RALLYING AROUND THE FLAG: WAR CHALLENGES AND CIVIC MOBILIZATION IN UKRAINE

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Abstract

Ukraine's resilience in the first months of Russian aggression came as a great surprise to both its Moscow adversaries and Western partners. Very few experts expected Ukraine to withstand the all-out military assault of the alleged second-best army in the world, and virtually no one believed that it would be able to fight back. An overblown image of Russian strength and military prowess may be one reason for this, but probably more significant was a protracted neglect and depreciation of Ukraine in both Western media and political circles. All of a sudden, it appeared that neither the state—broadly described as weak, corrupt, and dysfunctional—collapsed under the tremendous military assault, nor the society—broadly stereotyped as divided, conflicted, and arguably balancing at the verge of a civil war—broke down for the proverbial two parts. One may presume either that some negative features and tendencies of Ukraine's development were exaggerated or that some positive tendencies were neglected, undermined, or both. To elucidate the issue, I proceed in three steps. First, I outline briefly the real curses that plagued the Ukrainian state and society after the fall of communism and provide some reasons for international skepticism in regard to the newborn country. Second, I argue that very important and mostly positive (although incoherent and sluggish) changes had occurred in Ukraine in the past 30 years, so that the Russian aggression neither established any new patterns for Ukraine's development, nor shifted the country into a new direction, but rather accelerated the prior processes and solidified the existing tendencies. Third, I examine the ongoing civic mobilization in Ukraine as a way of accumulating social capital that may play a crucial role in Ukraine's postwar reconstruction and modernization.

Keywords: civic mobilization, neopatrimonialism, pluralism by default, postcommunist transition, Russia-Ukraine War, social capital, Ukrainian identity.

Introduction

Ukraine's resilience in the first months of Russian aggression seemed to impress so many and so much so that some observers avidly annunciated the birth of a new nation, and bizarrely even credited the Russian president as its major facilitator. Mental shortcuts tend to obscure the essence rather than clarify it. Nations are social constructs, indeed—"imagined communities," as Benedict Anderson famously put it—but no one can construct a nation instantly from an atomized and divided population unless the people have some common denominator to build on and some meaningful symbols and references that can be shared by everybody.

Putin's brutal invasion has certainly unified Ukrainians as a political nation. It forced most of them to put aside their minor quarrels and disagreements, not only those of political nature but also of personal ones. For example, the number of officially registered divorces has, remarkably, plummeted three-fold within a year. But for all the significant changes to happen there had to be some level of local patriotism, some ingrained attachment to the native land and native community that bridged the proverbial regional, ethnic, linguistic, and other sectarian divides.

So many words were wasted on the description of Ukraine's various fault lines and on the alleged opposition between the nationalistic West and the pro-Russian East[1] that Ukraine's sudden unity and civic mobilization came as a great surprise, not only for Mr. Putin (who learned nothing from the failure of his so-called Russian Spring in 2014), but also for many impartial observers who still cannot grasp why the pro-Russian easterners did not embrace their Russian brethren with tears and flowers, but instead grasped forearms and joined the nationalistic Westerners in nationwide resistance.

By the same token, it remains inexplicable as to why the arguably inept, corrupt, and cynical oligarchic elite did not flee the country with its stolen money in the first days of the war, but rather headed the well-organized resistance to the Russian invasion. Notably, most of the local leaders in Ukraine's southeast were no friends of the incumbent Volodymyr Zelensky's government in Kyiv, and even less so of his Euromaidan predecessor, Petro Poroshenko. Most local leaders in Ukraine's southeast used to belong to former president (2010–2014) Viktor Yanukovych's Party of Regions, which revamped in 2014 to the Opposition Bloc and then to the Opposition Platform–For Life. Nonetheless, during the war the elite preferred to ally themselves with political foes in Kyiv rather than putative friends in Moscow.

Encountering corruption

The fact that Ukraine, like many post-Soviet and more generally emerging states, was plagued with corruption is hardly deniable. But this does not mean that the state was dysfunctional at any point—or that it had failed, as Russian propagandists intensely implied through various channels with an apparent desire to discourage foreigners from either political or economic investment in the country and to assume, thereby, the role of Ukraine's only legitimate guardian and stabilizer. The country's significant regional, ethnic, and linguistic differences (and occasionally, divides) also were exaggerated, essentialized, and exploited by the same political forces in a similar way.

However, we need to admit that corruption, although vexing for citizens and harmful to a country's development, does not make the state inevitably dysfunctional or completely failed. As Keith Darden convincingly proves, Ukraine's "[F]ailure to crack down on corruption does not appear to be reflective of the state's incapacity to enforce the law. ...As a regionally polarized and impoverished country...the Ukrainian state has shown a remarkable capacity to collect taxes, provide basic services, and sustain public order. Indeed, Ukraine's murder rate, tax rate, and spending are closer to that of the United States, even though it shares a corruption ranking with Sudan".[2]

The neopatrimonial state that evolved in Ukraine under Leonid Kuchma's presidency (1994–2004) and which was reinvigorated under Yanukovych's presidency appeared institutionally quite robust, even though it was based on graft. Corruption was not freelanced but instrumentalized by the government as an informal tool of state domination: it was "[S]ystematically tracked, monitored, and granted by state leaders as an informal payment in exchange for compliance."[3] The volatility of such a system, ironically, occurred in the periods of its relative liberalization, when different centers of power emerged (especially under Viktor Yushchenko's presidency (2005–2010), but also under Petro Poroshenko's presidency (2014–2019), and monopolistic control over the mechanisms of the so-called blackmail state (surveillance, collection of kompromat, and selective application of law)[4] was weakened.

