



Roman Szporluk

Why Ukrainians Are Ukrainians

Roman Szporluk comments in this text on Mykola Riabchuk's concept of 'ambivalence' in the Ukraine. The divide between Western and Eastern Ukraine and the resulting 'ambivalence' have to be understood in more historical terms: Ukraine has only existed as a political entity since 1991 in contrast to other post – Soviet countries. Therefore, nation building and the emergence of a civil society will take more time.

Mykola Riabchuk intends to explore "ambivalence" in Ukraine as a pervasive socio–political phenomenon that has impacted perversely on the nation's political development. He attributes this ambivalence to Ukraine's regional, cultural and linguistic divisions as well as to "the atomising impact of Soviet totalitarianism on Ukrainian society" and believes that the 2002 legislative elections confirm his diagnosis.

A major problem I have with this article is the vagueness about ambivalence itself. There are several main categories of ambivalence, for example — Europe versus Sovietism, East versus West, democracy versus oligarchy —and it is not clear to me how they overlap. It sometimes seems that Riabchuk considers the Ukrainian speaking western regions like Lviv to stand for western values, etc. and the Russian speaking Donetsk to represent Sovietism and attachment to Russia. But in other places he seems to reject this division and makes the situation more complicated by never explaining what exactly his "third Ukraine" is. In this connection I find it very odd that Ukraine's capital Kyiv is never mentioned and yet it is the place which in some important respects is very "western" because it votes like Lviv, but in other respects is very "eastern" because it speaks like Donetsk. Arguably Kyiv may be showing or setting the future of Ukraine in which it will be possible for some people to be both for Ukrainian independence and for western–style democracy and at the same time to retain a preference for the Russian language. I find it specially important the fact to which Riabchuk devotes relatively little attention even though he notes it —that Donetsk and Lviv with all their differences agree that each of them is in Ukraine and that implicitly they thus recognize that Kyiv is their shared capital.

Riabchuk attributes the current condition of Ukraine in large part to its "ruling elite" which he sometimes calls the "nomenklatura" or "the post–soviet oligarchy" and he attributes to it "a vested interest in keeping society highly atomised, confused and alienated." " They do all they can to prevent any civic, democratic development in the country which could expose them to objective (and fair) political competition entailing, ultimately, the lost of political power and power–based economic privileges." It seems to me that in the case of Ukraine the relationship between the society, the population at large, and the

elite is much less simple and much more "ambivalent" than the author appears to think.

While in some important sense the author is right to speak about the "atomising" impact of Soviet totalitarianism, he fails to give due weight to the fact that it was during the Soviet period that Lviv and Donetsk found themselves within one country for the first time in history. Among the post Communist countries Ukraine belongs to the group of those who achieved political independence simultaneously with the collapse of the Communist system. But whereas such countries as Latvia, Lithuania, or Estonia —not to mention Poland or Hungary — existed as independent states before they became Communist, present-day Ukraine as a single or uniform administrative and then political entity emerged only during the Communist period. Ukraine's independent non-Communist existence after 1917 was intermittent and short lived and at no time extended to the territory of present-day Ukraine. It was over protests of local Bolshevik leaders that Moscow decided in 1918 to attach Donbas to the Ukrainian Soviet Republic; it was only in 1939–1945 that the formerly Austrian (and then Polish-ruled) Galicia, the formerly Hungarian and Czechoslovak Trans-Carpathia, and the formerly Austrian and then Romanian northern Bukovina were attached to the Ukrainian Soviet republic that included Kyiv and Donetsk. Only in 1954 did Crimea become a subdivision of the Ukrainian Soviet republic. In the meantime, the bulk of Ukraine's territory and population for over one hundred years in the case of Ukraine to the west of the Dnieper and much longer in the east had formed an integral part of the Russian Empire before the Communist takeover.

Bearing these and especially the last fact in mind, one can understand what Mykola Shulha writes about how for millions of Soviet citizens, and especially (but not exclusively) for those of Russian nationality, the breakup of the Soviet Union and the rise of new independent successor states created a profound personal and group crisis of identity. As is well known, public opinion polls in Ukraine and in other ex-Soviet republics reveal that for some people the Soviet Union remains the "imagined community" (to use Benedict Anderson's celebrated term), while others declare themselves to belong to some regional or provincial unit, and only a fraction of the overall population clearly replies that it owes its primary allegiance to the new state. Shulha's poll shows there are sharp differences between regions of Ukraine, and between ethnic Russians and ethnic Ukrainians, in the responses to questions on the people's identification primarily with the population of his or her region, or with that of Ukraine, or the Soviet Union, or "Europe"¹ [1] Thus, when Riabchuk speaks about the atomising impact of Soviet totalitarianism on Ukrainian society, we should remember the integrating impact of the Soviet system because in 1914 or in 1939 or in 1945 there was no meaningful integrated "Ukrainian society" that was co-extensive with the current Ukraine.

