

UKRAINA REDUX

On Statehood and National Identity

PAUL ROBERT MAGOCSI

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INTRODUCTION

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This second stage of a war that began in 2014 came in the wake of earlier pronouncements by Russia's president Vladimir Putin, denying the historical right of the Ukrainian people to a state of their own, and even denying that the Ukrainian people are ethnically distinct from their Russian neighbours.¹ The attachment of Ukrainians to statehood and to a distinct national identity did not materialize out of a vacuum. Rather, it is the product of an organic development spanning nearly four centuries.

Most recently, Ukraine declared its independence in August 1991, and before the end of that year, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it began functioning as a fully sovereign state within the international community. Independent statehood was not, however, something new. During the twentieth century alone, independence was proclaimed for all or part of Ukrainian territory no less than five times before 1991. Nor was the idea of statehood in Ukraine limited to the twentieth century. Three centuries earlier Ukrainians created

a state which existed in some form from the mid-seventeenth to late eighteenth centuries.

The following essay will address the heritage of statehood in Ukraine and the various forms that it has taken both before and after the most recent declaration of independence on 24 August 1991. It will also discuss how the inhabitants of the country define themselves and their relationship to the state of Ukraine in terms of an ethnic or a civic national identity.

I. THE CONCEPT OF NATIONALISM

The creation of modern European states is closely linked to the ideology of nationalism.

Before describing the relationship between Ukrainian identity and statehood, it would be helpful to distinguish two different forms of nationalism, both of which have had a role to play in the development of a Ukrainian identity since the early nineteenth century and the relationship of that identity in its modern form to the existence of the Ukrainian state.

In essence, nationalism is an ideology which assumes: (1) that humankind is divided into various peoples, or nationalities; and (2) that the optimal socio-political system is one in which each people/nationality should enjoy cultural and political autonomy or, preferably, full sovereignty and independent statehood.

The relationship of peoples to statehood was profoundly influenced by the French Revolution of 1789 and its aftermath. Until then, with few exceptions, states in Europe were either embodied in the person of a monarch (emperor, king, prince, grand duke) or in a corporate body of select individuals (oligarchy). These two variants of pre-revolutionary European statehood were exemplified by France in the famous formulation by King Louis XIV: *l'état c'est moi* (I am the state), and by the political structure of the Venetian Republic, which was controlled by

a group of patrician oligarchs who elected a leader (Doge) to carry out their decisions and instructions. Especially influential was the model of revolutionary France, where political leaders implemented the principle that the state is the embodiment of its people (citizens) who, therefore, are the ultimate source of political authority.

Throughout Europe in the nineteenth century both monarchical and citizen-type states existed. Moreover, both types tried to use nationalism to their own advantage; namely, to galvanize support for an existing state's regime by creating a common "national identity" among its inhabitants. Not all peoples, then or now, have had their own states. Therefore, one must consider two variants of nationalism: state-imposed and intelligentsia-inspired.

The first variant, state-imposed nationalism, included states like France, Great Britain, Spain, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Russian Empire, all of whom through government policy (especially the educational system) set out to impose a French, British, Spaniard, Austro-German, Hungarian, or Russian "national" identity on all inhabitants, regardless of their actual ethnolinguistic/national origin. The second variant, intelligentsia-inspired nationalism, applied to peoples who did not have their own state—Bretons, Irish, Basques, Catalans, Finns, Lithuanians, Poles, Czechs, Croats, Ruthenians/Ukrainians, as well as Italians before 1859 and Germans before 1871. The intelligentsia comprised intellectuals and political activists—more often than not self-appointed—who

argued on the grounds of universal human rights that their respective peoples had the right to self-rule. At the very least, self-rule meant cultural and some degree of political autonomy within the framework of an existing state, or it could mean the establishment of a new fully sovereign and independent state. In other words, many but not all national movements had independent statehood as their ultimate goal.

II. UKRAINIAN STATEHOOD: CONCEPTS AND REALITY

The Ukrainian national movement fell into the intelligentsia-inspired variant of nationalism. Like many other national movements among stateless peoples in Europe, Ukrainian intellectuals were inspired by the views of the Enlightenment German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder. He argued that all peoples throughout the world, regardless of their political status, are carriers of a unique culture, and that every culture (best represented by a people's native language) has its own particular worth and value.²

In the course of the nineteenth century, during the first phase of the Ukrainian national movement, Ukrainian activists (Ivan Kotliarevsky, Mykola Kostamarov, Panteleimon Kulish, and Taras Shevchenko, among others) were concerned primarily with cultural activity: describing the ethnographic characteristics and defining the geographical extent of the Ukrainian people, and codifying a written

form of their language. During the second phase, a new generation of activists (Mykhailo Drahomanov, Ivan Franko, Mykhailo Hrushevskiyi) looked to the historical past to justify the existence of a distinct Ukrainian people and its right for cultural and political autonomy and eventually statehood.

Early Ukrainian states

It was in the context of interest in the historical past that great emphasis was put on earlier examples of statehood on Ukrainian lands. The medieval entity known as Rus', which functioned as a loosely-knit conglomerate of principalities from the ninth to fourteenth centuries,* was the first example to be mentioned. This was inevitable, considering the fact that the political, socioeconomic, and cultural centre of Rus' was the city of Kyiv in the very heart of Ukraine. Kyivan Rus', however, extended beyond present-day Ukraine and included all of Belarus and much of European Russia.

