



## Ukraine's 'muddling through': National identity and postcommunist transition

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### ABSTRACT

The paper argues that the profound identity split strongly influences Ukraine's postcommunist development, precluding effectively consolidation of any political system – either democratic or authoritarian. In most cases, the identity issue supersedes all other issues on the agendas of political parties and largely determines the character and results of electoral rivalry, and the way in which both domestic and international politics is viewed and articulated. The paper examines historical roots of competing identities in Ukraine, their essence and impact on two different visions of Ukrainian past, future, and “Ukrainianness” itself. The use and misuse of identity issues by Ukrainian authorities is a special concern of the paper that stresses the need of alternative policy aimed at a national reconciliation.

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Of more than two dozen former communist countries that embarked on a democratic transition in 1989–1991, Ukraine represents probably the most ambiguous case, being neither a clear-cut success story – like its postcommunist neighbors to the west, nor a complete failure – like its neighbors to the east. All the theories of democratic transition suit the case well as long as we try to explain Ukraine's lagging behind the more successful countries of Central East Europe, or its unquestionable advance over sultanistic regimes of Central Asia. Cultural-civilizational differences loom particularly large: it is hardly an accident that the most advanced postcommunist countries had historically belonged to Western Empires and, respectively, to the Western realm of Christianity (either Protestant like Latvia and Estonia, or Catholic like Poland, Hungary, Lithuania, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Slovenia). Nor is it an accident that the main failures occurred in the Islamic realm of former Soviet Central Asia: all the newly independent nations there lost even modest democratic achievements of Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika and reverted back to repressive and highly corrupted authoritarian rule.

The major challenge for explanatory theories comes not from these two extremes – either positive or negative cases – but, rather, from the middle group of postcommunist countries whose transition is aptly defined as one of ‘muddling through’ (Motyl, 1998; Arel, 1998; Lushnycky and Riabchuk, 2009; Dyczok, 2000). All of them, perhaps also not incidentally, belong to the civilizational realm of Eastern Christianity (with a minor exception of mainly Islamic Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina that historically, however, had been also Christian). All these countries, in their past, had been parts of an Oriental (Ottoman) or a semi-Oriental (Russian) empires – with virtually no tradition of rule of law, constitutionalism, liberalism, and governmental accountability. Some tradition of independent statehood may have given certain advantages to Bulgaria and Romania for today's democratic transition that outweigh the advantages of Belarus and Ukraine in terms of economic development and other hallmarks of modernization. But what advantages were there in the case of Macedonia that made her transition more successful than that of Ukraine, let alone Belarus?

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Neither cultural ('path-dependence') nor modernization theories help to answer this question. Perhaps only the institutional approach can shed some light by drawing our attention to institutional reforms carried out in the Balkan states more coherently than in the western post-Soviet republics (i.e., Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova). This is an important difference, because in all other terms, primarily cultural, all of them belong to the same realm of Eastern Christianity and of historical outreach of non-Western (and essentially anti-Western) empires. Yet, the comparison of these two sub-groups of the postcommunist countries has a serious methodological flaw. Institutional reforms in the Balkans have been largely an exogenous phenomenon, strongly promoted and even enforced by the EU and NATO, a factor that was clearly not the case in post-Soviet states. This fundamental difference greatly distorts any comparison of other factors that determined divergent transitions of the two groups of otherwise very similar postcommunist nations. But even within the same group of states, Ukraine and Moldova substantially differ from Russia and Belarus in terms of their democratic development.

In a number of articles, Lucan Way argued cogently that an identity issue plays a crucial role in divergent regime trajectories of these four countries – despite a great similarity of other variables typically thought to affect transition outcomes. These variables include “relative international isolation, weak civil society, absence of democratic history, weak rule of law, and the dominance of an elite prepared to take anti-democratic measures to stay in power”. Yet, Way (2005) contends,

[i]n Moldova and Ukraine, the split character of national identity has meant that successive incumbents on both sides have faced relatively serious threats with fundamentally different views of national identity. In contrast to Belarus and Russia (and most of the rest of the former Soviet Union), Moldova and Ukraine included significant territories where the populations had gained a strong anti-Russian/Soviet national identity prior to their incorporation into the USSR. As a result, populations in these areas developed relatively strong anti-Soviet and pro “European” conceptions of national identity. At the same time, these countries also contained areas where Soviet identity was highly legitimate at the time of the Soviet dissolution. The resultant contestation has meant that oppositions (both pro and anti Russian/Soviet) were able to mobilize national identities in opposition to incumbent power. This facilitated mass mobilization even in the absence of a well-institutionalized civil society and deprived incumbents of central control and some of the benefits of external assistance.

