

Political Culture and National Identity in Russian-Ukrainian Relations

MIKHAIL A. MOLCHANOV



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To the memory of my father,

Aleksandr Prokofievich Molchanov (1922-1975)



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Mikhail A. Molchanov

Political Culture and National Identity in Russian-Ukrainian Relations

Introduction

The end of the Soviet Union heralded an era of dramatic transformations affecting both the shape of the world system and the direction of regional developments. With stable bipolarity gone, the structure of the world system softened to the point of near-chaos, where one can discern almost anything along the spectrum from the uncertain U.S. hegemony to fleeting multipolarity with the emerging new centers of power in Europe and Asia-Pacific. While ex-socialist states find themselves in the political and economic limbo of the so-called transition (to what?) and consolidation (of what?), advanced industrial democracies are fully engaged in their own “structural adjustment” to the new global imperatives.¹ Global chaos contributes to the uncertainty of transition and makes authoritarian downturns and local wars of attrition define the course of the postcommunist transformations in the European periphery and throughout much of Eurasia. This, in turn, places new strains on international security worldwide.

Post-Soviet developments are also interesting as yet another attempt at social engineering with broad international implications. Most of those who believed in the possibility of a big leap forward toward the radiant capitalist future were bitterly disappointed. Political scientists now talk of “liberalization without democratization,” “peripheralization,” “balkanization,” or “third-worldization” of what used to be the Second World of more or less developed socialist states.² Reality shows no signs of a civilized market economy or triumphant liberal democracy emerging in the vast expanses of the former Soviet Union.³ Instead, both government and opposition name corruption, cronyism, nepotism, privatization of the state, and overt criminalization of the economy as dominant characteristics of the emerging “corporate-oligarchic” capitalism.⁴ Post-Soviet regimes tend to resemble Latin American

democradura, a dictatorship masquerading as democracy, much more than Western presidential republics. Neosultanistic regimes dominate Central Asia and good part of the Caucasus, while ethnonationalism has become the state trademark in Latvia and Estonia.

The problems of the former Soviet Union are part and parcel of the global problems of today. Solutions, however, are to be found locally, as no external player can mend the texture of social relations ruptured by communism and further distorted by the “bandit capitalism” of the postcommunist transitions. Only people who have lived here for centuries can do it, provided they are spared new catastrophic upheavals and have time to recover from the old ones. Both economic growth and political maturation will come naturally, if these societies are spared artificial schemes that are imposed from above, by either national governments or outside regulators.

The former Soviet Union had been predicated mainly on the Eastern Slavs’ collaboration. With the creation of the Russia-Belarus Union, the shape and the prospects of the post-Soviet order have largely depended on the position of Ukraine. While Ukraine’s reabsorption by Russia would spell the doom of the country’s dream of independence, an independent Ukraine that is intrinsically hostile to its eastern neighbor and supported in this hostility by the West would sow discord between the increasingly resentful Russia and the rest of Europe. Ukraine’s anti-Russian position could actually strengthen those who back the creation of a xenophobic, antidemocratic and internationally revisionist Russian state. Finally, an independent but Russia-friendly Ukraine would serve as a bridge connecting Russia to Europe, a mediator in Moscow’s sometimes tense relations with the Western security community, and, in the best-case scenario, as an example of successful transformation of a Soviet-type society into a society of the East Central European type. The Russian-Ukrainian coexistence may be benign and mutually beneficial or fraught with animosity and disturbing to the world community at large. The outcome depends on both countries’ ability to find a *modus vivendi* that will best serve their national interests without creating a zero-sum situation where victory of one side means sure loss for the other. Such ability is crucially shaped by political cultures and perceptions of national identity that lay the groundwork for formulations of national interest and that importantly influence policy.

If there is one common element unifying otherwise dissimilar works on Russian politics and society, the theme of the unique Russian political culture might be it. Whether it is conceptualized as political culture, national character, or even destiny, the idea that Russian politics is somehow different from

what we might find elsewhere has proven surprisingly resilient. In its more dogmatic reincarnation, this view holds that Russian political culture is doomed to be authoritarian.⁵ Even in less assuming comparativist or institutionalist accounts, political culture often lurked backstage as a “residual variable,” always there to “explain out” whatever has been left unexplained.⁶ More often than not, conclusions have been pessimistic. As Russians could not change for the better, reform chances are always slim. If this were true, one might say in hindsight, perestroika would never have happened, and the USSR would never have disbanded as peacefully as it did.

