

Who are these People? 2.0

Roman Solchanyk

In the fall of 2004 I wrote an article for *The Ukrainian Weekly* titled “Who Are These People?”¹ The piece (and its title) was meant to be provocative, calling readers’ attention to a problem that I thought needed to be more widely recognized, critically examined, and somehow addressed—namely, the cumulative evidence, after more than a dozen years of Ukraine’s independence, of less than enthusiastic support on the part of the country’s citizenry for what is perhaps best described as the “national (or Ukrainian) idea.” The article cited various public opinion surveys from 2002–2004 that, among other things, indicated that Ukrainians² were not particularly supportive of their country’s status as an independent state.

Thus a poll taken in August 2003 and reported by the daily *Den* concluded that, based on responses to a question about attitudes toward the Independence Day holiday (August 24), over 70 per cent of the population took either a negative stand or were indifferent. Clearly, how one feels about a state holiday that celebrates independence and whether or not one supports state independence are two rather different things. However, other data cited in the article pointed in the same general direction. Polling conducted by the Razumkov Centre, in the course of which respondents were specifically asked how they would vote in a hypothetical referendum on independence, revealed that in 2003 only 46.5 per cent of respondents answered in the affirmative and 29.8 per cent were opposed. Moreover, the level of support was on the decline. In 2002, 48.8 per cent favoured independence, and in 2001 the figure had been 51.3 per cent. These numbers contrasted strikingly with the results of the December 1991 referendum, when just over 90 per cent of voters supported Ukraine’s declaration of independence. Further, a nationwide survey of young people (ages 16–34) conducted in the fall of 2002 by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology (KMIS) found that slightly more than 59 per cent of that age group were convinced that ethnic Ukrainians and Russians are “one people” [*odyn narod*]; in Russia the corresponding figure for the same age group was only somewhat higher—61.2 per cent. Another survey, organized by the All-Russian Centre for the Study of Public Opinion (VTsIOM) and made public in mid-2004, compared Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus and revealed that—with one exception where the results for Ukraine and Russia were identical—larger proportions of respondents in Ukraine than in either of the two neighbouring Slav states wanted to live in (1) a union consisting of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, (2) a commonwealth of independent states, and (3) a restored Soviet Union. More surprising was the finding that nearly double the proportion of

¹ Roman Solchanyk, “Who Are these People?” *The Ukrainian Weekly*, 17 October 2004.

² Unless otherwise stated, here and throughout the term “Ukrainians” is used to denote all citizens of Ukraine regardless of ethnic affiliation.

Belarusians (28 per cent) as compared to Ukrainians (15 per cent) would choose to live in a united Europe.

Space did not allow for bringing the regional dimension into the picture. Had that been done, it would have shown stark disparities between the western part of the country, on the one hand, and the eastern and southern parts, on the other, with regard 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.”³

As far as I am aware, no one was sufficiently exercised to comment on or otherwise react to my provocation—with one exception. In a posting on the Web site of the American Association for Ukrainian Studies (AAUS), John-Paul Himka contrasted the general thrust of my piece with an open letter from a well-known writer in Ukraine that was published on the AAUS site at about the same time. Among other things, the writer insisted that the notion of an east-west split in Ukraine with “pro-Russian” and “pro-Western” and Russian-speaking and Ukrainian-speaking parts fell into the category of “made in Russia political myths” that are eagerly consumed by naive Western journalists, leaving Himka wondering what to make of this seemingly conflicting information.⁴

Some years have passed since that episode, and it may be worthwhile and, indeed, instructive to offer an updated version of “Who Are These People?” Specifically, I propose to look at the issue of support or lack thereof for state independence, which, of course, is central to the larger question of how the “national (or Ukrainian) idea” or the “Ukrainian project” has fared after nearly two decades of independent statehood.⁵ Two caveats are in order. First, I am not entirely comfortable with either of these two concepts, both of which analysts have widely used in the discourse about nation building in Ukraine. They are, however, useful shorthand for complex and nuanced processes that reflect the degree to which Ukrainians can or cannot be judged as constituting a “modern nation.”⁶ Second, although I make wide use of survey research,

³ The origins of the debate can be traced to Mykola Ryabchuk’s article “Two Ukraines?” in *East European Reporter* 5, no. 4 (July-August 1992): 18–22, the theme of which he subsequently developed in various articles and essays that evoked a wide-ranging discussion about national identity and regionalism in Ukraine. For an overview of the polemics, see Ola Hnatiuk, *Požegnání z imperium: Ukraїnskie dyskusje o tożsamości* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2003), 245–51. A more recent installment is by the well-known historian Yaroslav Hrytsak: “Odna, dvi, dvadtsiat dvi ...” <http://zaxid.net/home/showSingleNews.do?odna_dvi_dvadtsyat_dvi&objectId=1061835> (29 September 2008).