In terms of territory, a much more specifically Ukrainian state was the Army of Zaporozhia, or Hetmanate, created in 1649 under the Zaporozhian Cossack leader Bohdan Khmelnytskyi, among whose most illustrious successors at the turn of the eighteenth century was Ivan Mazepa. The Hetmanate functioned as a largely self-governing entity in central Ukraine for well over a century until it was abolished

* Russian and Western scholars assume that Kyivan Rus' ended in 1240 with the Mongol invasion, not realizing that the Rus' state continued for at least another century in the form of the Kingdom of Galicia-Volhynia based in present-day western Ukraine.

in the 1780s by the Russian imperial authorities under Catherine II. Despite its demise, the Cossack Hetmanate subsequently inspired the work of an ever growing number of the nineteenth-century Ukrainian belletrists, artists, historians, and civic activists, and it provided them with a concrete example of a self-governing political entity that might be restored in one form or another in the future.

When the ideology of nationalism reached Ukraine's intellectuals during the first decades of the nineteenth century, Ukrainian lands were divided between the Russian Empire in the "East" and the Austrian (later Austro-Hungarian) Empire in the "West." The attitude of those two states toward Ukrainian aspirations differed greatly, especially during the second half of the "long" nineteenth century, 1848 to 1914. The rulers of Habsburg Austria tolerated and even encouraged the national movement among Ukrainians (officially called Ruthenians at the time) based in the "western" city of Lviv, while the tsarist Russian authorities aggressively attempted to suppress the Ukrainian national movement among Ukrainians (officially called Little Russians) based in the "eastern" city of Kyiv.³

Nonetheless, by the 1890s, specifically Ukrainian political parties functioned in both the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires. This was also a time when certain leaders—Luliiian Bachynskyi (*Ukraina irredenta*, 1895) and Mykola Mikhnovskyi (*Samostiina Ukraïna/Independent Ukraine*, 1900)—put forward the idea of an independent state which would include

Ukrainian-inhabited lands from both empires. Less than two decades later, seemingly far-fetched ideas became reality.

The twentieth-century revolutionary era

In February 1917, as World War I was continuing to rage throughout much of Europe and the Middle East, the imperial government of tsarist Russia collapsed. It was replaced by a liberal European and democratically oriented Provisional Government. Within less than a year, however, the Provisional Government was overturned and replaced by a revolutionary Bolshevik-led regime that was determined to create a radically new political structure: a worker's state governed by councils (soviets) of workers, soldiers, and the peasants under the ideological direction of the Communist party. Change did not come quickly. It took three more years before the Bolsheviks were finally able to overcome their internal and external enemies, create in the process several soviet-style republics, and eventually (December 1922) unite them into what became known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics—the Soviet Union.

From the very beginning of the revolutionary era, Ukrainians set out to achieve self-rule and eventually independent statehood. In March 1917 a body called the Ukrainian Central Rada (council) was established in Kyiv. It comprised between 800 to 900 elected delegates who represented a broad spectrum of Ukrainian society: rural agriculturalists, factory

workers, soldiers, and civic associations. Before the year ended the Central Rada called into being the Ukrainian People's/National Republic,** which in January 1918 became "an independent, subject to no one, Free, Sovereign State of the Ukrainian People."⁴ Hence, it was clear that for the Central Rada the concept "Ukrainian People" meant the "entire population of our land"; that is, ethnic Ukrainians and "other peoples of Ukraine."⁵ Moreover, all peoples had the "right of national-personal autonomy."⁶

In actual practice, thirty percent of the Central Rada's members were reserved for the republic's numerically largest peoples: ethnic Russians, Poles, and Jews. Each of those peoples had government ministers representing their interests in the Central Rada's General Secretariat for Nationality Affairs, and a special Ministry of Jewish Affairs was created to oversee autonomy for Jewish communities. Symbolic of the multinational nature of the Ukrainian National Republic was its paper currency on which, aside from Ukrainian, other languages appeared: Russian, Polish, and Yiddish.

The Ukrainian National Republic was able to rally a national army to defend the territory it claimed: nine predominantly Ukrainian-inhabited provinces

** The declaration, which came in the form of a *universal* (meaning proclamation or resolution), was used by the Central Rada to recall the historical precedent of the Cossack State, whose hetmans and other officials used the same term for its government acts issued during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Ukrainian adjective *narodnyi* (from *narod*: people) can be translated as "people's" or "national." The latter form is used in most English-language literature on the subject and is used here as well.

(*guberniia*) in the former Russian Empire. Independent Ukraine was recognized by the Central Powers through the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (February-March 1918), and Germany and Austria-Hungary accepted an invitation to send troops to protect Ukraine from Soviet Russia.

When Germany became displeased with what it considered the ineffectiveness of the Central Rada, in April 1918 it helped to install in Kyiv a pro-German leader, Hetman Pavlo Skoropadskyi, to head what was formally called the Ukrainian State. Skoropadskyi's very title recalled the long tradition of Ukrainian statehood dating back to the Cossack Hetmanate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

After Germany surrendered to the Allies in November 1918, their Hetmanate client state collapsed. Nevertheless, Ukrainian statehood survived with the immediate restoration of the Ukrainian National Republic, this time under the leadership of an executive body, the Directory, headed by Symon Petliura. In the context of civil war, peasant uprisings, and foreign invasions that characterized Ukraine in 1919-1920, the Directory-led Ukrainian National Republic managed to survive, although with great difficulty, until its forces were finally driven from Ukraine in November 1920.

