

Yulia Tyshchenko
Head of the UCIPR Board

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The Ukrainian Crisis: between the Identity Policy and Confrontation to the “Russian World”

Résumé

Cet article analyse les principales raisons de l'actuel conflit en Ukraine orientale, qu'il est devenu difficile de qualifier de « local ». Il étudie le rôle de la Russie comme catalyseur du conflit, via l'exportation de l'idéologie et l'engagement dans des actions militaires dans l'est de l'Ukraine. L'article se focalise aussi sur les raisons internes, partiellement fondées sur des facteurs d'identité régionale, et décrit des attributs identitaires tels que l'ambivalence de la société ukrainienne ; le terreau social de la confrontation ; le rôle des élites régionales dans l'escalade du conflit ; et la quête de valeurs communes pour renouveler la confiance.

Abstract

The article analyzes the main reasons for the current conflict in eastern Ukraine, which is difficult to call “local” today. It studies the role of Russia as the catalyst of the conflict through the export of ideology and involvement in military actions in the East of Ukraine. The article also focuses on internal reasons partially based on regional identity factors and describes such identity attributes as the ambivalence of the Ukrainian society; social grounds for confrontation; the role of regional elites in the conflict escalation; and the search for common values to renew the trust.



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Ukraine: challenges for identity

The illegal annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and the war in the East pose challenges faced by Ukraine on the 23rd year of its new history. So far, Ukraine has been one of the rare CIS countries without military conflicts. In the mid-1990s, Ukraine could cope with the Crimean crisis and defeat separatism on the peninsula. Yet, the current events threaten the people’s life, vital reforms, and the very existence of the country and its sovereignty. It is more than difficult to predict the consequences of the conflict in eastern Ukraine and the possibility of Crimea’s return. Despite the internal roots of the conflict in the East, there are also external factors. A very significant one is support for separatism in Donbass on the part of Moscow officials. The support is expressed in the form of open military assistance; there is massive propaganda of the separatist actions, hybrid war. Hence, one of the country’s key goals is finding a common political identity and its elements that would unite the nation.

Ukraine’s need for reconciliation, common values and existence patterns, a clear-cut identity policy and humanitarian reforms, which would ensure unity in diversity along with comprehensive political reforms, is obvious. There are grounds for this in multicultural Ukraine. Ukrainians in different regions are united by their perception of the country as their Motherland. Almost 90% of citizens of the eastern, western and southern regions identify Ukraine as their Motherland regardless of regional and ethnic factors. These figures have remained nearly the same for many years. Specifically, in 2007, 99.5% of Ukrainians saw themselves and their future within Ukraine; 65.5% of respondents were convinced that differences between the regions would not lead to the country’s disintegration; 61.9% of pollsters disagreed that western and eastern Ukrainians are two

different peoples (only 6.4 % of pollsters supported this idea)¹.

In 2014, after the Maidan events and actually at the moment of Crimea’s annexation, sociological surveys have demonstrated almost identical data. Specifically, the overwhelming majority of the population (89%) – from the West (97%) to the Donbas (89%) – perceives Ukraine as their Motherland².

Sociological surveys have also demonstrated the mythologization of theses about the dominating doctrine of separation from Ukraine allegedly prevailing among the Donbas residents. According to data of the sociological survey conducted in March 2014, *the absolute majority* of Ukrainians in the western (94%), central (82%), eastern and southern regions *does not support* the idea of separation of the southern and eastern regions from Ukraine and their annexation to Russia³. Yet, 52% of Donbas residents are against this idea, whereas 27% of respondents share it, which is almost three times higher compared to eastern (without Donbas) and southern Ukraine (11% and 10% respectively).

After Maidan, the number of patriots has grown. Now, 86% of pollsters believe themselves to be patriots⁴. 50% of respondents identify themselves as patriots, another 36% of respondents say they are rather patriots. 6% of Ukrainians feel that they are not patriots and 8% of pollsters cannot say for sure. In general, the number of people relating themselves to patriots has grown from 81% to 86% in the past year and from 76% to 86% as compared to 2010. At the same time, the number of those who are not patriots has decreased by nearly two times (from 15% in 2010 to 6% in 2014).