⁴ John-Paul Himka, “Apocalypse Tomorrow: Some Remarks on Two Texts on the Ukrainian Elections” <www.ukrainianstudies.org/aaus-list/0410/msg00027.html>.

⁵ For earlier analyses of Ukrainian public opinion on independence, see Valerii Khmelko, “Referendum: Khto buv ‘za’ i khto ‘proty,’” *Politolohichni chytannia*, 1992, no. 1: 40–52; Jaroslaw Martyniuk, “Ukrainian Independence and Territorial Integrity,” *RFE/RL Research Report* 1, no. 17 (27 March 1992): 64–68; and my book *Ukraine and Russia: The Post-Soviet Transition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 135–57.

⁶ In this connection, I should add that I have no desire nor do I see any particular need to contribute to the long list of definitions as to what constitutes a nation, modern or otherwise. Not unlike Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court Potter Stewart’s take on hard-core pornography, I know it when I see it.

I am fully aware of its limitations. Nevertheless, public opinion studies, while hardly an exact science, do reflect a certain reality in time and space.

And a final observation by way of introduction. Doubts about the state of the nation in Ukraine are hardly new and have been raised in one form or another by individuals as disparate in their views and prejudices as the former president of Ukraine Leonid Kuchma; the prominent and highly respected foreign- and security-policy scholar Zbigniew Brzezinski; and Russia's leading proponent of "neo-Eurasianism," Aleksandr Dugin. Kuchma was widely criticized by the patriotic Ukrainian intelligentsia after he asserted in early 1995 that "the national idea has not worked out" [*ne spratsiuvala*].⁷ Brzezinski, who has been consistently optimistic but also realistic when it comes to Ukraine, told an interviewer in the autumn of 2003 that

the main problem that confronts Ukraine is the absence of a deeply rooted national consciousness of civic responsibility. This is the core dilemma that the country faces. Most of Ukraine's leaders not only sacrificed nothing for national independence, they did not even strive for it. Many see it as an opportunity for self-enrichment.⁸

Dugin is an influential member of an assorted group of Russian academics, analysts, journalists, and politicians who believes that Ukraine as such and Ukrainians, with the possible exception of the residents of the western part of the country, simply do not exist.⁹ There is a substantial body of Western scholarly literature that is devoted to various aspects of regionalism in the context of nation building in Ukraine. More directly relevant for our purposes is a broader study by Stephen Shulman that focuses specifically on the achievements and failures of the nation-building process in Ukraine. Writing in 2005, Shulman noted "that one would be hard-pressed to find more than a handful of countries in the world where fewer than three-quarters of the population would favour the retention of their statehood."¹⁰ Ukraine was one of them. Finally, in Ukraine there are a large (and growing) number of publications on the subject that reflect—as the "two Ukraines" controversy suggests—sharply differing views.

At the end of 2002 KMIS president Valerii Khmelko announced that a November poll conducted by his firm gauged national support for independence at 77 per cent, which for the first time exceeded the level of support registered by the December 1991 referendum.¹¹ In 1991, 90.3 per cent of those who voted (84.3 per cent) said yes to

⁷ See Mykhailo Vivcharyk and Robert Kartashov, "Po shliakhu do konsolidatsii natsii," *Rozbudova natsii*, 1996, no. 2 (February): 15. Kuchma's comment was made during the first meeting of the organizational committee to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the victory in the Second World War. His verbatim remarks at that meeting, which he chaired, do not appear to have been published in the press at the time.

⁸ Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Na svitovii shakhivnytsi Ukraina nahaduie slona," *Yevroatlantyka*, 2003, no. 1: 16.

