"National Identities in Russia and Ukraine in the 21st Century: Conflict and In(ter)dependence"

National and Regional Identities in an Age of Globalisation 2014/2015
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**Introduction**

In 1654, the Tsardom of Muscovy (the seventeenth century iteration of the modern-day Russian Federation) and the Cossack Hetmanate (its Ukrainian counterpart) signed a treaty (the Treaty of Pereyaslav), uniting the two nations under the supremacy of the Russian Tsar and forming a formidable military alliance against the Polish, the Lithuanians and the Ottomans. Thus
began the era of continuous political and military closeness, and sometimes outright politico-legal unity, of Russia and Ukraine. In 1939-1940, when the Soviet Union annexed parts of Poland and Romania (now roughly identified as West Ukraine), they were added to the Ukrainian SSR, and thus became part of the greater USSR. Orest Subtelny, Canadian historian of Ukrainian descent, wrote the following about the importance of those events for the Ukrainian statehood:

“Since 1654, when the tsars began steadily to extend their control over Ukraine, Ukrainians had lived in two distinct worlds: one ruled by the Russians and the other by Poles or Austrians. As a result of the Second World War, the East/West Ukrainian dichotomy finally ceased to exist, at least on the political level. The process of amalgamation—of unification of two long-separated branches of the Ukrainian people—was not only a major aspect of the post-war period, but an event of epochal significance in the history of Ukraine.”

In 1954, to commemorate the 300 year anniversary of the Treaty of Pereyaslav, Nikita Khrushchev, then Secretary General of the Central Commissariat of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, signed a decree passing the Crimean peninsula from the jurisdiction of the RSFSR (Russia) over to the Ukrainian SSR. This was done to further emphasize the unity and unbreakable friendship of the two nations, and to show that Russia was not afraid of simply giving up a large and strategically important piece of its territory to Ukraine, since it was universally held as self-evident that the two countries would never find themselves on the opposite sides of a conflict, at least not a military one.

The closeness of the two nations is, of course, not limited to the ambit of political history. One could, indeed, argue, that historical, cultural, linguistic and ethnic unity and similarity are actually more important to grasp the simultaneous and tightly intertwined development of the Russian and the Ukrainian identities in the eras of the Russian Empire and the USSR. The strength of this argument becomes even more evident if one is to consider the fact that the two nations preserved an unparalleled feeling of closeness and fraternity even after the Soviet Union was dissolved, with Russia taking on itself all of Ukraine’s debt and guaranteeing its safety from external military aggression in accordance with the Budapest Memorandum. This closeness should not, furthermore, be seen as a “one-way” street, whereby Ukraine is simply a satellite of the larger and more powerful Russia, but rather as an overwhelming feeling of equality and brotherhood of the peoples that is not, or only loosely tied to the political status of Ukraine at any given time (consider, for instance, the portrayal of Russia as “Eternal Union of brotherly peoples”, no doubt referring also to Ukrainians, in the post-Soviet, modern anthem of the Russian Federation). Furthermore, one could argue that the widespread bilingualism, and even the predominance of the Russian language in Eastern Ukraine, as well as its status as an official language of the country next to the Ukrainian language, is not only an homage to the assimilated identity created from shared history, nor simply a coin of political appreciation, but rather a sign of the importance of the “Russian part” of the Ukrainian identity that has arguably been one of the major reasons and cornerstones of the recent conflict.

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2 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances, signed on December 5th, 1994.
The above paragraph does not purport to simplify the undeniably complex character of the conflict. This introduction merely sets the stage for a more or less pure historico-cultural analysis of the two identities and the conflict between them, which we try to separate from the whims of geopolitics and the technicalities of international trade and diplomacy. It is our firm belief that the conflict in Ukraine is primarily a conflict of values, and therefore it is of utmost importance to understand the identities at play that produced those values, if the conflict is eventually to be solved and harmony is to be restored between two nations that, until last year, could never even imagine going to war against each other.

The main problem that this paper addresses is that neither conventional politics nor international economic policies seem to address the true nature of the conflict currently engulfing the Eastern part of Ukraine, combined with attempting to answer the following question: “How has the Ukrainian national identity evolved since the late years of the Soviet Union, and how has it separated itself from the Russian view of Ukraine as a Russian sphere of influence?”