This indicates the broader social mobilization against the background of the domestic conflict and undeclared war with Russia on the one hand, and raises the issue of understanding of patriotism and common vision of Ukrainians for the country’s future on the other hand.

1. Data of the sociological survey on “Identity of Ukrainian Citizens: the State and Changes” carried out by the Razumkov Center, May-June 2007.

2. http://dif.org.ua/ua/polls/2014_polls/chi-vlastivi-ukraincjam-nastroi-separatizmu_-htm

3. http://dif.org.ua/ua/polls/2014_polls/chi-vlastivi-ukraincjam-nastroi-separatizmu_-htm

4. Dynamics of patriotic sentiments, Rating sociological group, August 2014, http://ratinggroup.com.ua/upload/files/RG_Patriotyzm_082014.pdf Patriotism is defined as the feeling of pride for the country, the feeling of involvement.

It has to be mentioned that however paradoxically, the issue of European integration could become a consolidating factor. Say, if the problem of Ukraine's European choice is submitted for a referendum, 54.5% of respondents would support EU membership compared to 23.9% of pollsters who would favor the accession to the Customs Union⁵. In the Donbas, this figure would be much lower although even there the general vector is towards the European Union.

Ironically, citizens from different regions are consolidated by socio-political apprehensions. One of them is the crisis of trust in political institutions. Residents all over Ukraine stress the following risks: low living standards, corruption, absence of social lifts, poverty and unemployment (only 59.2% of the able-bodied Ukrainians aged 15-70 are employed), social polarization, absence of social security and opportunities to secure the future of their children, and economic stagnation.

Western Ukrainians consider European integration and the elimination of authoritarian trends to be a way out, whereas residents of the eastern regions prefer to rely on ties with Russia, nostalgia for the Soviet past and usual rules of the game and interpret the loss of Soviet symbols as a threat to their regional identity⁶. The search for common values should also be based on the development of democracy and the fight against corruption. The success of the formation of a political nation depends, to a large extent, on finding a social compromise on social norms, standards and legitimacy of the power as well as on parallel processes of the country's democratization and creation of a consolidated democracy, which poses a challenge in split societies.

Conflict catalysts: from geopolitics to identity

Contradictions in the partially split Ukrainian society could be seen since the very moment of Ukraine's independence, although they have not entailed sharp conflicts or been destructive in nature over 23 years of the new Ukrainian history. So, what has served as a

5. <http://www.depo.ua/rus/politics/prozapadnye-nastroeniya-rastut-v-nato-uzhe-hotyat-40-ukraintsev--26062014134300>

6. See, for example, the works of Mykola Riabchuk: "Two of Ukraine", 2004 <http://www.ji-magazine.lviv.ua/dyskuija/arhiv/ryabchuk.htm>, DONBAS ethno-political dimension http://www.ipiend.gov.ua/img/monograph/file/donbas_181.pdf, 2014

catalyst, what is the role of internal and external political factors? Answers to these questions will be asked and studied for long both in Ukraine and abroad.

Yet, the theses reproduced in the Russian discourse and disseminated outwards – such as the violations of the rights of Russians in Ukraine or Maidan as a U.S. project – are not the real reasons for the conflict.

External factors

It is also a mistake to consider the conflict in eastern Ukraine to be domestic, as interpreted by official Moscow. Today, there is evidence that Russians have been taking part in military operations in some Donbas cities and towns and that the Russian Federation has been providing weapons. Besides, many leaders of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) or Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) are Russian citizens closely involved in the Transdnestrian conflict earlier on.