⁹ See, for example, his interview "Dugin: Abkhaziiu—brat, Ukrainu—rvat po shvam," *Rosbalt*, 5 June 2008 <www.rosbalt.ru/2008/06/05/491309.html>. The Russian notion that Ukrainians are a fiction is by no means new and was shared by 49 per cent of respondents in Russia who, in the fall of 2007, felt that Ukrainians and Russians are the same *narod*; 46 per cent said that they are separate peoples. See *Obshchestvennoe mnenie – 2007* (Moscow: Levada-Tsentr, 2007), 215.

¹⁰ Stephen Shulman, "Ukrainian Nation-Building under Kuchma," *Problems of Post-Communism* 52, no. 5 (September–October 2005): 34.

¹¹ UNIAN, 18 December 2002.

independence, which then represented 76.1 per cent of Ukraine's total adult population. Readers have every right to be puzzled. While for some the figure of 77 per cent may still leave a great deal to be desired, it nevertheless contrasts sharply with the Razumkov Centre's number of 48.8 per cent, also in 2002, cited above. Why the glaring difference?

The explanation lies in the different methodologies employed by the two polling organizations, both of which are highly respected at home and abroad. The KMIS questionnaire has a standard entry that asks respondents to choose a preferred variant of relations between Ukraine and Russia from among three options: (1) relations that are the same as with other countries—i.e., with closed borders, visas, and customs control; (2) Ukraine and Russia should be independent but friendly states, with open borders and without visas or customs control; and (3) Ukraine and Russia should unite in a single state. For KMIS the combined response to the first two options represents the degree of overall support for independence. Table 1 below illustrates the level of support for independence recorded in December 1991 and from KMIS surveys in 1992–2008. There was a sharp drop in support during the first two years following the independence referendum, reaching an all time low of 56 per cent at the end of 1993. This period coincided with a catastrophic economic crisis, which has led many observers to link economic performance to support for independence.¹² A second significant drop occurred in 1997–98, falling to 60 per cent at the end of 1998.¹³ Since the end of 2002, support for independence has hovered around the 75 per cent level, with a noticeable drop in mid-2006 and an equally noticeable rise in early 2008. KMIS data from surveys conducted at the end of 2008 and in early 2009 yield an average of 75 per cent supporting independence (see table 2). In sum, the proportion of the population that supports independence has remained moderately stable in recent years, averaging about three-quarters of the population.

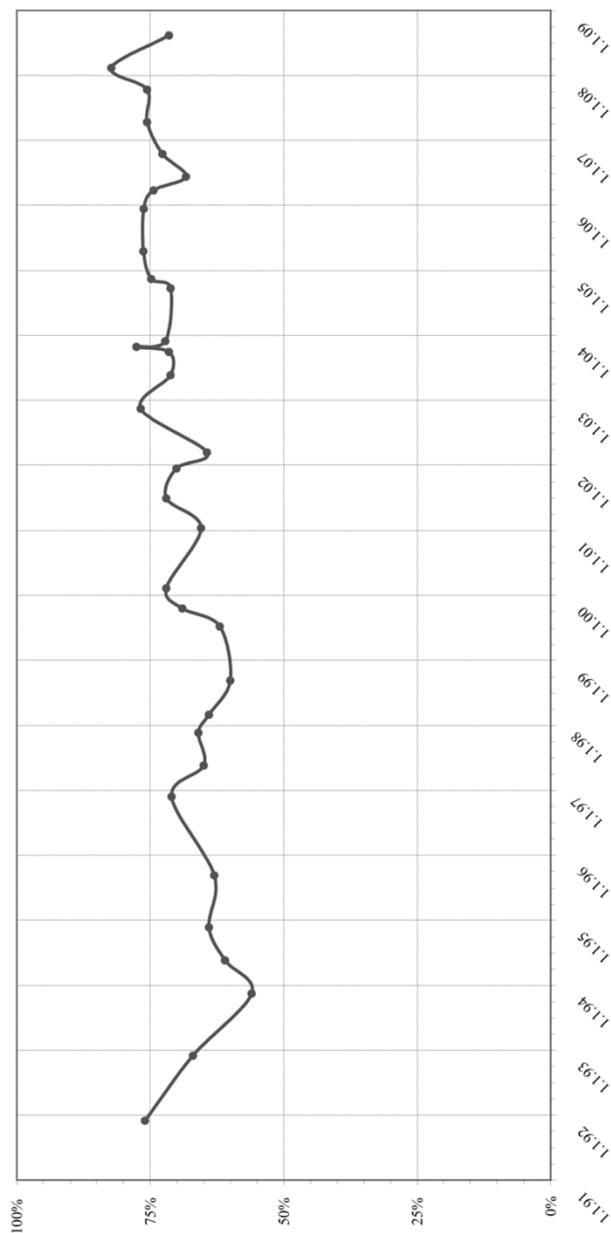
I will leave it up to readers to judge the extent to which the KMIS approach accurately reflects popular support for independence. It must be stressed, however, that its choice of methodology should not be construed as a mechanism for skewing the results in favour of independence. On various occasions KMIS pollsters have also asked respondents how they would vote in a hypothetical referendum on independence. The KMIS survey that posed that question in August 2008 revealed that only 50.1 per cent would vote in favour, which is in line with the data reported by the Razumkov Centre.¹⁴ Rather more problematical is the question of how many Ukrainians genuinely oppose independence. According to KMIS, by default that would be those who would like to see Ukraine unite with Russia in a single state—namely, an average of 22.3 per cent of the population in 2008–2009. The problem is that this third option, like the first two, does not *directly* address the question of independence, for or against. Presumably

