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Borders of Identity: Ukraine's Political and Cultural Significance for Russia*

Given that the former USSR has never been a nation-state but a multinational empire disguised as a federation, the problem of socioeconomic, political, and national self-identification remains a crucial one for all former Soviet republics. Their vision of its citizenry was circumscribed by the "new Soviet man," whose precise ethnic identity was presumed unimportant. Though this concept proved stillborn, the national identities of the people constituting the former empire was seriously damaged. As a consequence of this underdevelopment, the issue of political and cultural borders deserves very special attention because of its clear implication for international stability and security.

The newly established borders among the former Soviet republics remain essentially transparent (the partial exception being the borders between Russia and the Baltic states). In many cases, this situation reflects a lack of political will on the part of the national leadership, which, in turn stems from the acute identity crisis they suffer. In Russia's case this may also reveal a conscious or subconscious desire to leave the door open for re-appropriating the lost territories, or, at minimum, for exercising hegemonic control over them.

Nation- and state-building in the post-Soviet space cannot but remind the observer about similar problems experienced by a number of Third World countries in the 1960s. Then, transition from a colonial past to independence was described as the "modernization" of previously traditional societies. State borders were often drawn by former colonial powers. Nascent state administrations were usually built on the remnants of former colonial bureaucracies, with state officials of the newly independent countries receiving their education in the West. Tribal societies remained largely uncontrollable, creating the so-called "penetration crisis,"¹ which seriously impeded the performance of the state in all areas of domestic and international politics: from

* The author would like to thank the following colleagues whose critical remarks, advice and observations on related matters helped to put this paper in its present shape: Georgi Derluguian, Emil Draitser, John-Paul Himka, Oleh S. Inytskyj, John (Ivan) S. Jaworsky, Fred Judson, Michael Kennedy, David Marples, Alexander J. Motyl, Mykola Mykhalchenko, Larry Pratt, and Roman Szporluk. All errors remaining, of course, are my own.

¹ See Leonard Binder *et al.*, *Crises and Sequences in Political Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

the collection of taxes to exercising legitimate coercion to demarcating the territory of its own competence and authority.

Modernization theorists celebrated their “ultimate” comeback in a number of recent publications specifically inspired by the collapse of the Soviet bloc.² When these earlier schemes are applied to post-Soviet developments, new ethnic tensions are interpreted not unlike the more familiar African tribal cleavages; regionalism in Russia or Ukraine is commonly read in terms of “power penetration” problems; and struggles over issues such as border demarcations or the division of former Soviet assets appear almost identical to postcolonial contests of forty years ago. However, postcommunist nation-building is not the same as the transition from the pre-modern condition to modernity. Postcommunist ethnicity is politicized by the professional elites, and postcommunist ethnopolitical conflicts have nothing to do with the feelings of primordial animosity so often ascribed to them. Internal regionalism is as much a product of long established territorial-based corporatism as it is evidence of recently discovered state incapacity.³ The transparency of borders may betray not only the past status of an “internal colony,” but a conscious desire to emulate integrationist trends in the European Community or to secure an open market akin to NAFTA. The Russian-Belarusian Community, officially launched in August 1996, and the customs union, joined also by Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, are witness to the plausibility of this interpretation.

If the “modernization syndrome” is not an adequate explanation of developments in post-Soviet political geography, what is? I believe the short answer to this is an “identity crisis” of a kind unseen before. The novelty of the situation consists, first of all, in the fact that a number of newly independent states appeared in Europe—not in Asia, Africa or elsewhere in the Third World. Secondly, these states emerged as a result of fragmentation of Europe’s biggest power, whose political status and territorial integrity were beyond doubt as late as 1990. Europe has not experienced anything like this since World War I. And Russia, as an established member of the European family of nations, had not suffered comparable losses since medieval times. Thirdly, disintegration occurred in an already modernized, relatively advanced industrial economy. Whatever our concrete assessments of the nature, scope and human cost of this modernization effort may be, the truth of the matter remains that, by all accounts, it was essentially completed by the early 1960s. As for politics, the state seemed to be

² For one example see Lucian W. Pye, “Political Science and the Crisis of Authoritarianism” in *American Political Science Review* 84.1 (1990): 3–19.