To a large extent, the current conflict has been hastened by Russia's interference and its articulation of the "Russian world" (*russkiy mir*) concept in the direct and ideological sense (distinct Russian civilization, values of commune, state, history, religion), consequences of curtailment of democracy under Victor Yanukovich multiplied by the geopolitical accents of Russia in building a common Eurasian political and humanitarian space, formation of a joint Eurasian economic space that also stipulated joint cultural space. In this game, Ukraine and some post-Soviet countries have been viewed by Russia exclusively as objects of political influence to be located in the sphere of interests of the former Russian Empire.

Also, one of the reasons are Russian domestic problems, i.e. efforts to divert attention of the Russian society from social and economic problems, the deficit of democracy and to increase the popularity of Russia's ruling elite and of Vladimir Putin as 'the collectors of Russian lands'.

There are a number of other reasons for the current crisis of relations between Ukraine and Russia, which has attributes of not only a local, Ukrainian conflict. Actually, the Russian Federation is trying to revise the results of the Cold War. The Russian media and Russian propaganda portray this as a sort of revenge, getting up from one's knees, desire to make others respect Russia, the way this had been in the past. The situation in post-Soviet countries has traditionally been considered through the

prism of Russian geopolitical interests – ranging from fears of Russian elites for security caused by NATO’s enlargement to the East to economic apprehensions, e.g. the signing of the Association Agreement by Ukraine. This policy has lasted for more than 20 years, which poses risks of instability and further escalation of tensions at the borders of the EU. Even these very borders are not safe according to some statements by Russian Slavophiles such as the ideologist of “the Russian world”, Aleksandr Dugin, who speaks about the anti-European revolution and a common Russian space “from Lisbon to Vladivostok”⁷. Vladimir Putin has made it clear that the Russian identity is completely opposite of the western: it is a conciliar identity with the emphasis not on the individual but on the nation as the organic, spiritual and historical whole. It is the subject of history.

The insufficiently tough reaction of international institutions towards the Russian “effort” in Georgia in 2008 has led to the situation in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. And it is obvious that by no means this is the end of the conflict.

It has become possible to implement the above scenario of the Russian Federation in Ukraine in view of the acute internal contradictions (identity factors), regional specificities and their perception. By the way, a special mention has to be made about reconfiguration in sociology of the traditional main regions of the country and their increase to five. This has occurred, according to respondents, because of ‘the separation’ of the new/old Donbas region, which makes it impossible to apply the West-Center-North-Southern East scheme traditionally used in analysis over the past ten years.

Internal reasons

The centuries-old absence of statehood and Ukraine’s having been a part of different states (those often at variance) could not but tell upon the collective consciousness, identity phenomenon and regional identities.

At the social level, such ambivalence has lain in traditional (on the post-Soviet space) views of the same social groups on the market development, government paternalism, European integration and accession to the Russia-Belarus alliance. The population of different

regions has slightly different views on the memory, language and foreign policies as well as on the integration into the EU or NATO. 64% of respondents support Ukraine’s EU membership, 17% - Customs Union membership, 19% are undecided. Starting with April 2014, the number of EU supporters is growing (from 55% in April to 64%) and simultaneous decrease in the number of the Customs Union supporters (from 24 in April to 17%). Majority of respondents in the West, North, Center and East support the EU membership. Only in Donbas majority supports the Customs Union membership.

If a referendum on NATO membership were to be conducted today, half of the respondents (51%) would have voted in favor, 25% - against. The remaining 25% are either undecided or would not have taken part in such a referendum. Starting with April of this year, the number of NATO supporters has been on the constant rise. The highest level of support was recorded in November (from 40% in April to 51%) and the number of opponents has been decreasing simultaneously (from 46% in April to 25%). NATO membership enjoys the most support in the West, North and Center. In the East the numbers of supporters and opponents are about equal, and in the South and Donbass the number of opponents is bigger⁸.

Different public opinion surveys demonstrate that residents of the western regions are more inclined to share the values of democracy and freedom, social activity, and dominance of the country’s integrity over the regional needs (such preferences were underscored in the western regions compared to eastern ones as early as 2004). Meanwhile, the population of eastern Ukraine (the Donbas region) is more conservative and has more trust in people. In the Donbas, individual social apprehensions have grown into social fears and triggered off the conflict – the Ukrainian Vendée, if the historical allusions are suitable in this respect.