¹² Some have argued that there is little correlation between economic performance and support for independence. See Grigorii Naumovets, "Zapad i vostok Ukrainy: 'Dve bolshie raznitsy'? Na samom dele – odna bolshaia, vtoraiia – ne ochen," *Zerkalo nedeli*, 10–16 June 1995; and Stephen Shulman, "The Role of Economic Performance in Ukrainian Nationalism," *Europe-Asia Studies* 55, no. 2 (March 2003): 217–39.

¹³ V. Khmelko, "Makrosotsialni zminy v ukrainskomu suspilstvi za roky nezalezhnosti," 23 March 2004 <www.kiis.com.ua/materials/articles/macrosocial%20changes.pdf>.

¹⁴ "Stavlennia naseleattia Ukrainy do yii derzhavnoi nezalezhnosti" <old.kiis.com.ua/txt/doc/27082008/pr.doc> (27 August 2008).

Table 1. Support for Independent Ukraine, 1991–2008



Source: "Stavlennia naselennia Ukrainy do yii derzhavnoi nezalezhnosti," 3 <old.kiis.com.ua/txt/doc/27082008/pr.doc> (24 August 2008). The respondents were eighteen or older.

Table 2. How Would You Like to See Relations between Ukraine and Russia? August and September 2008, February and March 2009 (in %)

	<i>Aug 08</i>	<i>Sept 08</i>	<i>Feb 09</i>	<i>March 09</i>
The same as with other countries— with closed borders, visas, and customs	12.9	16.8	7.8	7.7
Ukraine and Russia should be independent but friendly countries— with open borders and without visas and customs	58.5	65.8	67.6	62.9
Total for independence	(71.4)	(82.6)	(75.4)	(70.6)
Ukraine and Russia should unite in a single state	24.8	15.5	23.1	25.7
Hard to say	3.9	1.7	1.4	3.7

Source: <www.kiis.com.ua>

Table 3. If a Referendum on State Independence Were to Be Held Today, How Would You Vote? (in %)

	<i>2001</i>	<i>2002</i>	<i>2003</i>	<i>2004</i>	<i>2005</i>	<i>2006</i>	<i>2007</i>	<i>2008</i>
For	51.3	48.8	46.5	53.1	59.5	58.8	-	52.1
Against	29.2	33.9	29.8	27.6	19.6	20.1	-	22.2

Source: Razumkov Centre database, unpublished. The question was not asked in 2007.

there are those who are opposed to independence but do not necessarily want unification with Russia in a single state. Conversely, Ukrainians have been known to support independence within the framework of a “union of Soviet sovereign states” based on Ukraine’s 1990 declaration of sovereignty, a formulation identical to the one placed on the ballot in Ukraine in the March 1991 referendum in order to offset the so-called Gorbachev question on preserving a “renewed” Soviet Union. In a survey conducted by SOCIS-Gallup in the spring of 1997, 52 per cent of Ukrainians opted for this variant.¹⁵

As can be seen from table 3, the data from polls taken by the Razumkov Centre, which posed the question of independence directly, reveal a very different picture from that suggested by the KMIS surveys. For nearly the last decade, an average of only 53 per cent of the population affirmed their support for independence when asked specifically how they would vote in a hypothetical referendum; 26 per cent were opposed; and the remainder, about 21 per cent, were either undecided or would not take part in the voting. Here too the figures are fairly stable, with the highest level of support recorded during the first two years of the presidency of Viktor Yushchenko.