**Methodology**

The toolkit of concepts which we adopt and utilize for our analysis consists to a large extent of “soft” concepts - they are context-specific, culturally dependent and sometimes so intricate that they, as we have discovered, can hardly be transmitted through methodologically nearly flawless\(^3\) analysis of history and politics by the Western authors who are not native to either Ukraine or Russia. This shortcoming of the Western media and academia is very evident in the ways in which the developments of the current conflict are being reported by the major Western news broadcasters: Even if we are to abandon any doubts as to the factual correctness of their presentations, there still remains the problem that they operate solely with “black letter” concepts such as international law, politics or economics. Despite the upturn in the interest international academia has in the region since the beginning of the conflict, they, too, seem to accept language or past formal political unity as the main, or sometimes the only common grounds of the two nations - a clearly faulty and oversimplified assumption.

So much information has been produced, and such detailed quantitative data has been presented to the public, that we can hardly aspire to add anything of value to the debate on the political and economic decisions, and perhaps the future of Ukraine and Russia, or their current and future frameworks of coexistence. At the same time, being “insiders” of those cultures, and having an intimate, almost inborn understanding of the two spirits, we feel that we can add a different dimension to the debate, a dimension that emphasizes harmony and strives for peace and cooperation - that of the historical interdependence of the two countries that neither can nor should disappear solely because they became two independent states. For that reasons, the purely “research” part of this paper will consult credible sources of academic doctrine and history. For

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\(^3\) For an example, see Lowell W. Barrington & Erik S. Herron, *One Ukraine or Many? Regionalism in Ukraine and Its Political Consequences*, Nationalities Papers, Vol. 32, No. 1, March 2004
the large part, however, this paper will use the force of rhetoric and unquantifiable cultural aspects that form the respective identities of the two nations.

In essence, the goal of this paper is to analyze in some depth the path to which Ukraine has committed itself in 1654, which it has been thrown off of in 1991 and which it now attempts to completely rid itself of, and use the acquired knowledge and insight to craft a recommendation as to what must be done to bring the current conflict to a halt with as little long-term harm as possible, and keep the door open for the re-establishment of friendly relations between the two sovereign states of Russia and Ukraine, as well as to avoid having to deal with persistent feelings of animosity between the two peoples.

*The Post-Soviet period: Independence, but still close friendship, tight economic and political ties*

Ukraine became independent most recently in 1991 after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The period of independence shifted the country’s market orientation and is perceived as a period of transition from planned economy to a market economy, which has started the problems among regions as those differ in their population and identity orientation of those regions. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine became a unitary state, with the power concentrated in Kiev. Such developments have caused conflicts among the regions regarding the economic and political dependence from Kiev (for instance, Crimea acquired the status of an autonomous republic, a status that is currently arguably the priority of the separatists-controlled self-proclaimed, and also Russian-speaking Donetsk and Luhansk people’s republics). In 1991, a referendum was held in Ukraine, resulting in 90% of its population voting for independence of the state from the Soviet Union⁴, an outcome that was recognised by the international community of states.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, regional identities - that had been largely unknown to the population until then, or sometimes even violently suppressed by the Kremlin in a bid to centralise the power (like in Hungary and Czechoslovakia) started playing an important role, in particular reflecting different tendencies among the Western and the Eastern Ukraine, where the population were more oriented towards Europe and to the Russian Federation, respectively. Regionalism became evident after secession of Ukraine from the Soviet Union in a way that Russian and other ethnic minorities started seeking more political and economic autonomy from the central government during the 1990s, which was perceived as constituting a threat to the Ukrainian unity. Among first regionalist tendencies were suggestions of the Donetsk-Dnipro autonomous region, and in 1990 a special state status for the so called Novorossiya was proposed in Odessa⁵. This led to an eventual annexation of Crimea in 2014 by Russia.

With regards to regionalism, the Western part of Ukraine can more or less be perceived as unitary, or monolithic; however, there is a fair share of its own kind of regionalism. As Ukraine

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has historically been split among different states, the region of Galicia was a part of the Austrian Empire, rather than of the Russian Empire. This reflects regional differences between the developments in the East and the West.

The initial years of Ukraine’s independence were marked by holding close ties with its ‘brotherly’ nations - Russian and Belarus and were relatively peaceful with regard to regional identities. The political and economical power has traditionally been concentrated in the capital - Kiev, and the regions have thus not had much of a say in the policy-making process. However, this period was also marred by significant corruption of high political offices, and this has eventually led to a popular and regional uprising in 2004, when the then-president Leonid Kuchma announced that he would not run for re-election any more.