Despite the turbulent environment in the post-tsarist Russian Empire, a Ukrainian state, whether in the form of a national republic or hetmanate, managed to survive in some form during the revolutionary era,

1917-1920. Evidence of its existence was confirmed on the international stage. Ukraine was recognized *de jure* and/or *de facto* by 25 countries, and as an independent state it was accepted into several international organizations (maritime navigation, postal, telegraph, and radio union).⁷

Very much aware of the reality and strength of the Ukrainian national movement and the importance of Ukrainian statehood as a unifying force for people who identified as Ukrainian, the Bolsheviks responded by creating in December 1917 a rival entity, the Ukrainian Republic of Councils, based in Kharkiv. The alleged need to protect the Republic of Councils, soon renamed the Soviet Ukrainian Republic, later provided the "legal" justification for Bolshevik Russia to send its Red Army into Ukraine in order to drive out the forces of its rival, the Ukrainian National Republic.⁸

Meanwhile, in Ukrainian/Ruthenian-inhabited lands in the Austro-Hungarian Empire (which ceased to exist in late October 1918), a West Ukrainian National Republic based in the former Austrian province of Galicia was established in Lviv on 1 November 1918. Two months later the West Ukrainian Republic declared its unification with the Ukrainian National Republic in Kyiv. Like its counterpart in Kyiv, the West Ukrainian Republic understood the term "Ukrainian" in a civic sense; that is, as encompassing all the peoples living on its territory. In the republic's proposed parliament, thirty percent of the deputies were reserved specifically for Poles, Jews, and Austro-Germans.⁹

Despite the declaration of unity, the West Ukrainian Republic maintained its own Ukrainian Galician Army (within which was a separate Jewish combat unit). The operationally distinct armies of both republics were constantly engaged in a struggle for survival. The West Ukrainian National Republic aligned against Poland, which eventually defeated it in July 1918. The Ukrainian National Republic fought against Bolshevik-led Soviet Russia, anti-Bolshevik White Russian forces, and several insurgent peasant “armies” operating on Ukrainian lands in the former Russian Empire. Even though both the Kyiv-based Ukrainian National Republic and the Lviv-based West Ukrainian National Republic were eventually defeated, they managed to mobilize tens of thousands of troops to fight and die for their country—Ukraine.

The strength of belief in Ukrainian statehood, which played itself out during the revolutionary era (1917-1921), convinced the Bolshevik leadership in Moscow (Lenin and Stalin) that Soviet Russia could only hope to maintain control over Ukraine if it sent the Red Army to invade and occupy the country. Such tactics reflected the views of a wide range of Bolshevik political (Trotsky, Manuilskyi, Rakovskii) and military (Muraviev, Antonov-Ovseenko) leaders. Military operations were carried out in tandem and cooperation with a distinct Ukrainian Communist party (Bolshevik) governing a Soviet Ukrainian state closely allied but nonetheless administratively separate from Soviet Russia.

The Soviet era

The Ukrainian Republic of Councils, renamed in January 1919 the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic, had all the trappings of statehood. It made Kharkiv the republic's capital and adopted its own constitution (March 1919), which provided for a parliament (Congress of Soviets of Workers', Peasants' and Soldiers' Deputies) and a governmental executive body (Council of People's Commissars). Its first major international act was a treaty of union (December 1920) concluded by the representatives of two separate states, the Russian S.F.S.R. (henceforth: Soviet Russia), and the Ukrainian S.S.R. (henceforth: Soviet Ukraine).¹⁰ Even though the treaty provided for a military and economic union, Soviet Ukraine remained for a while a "sovereign state," with control of its agricultural sector, justice, education, and foreign affairs.

In effect, during the period 1920-1923, Soviet Ukraine functioned—and was perceived in the outside world—as an independent state. It maintained diplomatic representation and/or was a party to treaties with several postwar countries (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Turkey), and it concluded bi-lateral agreements with several other countries.¹¹

As part of the transformation of the former imperial Russian territorial space, Soviet Ukraine's "sovereignty" came to an end in December 1922. By that time Bolshevik ideologists put aside their long-

term goal of world revolution and, under the direction of the All-Union Communist party General Secretary Joseph Stalin—someone who understood very well the on-going strength of ethnic nationalism—decided to create a federation of “national” republics. The 1922 treaty of union brought together Russia, Belorussia, Ukraine, and Transcaucasia to form the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (henceforth: the Soviet Union). To this federal state structure could be added on a “voluntary” basis other Soviet republics, something that indeed took place during the 1920s with the creation from Soviet Russia of three republics in Central Asia (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kirgizstan) and the reconfiguration of Transcaucasia into another three republics (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan). Within this nominally federal union, Soviet Ukraine functioned as a common political space in whose residents were identified (and identified themselves) with an entity called Ukraine which for a few years enjoyed a degree of autonomy.

For example, Soviet Ukraine continued for a while to maintain control over its educational system and cultural development. With the encouragement of the All-Union authorities in Moscow, Soviet Ukraine’s government initiated in 1923 a program known as Ukrainianization.¹² The program’s strategic goal was to legitimize the authority of the Communist party (Bolshevik) of Ukraine by attracting to its ranks a broader spectrum of the local population. Recognizing the actual and latent strength of Ukrainian national feelings, the party hoped to attract support and new

members by promoting the Ukrainian language and all forms of Ukrainian culture.