How do Ukrainians in different parts of the country feel about independence? As was to be expected, support declines as one moves from west to east and south, and, conversely, opposition to independence increases. Results from KMIS surveys taken in December 2001, October 2006, and August 2008 show that, with some variation, particularly in 2006, the trends have remained fairly consistent. Particularly interesting is the shift in the central part of the country, where support for independence

¹⁵ *Den*, 26 June 1997.

Table 4. If a Referendum on State Independence Were to Be Held Today, How Would You Vote? Regional Distribution in 2001, 2006, and 2008 (in %)

	<i>West</i>	<i>Centre</i>	<i>South</i>	<i>East</i>
<i>For</i>				
2001	72.0	46.6	38.9	27.4
2006	82.0	57.5	31.6	27.8
<i>Against</i>				
2001	7.0	22.8	37.9	38.2
2006	5.2	16.1	31.0	38.6
2008	4.9	13.6	33.3	39.6
<i>Would not vote</i>				
2001	8.1	17.9	14.0	20.8
2006	8.5	9.6	13.6	10.5
2008	7.5	11.9	17.9	18.2
<i>No answer</i>				
2001	11.9	12.7	9.2	13.6
2006	13.0	12.6	14.2	14.1
2008	5.6	17.0	17.2	14.4

Source: KMIS database, unpublished.

Table 5. If a Referendum on State Independence Were to Be Held Today, How Would You Vote? Respondents by Region in %, August 2008

	<i>West</i>	<i>Centre</i>	<i>South</i>	<i>East</i>
For	87.7	55.7	29.6	38.6
Against	3.7	21.0	39.1	26.3
Would not vote	3.9	12.1	17.1	14.1
No answer	4.7	11.2	14.1	21.0

Source: < http://www.razumkov.org.ua/rus/poll.php?poll_id=326>.

West = Lviv, Ternopil, Ivano-Frankivsk, Volyn, Rivne, Zakarpattia, and Chernivtsi oblasts; Centre = City of Kyiv and Kyiv, Vinnytsia, Zhytomyr, Khmelnytskyi, Cherkasy, Kirovohrad, Chernihiv, Sumy, and Poltava oblasts; South = the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and Odesa, Kherson, and Mykolaiv oblasts; East = Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts.

has grown markedly, and the uniformity of opposition to independence in the eastern region and, to a somewhat lesser extent, in the south (see table 4). With some exceptions, the regional breakdown in a Razumkov Centre poll taken in August 2008 yielded results that were largely similar to those from the comparable KMIS survey. In the eastern part of the country, the number of independence supporters was higher and the number of opponents was lower than in the KMIS survey, and the proportion of those opposed to independence in the central oblasts was higher in the Razumkov Centre poll (21.0 per cent) than in the KMIS survey (13.6 per cent; see table 5).

We also have KMIS data from 2006 and 2008 that breaks down the responses by ethnicity and language. Again, it comes as no surprise that a significantly larger proportion of ethnic Ukrainians and Ukrainian speakers support independence as compared to ethnic Russians and Russian speakers. Nonetheless, the degree of support among ethnic Ukrainians and Ukrainian speakers is by no means overwhelming. As for ethnic Russians, in 2008 it dropped to below 25 per cent, while the proportion of

opponents increased to nearly 44 per cent. Also, fewer Russian speakers supported independence in 2008 as compared with 2006 (see tables 6 and 7).

Table 6. If a Referendum on State Independence Were Held Today, How Would You Vote? Distribution by Ethnicity, 2006 and 2009, in %

	<i>Ukrainian</i>	<i>Russian</i>	<i>Both Ukrainian & Russian</i>	<i>Other</i>
<i>For</i>				
2006	58.5	34.9	—	31.3
2008	55.7	23.9	32.7	46.7
<i>Against</i>				
2006	18.1	38.8	—	41.7
2008	17.6	43.6	44.9	16.7
<i>Would not vote</i>				
2006	10.1	13.0	—	12.5
2008	13.1	16.1	14.3	21.7
<i>Difficult to say</i>				
2006	13.4	13.3	—	14.6
2008	13.6	16.4	8.2	15.0

Source: KMIS database, unpublished. In the 2006 survey, those who considered themselves both Ukrainian and Russian were not identified as a separate cohort.

