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The Myth of Two Ukraines

Most intellectuals agree that Ukraine is dramatically polarized along an East–West axis. The differences manifest themselves in linguistic differences and cultural orientation, especially however in different interpretations of the national history. How can this split be overcome in order to avoid a drifting apart between the 'europeanized' West and the more 'russified' East?

Mykola Ryabchuk, one of the most prominent intellectuals of his country, has been an astute observer of Ukraine's nation building process since 1991. His considerations about the "two Ukraines" date back to 1992, and he has developed and differentiated this concept ever since. However, it does not reflect only his personal view but contributes to a widespread discourse which has accompanied the young state since its inception and has in a way become paradigmatic. The skepticism about the viability of Ukraine as a nation state within the former Soviet borders is shared by many, inside and outside the country: by Ukrainian intellectuals, by politicians, parties and movements in the country, but also by politicians and observers in the West and in the post-communist neighboring countries.

The following remarks are targeted not so much at Ryabchuk's essay but at the prevailing "two Ukraines" discourse, and try to deconstruct some of its underlying assumptions.

In his recent study on Ukrainian history and identity Andrew Wilson gave an exhaustive classification of the historical narratives and myths which are crucial for the "imagined community" of the Ukrainian nation: myths of antiquity, of national revival, myths of national character and of the Other¹... It seems that today we are witnessing the emergence of a new powerful myth – the myth of the "two Ukraines". Like other myths, it is not just an invention, but rather a re-construction of the political and cultural realities of Ukraine, based on a certain vision of history, on opinion polls and election results, on Western theoretical constructs, cultural stereotypes and ideological prejudices.

In the eyes of many the "national idea" as it was conceived in 1991 – the long desired revival and consolidation of the Ukrainian nation for which the finally obtained independence offered a historical chance – has failed. The concept of the two Ukraines seems to offer a plausible explanation why this happened and who (inside and outside the country) is responsible for this failure. This is graphically illustrated by a proponent of this concept who recently argued that Ukraine is like a mechanical combination of Estonia and Belarus meaning that without Eastern Ukraine the country would be already in the EU². Moreover, the suggested dramatic opposition between the two Ukraines might also serve as an instruction for the West to understand which one of them deserves more

support. In our times national myths have to be sellable not only on the domestic market.

It is worthwhile to mention that this myth of two Ukraines has a twin which represents exactly its mirror image. It consists more or less of the same elements, but with opposite connotation. For example Vladimir Alekseev, a former deputy of the Verchovna Rada and vice chair of the Parliamentary committee on information and freedom of speech, argued that most of Ukraine originally belongs to the "Slavic–Orthodox civilization" and has a natural commitment to Russian cultural values. The mutual voluntary incorporation of Ukrainians in Russian society (and vice versa) was a process which went on for centuries and was only violently interrupted, mainly by external factors. Today, there are again forces which want to destroy the East Slavic Orthodox unity and to split its common cultural and linguistic space for the sake of the new world order which will emerge from the "clash of civilizations".

Ukrainian nationalism, especially its most radical and traditionally anti–Russian Galician version, serves as a tool in this "war of civilizations". Therefore, it is not the East but the West which is an alien part of the Ukrainian nation. Galicia is a periphery of Western civilization; it is not the "Ukrainian Piedmont", but its Vendée. Its function is not "nation–building" but "nation–destruction": Galician nationalists want to "uproot" the Ukrainians as a nation, to change their "cultural code" and to make them just raw material for the alien Western civilization³.

This mirror image of a fatally divided Ukrainian nation is typical for a view which is shared by quite some Russian journalists and political analysts who predict the split of the country every time elections are approaching.

The "Huntingtonization" of the Ukrainian political discourse

Any process of nation and state formation requires the construction of a symbolic geography: a "heartland", believed to be the cradle of the nation, a capital, and national boundaries, symbolically separating "us" from "them". This geography also can entail a symbolic hierarchy of regions: some of them claimed to be "more mature", some of them "more backward" in terms of national identity.