Ukraine, in Transparency International's corruption index, was usually ranked at the level of Russia, but this ranking essentially blurred the difference between two systems: in Russia, in fact, it was not corruption but state capture. The index obscures the problem in one more way: it is based on opinion surveys that measure not corruption per se, but on people's perception of corruption in their country. This makes the measurement very dependent on the accessibility of information in each society and the possibility to freely discuss it. In Ukraine, with its well-established freedom of speech, independent mass media, strong political opposition, and vibrant investigative journalism, there is no dearth of information about various corrupt deals. Sometimes they are real and sometimes they are alleged, but in most cases are heavily overblown by competing political groups. Occasionally, they even cost politicians their office, as Poroshenko's electoral defeat in 2019 graphically confirms.

Ukrainians, who strive overwhelmingly to access the European Union (EU), tend to assess their domestic conditions against the normative background of the EU. This is why, inter alia, British scholars were surprised to discover that Ukrainians are less confident in their own "Europeanness" than Russians and Belarusians.[5] The reason is simple: Europeanness for Ukrainians means not so much geographic belonging, which for them is quite obvious, but conformity to European standards—the putative Copenhagen criteria for membership. This means that Ukrainians are not only better informed about corruption in their country than people in closed and heavily censored societies, but also seem to measure it against higher normative standards.

Regardless of all these debatable interpretations, there are three major factors that definitively influenced today's resilience of Ukrainian institutions and their efficiency. First, there was the administrative reform launched in 2015 and aimed primarily at decentralization. It provided more funds and power to local authorities for all kinds of initiatives while it also enhanced their responsibility.[6] Second and of crucial importance, was the military reform

supervised since 2014 by NATO partners, which gradually transformed the Ukrainian army into one of the best—although underequipped—in Europe.[7] Third, Ukrainian authorities, under strong pressure from civil society and international donors, agreed to develop a set of anti-corruption bodies and took a few steps in the right direction, however lukewarm and equivocal.[8]

Tenets of imperial knowledge

The alleged Ukrainian internal divides are an even more complicated issue because understanding them requires some excursus in both political history and ethnosociology. As in the case of corruption, the divided-Ukraine narrative was overblown and distorted with even heavier Russian involvement, inasmuch as Moscow held an additional trump-card here: the imperial version of history and ethnology, established internationally as scientific knowledge.

Ewa Thompson, an American scholar who applies theoretical tenets of Edward Said's *Orientalism* to the Russian Empire, employs the term "imperial knowledge" to designate a system of narratives aimed at not only glorification of the empire (its supposedly great, universal culture and unique historical role), but also at the depreciation, marginalization, or sheer appropriation of cultures of subordinate nations, monopolization of a God-given (or history-given, under the Soviets) right to speak on their behalf and to mediate between them and the world, thus silencing them and making completely invisible.[9]

This so-called knowledge that was conceived in the 18th century has been developed, institutionalized, and disseminated globally as presumably scientific, impartial truth. It was normalized and therefore became unquestionable; worse still, it completely excluded alternative voices—in particular the voices of subjugated nations—from public debate as allegedly "deviant" and "nationalistic."[10] The West's own imperial legacy, a deeply ingrained tradition of cultural and political supremacism, made Westerners highly receptive to Russian imperial messages and ways of argumentation.[11] Generations of American and European scholars, politicians, and journalists absorbed Russian imperial knowledge uncritically in Western universities, very often via textbooks produced by Russian-émigré historians and their followers.[12] There is good reason to consider imperial knowledge as a root cause of many eventual cognitive problems, including a centuries-long international misperception of Russia, ignorance of Ukraine, and disastrously wrong policies vis-à-vis both countries that climaxed in the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War.[13]

Ukraine happened to be at the center of that knowledge, insofar as the entire Russian imperial identity hinged heavily on a toxic historical myth that placed Kyiv and the imaginary Kyivan Ruś in the core, symbolical center of the invented Russianness and established nonexistent political continuity between two very different entities, five centuries and a thousand kilometers apart from each other.[14] One of them was medieval Kyivan Ruś, which ceased to exist in 1240, and the other one was the 17th-century Moscow Tsardom, which evolved in the northeastern outskirts of the former Ruś under the auspices of the Golden Horde.