Table 7. If a Referendum on State Independence Were to Be Held Today, How Would You Vote? Distribution by Language Spoken, 2006 and 2008, in %

	<i>Ukrainian</i>	<i>Russian</i>
<i>For</i>		
2006	65.3	41.9
2008	64.3	36.4
<i>Against</i>		
2006	14.1	30.6
2008	10.7	33.3
<i>Would not vote</i>		
2006	8.3	12.9
2008	11.6	16.0
<i>Difficult to say</i>		
2006	12.3	14.6
2008	13.3	14.3

Source: KMIS database, unpublished

Polls organized by the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine do not, as a matter of course, pose the question of independence either directly or indirectly. However, two of its standard questions—one on the preferred path of development for Ukraine, and the other on attitudes regarding Ukraine joining an unspecified union with Russia and Belarus—do provide additional insight into the state of the nation. In 2008 the proportion of Ukrainians who primarily favoured some form of co-operation or strengthening of ties within the framework of the post-Soviet space totalled 52.8 per cent; 29.8 per cent of that number supported strengthening the

“east Slavic bloc” of Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus first and foremost. Those who preferred relations with the West totalled 17.7 per cent, and those who opted for relying first of all on one’s own resources and thereby strengthening independence was 19.3 per cent. At the same time 60.2 per cent were more inclined to choose a union with Russia and Belarus; 24.2 per cent were more inclined to oppose such a union; and 15.4 per cent were undecided.¹⁶

There are, of course, other indicators that would leave one with a rather different impression than the one that might be expected from the data reproduced above. In the spring of 2008, for example, the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians (87.5 per cent) viewed Ukraine as their fatherland, and a large majority was proud of their Ukrainian citizenship (68.5 per cent). Moreover, according to the Kyiv Institute of Problems of Management (Gorshenin Institute), these figures have been on the rise in recent years.¹⁷ Similarly, 74.9 per cent of respondents asserted at the end of 2005 that they are patriots of Ukraine.¹⁸ Interestingly, according to a Razumkov Centre poll conducted in the summer of 2007, 86 per cent of Russian speakers considered Ukraine to be their fatherland and 72 per cent said that they are Ukrainian patriots.¹⁹ These and similar data have led some to play down what is most certainly a serious problem. President Yushchenko, among others, was a forceful and consistent cheerleader in this respect. In May 2007, for example, he told a group of Ukrainian war veterans:

We are country with a great deal of diversity, but we are [also] a country without opposing sides. As a wise nation, as a great people, we cannot be divided either by problems of language policy, or problems of religious politics, or problems of history. We are a single nation, irrespective of history, although we remember it well.²⁰

On an earlier occasion, Yushchenko insisted to a Moscow newspaper that “for years [they] attempted to divide Ukraine into west and east.... They buttressed the feeling that eastern and western Ukraine are different. In essence, there is no difference.”²¹ However, those who, like Yushchenko, argue that the mix of Ukraine’s overlapping regional, ethnic, and language problems are primarily the work of political elites vying for votes forget that these elites would not be able to exploit issues if they did not exist.

Optimists would be better served and should be able to take greater comfort in the knowledge that a June 2007 Razumkov Centre survey showed that 99.5 per cent of Ukrainians saw the future of their region as remaining a part of Ukraine—either under existing conditions or with expanded local prerogatives, but without autonomy. Those opposed to their oblast seceding from Ukraine and forming an independent state constituted 88.2 per cent of the respondents; those against uniting with another

¹⁶ Yevhen Holovakha and Nataliia Panina, *Ukrainske suspilstvo, 1992–2008: Sotsiologichnyi monitoring* (Kyiv: Instytut sotsiologhii, Natsionalna akademiia nauk Ukrainy, 2008), 14.

¹⁷ *Ukrainska pravda*, 1 April 2009.

¹⁸ Yurii Yakymenko and Oleksandr Lytvynenko, “Rehionalni osoblyvosti ideino-politychnykh oriientatsii hromadian Ukrainy v konteksti vyborchoi kampanii – 2006,” *Natsionalna bezpeka i oborona*, 2006, no. 1: 12.

¹⁹ *Dzerkalo tyzhnia*, 17–23 May 2008.

²⁰ *Ukrainska pravda*, 9 May 2007.