Way (2005), however, rightly suggests that the identity split is a mixed blessing since it inhibits not only consolidation of authoritarianism but also of democracy. In some cases, he writes, two competing national conceptions are “available for mobilization by both sides. In such cases, incumbents of either national identity have faced serious obstacles in consolidating their rule”.

This is the reverse side of the problem that I intend to examine in my article in more detail. My major argument is that the identity split not only hampers Ukraine's democratic transition – that had become obvious following the Orange revolution, but also dramatically undermines Ukraine's international position. On one hand, it supports a Russian belief in the “nearly-sameness” of both nations and a presumed desire of the majority of Ukrainians to become “re-unified” with Mother-Russia. This, in turn, fuels Russian irredentist complexes and promotes a highly “assertive” policies vis-à-vis Ukraine. On the other hand, it makes Western international organizations and countries, specifically in the EU and NATO, reluctant to embrace Ukraine as a prospective member of the Euro-Atlantic community. They would like not only to avoid an unnecessary confrontation with Russia over what is broadly perceived as its natural ‘backyard’, but also to refrain from direct involvement in domestic controversies over identity issues in Ukraine.

In this sense, Western restraint vis-à-vis Ukraine is of the same nature as that vis-à-vis Turkey. Both countries have a strong Westernized minority, both possess a significant pro-European drive but, in many regards, their European credentials remain questionable in the eyes of Brussels. Both of them, as an Austrian expert has put crudely, “are involved in a more or less open civil war which seems to be fed by a disagreement on the adoption of Western values (Langer, 2004)”. In both Turkey and Ukraine “the EU is challenged by another spiritual power” – Islamic orthodoxy, in one case, and Russian/Eastern Slavonic imperial messianism and anti-Westernism, in the other.<sup>2</sup>

To understand the identity split's impact on Ukraine's postcommunist development, we need to take a closer look at the essence of this division. This requires a short excursus into early modern times when both Ukrainian national identity and its imperial Russian nemesis began to emerge. More than two centuries of settlers' colonization of Ukraine and assimilation of local peasants into the culture of colonizers resulted in a gradual development of an alternative, Creole-type identity within a substantial part of the population. Interaction between this and traditional nativist types of identity that produces various hybrids and ambiguities is examined in the second part of the paper. And finally, the political use and misuse of identity issues in post-Soviet Ukraine is discussed in the last part, with a brief outlook on a possible mitigation of identity controversies in the future.

## 1. Power of the myth

The identity issue that is at the core of many internal and international problems Ukraine copes with, stems from two very different notions of “Ukrainianness”. In a sense, Ukraine copes today with the consequences of a pernicious historical myth

<sup>2</sup> One may argue, in the same line of reasoning, that defeat of the Westernizers in either Ukraine or Turkey would have equally disastrous consequences for the West. This might be true, but it does not imply that the West can and should do the homework for Turks or Ukrainians.

that, being internalized, heavily influenced Ukrainian identity and, being internationalized, heavily influenced the Western perception of both Ukraine and Russia. In brief, it is a myth of the “thousand-year-old Russian state”, which in fact had neither been a “thousand-year-old” nor, actually, “Russian”. Hardly any historical myth has ever made such a great international career in a garb of an undisputable historical “truth”. No other myth was so broadly and uncritically accepted in academia, multiplied in mass media, and enshrined in mass consciousness and in popular discourse.

The myth was invented at the turn of the 17th century by Peter the Great’s empire that removed the Golden Horde legacy of Moscow Tsardom and established an imaginary connection with a semi-mythical medieval entity called Kyivan Rus. Ironically, it was Ukrainian intellectuals engaged at the time by Peter I in his ambitious modernization and Europeanization project who played the key role in the inception of this imperial myth, even though it initially had a substantially different meaning. The European idea of *translatio imperio* was quite a common framework for people born and educated in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. They invoked it to serve their corporatist goal – to assert their special role and therefore social status within the new political milieu that emerged after Left Bank Ukraine broke with Poland and forged alliance with Muscovy. The idea of Little Rus and Great Rus was invented as a clear historical (and symbolical) analogue of Little Greece as Greece proper, and Greater Greece as a vast terrain of Greek Mediterranean colonization. This had to grant Ukrainians a central status within the newly born empire and bestow upon their land a special symbolical role as the cradle of Russian and Rus civilization (Kohut, 2012).

