ukrainian society between pro-European orientation and positive attitude towards UPA. However, on the other hand, at the end of the day, the entrenchment of the civic national identity in Ukraine requires an honest confrontation with the dark 'ethnic' and nationalistic side of UPA legacy. The main goal of EU politics towards Ukraine should be to encourage this process, but in an intelligent way.