²¹ *Novaia gazeta*, 6 March 2006.

country constituted 85 per cent; and those who rejected autonomous status within Ukraine constituted 74.1 per cent. In the south of the country secession followed by independence was supported by 8.1 per cent, and union with another country was supported by 11.6 per cent. The corresponding figures for eastern Ukraine were 4.8 per cent and 10.4 per cent. Russian speakers—who accounted for 37 per cent of Ukraine’s total population—were solidly against regional independence (79 per cent), joining another country (77 per cent), and federalization of the country (60 per cent).²²

Today’s Ukraine, it seems, is a state in search of a consolidated, modern nation; a society that is obviously and seriously divided but not split along overlapping regional, ethnic, and linguistic lines; and a country that would prefer to work out its identity issues within its constituted borders.

²² “Formuvannia spilnoi identychnosti hromadian Ukrainy: Perspektyvy i vyklyky,” *Natsionalna bezpeka i oborona*, 2007, no. 9: 20; and *Dzerkalo tyzhnia*, 17–23 May 2008.

SERHII PLOKHY (PLOKHII) is the Mykhailo S. Hrushevsky Professor of Ukrainian History at Harvard University and a consulting editor of the Hrushevsky Translation Project at the CIUS. He is the author of *The Cossacks and Religion in Early Modern* (2001), *Religion and Nation in Modern Ukraine* (2003, with Frank E. Sysyn), *Mykhailo Hrushevsky and the Writing of Ukrainian History* (2005), *The Origins of the Slavic Nations: Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus* (2006), *Ukraine and Russia: Representations of the Past* (2008), and *Yalta: The Price of Peace* (2010).

NATALIA PYLYPIUK is a professor of Ukrainian literature and culture at the University of Alberta. She is the author of articles about the works of Hryhorii Skovoroda, Kasiian Sakovych, other early modern Ukrainian authors, and Ihor Kalynets and Vasyl Stus; and the co-author of *A Concordance to the Complete Works of Hryhorii Skovoroda* (2009).

OSTAP SEREDA is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Ukrainian Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine in Lviv. He is the author many articles about the Ukrainophiles, Populists, Old Ruthenians, Russophiles, Ukrainian-Polish relations, and national identity in nineteenth-century Galicia. He has co-edited several Ukrainian collections of historical articles.

MYROSLAV SHKANDRIJ is a professor of Ukrainian and Russian literature at the University of Manitoba. He is the author of *Jews in Ukrainian Literature: Representation and Identity* (2009), *Russia and Ukraine: Literature and the Discourse of Empire From Napoleonic to Postcolonial Times* (2001), and *Modernists, Marxists and the Nation: The Ukrainian Literary Discussion of the 1920s* (1992); the translator of Mykola Khvylovy, *The Cultural Renaissance in Ukraine: Polemical Pamphlets, 1925–1926* (1986) and Serhii Zhadan's *Depeche Mode* (2011); the editor of *Futurism and After: David Burluk, 1882–1967* (2008) and *The Phenomenon of the Ukrainian Avant-Garde, 1910–35*. (2001); and the co-editor of *Khrestomatiiia z ukrainskoi literatury v Kanadi* (2000).

ROMAN SOLCHANYK was the senior analyst for Ukraine and Soviet nationality issues at the RFE/RL Research Institute in Munich from 1977 to 1994. Now a resident of Santa Monica, California, he is the author of many articles about politics and society in Soviet and post-Soviet Ukraine and of *Ukraine and Russia: The Post-Soviet Transition* (2000). He compiled and edited *Ukraine: From Chernobyl' to Sovereignty. A Collection of Interviews* (1992); and is the co-editor of *Ukrainska suspilno-politychna dumka v 20 stolitti: Dokumenty i materialy*, 3 vols. (1983) and *Cultures and Nations of Central and Eastern Europe: Essays in Honor of Roman Szporluk* (2001).

FRANCES SWYRIPA is a professor of Canadian history at the University of Alberta. She is the author of *Storied Landscapes: Ethno-Religious Identity and the Canadian Prairies* (2010), *Wedded to the Cause: Ukrainian-Canadian Women and Ethnic Identity, 1891–1991* (1993), and *Ukrainian Canadians: A Survey of Their Portrayal in English-language Works* (1978); and the co-editor of *Sisters or Strangers?: Immigrant, Ethnic and Racialized Women in Canadian History* (2004), *Edmonton: The Life of a*

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