This brings us to the question of how to judge the elite and its record. Riabchuk's criticism is well taken but there is something else one should remember in passing judgment on that group of people. Until 1991 the elite had formed a regional subdivision or branch of the Soviet-Union-wide elite or oligarchy, and it made it possible for Ukraine to become independent and to preserve its territorial integrity within the Soviet-created borders. In becoming a counter-elite in relation to Moscow, it made it possible for Ukraine to secede peacefully from the Soviet Union.

That ex-Soviet but born-again Ukrainian elite was in its ethnic composition to a very high degree Russian; linguistically, it was even more so; and today it is

both Ukrainian and Russian in composition. These people transformed themselves from a provincial subelite into an elite of an independent state, and after an independent Ukraine emerged, they did not break up into rival Ukrainian and Russian factions which might have resulted in a breakup of the country. According to Andrii Zorkin, they even managed to frustrate the attempt of the Crimean elite to assert its independence from Kyiv. The Crimean elite after several years accepted a regional, subordinate position in relation to Kiev². Whereas the move for Ukrainian independence was initiated in western regions of Ukraine and enjoyed popular support in Kyiv and the central regions, it is safe to say that Ukraine would not have gained its independence and done so within its Soviet borders without the support of its party elite, the nomenklatura, or, as they are called today, the "oligarchs." Not only did these people abandon their loyalty to Moscow at a critical moment, they also rose above their own regional and ethnic divisions within their midst, whether they were Ukrainian or Russian by origin, and kept the country together. When one remembers what happened in Yugoslavia, this is no mean accomplishment on their part. Thus, I stand by the comment I made in 1994:

"It is essential to remember that the independent Ukraine proclaimed in August 1991 did not define itself as an ethnic state. It was a jurisdiction, a territorial and legal entity, in fact, a successor of the Ukrainian SSR. Its citizens were of different ethnic backgrounds and spoke Ukrainian and Russian to varying degrees, but also other languages. The new state declared that all power in it derives from "the people of Ukraine." The founders of the post-Soviet Ukraine thus adopted and adapted the concept of "the Soviet people," which, the official line had held, consisted of persons of many linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. However, this idea, in a different form, had a genuine Ukrainian pedigree: it had been formulated in the Ukrainian national movement of the 1960s and 70s, when Ukrainian dissidents and human rights activists proclaimed the idea that all persons living in Ukraine were its citizens³."

Now, eight years later, and more than ten years after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the relevant questions are: Is Ukraine more of a country today than it was in 1991? Is its society, people, and nation less "ambivalent", less "ambiguous", less "undecided", than it was ten years ago?

When one remembers the fundamental facts of Ukraine's Soviet — and pre-Soviet — experience, and then the process of how the "Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic" became an independent state, the answer has to be "Yes." The election of 2002 shows progress not regression in the formation of civil society. Therefore I agree with James Sherr, who in his evaluation of the 2002 election detects a "pronounced shift" from the election of 1998: "the transformation of reformists from a regional to a national force and a sharp erosion of support for the left." In Sherr's judgement, Ukraine's "regional discrepancies are both dramatic and receding," and in comparison with the "largely /Western/ borderland party, Rukh" four years ago, there has emerged in 2002 "a diverse national bloc with pluralities extending to the Russian border." "This shift, rather than the actions of the authorities, is the significant fact to emerge from these elections." Sherr also points out that while "civil society remains very much a minority of society, it is no longer confined to intellectuals, but has a 'mass' base." One might add to this that the election also provides evidence that supporters of democracy are to be found within the