New works on the topic showed up after the end of the Soviet Union.⁷ While some of them predictably saw Russia as chasing the “mirage of democracy” without getting any closer to the real thing, others argued that institutional change could influence traditions of governance and discovered political culture supportive of democratic values.⁸ The unraveling of the Soviet federal state created an additional problem for scholars, as the once-unified field of research was now fragmented into several nationally defined subfields. If only recently they could have been described as “subcultures” at the most, the reality of the new state formations demanded more respectful treatment. Explicit comparisons between Russians, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and so on appeared in print.⁹

When the Soviet Union fell, ending the Cold War and the half-realized project of “actually existing socialism” in one stroke, the ultimate victory of liberal democracy seemed to be assured.¹⁰ Ten years later, Russia appears closer to a bureaucratic authoritarianism of the Latin American type.¹¹ Ukraine, potentially the strongest post-Soviet economy, has recently joined the list of the world’s poorest countries. Communism has been replaced by regimes that are premised on varying dosages of nepotism, kleptocracy, nationalism, and presidential despotism. In several important aspects, post-Soviet elections and referenda do not significantly deviate from their predecessors’ infamous rubberstamping of “elections” under communism. Both public opinion and public trust are commonly manipulated and abused, and nationalism, as presidential elections in Ukraine in 1991 or in Russia in 2000 have clearly demonstrated, becomes a central instrument of such manipulations. In the post-Soviet world, participation may not necessarily lead to democracy, and the latter must not be equated with mere electoralism.¹²

Theories of political culture are frequently invoked to explain Russia’s failure to embrace more democratic ways of governance. These explanations often start in the country’s distant past, which is then extrapolated to the future. Sources of change remain obscured, and so do perspectives for the better.

In Russia's case, doom wears "imperial" attire, as the Russian imperial legacy is almost never discussed in tones other than unforgiving criticism. In the case of Ukraine, the fate of the nation is just as often sealed with the stigma of "nationalism," described, again, as a decisive feature of its domestic and international politics. In both instances, certain historically transient temporary stages of political development grow, under the pen of a writer, into the core elements of national *identity* of who the Russians or the Ukrainians really are. National identity, in this presentation, appears immutable and uncontrollable by the people. People, on the other hand, are shown as destined to bear the same preconceived "identity," once they are born to this or that presumably homogeneous "nation."

Fortunately, historicism of this sort is not the only way to problematize culture and identity after the end of communism. Recently, new voices have been raised to defend the themes of *multiplicity* and *construction* as "the two central motifs dominating the current rethinking of culture and identity in social theory."¹³ A constructivist approach represents social identities as intrinsically multiple and sometimes conflictual images of the self, whether the identified self is individual, corporate, or international. According to this view, cultures are created by people and changed when new ways of life arise to replace the old ones. No national identity is immutable, just as no culture can stay untouched by history. Identity, perceived as "the action unit of culture,"¹⁴ organizes and structures available cultural resources in a particular fashion to bring them into the orbit of social practices and to use them as currently required.

What lessons can be learned from this for our better understanding of Russian-Ukrainian relations? Identity considerations are to be found among the central variables construing or misconstruing post-Soviet dialogue between the two countries. Identity politics takes the form of nationalism, which represents an attempt at a task-specific utilization of cultural resources of a certain large group of people defined as a nation. On the other hand, postcommunist nationalism is an offshoot of political culture that had little space for pluralist values before and can hardly cope with their swift introduction now. Nationalism, therefore, should be looked upon as a political-cultural phenomenon in its own right. Political culture is understood as a complex of historically established modes of collective political action, and the distinction between elite and mass political cultures is taken as methodologically important. Postcommunist nationalism appears as elite-constructed politics and ideology that are extensively drawn upon to compensate for state incapacity and the underdevelopment of civil society in newly liberalized nations.

This study approaches the problem of cross-cultural negotiations between Ukraine and Russia in a broader context of these countries' dramatic search for their new identities in the postcommunist order. Russia learns to live as a regional rather than a global power, but also, in the process, has to fight shadows of its imperial and communist past. Ukraine, as a former part of the Russian Empire, is the crucial stumbling block in Russia's movement to a normal nationhood. Should Ukraine be considered a zone of the Russian "vital interests"? Is it possible to ignore it altogether? These questions plague Russian policy makers and thwart the ongoing negotiations between the two countries. Ukraine, for its part, has to defend its national independence against Moscow's attempts at reintegration, which are not surprisingly supported by many Ukrainian Russians and Russophones, especially in the left-leaning eastern areas of the country. Nationalist appellations on both sides promote further estrangement between the two countries and encourage authoritarian tendencies that frustrate development and jeopardize international security.¹⁵

Ukrainian-Russian relations cannot be disentangled from a history of intense interpenetration of Ukrainian and Russian cultures and national identities. Not only has the Ukrainian self-image been heavily Russified by the former empire, but the latter also, in its own turn, became inadvertently Ukrainianized through the permanent influx of Ukrainian talent, cultural borrowing, and reflection on the common past. A peculiar pattern of expansion through non-exclusive incorporation and assimilation heavily influenced Russian national consciousness. Russians had never learned to distinguish themselves as imperial overlords from the non-Russian subjects of the empire. Ukrainians were the primary beneficiaries and, on occasion, first victims of this predilection, which still shapes international relations in the region, generating a number of problems for all sides involved. On the Russian side, a crucial question is whether or not it can successfully follow a nation-state model of development that, some would argue, is more suitable for smaller European nations. If it cannot, refederalization of at least some part of the former Soviet space, of which the Russia–Belarus Union serves as an early indicator, might well be the only course for Russia's national revival.¹⁶ The counterpart question for Ukraine is whether or not a fully autonomous nation building can succeed in a situation where not only does one-third of the population consider Russian to be the mother tongue, but where the very identity sought appears to be influenced by conscious and subconscious mirroring of its Russian counterpart.¹⁷