This evidently applies to the case of Ukraine, where during the last decade the country has indeed dramatically polarized along the East–West axis. After 1991 the Western regions turned from the periphery of the Soviet empire into the main base of the national democratic movement and into the gateway to Europe. Simultaneously, Eastern Ukraine, which formed an industrial core of the USSR and contributed essentially to the intellectual and administrative potential of the Soviet system, with its overwhelmingly Russian–speaking population, was marginalized on the new symbolic map of Ukraine.

The formation of Ukraine's new political geography was also determined by long–term regional historical developments. In the 19th century various initiatives for a revival of Ukrainian culture emerged both in the Western and in the Central and Eastern parts of the country but took different shapes. Under the relatively liberal Austrian rule and in confrontation with the Polish authorities Western Ukrainians developed a strong sense of national identity which later resulted in a mass national liberation movement. After World War I Western Ukrainians continued to fight for their independence. Since 1939 their struggle was also directed against Soviet rule, and only at the end of 50's these territories were fully incorporated into the Soviet Ukraine, causing a lot

of troubles for the communist authorities. On the contrary, Eastern and Central Ukraine, as a part of the Russian empire, has never developed nationalism as a mass phenomenon – although it produced many influential intellectuals devoted to the idea of a national revival, and the educational institutions in this region, designed to serve the Russification of the imperial periphery, paradoxically prepared the ground for modern nationalist ideology. Even more important, the regional version of Ukrainian identity developed in the East did neither exclude a commitment to the Russian language and culture nor later a certain loyalty to the Soviet system.

According to the belief of pro-nationalist Ukrainian intellectuals and of many Western political experts, after 1991 these specific conditions made it difficult to mobilize the largely ethnically mixed and Russian speaking population of Eastern Ukraine for the mass support of the "national idea". The majority voted for the communists or the oligarchic "party of power", but not for the "national democrats". Thus, from the point of view of Western critics, Eastern Ukrainians turned into the worse part of the nation. Seen as a Russified, or rather Sovietized population, as people who lost their identity, they are perceived as the main obstacle for democratic transformation. Consequently Russian language became a synonym of pro-communist orientation and Soviet nostalgia, of dangerous ideas like pan-Slavism and the re-unification with Russia.

What even reinforced this image was the fact that it was mainly the Eastern Ukrainian communist nomenklatura which formed the post-Soviet oligarchic elite and profited from the flourishing shadow economy. According to most of his critics, Kuchma's meanwhile completely discredited regime is mainly rooted in the East. Since he came to power with the support of Eastern Ukraine, a whole set of ideas his presidency explicitly or implicitly represented in the beginning (keeping the status quo concerning the Russian language, developing a strategic partnership with Russia, and changing the political balance in favor of the Eastern part of Ukraine) has been eventually compromised. Thus one can say that the "Eastern" alternative to the "national idea", the alternative as represented by Kuchma's regime, has indeed failed.

Ukraine is not the only country in the world where different regions have their own traditions of political sympathies and patterns of electoral behavior. What makes the case of Ukraine special is that for more and more political observers, journalists and intellectuals the East–West divide is today perceived as an obstacle to democratic consolidation and reforms, as the main reason for the wasted decade of independence, and – even in absence of a separatist movement or of Russian nationalism – as a threat to the territorial integrity and national security. Even more important, the division between Western and Eastern Ukraine is presented by some Ukrainian intellectuals as a symbolic boundary dividing the democratic European future of Ukraine from its hated totalitarian past. This is reinforced by the mutually exclusive re-interpretations of Soviet history, especially of the Second World War, when Eastern and Western Ukrainians often fought against each other. Moreover, in addition to the traditional opposition of the Uniate and Orthodox churches, the growing contradictions between the orthodox churches of the Moscow Patriarchy and of the Kiev Patriarchy have become more and more politicized. Linguistic differences are probably not the most important but the most obvious dimension of the East–West opposition. The more problematic the perspectives of democratic reforms and nation-building become the more the regional differences between the "two Ukraines" are turned into differences between two civilizations in the Huntingtonian sense.