This imagined political continuity completely ignored the fact that the core lands of Ruś (today's Belaruś and Ukraine) were incorporated into Poland and Lithuania in the 13th and 14th centuries and have evolved since into a fundamentally different (European)

cultural and political milieu. By the first decades of the 18th century, when Peter the Great transformed oriental Moscow Tsardom into a more Westernized Russian Empire with the new capital in St. Petersburg, the core lands of historical Ruś were still a part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (until Polish partitions in 1772–1795), and differed from Muscovite lands in all possible terms (primarily in political culture) almost as much as today's Poland or Lithuania or Ukraine differ from Putin's Russia.

Ironically, Ukrainian intellectuals, who were hired by Peter the Great for his Westernization project, invented a noble historical pedigree for the newborn empire, conceived officially in 1721. They not only coined the new name for it —Ruś-sia, as a quasi-Latinized form of Ruś—but also developed the whole set of quasi-historical narratives that legitimized the appropriation of the name of Ruś by the remote Moscow Tsardom. These intellectuals established an imaginary continuity between present-day Moscow and ancient Kyiv to enhance their own symbolical weight and to legitimate their claims to the corporate shares in the imperial project. There were, of course, some dynastic, ecclesiastic, and other connections between the 17th-century Muscovy and medieval Kyivan Ruś that ceased to exist five centuries earlier, but semantic equation of these two very different and historically very distant polities is almost as nonsensical as equating modern Romania with ancient Rome.[15]

But the equation allowed Muscovites to appropriate four centuries of the Kyivan Ruś history and to promote a stereotypical image of an alleged "thousand-year-old" Russia into a common wisdom. The tricky semantic manipulation also facilitated Muscovites' claims to the core lands of historical Ruś, (today's Belaruś and Ukraine) which never belonged to Muscovy (or to the Golden Horde) but were incorporated after the fall of Ruś, as I state above, into Poland and Lithuania. By the end of the 18th century, these lands were conquered and "legitimately" Anschlussed into the Russian Empire as its alleged historical core, although its real core was in fact in Vladimir and Suzdal (and later in Moscow)—far away from Belaruś and Ukraine (at the time called Ruthenia) as a single post-Ruś entity.

The invented traditions and forged pedigrees are anything but unique for most states—suffice to mention the Gallic tradition appropriated by France or the 18th-century invention of Romania as a successor to ancient Rome.[16] But the invention of Russia as the only successor to Ruś had fatal consequences for two other, much more direct and legitimate successors: Ukrainians and Belarusians. The continuity myth not only facilitated the transformation of Muscovy into the Russian Empire by appropriation of Ruś history and Ruś territory that at no point in history was Muscovite, but also dismissed and delegitimized the very existence of Ukrainians and Belarusians. Since the 18th century, both of them have been downgraded to the status of regional ethnic subgroups of Greater Russia.

It is little surprise, then, that any attempts by Ukrainians to promote their distinct culture, language, and identity were harshly suppressed by the empire as the sprouts of dangerous separatism. In this sense, one may fairly claim that the Russian war on Ukraine has been ongoing for centuries in multiple forms that include bans on language and print, repressions of activists, the military destruction of the Ukrainian National Republic in 1918–1920, the famine-genocide of 1932–1933, mass deportations of unreliable natives and mass influx of colonial settlers, recurrent waves of repressions, and of course, the large-scale

policy of Russification. There have been short periods of armistice opportunistically accepted by Moscow in this war, such as during the 1920s and 1990s, but the war essentially has never stopped because Russia has never gotten rid of the myth of Kyivan Russia, has never developed a modern national identity instead of the antiquated imperial one, and has never come to terms with the existence of independent, democratic, and European Ukraine.

Ukraine's ambivalence and ambiguity

By the end of the 1980s, the Russification policies in Ukraine that combined carrots for the obedient species and sticks for the restive achieved considerable success. Most Ukrainians in the last years of the Soviet Union were educated in Russian, most publications and virtually all mass culture were in Russian, and almost all urban centers and state institutions were Russian-speaking. Crucially, most Ukrainians internalized (although to different degrees) the imperial knowledge that implied, inter alia, depreciation of the native culture, stigmatization of language, and erasure of national history or, more precisely, its reduction to the history of eternal Russian-Ukrainian brotherhood and teleological longing for unity.

The construction of *homo sovieticus* in Ukraine looked rather successful. In the first competitive elections in 1990, Ukrainian national-democratic opposition won only one-quarter of seats in the republican parliament, dominated by the old communist *nomenklatura*. In March 1991, only 28 percent of Ukrainian voters rejected Mikhail Gorbachev's proposal of the so-called renewed Federation, while 70 percent approved it. The December 1991 referendum, when Ukrainians overwhelmingly supported national independence, may look different, but it was held under peculiar circumstances when the Soviet Union collapsed and independence was de facto attained, so the voting meant a mere approval of the fait accompli rather than any real decision making. More significant was voting in presidential elections held on the same day, when the incumbent apparatchik head of parliament, Leonid Kravchuk, won 62 percent in the first round while his democratic opponents summarily got about 33 percent.