In 2014, the above contradictions have become acute in the regional dimension. For instance, in western and central Ukraine, every fifth-sixth respondent agrees with the presence of deep contradictions potentially provoking the country’s split, whereas in the eastern and southern regions, this opinion is shared 2-3 times more often. In the Donbas, the number of such Ukrainians in April has constituted 58%. Although these different

7. Greater Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok, Aleksander Dugin, <http://www.komitet.net.ua/article/61673/>

8. <http://ratinggroup.com.ua/products/politic/data/entry/14117/>

sentiments, contradictions and negative regional stereotypes have existed throughout the whole history of Ukraine's independence, they had never ended in irreconcilable conflicts and confrontation.

Another factor of the conflict in the East is its stimulation by eastern political elites affiliated to the Party of the Regions and the Communist Party of Ukraine. After the stunning collapse of the Yanukovich regime, they have sensed a threat to their political predominance and sources of super-profits. If Ukraine could in many ways be considered a façade democracy, there were, especially after 2004, civil society institutions, relatively independent media and different political centers of influence. The presidency of Victor Yanukovich was marked with the curtailment of democracy, actions based on the principle of winner-takes-it-all and total orientation towards the group in power close to "the Family".

Besides, in some cases, the role of regional politicians has been rather controversial as they stimulated the conflict and separatism while simultaneously attempting to present themselves as peacemakers and thus increase their political popularity in the eyes of the new Kyiv authorities in order to get additional political and economic influence. This tendency is observed today.

The conflict in the Donbas has been caused, among other things, by the social factor. The Donbas makes up 9% of Ukraine's territory with 15% of its population and 16% of its GDP. Yet, corruption has turned it into the most subsidized region of the country: last year, the region's proceeds amounted to UAH 8.2 billion, whereas subsidies were estimated at UAH 22.5 billion. Parallel to this, the region was de-industrialized: the closing of enterprises, social lumpenization, cultivation of the culture of poverty and lawlessness. Hence, another reason for the conflict lies in social aspects. Unemployment in Donetsk oblast is higher and in Luhansk it is clearly lower than average unemployment in the country, and in 2013 it comprised over 8% (based on ILO methodology)⁹. Besides, the Donbas has been historically oriented towards economic ties with the Russian Federation and nostalgia for the Soviet past, the denial of which is perceived as a threat to the regional identity. Furthermore, political elites have actually respective sentiments and used socio-regional

and identity apprehensions to mobilize Donbas voters for elections, often acting on the basis of the "us and them" paradigm. A civil society has not been developed in the region, being represented instead by a quasi-civil society intertwined with political-oligarchic groups maintaining the poverty and uncertainty in the Donbas and successfully exploiting it for the purpose of political mobilization.

As a rule, such scenarios play an important role in political rhetoric and political technological schemes like "the division between us and them". Specifically, one of many multidimensional strands of political rhetoric is that in the country, there are regions with completely opposite visions of the future, geopolitical orientations, opinions on historical events, language, cultural and social values. This is the issue of distorted national identity. At the same time, the issue of shaping a common national identity and its regional dimensions in today's Ukraine is multifaceted. The specific "division" line is drawn in the social consciousness rather than along the Dniepr river and depends not so much on ethnic identity as on age, influences, opinions, language and cultural traditions cohabitating in the social consciousness. The symbolic 'border' lies along the line of value and worldview orientations typical for such a specific community as the Soviet people, which was formed under the USSR and which is now attempting to reproduce itself in contrast to the Ukrainian political nation, which is at the stage of formation.

Russia, language and the "Russian world" in the Ukrainian context

It is possible to discuss the real reasons for the current situation in Ukraine but it is obvious what factors have *not* caused the conflict. Specifically, these are violations of the rights of Russians in Ukraine or Russian-speaking Ukrainians. This thesis is actively used by Russia as a reason for its interference though in fact, it is nothing but a myth of the information war. Nevertheless, the language issue is a very important identity indicator in the country.