The year 2004 marked the beginning of conflicts relating to the political orientation of Ukraine and a problem of Ukrainian identity became evident as to whether the country should continue with the historical development and walk further down the path that pulled it closely towards Russia, or overcome the historical bias of the large part of the population and continue the development of the Ukrainian identity independent from the Russian influence. Two candidates - the pro-Russian incumbent Prime Minister at the time Viktor Yanukovych, and the pro-Western candidate Viktor Yushchenko ran for presidency. The first candidate, supported by both Kuchma and the Russian Federation wanted closer ties with the East, appealing to historical ties between the ‘brotherly’ nations; while Viktor Yushchenko was a protagonist of westward thinking and orientation that called for eventual accession of Ukraine to the European Union.

This period of Ukrainian history signifies an important shift in the self-perception of the Ukrainians as a people - faced with new opportunities, but also new responsibilities and thus new challenges that independence and sovereignty pose, Ukraine was essentially asked a question to which it was not prepared to give a unified answer: Should it pursue the more risky, yet potentially more rewarding path of building up its own history, or is it wiser “to play it safe” and stick with Russia, as they had done for centuries? When a nation, or any large community, for that matter, faces a question of such magnitude, and of such potential consequence, and at the same time finds itself incapable of overcoming internal dissensus, a period of conflict and turmoil is inevitable, as was proven once again by the Orange revolution in the Ukraine. At the same time, the shift was perhaps not final, and if it was, then it was only true among the more radically-minded Ukrainians. Overall, the feelings toward Russia and the Russians was positive, and the closeness of the two peoples was still beyond doubts for both the Ukrainians and the Russians.

**Regionalism in Ukraine vs. Regionalism in Russia**

As Russia is greater in terms of size, most of the political science experts have expected regionalism to be a bigger problem in Russia rather than Ukraine. Paul Goode however, argues that with Putin coming to power, regionalism and tendencies for decentralisation of the central power of Kremlin have both declined and central authority of state has been upheld. On the other

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hand, in Ukraine regionalism centred around regional marco-units by shared ethnic, linguistic and historical ties rather than separate regional institutions. Consequently, because of these different tendencies, regionalism in Ukraine tends to escalate and form nationalist challenges to the central state, while in Russia it remains focused on fates of individual regions.7

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the two countries initially took similar political steps and the dynamics of regionalism spurred exiting the USSR in its last two years of existence. Though regionalism was a central engine of this and both Ukraine and Russia shared similar origins and political culture, it took on different trajectories; whereby in Russia the state power was initially decentralised among the regions, and the Kremlin only assumed the central power after the campaign to re-centralise it afterwards during the first years of Putin’s presidency. Ukraine took a different approach in that drive for independence from the Soviet Union emerged from regions, but the government in Kiev moved to centralisation of power and dominance of the centre faster - in 1996. Moreover, the reforms taken by the central government in Kiev shortly after forming an independent state in order to ensure the centrality of government in Kiev, have mostly been abolished by Putin, and regions and the regional representation at the state level have been integrated into the power of Kremlin, which explains why regionalism in a modern day Russia is not an issue that would threaten the statehood.8

Historically, Ukraine has been a heterogenous society of people, traditionally living in relatively peaceful coexistence of Ukrainian majority and a variety of minorities. Collapse of the Soviet Union however, brought about discussions about federalism, or second official language, that with the previously mentioned regionalist tendencies, grew to large scale conflicts. Thus, Ukrainian regionalism has intensified, while regionalism in Russia has decreased in the recent years.9

Defining regionalism in terms of Ukraine is a challenging process as there are no clear borders of regions there. Thus, there arise ambiguities and misconceptions become possible when attempting to mark physical borders of regions. The most sensible way of identifying regions in Ukraine is thus to focus on ethnicity bases of various identities. Though Ukrainians have formed minority only in the region of Crimea, the minorities in other regions of the country have been able to react to centralising tendencies in an immense effect in the rest of Ukraine as well. Scientists have argued about what makes regions distinct, and a variety of opinions have been put forward. Wilson, who defines Ukrainian society as bi-ethnic, or bilingual, rather than bipolar with regards to the fact that ⅓ of the population is Russian speaking. Similarly, Kuzio also recognises that even though titular nationality of the population in Ukraine is around 78%. However, said this, it thus proves that Ukrainians are then divided by history, religion, language and political culture.10

8 Ibid.
9 Anastasiya Salnykova, Ukrainian Regional Intensification: Forces Behind. CEU eTD Collection - Central European University, Summer 2007.
10 Ibid.
2014: Maidan, beginning of bitter conflict on the basis of conflict of identities: Ukrainian strive for full independence and realignment with a view to the West, versus Russia’s Neo-imperialist and traditionalist ambitions