The disposition of political forces (and geopolitical preferences) was clear: roughly one-third of Ukraine's population wished to follow the Baltic and Central East European way of development that stood for a radical break with the communist past, dismantling colonial legacy, and carrying out fast, all-encompassing reforms, while two-thirds of the population opted instead for a smooth transition, lack of radical changes, and essentially the preservation of the ancient regime, however separated politically from Moscow. Their vote for independence was primarily economic as they succumbed to the popular myth at the time that Ukraine would be much better off if it stopped feeding Russia and other less prosperous Soviet republics.

Hence, independent Ukraine emerged as a common state of both Soviet and non-Soviet (and increasingly, anti-Soviet) Ukrainians; of those who internalized, variously, the imperial knowledge and those who vehemently rejected it; those who considered themselves almost the same people as Russians and those who considered Russia the main other; those who simply accepted Ukraine's independence as a fait accompli; and those who had dreamed about it or even fought for it for decades. The impressive 90 percent support for national independence in the referendum hid a profound difference between the two major groups, of which each had its own reasons for a yes vote. What was the absolute good for one

group appeared to be just a lesser evil for the other; what for non-Soviet Ukrainians was a realization of their dreams came to be for their Soviet countrymen just a pragmatic response to some historical incident.

The groups were not antagonistic in the sense that both supported Ukraine's political independence, but had very different visions of their own essence, of the eventual state-nation building processes. They were committed to two different projects that can be roughly defined as anti-Soviet (Central East European) versus post-Soviet (Eurasian or East Slavonic). The intergroup differences came to the fore in subsequent elections that reflected much higher support for one or the other project in different regions and among different ethnolinguistic groups. The correlation, however, never meant causation; the factors of region, ethnicity, and native language, as well as of age, education, or income determined the probability of certain political preferences, but not the preferences per se.

Many observers, especially international observers, succumbed to mental shortcuts and substituted equation for correlation. Ukraine's complex societal fragmentation was presented crudely as an East-West divide and ossified in a quasi-explanatory model of allegedly nationalistic West versus pro-Russian East. The cliché flooded media reports on Ukraine and became a kind of the international common wisdom despite its patently false premise. A closer look at this catchy formula reveals that the two key adjectives that make it do not logically match each other. The antonym to *nationalistic* should be either *internationalist* or *cosmopolitan*—certainly not *pro-Russian*, as it belongs to a different semantic field. The proper antonym should be either *anti-Russian* or *pro-Ukrainian* (and *pro-Western*, *pro-European*, and so on).

The false binary opposition is not just wrong, it is also pernicious: it manipulates semantics and reality. It implies that being pro-Russian absolves anyone of being nationalistic, while being nationalistic is a primordial (and perhaps genetically determined) feature of Ukraine's West. The consequences of these mental shortcuts and semantic manipulations are dramatic because they facilitate many more distortions and play into the hands of Russian/pro-Russian forces that used to demonize Western Ukraine (and all things Ukrainian) as nationalistic (aka Nazi in today's Putin's parlance), while implying that the high level of Russification in Ukraine's southeast represents desirable normalcy and true internationalism.

Electoral maps that reflected political polarization in Ukraine along different historical lines seemed to graphically illustrate the idea of two different Ukraines (even though these two entities existed only on paper) in opinion surveys and politicians' statements, but not in daily social reality. Two types of Ukrainian identity—Central European and East Slavonic—and the respective two projects of state-nation building can be understood as Weberian ideal types that establish some theoretical framework to examine very fluid and hybrid phenomena within.[17] For example, the category of ethnicity featured so prominently in many sociological surveys has little salience in Ukrainian society because the state removed any reference to it in official documents and it never played any significant role in public debates. This is especially true about the ethnicity of two major groups in Ukraine: Ukrainians and Russians. About one-third are of mixed origin and could easily claim both ethnicities, depending on circumstances.

But the general consent in society was to downplay their relevance altogether.

Language was a more controversial issue because Russian speakers tried to preserve the dominant position of Russian in all spheres of life, while Ukrainian speakers strove to revitalize their own stigmatized language and to secure its full-fledged functioning in spite of the supremacist contempt and obstruction by many Russophones. The tension was serious, especially in the early post-Soviet years, and was instrumentalized (and fueled) by politicians. But generally, it was mitigated by a huge group of bilinguals who used both languages interchangeably depending on circumstances, and made the language issue nearly as insignificant as that of ethnicity.[18]

Ukrainian society was fragmented but not divided. Its porousness and hybridity precluded ossification and compartmentalization of different groups. Contradictions were noticeable but not very salient, so it required much energy and inventiveness from political spin doctors to translate these discords into political mobilization. Of two Weberian ideal types, only one corresponded more or less with the actual phenomenon on the ground: Ukrainian Central European identity and the respective project of state-nation building were well elaborated since the 19th century, equipped with coherent narratives and symbolic resources, and drew from the strong intellectual and emotional support of committed followers.