The Ukrainianization program turned out to be remarkably successful, so that by 1929, three-quarters of the republic's students attended schools in which Ukrainian was the language of instruction. There was also an enormous increase in the number of publications and cultural institutions (scientific bodies, libraries, theatres, museums) using the Ukrainian language.

So successful was the Ukrainianization program that the All-Union Communist authorities in Moscow (after 1929 under the increasing authority of Joseph Stalin) feared that they inadvertently were contributing to Ukrainian nationalism, which was always viewed as a threat to Soviet rule. At the very same time, Stalin initiated the Soviet Union's First Five Year Plan in order to more rapidly industrialize the country and collectivize the agricultural sector by force, if necessary. Ukraine especially felt the brunt of forced collectivization, which led to the deportation of over a million private farmers (kulaks) and the imposition of an artificial genocidal famine, known as the *Holodomor* (Murder by Hunger), or Great Famine, that in 1932-1933 alone accounted for around four million deaths.¹³

These tragic developments were accompanied by the full dismantlement of the Ukrainianization program and a frontal attack on Ukrainian intellectual and cultural leaders. The concerted simultaneous

assault in the early 1930s on Ukrainian agriculturalists and urban intellectuals did not eliminate Ukrainian national feelings. In a real sense the positive results of Ukrainianization and, in particular, the shared suffering during the Great Famine (*Holodomor*) provided a store of common memories that would resurface in the future whenever changed political circumstances allowed for a revival of the Ukrainian national movement.

Not all ethnic Ukrainians lived within the borders of Soviet Ukraine during the interwar years of the twentieth century. Over 7.2 million (1930) continued to inhabit their age-old homelands at the time ruled by neighbouring Poland, Romania, and Czechoslovakia.¹⁴ The vast majority (5.9 million) who lived in Poland (historic Galicia) were among the most fervently patriotic component of all Ukrainians. They briefly had their own state, the West Ukrainian National Republic, which functioned from November 1918 until July 1919, when it was defeated by Polish armies.

Subsequently, Galician Ukrainians formed several underground political and military movements (Ukrainian Military Organization—UVO, Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists—OUN, Ukrainian Insurgent Army—UPA), which from the 1920s through the early 1950s fought against Poland, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union. Their goal was to create a non-Soviet, independent Ukrainian state. For example, Ukrainian statehood was proclaimed on the eve of and during World War II—in eastern Czechoslovakia (Carpatho-



REVOLUTIONARY UKRAINE, 1917-1918







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- — Boundary between Slovakia and Subcarpathian Rus', 1928-1938
- o o o Annexation by Hungary, 2 November 1938

- Yellow box Rusyn/Ukrainian lands south of the Carpathians
- Blue line Present-day boundary of Ukraine

0 25 miles
0 25 kilometers
Scale 1 : 2 125 000

Ukraine, November 1938–March 1939) and in former Polish-ruled Galicia (the so-called Act of Renewal of the Ukrainian State, 30 June 1941). Although both entities were short-lived, they enriched the population with historical memories about a once and possible future independent state.

The victory of the Soviet Union along Europe's World War II eastern front and Stalin's insistence on extending his country's borders farther to the west had a direct impact on Soviet Ukraine. Ukrainian-inhabited territories in interwar Poland (eastern Galicia and western Volhynia), Romania (northern Bukovina and parts of Bessarabia), and Czechoslovakia (Subcarpathian Rus'/Transcarpathia)—a total of 64,500 sq. miles/165,000 sq. kilometers with eleven million inhabitants—were added to Soviet Ukraine. This represented one-quarter of the postwar country's territory—232,000 sq. miles/604,000 sq. kilometers with 41.9 million inhabitants (1959).¹⁵ For the first time in history, the vast majority of ethnic Ukrainian-inhabited lands (as defined by Ukrainian scholars) were within the borders of a single Ukrainian, albeit Soviet, state. Moreover, these were the lands (especially historic Galicia) where the Ukrainian national movement had its earliest beginnings and where ethnolinguistic and national identity were still at their strongest and most widespread.

Although it became clear that by the late 1940s the goal of Ukrainian independence was not achieved, the concept of Ukrainian statehood did not disappear and, in a real sense, was given a new lease

on life. In 1945, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (Soviet Ukraine) became one of the 51 founding members of the United Nations.

To be sure, Soviet Ukraine remained a part of the Soviet Union, but it did function *de jure* as a distinct state that included: its own Permanent Mission to the United Nations where its ambassadors represented Soviet Ukraine as nominally distinct from the Soviet Union; membership in a wide range of United Nations agencies (Atomic Energy, Labor, Telecommunication, UNESCO, World Health Organization, among others); and signatory to over 120 international treaties, conventions, and declarations—the Paris Peace Treaties (1947), Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948), and the Moscow Treaty on the Limitation of Nuclear Weapons (1963), among others.¹⁶

It is certainly true that Soviet Ukraine's actions on the international stage could only be undertaken in full cooperation and accord with the central government of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, Soviet Ukraine acted as a state and was perceived as such in several international settings.

Even at home, Communist party leaders in Kyiv tried to enhance the interests of Soviet Ukraine by lobbying the central government in Moscow for more investments from the All-Union budget to their republic. One example of such concern was Crimea. After it was "ceded" by Soviet Russia in 1954, the Soviet Ukrainian government took this matter seriously and did its best to improve the economy of

its new territorial acquisition.