post-Communist elite, which is far from being a monolith. (Where do leaders of the democratic and pro-Western camp, including Yushchenko himself, come from, after all?) Sherr therefore is right to note that while "the growth of civic instincts is sharpening the divide between state and society, it is also creating points of friction within the state and hence, a dynamic of evolution inside it⁴." This does not mean that Ukraine today is a democratic state, a developed civil society, or a modern nation. But one of the reasons why Ukraine is not like Poland or Hungary, or even not like Romania or Bulgaria, is that its civil society has yet to organize itself as a nation-wide force, from Lviv and Uzhorod in the west to Donetsk and Luhansk in the east, thus matching the state's — and the ruling elite's — territorial extension. Against those who believe that language and other cultural differences inevitably cause the breakup of states, it is helpful to turn to George Schopflin's reminder that nations are "civic" and "ethnic" at the same time, and that in particular "the so-called large civic nations of the West...also have ethnic identities; it is just that these are framed by the state and citizenship (civil society)." When applied to Ukraine, this means that its ethnic Russians, free to use their language, to maintain their culture, and to retain a non-political attachment to Russia, may be considered (and consider themselves) full-fledged members of a Ukrainian nation that is political, civic, and cultural at the same time.⁵ In their work, the builders of a democratic and pro-Western Ukraine will be wise to follow the lessons of 1991, which confirm Schopflin's general thesis that "nationhood is an interactive /my ephasis/ set of processes involving ethnicity, the state and citizenship. All these are identity-forming⁶," — and not allow regional, ethnic, and linguistic divisions to override their commitment to citizenship and democratic statehood. They will have to fight the attempts to identify political orientations — democracy or Sovietism, "Europe" or "Eurasia"— with any one regional, linguistic or ethnic group.

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- ¹ 1. Mykola Shulha, "Natsional'na i politychna marhinalizatsiia za umov systemnoi kryzy" ("National and Political Marginalization under the Conditions of System Crisis,") *Sotsiologhiia: teoriia, metody, marketynh* (Kiev), No. 1, 2002, pp. 5–20. What George Schopflin, *Nations, Identity, Power: The New Politics of Europe* (London: Hurst, 2000), p. 167, says about East Central Europe, applies fully to Ukraine: "... communism ... did ... function in real terms. Among its residues is the proposition that people derived at least a part of their identities from communism, whether directly or in opposition to it. Public achievement, for example, career patterns, distinction, intellectual attainment were all in some form or another linked to communist institutions."
- ² Andrii Zorkin, "Deiaki aspekty elitohenezu v Ukraini ta Krymu" ("Some Aspects of the Elite Formation in Ukraine and Crimea"), *Sotsiologhiia: teoriia, metody, marketynh*, No. 1, 2002, pp. 202–211.
- ³ . "Reflections on Ukraine after 1994: The Dilemmas of Nationhood," first published in 1994, reprinted in Roman Szporluk, *Russia, Ukraine, and the Breakup of the Soviet Union* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2000), p. 327.
- ⁴ James Sherr, "Ukraine's Parliamentary Elections: The Limits of Manipulation," *CSRC Occasional Brief*, 21 April, 2002.
- ⁵ Contrary to widespread misconceptions, Ukraine's different historical and political experience, not the Ukrainian language's difference from Russian language, was originally invoked by Ukrainian nation-builders to support their claim to a nationhood separate from Russia. For relevant references and analysis, see Ivan L. Rudnytsky, *Essays in Modern Ukrainian History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, Ukrainian Research Institute, 1987), passim. In my own article, "Ukraine: From an Imperial Periphery to a Sovereign State," I wrote: "The Ukrainians consciously and energetically worked to create a common language; the Austrian west modeled itself on eastern authors. Even so, the relation between language and nationality is commonly misunderstood. The Ukrainians of Russia and Austria did not become one nation because they spoke the same language; they came to speak the same language because they had first decided to be one nation. They were helped in reaching this conclusion by /Mykhailo/ Hrushevsky's greatest accomplishment—his synthesis of Ukrainian history." (See Szporluk, *Russia, Ukraine, and the Breakup of the Soviet Union*,

p. 386.)

- ⁶ Schopflin, *Nations, Identity, Power*, pp. 4–5. To these three one might add a fourth — economic factor. This was something Iulian Bachynsky had in mind when in his *Ukraina irredenta*, originally published in 1895, and here quoted from third edition (Berlin: *Vydavnytstvo Ukrainskoi Molodi*, 1924, p. 95), he wrote: " The struggle for political independence of Ukraine is not a matter of concern to ethnic Ukrainians alone, but to all /emphasis in the original/ who live in Ukraine, without regard to whether it is a native Ukrainian or a colonist: Great Russian, Pole, Jew, or German. Common interest will Ukrainianize them, will force them all to become Ukrainian 'patriots.'" However unrealistic this scenario may have been for the author's time and the following century, there is some food for thought in it for nation-builders in the 21st century.

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