The alternative East Slavonic type lacked clear outlines and represented an eclectic mix, in different proportions, of traditional local patriotism, with imaginary belonging to a quasi-religious Ruśki (Orthodox Christian/ East Slavonic) community, and of the newly acquired political Ukrainianness with the residual Soviet nostalgia. The adherents of this type of identity had some idealized view of the past but a very vague, if any, feasible view of the future. They were quite nebulous ideologically and malleable politically. This made them easy prey for various spin doctors. Their residual Pan-Slavism was often confused (sometimes deliberately) with Russianness, while traditional Soviet-style anti-Western bias was misread as an attachment to Moscow.

In actuality, that part of Ukrainian society was neither pro-Western nor pro-Russian; it was ambivalent and confused in its feelings, and was ambiguous and confusing in its behavior. But it comprised the majority of Ukraine's population throughout the 1990s, thus featuring the frustratingly convoluted development of Ukraine with ambivalence and ambiguity. Nonetheless, the major argument (and divide) in the country was not about being Ukrainian or Russian, as virtually no one doubted their own Ukrainianness. The argument was about the different ways of being Ukrainian—either in a Central European (or Baltic) way that stipulated a radical break with the Soviet past and a thorough decommunization/decolonization or in a milder, post-Soviet (Eurasian) way that stood for continuity and hybridity. It was all about matching the unmatchable: free market with state-regulated prices; revival of national cultures and languages with unchallenged domination of Russian; and European integration with continuation of close (and highly corrupt) ties with Moscow. It was an old puzzle about eating the cake and still having it.

Perhaps the best indicator of Ukraine's ambivalence at the time (until 2012) was the almost equal support for the country's hypothetical membership in the EU and in the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union.[19] The bitter irony was not so much that the number of supporters of each option was equal, but that the same people overwhelmingly (two-thirds

of the same survey respondents) supported both the first, and (simultaneously) the second option, apparently seeing no contradiction in such a choice. Psychologists may discern here fear of freedom or perhaps an infantile desire to have the best of both worlds—notwithstanding the apparent incompatibility at both normative and practical levels. Still, when pressed hard and forced to choose either/or, a majority opted for ties with Russia, i.e., for the post-Soviet world—which was not great but was at least familiar. An egg today was apparently better than a hen tomorrow.

Soviets into Ukrainians

This calculus changed by 2012 (two years ahead, nota bene, of the Maidan Revolution and the ensuing Russian invasion). It reflects not only a year by year Westernization of Ukrainian society, but also the invisible effect of what Michael Billig describes as "banal nationalism." Any state, the scholar argues, nationalizes its citizens by the very fact of its existence. People (in our case) hold Ukrainian passports, take part in Ukrainian elections, and follow the news and weather forecasts in Ukraine, and, routinely hear the words *in our country*. They know by default what the word *our* means in all these cases; they cheer our athletes, celebrate our holidays, castigate our government, and take pride or shame in our history. Billig calls this 'a continual "flagging", or reminding, of nationhood. Political leaders should not be ardent nationalists, according to Billig—and in most cases, Ukrainian leaders were not, but they usually benefitted from the very existence of nationhood, which provides a continual background for their political discourses, for cultural products, and even for the structuring of newspapers.

Billig also writes, 'In so many little ways, the citizenry are daily reminded of their national place in a world of nations. However, this reminding is so familiar, so continual, that it is not consciously registered as reminding. The metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building'.[20]

Authoritarian backsliding in Russia also may have influenced Ukrainians' attitude toward that country: Putin's tricky return to presidency in 2012, brutal suppression of the Bolotnaya protests in Moscow, and further restrictions on freedom of speech and civic liberties reverberated in Ukraine quite negatively. In two years, Moscow struck a decisive blow to Ukrainian ambivalence by invading Donbas and occupying Crimea. Even the most Russia-friendly citizens had to recognize the dramatic impossibility of sitting on two chairs, eating the cake and still having it, being in Europe and still befriending Putin.

All these transformations, however, could happen only because a substantial part of the Ukrainian population was rather ambivalent than unequivocally pro-Russian. No local Serbs took the Bosnian or Kosovar side during the Serbian invasion, graphically proving what a really divided society means. Ukraine has never been divided in this sense and therefore, did not split.

The pro-Russian East did not embrace Putin's liberators because it was not pro-Russian. In actuality it was vague, confused, and uncertain. Ambivalence can work both ways. In Ukraine's case, local patriotism prevailed over a nostalgic feeling of imperial belonging. A poorer but liberal Ukrainian state appeared to be more attractive than a wealthier but dictatorial Russian one. Freedom of speech in Ukraine was more important for Russian speakers than the

seemingly unconstrained but heavily censored use of Russian in Russia.

