

# Ukrainian Identity after Euromaidan: Drivers of Change and Impact on Reforms

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## Background

On 17 January 2017, the Chatham House Ukraine Forum held a roundtable discussion with Mykola Riabchuk and Rory Finnin. The event, which was held on the record, focused on the consolidation of Ukrainian identity since the Euromaidan protests.

## Survey results

Since 2014, several surveys and studies have demonstrated the consolidation of Ukrainian identity and a strong increase in support for Ukrainian nationhood and independence. Mykola Riabchuk stated that 86 per cent of Ukrainians identified themselves as patriots in 2014, compared to 76 per cent in 2010. Furthermore, 76 per cent of Ukrainians supported Ukraine's independence in 2014 compared to 62 per cent in 2012.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, only 28 per cent of Ukrainians supported EU membership in 2008, while 62 per cent supported it in 2015.<sup>2</sup> Both the 'Revolution of Dignity' and Russia's aggression played a significant role in the consolidation process. The war in eastern Ukraine has acted as a catalyst for the increased cohesion of the country.

Differences between Ukrainian-speaking and Russian-speaking and ethnic Russian Ukrainians persist but they have decreased significantly since 2014. For instance, in 2001, 60 per cent of Ukrainian-speakers supported Ukrainian independence compared to 43 per cent of Russian-speaking Ukrainians. In 2014, 91 per cent of Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians supported independence compared to 71 per cent of Russian-speaking Ukrainians. Some ambivalence remains: for example, while 72 per cent of Ukrainians consider Russia the aggressor in this conflict, 51 per cent still consider Russia and Ukraine as 'brotherly nations'.

## Competing identity narratives

Mykola Riabchuk explained that until recently two identity narratives, based on different value sets, were competing for discursive hegemony in Ukraine. The first claims that Ukraine is part of Central Europe and is an inherently European nation, which was taken hostage by Russia and the Soviet Union. It views Russia and the eastern Slavic world as its defining 'others'. It is in favour of European and Euro-Atlantic integration. The second narrative claims that Ukraine belongs to the eastern Slavic civilization together with Russia, Belarus, and other Eurasian states, and favours Eurasian integration.

The widely accepted argument is that the Central European identity is mostly present in western and central Ukraine, while the east Slavic identity is stronger in the south and east. However, the reality is much more complicated and these competing identities are mostly theoretical. Many people have an ambiguous relationship with Ukrainian identity and cannot easily identify with either identity.

The role of the Institute of National Memory in the public discourse on Ukrainian identity is very limited. Mass media play a much larger role, especially Russian media. Furthermore, Riabchuk explained that the politics of memory – i.e. the way history is written and passed on – is important in all countries, and one reason for the rise in popularity of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) and the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) in Ukraine now is that in the past they fought the same enemy as the country does today.

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<sup>1</sup> Rating Group Ukraine (2014), *Dynamika Patriotychnykh Nastroyiv*, [http://ratinggroup.ua/files/ratinggroup/reg\\_files/rg\\_patriotyzm\\_082014.pdf](http://ratinggroup.ua/files/ratinggroup/reg_files/rg_patriotyzm_082014.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Gorshenin Institute (2015), 'Ukraine Stress Test' opinion poll, [http://gorshenin.eu/programs/researches/926\\_ukraine\\_stress\\_test.html](http://gorshenin.eu/programs/researches/926_ukraine_stress_test.html).

## The role of the diaspora and Ukrainian identity

The role of the Ukrainian diaspora in shaping the Ukrainian identity is not very significant. They are often perceived not as Ukrainian diaspora, but as western Ukrainians. In the Soviet era the diaspora was completely marginalized and until recently their image in Ukraine was quite negative. However, this is gradually changing, especially since government officials with a diaspora background have achieved some success in pushing through reforms.

## The role of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Crimea was not absorbed by the Moscow Patriarchate. In many places parishes of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church do not draw attention to their links to the Moscow Patriarchate – indeed, there are more parishes from the Moscow Patriarchate in Volhynia than anywhere else. However, church attendance is low among followers of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church; it is higher in the Greek Catholic and the Protestant Church, meaning the institution's influence is limited.

## A New Research Agenda

Rory Finnin argued that many Western observers tend to fundamentally question the sovereignty of Ukraine or the stability of Ukrainian identity. Furthermore, they prefer to argue in geopolitical terms, not giving any voice to Ukraine. These assumptions set division rather than unity as a starting point for Ukrainian identity, even though survey data for the past 25 years shows growing cohesion. More recent tropes are formulations such as 'the birth of a new nation' implying that before the 'Revolution of Dignity' Ukraine was not a nation. In other words, the claim that Ukrainian identity is weak does not correspond with reality.

Finnin also argued that the concept of national identity is not given sufficient attention. The strength of national identity is often equated with a high level of homogeneity, while a weak national identity is identified with heterogeneity and fluidity. Ukraine does not correspond to this pattern.