The Greek model, however, was soon reversed, and Realpolitik took a predictably upper hand over historical symbolism. Great Rus became naturally the central part of the empire, whereas Little Rus was downgraded to the status of its provincial appendage. A number of additional manipulations had to be undertaken to make the imperial myth viable. First, the Latinized name “Russia” was coined to replace the traditional name “Muscovy” and to prove an imaginary connection with Rus not only dynastically and ecclesiastically but even phonetically. Secondly, the history of Kyivan Rus was discerned and studied for the first time, and appropriated as a part of imperial history. To suit imperial needs, not only was the subtle difference between Rus and Russia completely deterred, but also a loose conglomerate of dynastically connected East Slavonic duchies around Kyiv was upgraded to the level of medieval “empire” – a precursor and prefiguration of Peter the Great’s project. As a result, a minor and marginal Duchy of Muscovy that had gradually managed, under Mongol auspices, to subjugate its neighbors, assumed the status of the direct successor of Kyiv – something that not a single Muscovite had ever thought about until the end of the 17th century (Keenan, 1994).

One may recollect the 18th-century invention of “Romania” as an imaginary successor to ancient Rome; or the earlier construction of the Holy Roman Empire of German people. The invention of “Russia”, however, had much more serious political implications. First, it legitimized territorial claims to the arguably “Russian” lands held at the time by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. (The logic was simple: the lands that used to belong five hundred years ago to “Rus” – and had nothing to do with Muscovy – should belong now to “Russia”). And secondly, the invented continuity delegitimized the very existence of Ukrainians and Belarusians because they were perceived to be merely “Russians” – even though they had little in common with Muscovites by the time. Even today, after two centuries of Russification, their languages are still much closer to each other and even to Polish than to Russian; their religion, even after the forceful extinction of the Greek-Catholic Church, still remains much more open to Western influences and ecumenical trends; and their Orthodox Church, until it was subordinated by Moscow, had been an institution of civil society rather than an appendage of the state and officialdom (Soltys, 2005–2006; Kuzio, 2010, p. 287).

Paradoxically, the “Kievan Russia” myth proved to be extremely harmful not only for Belarusians and Ukrainians whose existence as separate nationalities it simply denied, but also for Russians whose development into a modern nation it strongly retarded. The “continuity” myth overemphasized, rather anachronistically, the religious (Eastern Orthodox) identity of Eastern Slavs as a base of their quasi-national unity; and introduced, even more anachronistically, dynastic ties between Kyivan dukes and Moscow tsars as the main institutional legitimization of the modern Russian state. Little if any room was left for modern civic identity and modern state institutions to evolve within this rigid and outdated model. With due reservations, it can be compared to an Islamic “*ummah*” – a spiritual community of true believers or West European “*Pax Christiana*” which is even a closer analogue to Eastern “*Pax Orthodoxa*”. The profound difference, however, comes from the fact that *Pax Christiana* has not been nationalized and etatized by any European nation, and vice versa – no national identity in modern Europe was fused primordially with *Pax Christiana* and sacralized by this syncretic fusion.

Such an imaginary belonging and anachronistic loyalties clearly complicate the development of modern national identities and nation-state institution-building, rather than facilitate them. Not incidentally, *inter alia*, today’s Russian conservatives claim to have more in common with the Islamic tradition than with Western liberalism. Alexandr Dugin, an outspoken Eurasinist and “geopolitical strategist”, believes that “in the Islamic and Orthodox traditions, almost everything corresponds. We both reject specific aspects of secular, Western, European, individualistic conception of human rights”. The Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church Metropolitan Kirill avers that “there are values no less important than human rights. These are faith, ethics, sacraments, Fatherland (Coalson, 2008)”.

Rejection of the “Kyivan Russia” myth seems to be of paramount importance for the successful development of all three nations – Ukrainians, Russians, and Belarusians, but in the case of Russians it looks especially crucial – and problematic. The myth reinforces and is reinforced by very strong anti-Western forces that emphasize the profound “otherness” of mythical/essentialized East Slavonic-Eurasian-Orthodox Christian civilization and reject Western values and institutions, including the notion of human rights, civic national identity, and liberal-democratic nation state as a viable alternative to the pre-modern patrimonial empire. The East Slavonic-Orthodox Christian “*ummah*” is highly instrumental in this rejection and preservation

of pre-modern structures, habits, and institutions. Centuries-old controversy between the Slavophiles and the Westernizers is a particular reflection of a more fundamental “clash of civilizations” and “clash of identities” in modern Russia – but also, to various degrees, in modern Ukraine and Belarus.