Despite a number of similarities, the identity crises both countries experience are rooted in different historical milieus. While Russians struggle to

accommodate Ukrainian “otherness,” Ukrainians find it difficult to rediscover Russian “sameness.” The two peoples are very close indeed. Their languages are mutually comprehensible, their histories are intertwined and apparently originating from the same ancestral homeland (Kievan Rus), their patterns of settlement are intermeshed, and their psychological profiles are very much alike. Inter marriages between the two groups are commonplace, and Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism is widespread.¹⁸ Cultural and ethnic interpenetration is profound. Still, Russians and Ukrainians are not one and the same people. Dissolving Ukrainian distinctiveness in Russianized “family culture” is both impossible and unethical. Russia’s attempts to dictate to Ukraine what the Ukrainian policy should be like may not be excused by any amount of cultural similarities. Reciprocally, the Ukrainian quest to become a part of “Europe,” as opposed to the “Eurasian” Russia, overrates the cultural distance between the two and creates false imagery, which can only impede Ukraine’s progress in the desired direction. Proponents of Ukrainian Russophobia must remember that “their own ideas risk pulling Ukraine in a half-circle, away from the modern West and back toward a much older and darker Europe, not Russian or Soviet, but also not to be remembered with much nostalgia.”¹⁹

Ukrainian “otherness” in the Russian eyes, or Russian distinctiveness vis-à-vis Ukraine, is of such a special nature that we may think of these two as being the “closest” and most significant “others” with respect to each other. Closeness of this kind can mean one of two things. It may result from a genuine sister-nation relationship that advances equality and complementarity of the parties. Or it may reveal a long-standing relationship of hegemonic domination and assimilation that eradicates cultural specificity of a subdominant group and underscores its liminality, aiming to dissolve it in another nation’s body.²⁰ In the first instance, the closeness of the two peoples drastically reduces the possibility of a “hot” conflict between them, if it does not eliminate the chance of conflict altogether. However, intercultural closeness can actually heighten hostilities in the second instance. Cultural anthropologists have observed that in many instances the lesser distance between “us” and “them” tends to be translated into fiercer reactions to “their” encroachments on “our” territory.

Both interpretations of Ukrainian-Russian closeness have been offered and defended. If Soviet propaganda stood behind the image of a “brotherly family of nations,” anticommunist scholarship was all too often tempted by the no less propagandistic image of a “prison of the peoples.” In that hypothetical prison, Russians were the principal guardians and executors, while Ukraini-

ans, together with other non-Russians, usually took the place of inmates. Whether the two peoples were “friends” or “foes” depended on the perspective of the writer. Changing the stress from “enmity” to “friendliness,” interestingly, did not make the result of an enterprise less reified than before. If not antagonists, Ukrainians and Russians were doomed to remain “brothers,” with the former inevitably assigned a “junior brother” role.²¹

The “friends” or “foes” dichotomy is itself constructed and may well designate a false dilemma. Ambivalent relationships are not uncommon among states, just as they are not rare among individuals or groups. It is reasonable to expect that both positive and negative meaning-structures with regard to the other may coexist, influencing mass psychology and decision making alike. These structures may also alternate, depending on perceived behavior of the other and concrete predicament and corresponding priorities of the self. Finally, if “either-or” is wrong, then “neither-nor” could be just right—a possibility that we must always be prepared to accept. “We” construct “their” identity in no smaller way than “they” constructed it on their own. The resources of both parties are involved in the process. The way the opponent is treated is conditioned by the actors’ culture, which is tantamount to political culture whenever larger social groups and nations are involved.

While Russian political culture has been extensively studied since at least the late 1950s, Ukrainian political culture has barely presented a research problem until recently. The reason was simple: Ukrainians have lacked a state of their own. In spite of that, indigenous traditions of governance and local styles of politically relevant behavior did have a chance to develop. Modes of collective behavior in Ukraine differed from those in Russia, reflecting differences of political development. It is erroneous to treat Ukrainian political culture as just a regional variety of Russian political culture, if only because the former has also been shaped by Polish, Austro-Hungarian, and other foreign domination. The study of Ukrainian political culture presents an important research task of its own.

An explicit comparison helps to throw the principal values of both peoples into a sharper relief. By looking at Ukrainian political culture as such, we may arrive at a better understanding of contemporary Ukrainian state and society. We may also learn something new about Russia. From here, we may proceed further to discuss the nature of Russian-Ukrainian relations, as they developed historically and continue to evolve at the moment. Since political culture conditions the self-other imagery and methods of dealing with opponents, better and more detailed knowledge of culture-relevant aspects of politics is indispensable for the theory and practice of international relations.