It has to be remembered that by its ethno-demographic structure, Ukraine belongs to multi-ethnic societies (77.8% - the national majority and 22.2% - national minorities). At the same time, Ukraine's multi-ethnicity is rather relative as according to data of the 2001 National Census, ethnic Russians constitute

9. http://www.ier.com.ua/files//publications/Policy_Briefing_Series/TN_04_2014_ukr.pdf

the lion's share of national minorities (77.8%) and make up 17.2 % or about 8 million of the total population of Ukraine. The share of other minorities amounts to about 4.5% of the population. The regional dimensions of Ukraine's ethnic composition have specific features, e.g. in Crimea, Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars compose only 24% and 13% of the population respectively.

Until recently, the attitude of ethnic communities towards each other has been measured by the level of socio-cultural distance (the so-called Bogardus scale). The results of annual sociological studies carried out by this method give reasons to state that the social distance between ethnic groups in Ukraine has been the same for long and that, at least, the largest communities permanently residing in the country are willing to participate in close contacts with members of other ethnic groups. As for ethnic Russians, they have always been in the area of comfort and respect in Ukraine.

Hence, the conflict is not based on ethnic or language self-determination. By the way, according to data of the 2014 sociological surveys, 56.5% of pollsters support Ukrainian as the only national language and the free use of Russian. 37.6% of respondents are not against the option to have two national languages, Ukrainian and Russian¹⁰.

Russia has raised the issue of the Russian-speaking population since the time of the Kuchma administration in the late 1990s and it never resulted in conflicts. The language situation is rather heterogeneous as there are three mega-language groups in the country: Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians, Russian-speaking Ukrainians and Russian-speaking Russians. The 2001 National Census indicates that over 5.5 million ethnic Ukrainians consider Russian to be their mother tongue. Actually, they all live in cities and towns. It has to be mentioned that in the eastern and southern regions, the Ukrainian-speaking population is "a minority in the minority".

According to data of the 2001 National Census, Russian is the mother tongue for 1,612,243 out of 2,744,149 residents of the Donetsk region (58.75%) and 727,403 out of 1,472,376 Ukrainians residing in the Luhansk region (49.4%). In the Kharkiv region, the situation is slightly different: only 528,914 out of 2,048,699 Ukrainians or 25.82% consider

Russian to be their native language.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has recently pointed out that Russia will always defend ethnic Russians in Ukraine and Ukrainians. Yet, Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea have also been justified by the need "to defend Russians", notwithstanding the absence of objective reasons for and threats to the Russian majority in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (ARC). At that time, Russian news agencies and pro-Russian politicians have constantly referred to the abolition, by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, of the law "On the Principles of the State Language Policy", which gave Russian the regional status in 12 Ukrainian regions, as a threat to the Russian language. However, the President of Ukraine has not signed the bill and the law.

It has to be mentioned that at the moment of Crimea's annexation and, besides, under the Constitution of the ARC, the Russian language had official status and there were more than 600 secondary schools offering tuition in Russian, 6 schools providing instruction in Ukrainian and 16 secondary education institutions with the Crimean Tatar language of education.

After Crimea's annexation, Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars have become the most vulnerable groups. The latter are often called "Tatars of Crimea" in the Russian official discourse, which actually denies the fact that they are the indigenous people of the peninsula, whereas Ukrainians are being repressed and practically ousted from Crimea. Today, no first grader in Crimea will study in Ukrainian for all Ukrainian gymnasiums have been switched to the Russian language of tuition.

As demonstrated by sociological surveys, notwithstanding theses about threats to the Russian language or rights of the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine, 71.5% of respondents polled in the 8 Ukrainian regions have negatively answered the question "Do you believe that the rights of the Russian-speaking population are being restricted in Ukraine?" The Donetsk region traditionally takes the lead in the number of those who have given positive answers, (39.9%) followed by the Luhansk (29.5%) and the Kharkiv (24.8%) regions¹¹.