Ukraine, for the time being, seems to be the most advanced in terms of emancipation from the East Slavonic “*ummah*” and construction of modern national identity. The process is far from being over, as the current political battles largely reflect it. But, importantly, rival identities in Ukraine are no longer “Ukrainian national” and “Russian imperial” (or, even less, “Russian national”) but, rather, two different types of Ukrainian identity. One of them that was roughly defined as “Ukrainian national” is similar to other Central-East European identities, largely but not exclusively ethno-linguistic, i.e., largely inclusive and civic but with a clear ethno-cultural core. It has evolved within the past two centuries through painstaking emancipation from the Russian-Orthodox “*ummah*”, distancing itself from Russia as the main “Other”, and symbolical self-identification with the imaginary “West”. The other type of Ukrainian identity can be even more roughly defined as “Little Russian” or “Creole”. It is a peculiar product of the semi-destruction of the traditional supranational (East Slavonic, Orthodox Christian, Soviet) identity, a result of partial emancipation from “*ummah*” and vague, incoherent drift from regional patriotism within the empire towards a Ukrainian national loyalty within the independent state. In the first case, cultural, mental and psychological emancipation from the empire preceded political liberation. In the second case, the political emancipation (dissolution of the Soviet Union) occurred first, whereas the cultural and psychological emancipation from the former metropole remains a pending project that can be realized differently – or not realized at all.

## 2. Controversial identities

In 2003, an American expert aptly noticed that the main difference between the Western “new independent states” of the former Soviet Union, on one hand, and the Balkan states, on the other, is not in political culture, economy, rule of law, level of corruption, and so on. The main, if not only, serious difference between the two groups is in their identity (Solchanyk, 2003). This entails, one may add, Russian willingness and ability to manipulate the issue in one case, and inability and unwillingness to do so, in the other. Ukraine’s main problem is not that “it was only obliquely affected by the evolution of political structures in the Western world during the past five hundred years from authoritarianism to pluralism”, as some scholars (Fraser, 2008) contend.<sup>3</sup> The Balkan nations were not much affected by this evolution either. Importantly, they did not become a part of the medieval ‘*ummah*’. Most of them did not internalize a supranational Islamic identity under the Ottomans – in the same way the majority of Ukrainians and Belarusians internalized ‘Rus-sian’ (from Rus, not Russia) East Slavonic identity as a mere extension and nationalization of Eastern Orthodox identity with an essential, constitutive anti-Western component in both cases.

Soviet experience, with its rabid anti-Westernism and mass political terror, substantially strengthened the supranational East Slavonic identity of Ukrainians and Belarusians. In both cases not only was the sinister West deemed to be the main ‘Other’ but also pro-Western (‘nationalistic’) Ukrainians and Belarusians who broke away from the East Slavonic “*ummah*” were added to the list of enemies. Remarkably, today’s inhabitants of central Ukraine still possess greater social distance to western Ukrainians than they do to Russians, whereas the inhabitants of southern-eastern Ukraine perceive western and central Ukrainians to be more alien than Russians and (heavily Russified and Sovietized) Belarusians. In the Crimea, only 12% of respondents would like to see western Ukrainians as members of their families, whereas 3% would not like them even to visit the peninsula. (The respective figures for Russians from Russia are 45 and 0.3%; for Ukrainians from south-eastern Ukraine it is 42 and 0.1% respectively) (Razumkov Center, 2011).

Available data provide many arguments to speak on the “stark disparities between the western part of the country, on the one hand, and the eastern and southern parts, on the other. These relate to such issues as the intrinsic value of independence, the role and status of the Russian language in Ukraine, the nature of relations with Russia, geopolitical orientation, and the like – a phenomenon central to the ongoing debate about “two Ukraines (Solchanyk, 2009; Riabchuk, 2002; Szporluk, 2002; Zhurzhenko, 2002)”.

This also provides a fertile soil for various intellectual and political speculations that in most cases are rather naïve and incompetent (Hochhuth, 2008; Papadopoulos, 2008; Prazan, 2008; Richard, 2008; Spengler, 2008). In some cases, however, they are deliberately provocative, aggressive and sinister, – like Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin’s reported remark to US president George Bush at the April 2008 Bucharest NATO summit that “Ukraine is not even a country” (RFE/RL Headlines, April 8, 2008) or his earlier “slip of the tongue” in an interview with *Time* magazine: “Ukraine is very close to us and almost half of the population have either friends or relatives in Russia. There are 17 million ethnic Russians there, officially. Almost 100% of the people consider Russian as their mother tongue” (Putin, 2007). (None of these figures, in fact, even remotely approximate reality. According to the 2001 Ukrainian census, there are 7.8 million Russians in Ukraine, and about 30% of Ukrainian citizens consider Russian as their mother tongue) (Ukrainian census 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Mangott (2007) spares no efforts to prove that the “new Eastern Europe” (i.e., Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova) does not exist as a separate region because these countries are very similar to Russia and very different from the post-communist countries of Central-Eastern Europe. He draws on contemporary data which points, however, not to any intrinsic differences between the two groups of states, as the author argues, but to the volume of political, institutional, and economic support that one group received and the other did not. Data from the early 1990s would have been more pertinent here but would not have suited the author’s arguments. Even more remarkably, he compares “New” Eastern European countries with Central-Eastern Europe rather than with the Balkan states – which, in the 1990s, performed in most cases worse.