Ukrainian Russians and Russian speakers had many reasons to identify themselves with Ukraine as a political nation. And the very fact that the Russian military in the newly occupied regions today fail to recruit a sufficient number of collaborators and are forced to fill local vacancies with personnel imported from Russia indicates how shallow the notion of the pro-Russian East was. This does not mean that there was no pro-Russian (or perhaps even anti-Ukrainian) population in Ukraine. Recall that not only did 90 percent of residents of Ukraine supported its independence in 1991, but also that 7.5 percent voted against. And 16 percent did not take part in the referendum at all, which probably means that they were not very enthusiastic about the idea. Numerically, they comprised a few million people who could be seen as the real core of pro-Russian Ukraine and the backbone of different pro-Russian groups and projects.[21]

However minor this group was in electoral terms, it benefited from both overt and covert Moscow support, and tried to influence and to mobilize politically a much bigger group of post-Soviet (East Slavonic) Ukrainians, who were ambivalent in many ways and therefore, vulnerable to manipulations. In fact, the main ideological struggle in Ukraine between pro-Western and pro-Russian political forces was about the decisive impact on an ambivalent silent majority, which by various indicators initially comprised about two-thirds of the population. And since the Ukrainian European project was a "minority faith" throughout the 1990s,[22] it had to become very flexible and inclusive to win against the alternative "Eurasian" project promoted by Russia and pro-Russian groups in Ukraine. In a sense, Ukrainian nationalism became more civic than ethnic by default, as it was the only way to attract the ambivalent post-Soviet majority to its cause.[23]

First of all, Ukrainian nationalists had to abandon their initial (and apparently unproductive) treatment of Russified compatriots as kinds of incomplete and inferior Ukrainians (let alone as traitors). They were to recognize that ambivalence was not a pathology, but a strategy of survival for the stateless nation under imperial pressure aimed at its absorption. Local patriotism combined with imperial loyalty was the only way to legally maintain Ukrainian identity, despite linguistic assimilation. Russian-speaking Ukrainians, for the most part, did not become Russians—exactly like English-speaking Scots or Irish did not become English, although many may feel British. The overarching supra-ethnic identity was very convenient for many Ukrainians in either Soviet or earlier on, Ruśki form, as long as it provided some room for their Ukrainianness.

A wide quantitative gap between self-declared patriots of Ukraine (over 80 percent in recurrent opinion surveys) and self-declared supporters of Ukrainian independence (about 60 percent until 2014) illustrated this ambiguity: at least 20 percent of Ukrainians did not see any contradiction between their stated patriotism and indifference towards national independence, either on normative (moral) or practical (political) grounds.[24] This gap only disappeared in 2014 after the Russian aggression in Crimea and Donbas, which infused a new meaning to the notions of independence and patriotism. But throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s, ambiguity reigned supreme and caused much confusion both at home and abroad.

Subjects into citizens

Putin neither created the Ukrainian nation nor strengthened its civic identity in any positive way. He only cured a substantial part of Ukrainian society of ambivalence—from infantile hopes of belonging to both worlds to embracing a European future and to praising the Soviet past to combining incompatible values and geopolitical orientations. In 2014, after Crimea, Putin's ratings in Ukraine plummeted to single digits, but the general attitude toward Russia and the Russian people remained neutral or even positive. The year 2022 brought an end to that dichotomy. Ukrainians no longer believe in the sedative story about a bad government but nice people. Their positive feelings toward all Russians plummeted almost to nil.[25]

Until 2014, less than 20 percent of Ukrainians supported accession of their country to NATO—partly because of the old Soviet-made and Russia-revitalized anti-NATO bias, but also because of a realistic assessment of Ukraine's meager chances to join the club under Russian obstructions and Western amenability to Moscow whims. The neutral (non-allied) status, officially adopted by Ukraine in 2012, reflected some balance of popular attitudes toward the issue and toward the international arguments and controversies in this regard. But by 2015, after the Russian Anschluss of Crimea and invasion of Donbas, the Ukrainians' support for a NATO membership rose to 51 percent (with 25 percent against), then reached 76 percent in March 2022, and climaxed at 86 percent (with 3 percent against) in February 2023.[26] The allegedly pro-Russian East appeared to be not much different from the rest of the country, with the expressed 69 percent vote for NATO and only 9 percent against.[27]

Interregional and intergroup differences are still discernable in opinion surveys, but are more quantitative than qualitative. They do not lead to deep social fissures, as a clear majority of each group is on the same side. This may be a sign of the eventual normalization of Ukrainian politics when national interests are prioritized over the partisan and political struggle becomes a fair competition between the good and the best rather than a millenarian fight between absolute good and absolute evil. This time, the evil entered Ukraine from the outside and invalidated all the domestic tensions and grievances. It forced Ukrainians to reconsider their internal relations, to put aside particular grudges, and to seek national unity and solidarity in extraordinary circumstances.

One does not need to be a scholar to observe how small kin-related communities give up their family quarrels and disagreements when challenged by alien intruders. Sociologists call this phenomenon "rallying around the flag," after a line from a popular song that was sung by both Northerners and Southerner—with slightly modified lyrics for each group—during the American Civil War. It refers to a peculiar kind of mobilization under extraordinary circumstances that are understood as an existential threat to the entire community and therefore, require a unified response. People express a high level of solidarity, subordinate their particular interests to the common cause, impose various self-constraints, accept harsh austerities, and commit sacrifices otherwise unthinkable. All social reality loses colors and shadows, all acquires simplified forms, black-and-white, yes-or-no—everything is assessed teleologically as contributing to or obstructing

and undermining the ultimate victory, understood as a common salvation.