But the most important factor of this "Huntingtonization" has been an external one. After the end of the Cold War and the initial euphoria caused by the fall of the Berlin Wall Ukraine found itself "in between" the new emerging geopolitical realities: between an enlarging EU and NATO on the one side, and a rather shaky re-integration of the former Soviet republics, dominated by Russia, on the other. Unlike its Central European neighbors, Ukraine could not dream about the accession to the EU in the near future and remained heavily dependent on Russian markets, especially on Russian gas supply. This uncertainty has been interpreted ideologically as a conflict of two cultural orientations and two mutually exclusive identities: European culture embodied by Western Ukraine and pan-Slavic or Eurasian culture embodied by Eastern Ukraine. The conflict of the political and economic interests of the regional elites has turned increasingly into a "war of identities". The basic question, "Who are we, the Ukrainians?", has been replaced by another one: "Where do we belong?", or rather, "With whom are we?".

This "Huntingtonization" of the Ukrainian political discourse was certainly not the initial intention of the "national democrats". Rather they would argue that the symbolic boundary between "the West and the rest" goes along the Eastern border of Ukraine, dividing Asiatic despotic Russia from European democratic Ukraine. But in their eyes, the promising project of a "European Ukraine" was rejected by the Russified population of the East, and it is therefore the East which is responsible for the split into "two Ukraines".

A divided history

It is true that it is not the language itself which divides Ukraine today but rather the interpretation of its national history. Were the Russification and assimilation to Russian culture forcibly imposed or were they voluntary? Was Ukraine a colony of imperial / Soviet Russia? Is the Russian language an imperial legacy, imposed on the denationalized Ukrainians in the East, or is it rather a legitimate part of their national identity as Ukrainian citizens?

It is also true that the experience of the Second World War was very different for Ukrainians of the Western and Eastern regions. While "the Westerners" fought against the Nazis and the Soviet army for the national liberation of Ukraine, "the Easterners" fought for the liberation of Soviet Ukraine against the Nazis together with the Russians. In the East, the "Soviet version" of historical memory still predominates, and most Eastern Ukrainians can hardly accept the "anti-Soviet" version of Ukrainian history. But instead of trying to overcome the divided memory and reconcile the nation, the Ukrainian ruling elites cynically use it for their own interests.

It would, however, be too easy to conclude that all Eastern Ukrainians look at the world through the communist lens. True, contrary to those in the West, they did not experience direct repressions from the regime after World War II, so their attitude to the Soviet system is different. But I think that the real divisive question is not "Was communism or the Soviet system a good or a bad thing?" but "Did the repressions of the Soviet regime affect all people regardless of their nationality, or was it an ethnocide (or ethnic discrimination) of the Ukrainians, committed by the Russians?"

It is not the "national idea" itself Eastern Ukrainians refuse to accept, but its anti-Russian message. Psychological complexes of dependency or inferiority do not explain this. Rather, it is a shared Soviet history, with its hopes, failures, horrors and crimes, where Ukrainians were not just victims of an imposed

external power but also active agents of their own history.

Indeed, if there were not the rest – the "Sovietized Ukraine" –, the "Westerners" could follow quite successfully the Central European and Baltic model of externalizing the communist past. In Western Ukraine, like in the Baltic States, the communist regime can be easily interpreted as forcibly imposed by the enemy, against the resistance of the nation. Consequently, Russians can be seen as foreigners, if not occupants. But due to the different historical experiences of Eastern and Central Ukraine this model of dissociating oneself from the Soviet past does not work in the East.

For obvious reasons Ukraine can also not follow the Russian model of dealing with the communist past. In Russia, it seems that meanwhile a kind of national consensus has been established that the historical experience of the Soviet period, ambivalent and dramatic as it was, undeniably represents a chapter of the history of Russian statehood and of Russian political and social modernization. This does not mean that the communist past is a closed chapter in Russia or that the achievements of dealing with this period are not questionable⁴. This issue still divides contemporary Russian society, but this is not a division along ethnic, linguistic or regional lines as it is the case in Ukraine. What is evident is that Russia cannot just borrow a "European" identity. It is not by accident that the focus of public debates in Russia has shifted again to the possibility of a "third way". Contrary to most of the other countries of the former Soviet bloc, the new Russian national identity will probably include not only negative, but also positive aspects of the historical experience of communism (though this process might take a long time).