Regardless of (in)sincerity and (un)truthfulness of all these statements, they have an important underlying assumption in common. All of them seem to accept and promote a common wisdom that Ukraine is dramatically divided between its Ukrainian and Russian (or Ukrainophone and Russophone) components and that the latter part strives to secede from Ukraine and join Mother-Russia. This idea, however, might be as naive as belief that the English-speaking majority in Ireland, or in South Africa, are eager to join the United Kingdom, German-speaking Austrians dream about unification with Germany, Quebecois to join France, and Hispanics in Latin America dream about re-unification with Spain.

A national survey carried out in Ukraine in December 2004 at the height of “secessionist threats” during the Orange revolution proved that Ukrainians support neither the establishment of an independent state in south-eastern Ukraine (82.3% versus 8.8%), autonomy of the Donetsk region (83.4% versus 8.1%), nor the separation of the Donetsk region from Ukraine and its unification with Russia (86.2% versus 5.9%). In a 2007 nation-wide survey 99.5% of respondents declared they saw the future of their region as remaining within Ukraine. 88.2% opposed their oblast seceding from Ukraine and forming an independent state; those against secession and unification with another country amounted to 85%; and those who rejected autonomous status within Ukraine constituted 74.1%. In the south of the country, secession and independence was supported by 8.1% (mostly in the Crimea), and in the east of Ukraine by a mere 4.8%. Remarkably, not only Ukrainians and Ukrainophones but also Russians and Russian speakers were solidly against regional independence (79%), joining another country (77%), and federalization of the country (60%) (Razumkov Center, 2007; Lytvynenko and Yakymenko, 2008).

In the spring of 2008, the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians (87.5%) viewed Ukraine as their Fatherland and a large majority was proud of its Ukrainian citizenship (68.5%) (Bondarenko, 2009). In 2005, 74.9% of respondents asserted that they are patriots of Ukraine (Razumkov Center, 2006). Interestingly, Russian speakers express virtually the same attitudes as the Ukrainian population in general: 86% of them consider Ukraine to be their Fatherland and 72% say they are Ukrainian patriots (Lytvynenko and Yakymenko, 2008).

A survey conducted at the end of October 2008, as the global financial crisis hit Ukraine, revealed that 20% of respondents may be willing to trade off national independence for economic well-being while 65% definitely oppose such a deal. Regional responses significantly vary (13 versus 70% in the west, 24 versus 62% in east) but everywhere pro-independence feelings remain rather strong, despite serious economic problem (Maydan-inform, 2008).

This may look at odd with Stephen Shulman's (2006) earlier conclusion – that “perceived cultural differences in Ukraine do not substantially undermine national identity, but they do weaken national unity (p. 247)”. The contradiction, however, can be easily solved if we take a look at some Ukrainian peculiarities. Overwhelming support for territorial integrity of Ukraine is determined not by “national unity” defined as “degree of cohesion and solidarity that exists among members of the nation” and measured by “the level of cooperation or conflict among individuals and groups comprising the nation (p. 249)”. Rather, it is determined by the “strength of national identity” defined as “degree to which members of the nation actually feel themselves to be members of the nation, and feel positively toward it”. And one of many Ukrainian paradoxes is that despite the identity split and substantial cultural differences and regional cleavages, the bearers of both “Ukrainian national” and “East Slavonic” identities are strongly attached to Ukraine as their own country and would rather agree to push away their rivals from the body of “our” Ukrainian nation than to secede themselves.

### 3. Competing identity projects

To comprehend the relative stability and integrity of multiply fractured Ukraine one should note that the ethnic and linguistic identity of many people is mixed and fluid. When opinion polls provide more options for self-identification they reveal that only 56% of respondents define themselves as “Ukrainian only”, and only 11% as “Russian only”. At the same time, 27% identify themselves as “both Ukrainian and Russian”, to a different degree (Wilson, 2002). The linguistic identification is also ambiguous since virtually everybody can understand both Ukrainian and Russian, and more than two thirds of the population can communicate fluently in both languages, depending on circumstances. The situation where one person converses in Ukrainian and the other in Russian is common in public, parliament, on television, and elsewhere.