Meanwhile, the idea of statehood independent of the Soviet Union lived on. Dreams they may have been, but they remained alive throughout the 1960s and 1970s in the writings of a wide range of persecuted and dissident intellectuals in Soviet Ukraine (Ivan Dziuba, Valentyn Moroz, Ivan Svitlychnyi, General Petro Grigorenko) and among the six-million strong Ukrainian diaspora living in many countries worldwide, in particular the United States and Canada.

Independent Ukraine

On 24 August 1991 Soviet Ukraine's elected parliament (Verkhovna Rada) declared Ukraine an "independent democratic state."¹⁷ This latest movement toward independent statehood was a gradual process connected to the reforms and transformation of Soviet society initiated after 1985 by the chairman of the All-Union Communist party, Mikhail Gorbachev.

Changes in Soviet Ukraine did not begin in earnest until 1989 and were spearheaded by a civic organization called Rukh—the Popular Movement for Restructuring Ukraine. Rukh supporters were elected deputies to parliament and they, in cooperation with some Communist deputies, led that body to declare Ukraine a sovereign country (July 1990). The next step toward statehood was triggered by unexpected events in Moscow: an attempted coup (August 1991)

to overthrow Gorbachev. In the wake of the coup's failure Ukraine's parliament declared independence (24 August).

To legitimize further that declaration, the parliament called for a national referendum to be held three months later on 1 December. Citizens eligible to vote were asked to approve or disapprove the parliament's declaration. The results were unexpected even among the most fervent supporters of independence. A remarkable 92 percent of the electorate approved the declaration. Even in those areas of the country that seemed less likely to support Ukraine's independence, well over half of the voters did so (Donetsk oblast 84%; Luhansk oblast 84%; Crimea 54%).¹⁸

What motivated such vast numbers of people to approve independence? To be sure, many were inspired by the belief that having their own state was the best guarantee for ethnic Ukrainians to survive as a people. Others, however, just wanted change of any kind, in the hope that their lives and those of their children might improve. Independence seemed to fulfill the desires of both groups.

Within a few weeks of the 1 December referendum, the Soviet Union ceased to exist (31 December 1991). During the next several months Ukraine's independence was recognized by most countries worldwide, by the United Nations, and by its post-Soviet neighbours, the Russian Federation and Belarus.

As an independent state Ukraine embarked on a period of transition during which its highest priorities were: 1. economic transformation (from a command to a free market economy); 2. building state institutions (from an authoritarian to a democratic model); and 3. reconfiguring foreign relations (from dependence on the former Soviet world to closer association with the European Union and North America). A crucial first step during the transitional period was the need to adopt a new constitution.

Extensive discussions took place throughout a wide spectrum of Ukrainian society about the future constitution. Should Ukraine be a centralized state on the model of France, or a federal state on the model of Germany? The reality of Ukraine's many diverse regions, each with a distinct historical past and multiethnic inhabitants, would seem to favour a federal state structure. In the end, the constitution that was adopted in 1996 provided for a unitary state structure with a government headed by a president elected by direct vote and a legislature in the form of a one-chamber parliament (Verkhovna Rada) whose deputies were chosen by parties on the basis of the number of votes obtained. The only exception to the unitary state structure was Crimea, which was recognized as an autonomous republic within Ukraine and with its own parliament.

Ethnolinguistic diversity

As a typical European country, Ukraine was and

is ethnically diverse. In the past, all Soviet censuses recorded—actually required—that each inhabitant (including all children regardless of age) indicate his or her nationality, which was usually the same as listed in personal identification documents—the so-called internal passports. The nationality designation (Ukrainian, Russian, Polish, etc.) was distinct from citizenship (Soviet or in some cases “foreign”).¹⁹

According to the last Soviet census (1989), of Ukraine’s total population of 51.4 million nearly 73 percent were ethnic Ukrainians. The remaining 27 percent were among the country’s over 100 national minorities. The numerically largest minority comprised 11.3 million ethnic Russians (22 percent of Ukraine’s total population), followed by much smaller numbers (all less than one percent) of Belarusians, Moldovans, Crimean Tatars, Bulgarians, Hungarians, Romanians, Poles, Jews, and Armenians.²⁰ Despite their small numerical size, some of these minorities bordered on being a local “majority” if they happened to be concentrated in certain areas such as the Hungarians in Transcarpathia, the Moldovans in Kherson oblast, the Bulgarians along the Sea of Azov, the Crimean Tatars in Crimea, and the Greeks in and around the Azov port city of Mariupol. The numerically largest national minority, ethnic Russians, actually did comprise the majority of the inhabitants in several parts of far northern, eastern, and southern Ukraine (the Chernihiv, Kharkiv, Donetsk, Kherson oblasts and Crimea).

It is important to keep in mind that despite current Ukrainian legislation, all of the above mentioned “national minorities” are descendants of Russians, Poles, Hungarians, Romanians, Moldovans, etc. who have been living for centuries in the same place. In other words, their ancestral homes are in present-day Ukraine; their motherland or homeland is Ukraine, not Russia, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Moldova, Bulgaria, or somewhere else.