Ukrainians' behavior since the beginning of the war provides a graphic example of such a mobilization, and sociological surveys largely confirm these regular observations on the ground. For the first time in their history, Ukrainians overwhelmingly claim a very high trust in state institutions, with the armed forces (96 percent versus 3 percent) and the president (83 percent versus 12 percent) predictably on the top. Very high on the list are also volunteer organizations that support both armed forces and civilians affected by war (88 percent trust), National Guard and State Emergency Service (85 percent), Security Service (74 percent), Police (72 percent), local authorities, media, and NGOs (over 60 percent), and National Bank and Government (over 50 percent). This does not mean that Ukrainians give carte blanche to their authorities or turn a blind eye to their wrongdoings. They still are dissatisfied with some institutions, and express rather low trust in courts, anti-corruption agencies, and law-enforcement bodies. Their balance of popular trust/mistrust is still negative, although it noticeably improved in 2022.[28]

The state in general became a value that largely had been underappreciated before the war. In November 2021, only 7 percent of respondents declared a positive attitude toward the state, 38 percent felt neutral, and 56 percent claimed a negative stance. In one year, these attitudes changed radically. In December 2022, 46 percent of Ukrainians declared a positive attitude toward the state, 27 percent felt neutral, and 26 percent rather negative.[29] They did not change their attitude toward the state at the time—probably as a response to its unexpected resilience and efficacy—but also changed their view retroactively. When asked about Ukraine's development since 1991, only 4 percent of respondents in November 2021 claimed that successes predominated in that period but 53 percent argued that failures prevailed and 34 percent found successes and failures more or less equal.[30] Ten months into the war, in August 2022, as many as 37 percent of respondents found the past developments mostly positive, and only 15 percent claimed that the negative developments prevailed. (Forty-one percent of respondents tied the score).[31]

The optimistic, positively assertive mood of Ukrainians is reflected in an unusually low level of social anomia (one of numerous ills that plague post-Soviet societies) and in an almost unanimous claim that Ukraine develops into a right direction.[32] Only 3 percent of Ukrainians wonder if their country will be able to ever overcome its grueling problems. Fifty percent envision success in the nearest few years, and 36 percent expect it in a more distant future.[33] As many as 75 percent of Ukrainian respondents are absolutely confident that their country will win the war against Russia, and 20 percent are rather confident.[34] Only 8 percent of respondents believe that some concessions to Russia may be justified as a means to achieve a much-needed peace, and 85 percent oppose any concessions to the aggressor state. The attitude slightly fluctuates over the months but remains strongly dominant all over Ukraine—either in the relatively safer Center and West (87 to 88 percent) or in the terrorized-daily by Russian artillery South and East (80 to 82 percent).[35]

Perhaps most impressive in all these surveys is Ukrainians' assessment of conditions of their lives today. Shortly before the war, in November 2021, as many as 53 percent of Ukrainian respondents defined those conditions as bad and only 34 percent recognized them as satisfactory (4 percent even felt them good). In May 2022, after three months of daily shooting

and shelling, and death and destruction, only 28 percent defined them as bad, while 59 percent called them satisfactory and 9 percent even defined them as good. This is, apparently, not about real assessment of life conditions but is first and foremost about defiance, resilience, and readiness to withstand the Russian terror as long as it takes.[36] In one of the recent surveys, Ukrainians where asked how much money they need for a normal, that is, more or less satisfactory, life today. Strikingly, in December 2022, they mentioned substantially lower sums than before the war, in November 2021—even though the national currency was devalued in the meantime over 30 percent.[37]

A new Ukraine in a new Europe?

To a certain degree, rallying around the flag also affected some foreigners (primarily in the West), as they feel not only geographic proximity to Ukraine (and ominously, to Russia), but probably also axiological and emotive affinity to the fledgling European democracy, invaded and brutalized by the neighboring rogue regime. As a result, the solidarity and cooperativeness within the EU did not weaken, even though Moscow had good reason to expect it. Indeed, as Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard aptly remark, "[U]nity has usually been the first casualty of crises in Europe" — either during the Iraq War, or the euro crisis, or the refugee crisis. But this time, the EU did not fragment into different camps and countries, and provided an unexpectedly strong, unified response to the external challenge.[38]

According to the recent Eurobarometer poll, 72 percent of the EU citizens consider their country's membership in the EU beneficial. That is the highest score in the 20 years since Eurobarometer first asked this question. In 2010, only 50 percent of Europeans responded to it approvingly. Now, they consider EU membership beneficial not only economically, but also in terms of security. As Caroline de Gruyter commented on these results, the Russian war in Ukraine "[I]s increasingly seen not as an attack on a neighboring country but as an assault on an entire continent".[39] Seventy-four percent approve of the EU's support of Ukraine as well as the specific measures, including sanctions, against Russia. The data varies in time and in specific countries, but in all of them the majority of the citizens are on Ukraine's side. Fifty-eight percent of respondents say they are satisfied with the cooperation between EU member states in addressing the consequences of the war.[40]