There is little doubt that Ukraine is divided – linguistically, culturally, religiously, politically, and regionally. At the same time, there are no clear fault-lines facilitating a would-be split of the country. Different groups overlap, permeate each other; inter-group borders are blurred and easily crossed, shifted or even removed; various swing-groups facilitate the diffusion of various identities, their hybridity, and grass-root dialogue.

The east-west division looms markedly when one compares the westernmost city of Lviv with the easternmost city of Donetsk, with its primarily Soviet, but also robustly local identity. However, the contrast fades as one moves to the center: where postmodern hybridity, or post-Soviet eclecticism, comes to the fore. To put it simply, the West is not 100% orange, while the east is not completely blue (i.e. pro-Party of Regions). Lviv and Donetsk represent two opposite ends of the Ukrainian identity spectrum.

However, Ukraine is divided ideologically, not geographically. The ideological divide can be represented as two differing visions of the nation's future and two differing conceptions of the nation's past that largely correspond with the two major types of Ukrainian identity. The first project can be roughly defined as “Ukrainian national”, or “Central East European”. It is based on the assumption that Ukraine is essentially a European nation whose development was arrested and largely distorted by Russification and Sovietization, but which still strives to “return to Europe”, its values and institutions, following the course of Poland, Lithuania, and other Central-Eastern European neighbors.

The alternative project can be roughly defined as “Little Russian”, or “post/crypto-Soviet”, or “East Slavonic”. The problem with definition arises from the fact that the project is far less developed and is much more fluid. Essentially, it fluctuates between old-fashioned imperial regionalism (psychological, cultural, and political) and a new type of post-imperial “creolism”, which explicitly asserts the superiority of Russian culture and language, and implicitly preserves the legacy of two centuries of settler colonization of Ukraine – the superior position of mostly urban Russophone colonizers over historically backward and mostly rural and provincial Ukrainophone aborigens. The project apparently lacks symbolic resources and coherent argumentation, being more of a transitional phenomenon (from colonial to post-colonial or neo-colonial). In essence, however, it is highly conservative, Sovietophile, anti-Western, authoritarian and, in some extreme forms, Ukrainophobic or Ukrainophono-phobic.

This crypto-Soviet project, despite or, perhaps, because of its vagueness, was supported in 1991 by two thirds of Ukrainians who voted not only for independence but also for ex-Communist leader Leonid Kravchuk as president of the newly independent state. And only one third of voters opted for independence with a president not from the former nomenklatura (either former dissident Viacheslav Chornovil or minor anti-communist candidates). In other words, only a minority supported a radical break with the Soviet past, de-Communization and Europeanization of Ukraine along Polish or Baltic lines, while the majority approved a continuity of the ancien regime, albeit with some superficial changes.

Within the first decade of independence, however, the situation had gradually changed and by 2002–2004 the democratic opposition in Ukraine appeared to be strong enough to challenge the authoritarian dominance of the ancien regime. This resulted from two intertwined processes – a gradual maturing of civil society and strengthening of Ukrainian national identity. The connection between these two processes is a Ukrainian peculiarity largely determined by the specific way Ukrainian identity evolved and positioned itself vis-a-vis Russia and Europe and, consequently, vis-a-vis the values they represent. In a 2005 article based on extensive sociological data, Stephen Shulman proved a significant correlation between strong Ukrainian national identity and adherence to democracy, market reforms, and Westernization. He concluded that a crucial determinant of this correlation was Ukrainians’ self-image. Since Ukrainian nationalism emphasizes Ukraine’s ‘otherness’ vis-a-vis Russia, and asserts its alleged “Europeanness” as opposed to presumed Russian “Europeanness”, it has, by default, to accept the whole set of Western liberal-democratic values as ‘natural’ and ‘organic’ for Ukrainians (yet allegedly ‘alien’ for Russians).

Elite proponents of this identity typically contrast ethnic Ukrainians and Ukraine historically and culturally with Russians in Russia, a people and a country that are perceived to have strong collectivistic and authoritarian roots. At the same time, elite proponents of this identity argue that Ukrainians have much in common culturally and historically with Europe (...) [Therefore] democracy and capitalism symbolically raise the status of ethnic Ukrainians, spread the values alleged to be associated with ethnic Ukrainian culture throughout the country, and are more likely to function effectively in a country based on perceived ethnic Ukrainian values. Further, since the main ‘Other’ of this identity, Russia, is seen as having a history and culture estranged from individualistic and freedom-based development models, rejection of non-democratic and non-capitalistic models symbolically and actually maintains the perceived cultural distance between Ukraine and Russia and thereby reinforces the Ethnic Ukrainian national identity. Finally, precisely because European and ethnic Ukrainian culture are seen as close, and Europeans are associated with democracy and capitalism, these models are likely to be favored because they symbolically and actually reinforce the cultural similarity between these two peoples and elevate the status of ethnic Ukrainians in Ukraine as a core group (Shulman, 2005).