It is also important to distinguish between one’s native language (also recorded in censuses) and one’s nationality. Not all Ukraine’s inhabitants who reported Russian as their native language/everyday language/language of convenience were ethnic Russians. Historically, a significant percentage of self-identifying ethnic Ukrainians were Russian speakers. This language phenomenon was strengthened during the seven decades of Soviet rule (1921-1991), when Russian was given pride of place as the most important language in the country. Moreover, many of the national minorities—in particular Belarusians, Crimean Tatars, Bulgarians, Greeks and Jews (whose numbers were much greater in the past)—were and still are Russian speakers.

III. UKRAINIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

With the achievement of Ukrainian statehood in 1991, the question arose as to whether this new political entity should encompass a population whose common national identity is based on civic

principles or ethnic principles. In other words, a civic-based national identity based on association with a state representing a community of people linked by common citizenship who live in a specific territory and are aware of being subject to a common body of laws and political institutions? Or an ethnic-based national identity in which the state is associated primarily with a particular ethnicity/nationality defined by its language, historical traditions, and cultural values? The 1996 constitution responded clearly to that question by defining “the Ukrainian people” as “citizens of all nationalities.”²¹

Evolution of Ukrainian identity

The constitutional emphasis on a civic identity did not eliminate more traditional notions of what constitutes a Ukrainian identity. The constitution also called on “the state to promote the consolidation and development of the Ukrainian nation and of its historical consciousness, traditions, and culture.”²² An especially important consolidating element was the state’s sole official language, Ukrainian, whose “comprehensive development” was to be promoted “in all spheres of social life.”²³

While the Ukrainian language was to be given greater prominence, especially in the state-controlled national education system, “the languages of national minorities” were guaranteed “free development.”²⁴ Of most concern was Russian, the mother tongue of 30 percent of Ukraine’s inhabitants

(2001 census).²⁵ Although many of its speakers often expressed dissatisfaction with the classification “minority language,” in practice Russian remained the exclusive medium of instruction in 1,275 of the country’s elementary/high schools.²⁶ At least until the outset of the twenty-first century, Russian was the language of instruction in most schools of higher learning (universities, colleges, technical institutes), and Russian dominated the print and especially non-print media throughout Ukraine.

Since independence, reforms in the school curriculum have facilitated the emergence of a new younger generation with a shared historical frame of reference and shared Ukrainian experience at its core. Following guidelines established by the Ministry of Education for the entire country, the curriculum was substantially revised. The history of Ukraine was made a required subject beginning at the upper level of elementary school and continuing throughout high school, as well as in colleges, universities, and technical schools regardless of a student’s specialization. The former Soviet-Marxist version of history was replaced by the Ukrainian national schema formulated already before World War I by Mykhailo Hrushevskiy, the country’s most renowned historian and its first president (1918). According to the Hrushevskiy schema, the medieval polity Kyivan Rus’ is considered a proto-Ukrainian state, but the greatest emphasis is given to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Cossack state which is understood to have struggled for independence from—and not for unification

with—Muscovy/Russia. With regard to the twentieth-century Soviet era, it is no longer depicted solely as a period of social and economic achievements, but also one of widespread human suffering epitomized by the repression of the Ukrainian national idea and the horrific death toll of the *Holodomor* imposed on Ukraine during the Great Famine of 1932-1933.

The formation of a shared Ukrainian sensibility has been further encouraged by the efforts of local communities to transform their public spaces. Symbols of Soviet rule—in particular statues of the Soviet founding father Lenin—have been removed from squares in many cities, towns, and villages, and usually replaced by monuments to the nineteenth-century Ukrainian national bard, Taras Shevchenko. Events and personages suppressed by the Soviet regime in the twentieth century were rehabilitated through a wide range of activity by university scholars and writers of school textbooks; various institutes of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine; and the newly created Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance. Ukraine's public space was simultaneously enriched by public monuments to commemorate the Great Famine (*Holodomor*) and to honour figures (Andrei Sheptytskyi, Mykhailo Hrushevskyy, Mykola Skrypnyk, Stepan Bandera, among others) who were opposed to aspects—or to the very premise—of Soviet rule. Soviet-inspired names of several towns and cities were changed (Dnipropetrovsk became Dnipro; Kirov became Kropyvnytsky) as were names of streets and squares,

while the country's paper currency featured portraits of Ukrainian patriotic heroes (Taras Shevchenko, Bohdan Khmelnytskyi, Ivan Mazepa, Mykhailo Hrushevskyi).

On the one hand, the teaching of Ukrainian history and the re-imagining of the public space seemed to emphasize ethnic nationalism. On the other hand, Ukraine's de-Sovietization reflected the principles of civic nationalism in that there was an effort to give voice to all of Ukraine's peoples.

New histories of Ukraine, especially required textbooks used in elementary and high schools, gradually adopted a multicultural approach with greater attention given to the achievements of non-ethnic Ukrainian individuals and communities. For example, special programs organized by the Ministry of Education and Science provided teacher training and awareness about the Holocaust and its Jewish victims in Ukraine.²⁷

In the public sphere, places with concentrations of national minorities got street names named after their own prominent figures. This is particularly evident in the number of streets that now carry Jewish names (in Lviv, Chernivtsi, Uman), Greek names (in Mariupol), and Hungarian names (throughout southern Transcarpathia).