Ukraine seems to be trapped between these two different models of dealing with Soviet history: the "East" is not able to externalize completely the communist experience, and the "West" has obvious difficulties with appropriating it as a part of its own national history. At the same time, Ukraine in general shares with Russia all the negative consequences of an unfinished de-communization.

It is a fact that Ukrainian society is divided by inconsistent interpretations of its history, and the process of reconciliation will take time, patience and the political will of both "Ukrainians". But it will be successful only when Eastern Ukrainians are treated as equal – not as an object of re-nationalization but as people whose right to have a distinctive version of Ukrainian identity is recognized. One should not forget that in 1991 the overwhelming majority of Eastern Ukrainians voted for state independence, together with the "Westerners". It proves that already at that time not just an ethnic nation but a civic Ukrainian nation was in the making, voting against the failed communist project and for the "national" alternative. The crucial point is that the democratic-minded Eastern Ukrainians imagined this alternative not as a state with a "titular Ukrainian nation" tolerant towards its national minorities, but rather as a supraethnic community, as a Ukrainian *Sovetskii narod*⁵ in a new democratic state where ethnic and linguistic issues can be solved without being politicized. This utopia, still inspired from the Gorbachev-era, was doomed to fail, although it worked not against but for the project of a Ukrainian civic nation.

Paradoxically, this embryonic civic nation which in 1991 broke with the communist ideology and the Soviet system was a product of this system: not only in a negative but also in a positive sense. Here I mean not only the industrial, communicational, cultural infrastructure of the modern nation, but

also some elements of the so-called "Soviet identity". Again, if the "Westerners" just threw it away or rather had never accepted it because in their eyes it was an imposed imperial invention, for the "Easterners" it had something to do with the ideas of multiculturalism and non-ethnic citizenship, as developed, for example, by the Kharkiv politician and member of the Ukrainian parliament, Volodymyr Hryniov.

"Weak" or "open" identity?

What the myth of the "Two Ukraines" in fact claims is that only one "true Ukraine" can exist. Therefore, in the "national democratic" ideology (which today represents the mainstream ideology in Ukraine given that the communists are more and more marginalized and the cynical oligarchic party does not care about ideology) Eastern Ukraine can be considered only as a "proto-nation" which has to "catch-up" with Western Ukraine. From the point of view of Eastern Ukraine it is quite obvious that this ideology is neither democratic nor liberal.

There is nothing like a primordial political culture or "mentality" of the East, which would have produced a mafia, corruption or criminal business. And if Kuchma's oligarchic regime is in some sense rooted in Eastern Ukraine, this is only due to the fact that in the predominantly industrial East the regional elites have had substantial economic resources at their disposal and were strongly tempted to convert them into political power to control (and direct) the processes of privatization and redistribution of property according to their own interests.

The biggest problem of the "other Ukraine" and of its intellectuals in particular is the lack of symbolic resources to construct a distinctive version of national identity. Soviet ideology is not only completely delegitimized as "imperial", it is also culturally old-fashioned, "non-European", although still attractive for the older generation; Pan-Slavism and "Eurasianism" are also compromised by Russian policy in Chechnya and by the dubious Russian-Belarusian union. During the last elections political parties proposing a closer integration with Russia got almost no support. The same is true about the Russian ethnic nationalists and those defending an equal status of the Russian language. Although the issue of the Russian language seems to be important for the people in the East (at a plebiscite conducted by the local authorities in Kharkiv 83% voted for granting Russian an official status) it turned out to be difficult to mobilize them politically to support Russian nationalism.

It is true that during the last elections only few Eastern Ukrainians supported Yushchenko's block, the main hope of "national democrats", and in most regions communists again have got the majority. But it would be too simple to color the East in red, as the proponents of the "two Ukraines" have done. Contrary to Western Ukraine, traditionally having clear political orientations, political sympathies in the East are more diverse and changing. Some political analysts argued that under the present conditions it is difficult for Eastern Ukrainian voters to translate their preferences into a clear voting behavior. This might also explain what Ryabchuk calls "ambiguity": I think one cannot exclude that the specific Eastern indifference towards many questions in the opinion polls he cites is due to the fact that the respondents often simply could not accept the logic behind the alternatives they were confronted with.