Such an approach says clearly more about Ukrainians’ self-assertion and symbolic emancipation from Russian dominance than about their genuine commitment to civic, republican, liberal democratic values deemed to be ‘European’. One may argue that there is a long distance between the constructed self-image of the ‘European nation’ and its heavily Sovietized, illiberal, uncivic, or at best ambiguous, character. But the counterargument says that an ideal image may have a positive impact on a nation that strives to approximate it in actuality, to gradually assume the invented image.

Whatever the case, the empirically observable fact is that Ukrainian democratic society is predominantly Ukrainian-speaking and definitely Ukrainian-thinking, whereas the authoritarian regime and its electoral base speak mostly Russian and think Soviet. Neither group makes up a clear majority, so the composition of the Ukrainian parliament largely reflects a vague equilibrium of antagonistic and opportunistic political forces. In 2004, during the presidential elections, the balance was tipped on one side by the strong mobilization of pro-Ukrainian and pro-democratic electorate. In 2010, the other side prevailed – not so much by a stronger mobilization of their Russophile and authoritarian supporters but, rather, by demobilization of frustrated opponents and, eventually, by bribery and cooptation of opportunistic MPs in parliament and judges in the constitutional court.

#### 4. Still at the crossroads

Despite high expectations, the 2004 Orange revolution did not become a Ukrainian analogue of the 1989 velvet revolutions in Central-Eastern Europe. It failed to radically change the old system, remove completely corrupted authoritarian elites from power, and introduce rule of law and liberal democracy as the only game in town. The Orange leaders continued to play habitually with the rules rather than playing by the rules. The democratic society that brought them to power proved to be not strong and persistent enough to hold them accountable. Internal divides and internecine wars within the democratic camp are typical for post-communist politics. But in Ukraine, the identity split greatly exacerbated the problem. What in Albania, Romania, and elsewhere was merely a struggle between two mediocre East European politicians in Ukraine appeared to be

suicidal infighting between two bad East European politicians that benefited the third, profoundly anti-European and anti-democratic force. Neither in Albania nor in Romania has such a third force ever existed. In Ukraine, this force is firmly entrenched and can strongly rely not only on the external support from Moscow or enormous internal oligarchic resources. They can also rely on at least one-third of Ukrainian citizens that are always ready to support “our bad boys” regardless of whatever they say and do because they presumably represent and defend “our” Russophile and Sovietophile identity.

Within a few months after his narrow victory over his rival in the 2010 presidential election, Viktor Yanukovich usurped virtually sultanistic power in the country, emasculated parliament and the courts, crushed the opposition, and severely restrained civic freedoms, specifically mass media, right to assembly, and elections. All this was undertaken by the familiar instruments of a “blackmail state” perfected by President Leonid Kuchma for whom Yanukovich served as a trustful prime-minister in 2002–2004. In international politics, after early ill-thought concessions for Moscow, Yanukovich maybe also reverting to Kuchma’s “multi-vectorism”, the manipulation of both the West and Russia to the personal benefit of the president and ruling elites. The only area where Yanukovich has not returned to Kuchma-style politics of playing off elite groups and regional interests is in the area of language, culture, religion, memory and, of course, identity.

Here, like elsewhere, Kuchma pursued a quasi-centrist policy that allowed him to play the role of the main arbiter between various clans and groups, making opportunistic concessions to all of them but, in sum, implementing a mild bureaucratic Ukrainization that legitimized his sovereign rule and satisfied, more or less, Ukrainophiles as the most politically active part of the electorate. President Yanukovich instead bets unambiguously on the dominant Russophile and Russophile group, primarily from his native Donbas, and supports specific anti-Ukrainian policies that further socially marginalize Ukrainophones and undermine their language, culture, and identity.

The new Ukrainian authorities have not read Shulman’s study of correlations between the identity of citizens and their pro-Western, pro-market, and pro-democratic orientations. At the same time, they act fully in line with Shulman’s findings by seeking to weaken this identity as a major obstacle to their authoritarian dominance and replace it with Russian-Soviet-East Slavonic identity, profoundly anti-Western and anti-liberal, that is well established in Russia and Belarus. Therefore, as another American observer sardonically remarks, “Ukrainians should expect the assault on democracy and Ukrainian identity to continue. Indeed, because Ukrainian language, culture, and identity have become so closely bound with democracy and the West, and because Russian language, culture, and identity have – unfortunately – become so closely bound with authoritarianism and the Soviet past, Yanukovich must attack both democracy and Ukrainian identity with equal vigor (Motyl, 2011)”.