Ukraine's state and local authorities provided direct support and encouraged foreign investment to build new or restore existing secular and religious monuments representative of the country's various

peoples. Prominent among many examples are: for Jews—the Holocaust killing sites in Kyiv (Babyn Yar) and Kharkiv (Drobytskyi Yar), the Menorah community centre and TKUMA museum in Dnipro, the old Jewish quarter and Yanovsky labour camp in Lviv, and numerous synagogues throughout the country; for Crimean Tatars—the Khan’s Palace in Bakhchysarai, mosques throughout Crimea, and statues of cultural and political activists; and university-level institutions for Greeks (in Mariupol) and for Hungarians (in Berehovo). In particular, multicultural Odesa was encouraged to create civic and cultural centers devoted specifically to the city’s Greek, German, Jewish, Armenian, and Bulgarian communities. There were even monuments restored or newly erected to satisfy the nostalgic longing of some citizens for iconic figures from the pre-World War I empires that once ruled Ukraine, whether Austria-Hungary (Habsburg Emperor Franz Joseph in Chernivtsi) or Russia (Romanov Empress Catherine II in Odesa and her favourite minister Gregory Potemkin in Kherson).

As the foregoing suggests, the modern sense of Ukrainian identity is a complex and evolving phenomenon. Ethnic markers of Ukrainian identity, such as language and culture, have been overlaid in recent decades by a civic identity that both informs how ethnic Ukrainians think about the Ukrainian state and allows residents of Ukraine who lack those markers to embrace their membership in that political community. At the same time, these ethnic and civic identities have co-existed with other worldviews held

by particular segments of Ukrainian society, often dictated by age and geographical location.

Types of identity in Ukraine

For analytical purposes one might speak of four “national” identities organized according to either ethnic or civic principles. In reality, however, these identities are not discrete or mutually exclusive, and two or more of them may combine in the self-identity of any given citizen of Ukraine.

1. Ethnic Ukrainian Identity. The ethnic Ukrainian identity is determined by the belief that a person is Ukrainian if she or he speaks the Ukrainian language, identifies as a Ukrainian, and believes in the idea of Ukraine as a viable nation-state. Before independence, ethnic Ukrainianism was strongest among the inhabitants of western Ukraine, in particular the historic regions of Galicia and Volhynia. Since independence, increasing numbers of young people throughout all parts of Ukraine (born or largely acculturated in post-Soviet times) have embraced the ethnic approach to their “national” identity.

2. Ethnic Russian Identity. The ethnic Russian identity applies to those citizens whose ancestors were ethnic Russians who lived for generations, even centuries, in Ukraine, mostly although not exclusively in the eastern and southern regions of the country. Not only is Russian their primary, often exclusive language of communication, but their cultural affinity (often expressed through adherence to the Moscow

Patriarchate of the Orthodox Church) is to Russia, of which they or their forebears were a part, whether in the form of the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union.

3. Soviet Civic Identity. The Soviet civic identity refers to people (often called Sovoks) who were born, raised, and educated anywhere in the Soviet Union. Their language of communication is Russian, which was the most prestigious language in that former state. As a corollary, they look down at Ukrainian as little more than peasant speech, not a language at all, and refuse (often demonstratively) to speak it despite language laws and guidelines adopted by the Ukrainian authorities which they openly resent.

These Soviet (Sovok) types did have a nationality designation in their Soviet-era identification documents, but it was for the most part a nominal identity. This was because nationality, whether Russian or any other, was not considered important. Hence, association with the Soviet state and its cultural and political values became the main characteristic of the Soviet civic identity. In the absence of the Soviet Union, Ukraine's Sovoks have looked to its successor, the Russian Federation, as their ancestral homeland to which they again might one day belong politically. Sovoks are mostly of the older generation (today fifty years plus) and found throughout Ukraine, but mostly in the eastern and southern parts of the country, in particular Crimea.

4. Ukrainian Civic Identity. The Ukrainian civic identity views the state as defined by a set of shared

values to which people of all ethnicities may subscribe. Key among those values is loyalty to the state and its interests, regardless of a citizen's nationality and language. Hence, Russian- or Crimean Tatar-language speakers are as Ukrainian as are Ukrainian-language speakers. It is in this context that one can speak of a modern multinational, multicultural state comprised of ethnic Ukrainians, Russian Ukrainians, Polish Ukrainians, Jewish Ukrainians, Crimean Tatar Ukrainians, etc.

Also of crucial importance are shared values about what kind of state deserves the loyalty of its citizens. In contrast to Russians (whether citizens of the Russian Federation or Sovoks living in Ukraine and in various parts of the post-Soviet space), who view the state as an end in itself, citizens who espouse a Ukrainian civic identity expect their state to abide by democratic principles, including the rule of law and the protection of human rights. Their model is clearly the European Union to which they aspire to belong, not the Russian Federation or any other autocratic system.

The impact of recent events

There is no question that recent events have had a profound impact on notions of civic Ukrainian identity and statehood. The first of these was the Orange Revolution of 2004. The significance of this event was not only that it resulted in a second presidential election overturning the results of the first, but that it demonstrated the power of the people. For societies

like Ukraine used to authoritarian and dictatorial rule, the Orange Revolution transformed the national psyche of large segments of the population. Ordinary citizens could not only take to the streets and protest, but they could also effect real change. Moreover, their personal sacrifice over several weeks (in the face of mid-winter freezing temperatures) was done in order to protect the interests of the state—“their” state.