Rallying around the flag, as the experience of other societies in similar situations reveals, usually does not last long—in any case, no longer than the crisis that catalyzed it. It is very unlikely that Ukraine will instantly rid itself of traditional sores deeply rooted in everyday culture and mentality—a proclivity for corruption, nepotism, and abuse of power. Even today in a state of war, recurrently we learn about new fraudulent and corrupt schemes devised by both private and public actors. Quite often, too, we observe attempts by government officials, including those at the highest levels, to take advantage of the emergency and marginalize political opponents and promote their people to positions via behind-the-scene deals. Social culture does not form and change in a few months; it is, in fact, a process that takes centuries. Ultimately, no revolution can substitute for evolution.

Nevertheless, each rally around the flag provides an experience of cooperation and mutual trust, perhaps not for the whole population, but for the most active, engaged, and committed people who eventually comprise the core of civil society and a political nation. Today's civic mobilization would hardly be possible

without some past upheavals—starting from the Revolution on Granite in 1990, through the Ukraine without Kuchma movement in 2000–2002, to the spectacular anti-authoritarian revolutions of 2004 and 2013–2014. All forms of civic mobilization contribute to accumulation of social capital, thereby facilitating long-lasting changes in the society.

Mobilization itself cannot last long: with the end of the war it is likely to dissipate. But it has important side effects that may be durable: social optimism, growing self-confidence, mutual trust, solidarity, and higher-than-ever attachment to relatives, friends, local community, and to the whole nation.[41] Opinion surveys also uncover some new phenomena, such as broadly shared affinity with Europe or unexpected (during the war) growth of empathy, tolerance, and support for democracy. Within one year, Ukrainians' acceptance of the death penalty decreased from 52 to 42 percent, while among the youngest respondents it fell even more dramatically, from 45 to 28 percent. In another unexpected turn, the neutral or positive attitude toward the LGBTQI+ people increased from 53 to 64 percent. And most puzzling from the theoretical point of view was the pronounced support for democracy as the best form of government, going up from 54 percent in 2021 to 68 percent a year later (with the lowest ever support for authoritarian rule at 11 percent).[42] This may be a response to Putin's invasion and the strongman leadership he promotes and epitomizes (and, more generally, to all the adjacent values of Russkii mir). But also, as British scholar Olga Onuch suggests, Ukrainians may move toward a greater support for democracy between 2019 and 2022, "…precisely because ordinary citizens were able to observe democracy in action and working even in the face of major compounding crises." (Onuch also means Ukraine's quite good management of the COVID-19 crisis by both the central and local authorities). "With democracy already having shown that it could work even in the face of multiple crises," she concludes, "…the Russian invasion pushed citizens to rally around democracy even more."[43]

Opinion surveys indicate that Ukrainians, with all their high support for the incumbent authorities, agree (53 percent versus 36 percent) that international assistance should not be unconditional but must depend on reforms and the effective use of resources, and should be tightly controlled by both domestic and international watchdogs.[44] When asked to feature the main development aims for Ukraine from a list of 10 over the next 10 years, they select two priorities: to restore the territorial integrity of Ukraine and to get rid of corruption.[45] By all estimates, Ukrainians are more eager than ever to take responsibility for their affairs and are even less inclined toward the old Soviet paternalism. When asked an open question about who should be responsible for rebuilding Ukraine's economy after the war, most of them predictably agree that it should be Russia, but the second role is not assigned to the EU, US, or the International Monetary Fund, etc., but to the Ukrainian people.[46] All investments are welcome except Chinese investments, however tempting, which are seen as undesirable. And the whole process of reconstruction is seen primarily as rebuilding the enterprises and providing the jobs, while financial assistance is only third on the priorities list (after rebuilding the infrastructure).[47] This is a hopeful sign of social maturity, of prioritizing the fishing rods over the fish.

After decades of denial of Ukraine's membership prospects and even questioning its European belonging, the EU finally recognized that "Ukraine belongs to our European family," and offered it a candidate status with some remote

prospects of the EU accession. Cooperation with the EU in the process of preparing for membership can accelerate positive change, facilitate reforms, and enhance government accountability and civil society engagement. One may wonder why this was not done in the 1990s, when the EU's so-called conditionality machine was successfully employed to stabilize the Balkans or at least in 2005, after the Orange Revolution, when expectations ran high and the chances for success were quite good.

Rallying around the flag gives Ukrainians an opportunity to experience the ultimate revolutionary breakthrough: the final national liberation—not only political, but also mental and intellectual—from Russian colonial domination. In this sense, Ukrainians are now finishing the 300-year national-liberation war, which in 1991 was only postponed, but not completed. The empire had lost its zeal but not its ambitions, nor did it ever come to terms with Ukraine's independent existence. It seems now that Ukrainians have finally passed the point of no return: they have achieved the level of mental emancipation that makes their true political liberation only a matter of time.

Notes

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