Such a policy can bring the president and his associates some temporary benefits but in the longer run may have catastrophic consequences for both the state and nation. First of all, it precludes Ukraine’s efficient modernization and advance into the modern world that can be accomplished only through full-fledged Euro-Atlantic integration. Nothing of the kind can be achieved without a strong strategic alliance with the democratic part of society and unequivocal acceptance of the democratic rules of game. Secondly, such a policy antagonizes a substantial part of the population, deepens cultural and linguistic cleavages and leads ultimately to a split of the country or its ‘Ulsterization’. Thirdly, the escalation of internal conflicts would require an escalation of repressive policies that, in turn, would inevitably provoke international sanctions and make an ostracized regime an easy target for Russia.

Yanukovich’s regime or, at least, its pragmatic wing seem to recognize these threats and tries to return to Kuchma-style ‘multi-vector’ international politics and domestic quasi-centrism. For a number of reasons, however, this traditional opportunistic policy of ‘muddling through’ no longer looks feasible. One reason was aptly pointed out three years ago by Alexander Motyl and Adrian Karatnycky: Moscow is not going to tolerate Kyiv’s ‘multivector’ games any more, it demands full obedience (Karatnycky and Motyl, 2009). Brussels is also tired of Ukraine’s ambiguity and seems less and less eager to tolerate Kyiv’s authoritarian policies covered by shallow ‘pro-European’ rhetoric. Equally slim are chances for restoration of the quasi-centrist niche in domestic politics. On one hand, the “communist threat” that suited Leonid Kuchma’s manipulative policies so well throughout the 1990s has faded away; the popularity of the Communist party has collapsed and its traditional Russophile-Sovietophile electorate has been almost fully taken over by the Party of Regions. On the other hand, the “nationalistic threat”, despite all the efforts of Yanukovich’s spin-doctors to manipulate it, is limited in its usefulness and can get out of control, as seen in the May 2011 violence between Ukrainian and Russian nationalists in Lviv.

This does not mean that the incumbent would like to follow Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenko, i.e., to radically re-Sovietize the country and transform it into a real police state with all the international consequences this would entail. Even less likely are Ukrainian oligarchs to democratize and Europeanize the country; that is, i.e. remove the monopoly they enjoy in all areas and open themselves up to political and economic competition. The most probable path for Yanukovich’s administration would be to hesitate for some time between the repressive measures undertaken by Lukashenko and the divide and rule, manipulative policies of Kuchma. They will have to make their choice by the 2012 parliamentary or 2015 presidential elections which could lead the possibility of their removal from power. The ultimate choice would depend on what the regime perceives as a lesser evil: victory of the opposition or international sanctions following elections deemed not to have been undertaken in a democratic fashion and repression in response to mass protests.

## 5. Conclusion

Since 1991, throughout the last two decades of Ukrainian independence, Ukraine has been developing rather opportunistically without any clear strategy or master-plan. Cultural and linguistic cleavages and weak and unconsolidated national

identity greatly exacerbated social ambivalence and complicated Ukraine's postcommunist transformation. Firstly, identity questions lowered social trust and undermined social cohesion. Secondly, such questions secured the survival of corrupt and incompetent politicians who otherwise would have been removed in elections but, instead, were reprieved by the electorate because they were 'our bad guys' versus 'their bad guys'. Thirdly, they made the country vulnerable vis-à-vis external influences and manipulations, primarily from Russia which is actively engaged in Ukrainian politics. Finally, identity issues formed a 'besieged consciousness' in Ukrainian society that limited the scope and agenda of discussions. Indeed, they "inject identity politics into everything, making compromise difficult (Karatnycky and Motyl, 2009)". In fact, they support quasi-war conditions that make sober decisions and reasonable behavior more problematic.

To overcome these divides is not an easy task, although it is not impossible as the experience of Spain shows. National consolidation based on respect for a plurality of values could be the basis for this. National integration could be provided by economic achievements, pride in efficient national institutions, democratic citizenship, and rule of law, factors that will be difficult to achieve while identity cleavages and confrontations remain in place. The Orange Revolution that ushered in, for a brief moment, very high public trust in government institutions and policies was an opportunity to break the vicious circle described in this article but the window of opportunity was never used and closed. This does not mean that another window will not open in the next two decades of Ukrainian independence.

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