I have no ambitions to interpret the results of the recent elections, but it seems to me that one of the reasons why people in Eastern Ukraine do not want to

buy the "national idea" is that they resist to the moral "delimitation" along ethnic/linguistic lines proposed by the myth of the "two Ukraines": civil society and democratic traditions seen as a Ukrainian asset on the one side; a corrupted state, shadow economy and low standard mass culture seen as a Russian liability on the other. The Russian speaking Ukrainians and the Russians in Eastern Ukraine are politically loyal to the Ukrainian state, but many of them do neither want to accept the imposition of a Ukrainian cultural identity based on ethnic/linguistic criteria combined with anti-Russian resentments, nor the opposition of a "European Ukraine" to an "Asiatic Russia".

The myth of a "European" Ukraine as a means of rejecting Russian identity has its own history, but this Europeanism has always been rather ambivalent. Between the two World Wars the attitude of Ukrainian nationalism to the "West" was highly problematic; the nationalists criticized liberal democracies for neglecting the national issue and collaborating with the communists and the Soviet power. For Ukrainian nationalism, political identification with the "West" became possible only with the Cold War and the radical polarization of the two political systems and ideologies. And only after the fall of the Berlin Wall the Ukrainian national identity was reconstructed by the intellectual elites as "European" (or rather "Euroatlantic"). In our times, when even the Volga Tatars claim to be European Muslims, the opposition between a "European" and a "Russian" Ukraine can only be highly ideological. Who can prove that Russia cannot be "European" (and even more so than Ukraine)? And why should being "Russian" exclude being "European"? Today, the idea of "Russia" goes itself through an intensive transformation, it is not any more just a pole in the "West-East" opposition. There is nothing bad about having national myths, but the myth about Western Ukraine as "more European" misrepresents Eastern Ukraine with its own distinctive "Europeanism".

It is quite possible that in L'viv only low standard mass literature in Russian is offered on the market – just because the demand of the local intellectuals for Russian books is low. But the Kharkiv book market offers a broad variety of Russian contemporary literature, academic books and translations from Western languages. In the absence of even one English language bookstore in Ukraine and under conditions of very limited financial capacities for translation and publishing, Russian books as an information channel to the West "through the East" are still crucial for a peripheral country like Ukraine.

In the times of the "Soviet empire" we learnt at school that Peter the Great "has cut through the window to Europe". It was only this window which Ukrainians in the East had in the Russian empire and later under Soviet rule. Ten years ago Ukraine claimed to have its own window, and as Roman Szporluk wrote "the idea of Ukraine as a nation (...) was that its people should have direct access to the centers of civilization"⁶. It is still a lot to be done to widen this new Ukrainian window, but I will never agree to the argument that in order to open a new window the old one has to be closed. What is also true, however, is that all windows should be cleaned from time to time.

¹ A. Wilson, "National history and national identity in Ukraine and Belarus", in: G. Smith, V. Law, A. Wilson, A. Bohr, and E. Allworth, *Nation-building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands: The Politics of National Identities*. (Cambridge University Press 1998), pp.23–47.

² Taras Kuzio, presentation at the round table on Ukrainian parliamentary elections, University of Toronto, CREES, April 8, 2002.

- ³ Vladimir Alekseev, "'Vendée': The Dialog of Ukrainian and Russian Cultures in Ukraine", Materials of the IVth International Scientific and Practical Conference (Kyiv, December 9–10, 1999), Kyiv 2000, pp. 66–75.
- ⁴ Cf. Alexei Miller, "The communist past in post–Communist Russia", unpublished ms., German version published in *Transit* 22 (2001).
- ⁵ "*Sovetskii narod*" (Soviet people) was a central concept of the late Soviet regime, a kind of ideological equivalent to the "bourgeois" notion of the "political nation". It assumed that a "new historical community" – the multinational people of the USSR – had been formed; "national" cultural identities could be combined with loyalty to the Soviet system and communist ideology, and the Russian language served as a means of transnational communication.
- ⁶ Roman Szporluk, "Ukraine: From an Imperial Periphery to a Sovereign State", in *Daedalus*, vol. 126, no. 3 (Summer 1997), p.113.

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