The conflict of 2004 eventually led to the destabilisation of Ukrainian authority in the regions, which was reflected by the loss of confidence in president Yushchenko and eventual presidency of the pro-Russian candidate Yanukovych. Throughout his presidency, Yanukovych was reluctant to direct his policies towards the West by refusing to sign the Ukraine-European Union Association Agreement, and instead opting to accept a large economic help package from Russia, which eventually resulted in political schism and riots in Kiev and other pro-Western oriented cities and parts of the country. Initially, the protests started at Maidan Nezalezhnosti - the Independence Square in Kiev, by protesters taking over the government buildings. Thus, the notion of Ukrainian identity suffered from unclear orientation and future direction of ideology. The riots lead to the Parliament removing the president from his office. As a result, the president fled Ukraine to Russia, and new elections were held, whereby Petro Poroshenko - the pro-Western candidate, became the new president with the aim of Ukraine becoming more westernized in the sense of cooperation with Europe rather than Russia.

Such developments led to the change in Russian foreign policy, which resulted in Russian annexation of the Crimean peninsula on the basis of a questionable referendum that was held in Crimea. The referendum - organised under Russian military occupation, was not recognised by the international community. However, this does not change the fact that Crimea is now de facto a Russian territory. Since the referendum was held under suspicious circumstances, it remains unclear as to what is the overall sentiment on the peninsula and whether its people have suffered a cultural shock or a crisis of identity after the Russian annexation. However, the relative peace and order, as well as the linguistic makeup of the Crimean population - a heavy Russian majority, would indicate that their unique regional identity was perhaps actually brought to harmony by accession to the Russian Federation.

The annexation of the Crimean peninsula by Russia in turn led to other Ukrainian regions’ uprising, whereas separatist movements in eastern Ukraine made strong claims of regionalism followed by ideology distinct from the Kiev policies. The separatist movements in Donetsk and Lugansk regions proclaimed independence from the central government, basing their legitimacy on referendums held in May 2014, which in turn led to internal displacement of over half a million people within Ukraine and the beginning of the civil war in Ukraine

In 1918, Lenin proclaimed a communist state in Russia, two of the main ideas of which were “No war” and “No annexations”. Clearly, Lenin’s imperialism was ideological rather than nationalistic. And yet, it was the state that used ideology to grow into an empire rather than the other way around. In 1991, after that empire had crumbled, Russia was faced with the harsh reality of being surrounded by equals rather than by de facto subjects - a reality that contradicted the well-

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11 Half a million displaced in eastern Ukraine as winter looms, warns UN refugee agency, UN (5th December 2014).
settled imperial identity of not only the state, but also of the people, particularly those in Saint-Petersburg and Moscow - the capitals of the two Russian Empires. Thus began a shift in the Russian identity as it pertains its position in the Eastern European region - a shift towards nationalism driven by nostalgia of the great empires of the past, but at the same time a shift towards the promises of liberalism, democracy and capitalism. Those opposite dynamics led to the turmoil of the 1990s, and have resurfaced in the minds and hearts of the Russian people with the conflict in Ukraine.

2015: The hesitancy of the West, the Media War; War of Exhaustion, and exhaustion from war

Even a most optimistic observer, let alone a participant in the conflict on either side, would say that by the end of 2014 the climax of the conflict had been passed. The large-scale hostilities between the government army and the allegedly Russian-backed separatists continued, and the body count rose exponentially. With the crisis spinning out of control, the West, and in particular the European Union, did not support its powerful rhetoric with any action other than the imposition of economic sanctions on Russia. The Russian government, in turn, imposed its own sanctions, and began manipulating the public opinion by waging a media war, outside the country through channels like the state-owned Russia Today as well as through domestic channels, in an attempt to persuade more people to take its side and to take people’s attention away from the allegations of the breaches of international law by the Russian officials. The cowardice, or perhaps the institutional gridlocks in the EU allowed the conflict, irreconcilable without an outside intervention, to spin out of control. The EU utilizes the rhetoric of state action, ignoring the fact that there are millions of people who do not want the war and yet are faced with its brutal reality every day while the EU stands idly by. Much has been made of the Russian propaganda, and the manipulation of the media. While those allegations are likely true, the West is at least as much to blame for the conflict as anyone. By enticing Ukraine to strengthen its ties with Europe, thus attempting to alter the identity of its people, the EU took the risk of facing the consequences of scorning Russia - and yet acted surprised and outraged when those consequences actually came to transpire.