11. http://www.razumkov.org.ua/ukr/news.php?news_id=466The opinion poll has been conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) on 10-15 April, 2014. 3,232 respondents aged 18 and above from 160 localities of the 8 southern and eastern

10. Most Ukrainians support a common national language, European integration and unitary state but oppose the accession to NATO (data of sociological poll, 22 April, 2014).

About one half of pollsters (49.9%) doubt that Russia defends the interests of Russian-speaking citizens in the Southern East of Ukraine, whereas another half is divided between those who hold the opposite opinion (32.6%) and those who hesitate to answer (16%). 47% and 44.2% of Ukrainians in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions respectively say they need Russia's help, whereas 53% of Ukrainians in the Kharkiv region do not require any protection at all. As for the share of citizens who are forcible protection, the above regions are followed by the Dnipropetrovsk – 65.6%, Zaporizhzhya – 53.3%, Mykolaiv – 71.5%, Odessa – 52.3% and Kherson regions – 61.1%.

The conflict in Ukraine does not have features of the one against Russians or Russian-speaking Ukrainian citizens. Moreover, the conflict performs a consolidation function for Ukrainians irrespective of their ethnic or language identity. Numerous examples of criticism against the war in the East and the Russian policy on the part of Russian-speaking Ukrainians are being reported.

In contrast to information on “Novorossiya” highlighted in the Russian media, the conflict in the East is not viewed from the ethnic angle in Ukraine. Moreover, in the East as well as in Russian-speaking Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk and Odessa, i.e. regions which Vladimir Putin would like to annex to Novorossiya, the situation is completely different compared to that in Donetsk and Luhansk. No negative attitudes towards Russians are reported in Russian-speaking Kyiv as well.

Yet, the undeclared war between the Russian Federation and Ukraine amends the mutual perception of citizens. Specifically, Ukraine's attitude towards Russia and the Russian population's attitude towards Ukraine have considerably deteriorated recently. Yet, the

regions of Ukraine (Odessa, Mykolaiv, Kherson, Kharkiv, Luhansk, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhya, and Donetsk) have been polled. The sampling error does not exceed 0.95%.

Author

Head of the UCIPR Board,
Head of the Supporting Democratic Processes
Program
Ukrainian Center for Independent Political
Research

attitude of Ukrainians to Russia is better than that of Russians to Ukraine. The share of Ukrainians positive about Russia has sharply reduced from 78% in February to 52% in May 2014. At the same time, the share of Ukrainians negative about Russia and Russians has almost tripled (from 13% in February to 38% in May 2014).

In turn in Russia, the share of Russians with a positive attitude towards Ukraine has dropped by almost two times, from 66% to 35%, whereas the Russians with a negative attitude has increased in the same period from 26% to 49%. Besides, as reported by the Levada Center, 69% of Russians support the leadership of the Russian Federation in the military conflict with Ukraine, 90% of Russian pollsters welcome Crimea's annexation to Russia and 86% of respondents believe the annexation to be the result of the free expression of the will of Crimeans¹².

The above situation raises difficult questions and poses complex problems as to future attitudes between the two states and populations because the current conflict will definitely tell upon the mutual perception of Russians and Ukrainians for at least one generation.

However, these specific features political struggle and social factors would have not maintained the conflict (as well as the absence of opportunities for the dialogue and search for peaceful solutions), if it were not for external political factors. These catalysts include Russian influences and actions, propaganda, ideology and open military confrontation with Ukraine. In any event, all wars end in peace and despite the current extremely serious challenges going beyond the bounds of the local conflict, Ukraine is expected to go a long way in finding a compromise, carrying out reforms, building a consolidated democracy and approaching the EU.◇

12. Dynamics of Ukraine's attitude toward Russia and Russian population's attitude toward Ukraine, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology

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