The second event that ultimately sealed the civic aspect of Ukrainian national identity was the Revolution of Dignity. It played itself out over four months (November 2013-February 2014) on the central square of the country’s capital Kyiv, known as the Maidan. The protests this time were related to the interests of Ukraine as a state and its geopolitical status, particularly as, ever since the Orange Revolution ten years earlier, Ukrainian society and identity had become increasingly oriented toward the European Union. Ukraine’s president, Viktor Yanukovich, had agreed to sign a memorandum of cooperation with the European Union. But at the last moment, under pressure from Russia’s president Vladimir Putin, he refused to sign. That decision touched off protests in Kyiv’s Maidan, which turned bloody when Yanukovich called out anti-riot special forces who shot and killed over 100 protestors. Ultimately, the protestors defeated the government’s special forces and drove President Yanukovich from office. People power had won. A new pro-European government, with the enthusiastic support of Ukraine’s citizenry, now ruled the country.

The victory was bittersweet, however, because in the immediate wake of the Revolution of Dignity, Russia invaded (late February) and annexed Crimea (24 March), and at the same time provoked and actively supported separatists in the Donbas (the eastern part of the country comprised of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts) to secede from Ukraine. The government in Kyiv now found itself involved in a war along its eastern borderlands. After eight years of conflict with separatist forces assisted by Russia, over 13,000 Ukrainians were killed and two million driven from their homes in the Donbas to other parts of the country.²⁸

The forcible annexation of Crimea and the war with Russia and pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas has done more than anything else to enhance a civic state identity among Ukrainians, regardless of their ethno-national background. For example, it is more than ironic that in Kyiv's Maidan the first protestor killed in late 2013 was a young Ukrainian of Armenian ancestry. Furthermore, among the most vocal speakers at the daily rallies on the Maidan was Josef Zissels, head of the influential Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Ukraine—VAAD.²⁹ The majority of soldiers in Ukraine's army fighting against pro-Russia separatists in eastern Ukraine turned out to be local Russian-speaking inhabitants. It is clear that the protestors on the Maidan and the Russian-speaking soldiers in the east were speaking, fighting, and dying for their state—Ukraine.

The latest phase of the war with Russia that began in February 2022 has shown how strong and widely shared the Ukrainian identity, whether ethnic or civic, has become. The valiant resistance of Ukrainians from all walks of life to the Russian invasion is both evidence of, and will further reinforce, the trend in Ukrainian self-identity to define itself, on the one hand, in contradistinction to Russia and, on the other, in alignment with European values.

IV. SUMMARY

The idea of Ukrainian statehood has a long tradition that dates back at least to the mid-seventeenth century. At that time a Cossack State was created in the centre of modern Ukraine, where it existed as an independent and then autonomous entity until the 1780s.

The Ukrainian national movement kept the idea of statehood alive during the nineteenth century. Statehood was eventually, if briefly, realized during the post-World War I revolutionary era (1917-1920), which witnessed the collapse of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires and the establishment of no less than four Ukrainian states under five different regimes: the Ukrainian National Republic (Central Rada and Directory), the Ukrainian Republic of Councils/ Soviet Ukraine, the Ukrainian State (Hetmanate), and the West Ukrainian National Republic.

Only one of these republics survived, Soviet Ukraine. This was largely because of its close alliance

and dependence on Soviet Russia, which it joined in December 1922 to form the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics—the Soviet Union. Soviet Ukraine maintained many of the trappings of statehood (including for a while foreign relations), until in the early 1930s it became fully subordinate to the All-Union Soviet government in Moscow. Nevertheless, Soviet Ukraine remained a distinct administrative entity whose territory was increased by one-quarter at the close of World War II.

Soviet Ukraine's status as a state was actually enhanced in 1945, when it became a founding and permanent member in its own right of the United Nations. When, in the late 1980s, the Soviet Union entered a period of transformation, calls for a sovereign Ukraine increased until 1991, when a fully independent Ukraine came into being.

After gaining its independence, the present-day Ukrainian state adopted a constitution (1996), which outlined its structure as a unitary (not federal) state. The question nevertheless remained open as to whether Ukraine was to be state based on ethnic or civic principles; in other words, a state defined by the cultural values of ethnic Ukrainians, or a state defined by the common identity of all citizens regardless of their nationality or language?

The evolution of Ukraine since its establishment in 1991, and in particular following two social upheavals—the Orange Revolution (2004) and the Maidan Revolution of Dignity (2013-2014)—has

shown that Ukraine had moved more and more in the direction of becoming a nation-state where Ukrainianness is defined primarily by the civic principle enunciated in its constitution: “the Ukrainian people” are “citizens of Ukraine of all nationalities.”³⁰

Among the shared aspirations of the Ukrainian civic identity is a commitment to a state governed by European democratic values with an emphasis on freedom of expression, human rights, and the rule of law. The strength of the civic principle has been proven beyond all expectations by the reaction to the current Russian invasion—“Putin’s War” of 2022—during which Ukrainian citizens of all regions, nationalities, gender, and language have stood up, fought, and died defending the state with which they fully identify: Ukraine.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹⁶ Theofil I. Kis, *Nationhood, Statehood and the International Status of the Ukrainian SSR/Ukraine* (Ottawa, London, and Paris: University of Ottawa Press, 1989), pp. 57-62.
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PAUL ROBERT MAGOCSI is a professor in the
Department of History and the Department of
Political Science at the University of Toronto, Canada.

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