The effect was the usual - the innocent people in the East of Ukraine - whatever their political affiliation, have suffered and continue to suffer tremendously while political agendas unrelated to them continue to be advanced. While this paper has admitted that the shift of the Ukrainian identity towards independence is final and irreversible, it is also beyond question that war and violence have in effect only radicalized the moderate and engaged the apolitical, an overwhelmingly negative consequence.

Conclusion
A multitude of historians, as well as lawyers, economists and other social scientists have written about path dependency as a major determinant as to what course a nation is likely to adopt and pursue, emphasizing the power of inertia and entrenchment in historical processes. The crisis in Ukraine is a clear example of the opposite - Ukraine - a country, a society, a large part of which has decided to radically divert from its historic path, and blaze the trail, if necessary by violent means, to a new direction. While the goals of adopting this direction are rather clear - pursuing greater economic prosperity, joining the NATO and perhaps eventually the EU, this sharp and largely unexpected shift cannot be fully understood, and thus sufficiently controlled, without a profound understanding of the path being abandoned.

This paper has presented historical, cultural and societal similarities and interdependencies between Russia and Ukraine that, in combination, inevitably led to close ties of friendship and even brotherhood that the two nations enjoyed from early history (one can in principle look as far the 9th century AD, when the Kievan Rus’, that both Russia and Ukraine claim as their cultural ancestor, came into being). In a conflict that is correctly classified as international by international legal scholars, but at the same time resembles an inter-state conflict of attempted secession (not legal or political, but rather rooted in historical developments of identity), the international community has failed in curtailing it, since it only used the mechanisms at its disposal that affect the parties economically and politically, without taking little to no account of the identity revolution that took place in the Ukrainian society that finally realized that it was truly independent from its ‘big brother’, and decided to craft its own future by looking towards the West.

It would be methodologically irresponsible to ignore the well-documented events of the recent past, for which reason this paper dedicated chapters for a detailed timeline of the factual developments that have taken place in Ukraine starting January 2014, as well as a brief account of the post-Soviet political developments there. We urge the reader, however, to try to read them while remaining skeptical of their political background, and remaining aware of the ever-persistent cultural history and historical cultural interdependence of the two peoples.

Ever since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the national identities of the newly-alone Russia and the newly-independent Ukraine started diverging, with Russian manifesting its centuries-old imperial ambition in establishing a sphere of influence in the neighboring countries, and Ukraine attempting to find its own way as an equal member of the international community with little experience in self-governance. The Russian identity remained largely unchanged in the last 24 years, with regular cyclical fluctuations - in difficult times, nostalgia for the mighty empires of the past, in prosperous times - embracing the and reinforcing the liberal capitalism of the present. Thus, the abolishment of strong regionalism that followed to collapse of the Soviet Union and return to the strong central government in Moscow ought not to seem surprising, as it can be perceived as a historical tradition within the society. Ukraine, on the other hand, having taken more than 20 years to see its national idea grow up and strengthen to evolve into a full-fledged independence from the Russian-dominated past, has come to the point where Russian influence was no longer accepted. When this point in the evolution of the Ukrainian identity was reached, that led to protests, which eventually led to the situation presently at hand.
The above paragraph shows how, by distancing itself from Russia, Ukrainians eventually acquired a sufficiently strong national identity to rebel against what they considered to be a remnant of a less-than-glorious past - being a Russian satellite or a buffer-state in military terms. This view, however, is not sufficient to illustrate a central theme of this paper - the interdependence of the two countries and the two identities, which has to include the dependence of Russia’s identity on Ukraine with regards to history, as well.

Since the beginning of the conflict, much has been said of the two major schisms - the one between Russia and Ukraine, and the one in the Ukrainian society. What has not been covered (sadly, this is because it is not considered newsworthy by the Western media) is the schism inside the Russian society, an identity crisis that led to an internal national dissonance and is a potentially strong source of conflict and unrest. There are accounts of the downturn in the approval ratings of the government and such since the imposition of economic sanctions against Russia, but this kind of short-term swings are inevitable even in times of peace. What really matters is the how war-like action against Ukraine angered and saddened millions of Russians solely for the reason that they saw it as something absurd and unimaginable, like a fratricide.

In conclusion, it is necessary to underline the importance of identity-related developments in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine - developments that are largely oversought in the globalized, economy-driven world of today.