³ Mikhail A. Molchanov, “Political Culture in Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: The Post-Soviet Case,” in *The Harriman Review* 9.1–2 (1996): 43–56.

fully in control of society—more so than in any of the Western democracies. How could it weaken so suddenly in the absence of any hidden “movements for national liberation,” which emerged in a significant way only when the state allowed it?

One possible answer is given by Richard Sakwa who speaks about “mismodernization” as a distinct feature of Soviet development.⁴ The term implies that, formally, modernization goals had been achieved but the direction they took proved detrimental to the national interest. When the political leadership realized this, it tried to change its course to catch up with the advanced industrial democracies. One of the unintended consequences was the unravelling of a state that could not withstand the diametrically opposed impulses of late re-modernization (perestroika) and Soviet inertia (the latter making it what it was over several decades of authoritarian development).

Fourthly, the crisis bore discernible traits of at least some elements of the Western postmodern condition. As a result of Brezhnev’s “social contract” policies, the essential material needs of the population were satisfied. However, this only prompted a significant segment of the younger and better educated generation to shift its concern from material to “postmaterialist” values (i.e., a better quality of life, freedom of self-expression and individual assertion).⁵ It is no accident that underground rock and ecological movement arrived in the former USSR before any nationalist opposition large enough to be noticed by the average citizen. Postmodernist politics of identity preceded the rebirth of “normal” party politics, and heavily influenced it thereafter. A culturally constructed image of the nation—built on personal values—espoused by the intellectual and cultural elites of the former Soviet republics preceded the actual state- and nation-building policies. The political behaviour and the mutual stance of the post-Soviet states from 1991 onward, have been largely informed by identity considerations.

With each individual republic asserting its political autonomy and sociocultural identity against the Russian Other, Russia’s own identity became eroded and entered a period of protracted and severe crisis which, six years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, is far from being resolved. It is sometimes asserted that the main threat to contemporary Russian national identity is the conflict between Russia’s imperial and national consciousness.⁶ According to

⁴ See Richard Sakwa, *Russian Politics and Society* (London: Routledge, 1993).

⁵ See Ronald Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

⁶ Roman Szporluk, “Dilemmas of Russian Nationalism” in *Problems of Communism* 38.4 (1989): 15–35.

this argument, over the centuries Russia became enmeshed in her colonial possessions and preoccupied with great-power messianism. Finally, Russia lost her potential for independent nation building, becoming incapable of distinguishing between the Russian Empire and Russia proper. In the postcommunist period, debates over the definition of Russian national identity coincided with the more practical question of designating new state borders among the erstwhile Soviet republics. Two camps appeared on the Russian political horizon: those who tried to preserve a broad unity of post-Soviet nations with Russia as the centre; and those who were eager to shed the Soviet geopolitical heritage completely. The first group, dubbed the “restorationists,” stressed the importance of the supranational union built by the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union over the centuries. They emphasized “the ties of language, culture and economy, but above all the sheer scale of human intermingling.”⁷ The practical political implications of this position ranged from an unconditional demand for restoring the old Union to more subtle advocacy of a new federative or even confederative structure that would embrace most, if not all, the former territories. The second group, whom political theorist A. Tsipko named the “divisionists,”⁸ contended that civic nation- and state-building would not be successful if it was burdened by the imperial legacy. Their reasons also cited incompatibilities between empire and liberal democracy as well as more nationalist arguments which presented any “restorationist” effort as a waste of Russian national resources.

I would certainly not deny the significance of the restorationist-versus-divisionist debate for the ongoing political developments in Russia and the CIS. However, the real weight and significance of the imperial components in the Russian national identity is not answered by a simple juxtaposition of “nation builders” and “empire savers,” “patriots” versus “nationalists,” or “small Russia” vs “big Russia” nationalists, etc.⁹ After all, the shock of imperial breakdown is not something uniquely relevant to Russia. Most advanced industrialized countries experienced form of this even quite recently. Still, no one would say that, for example, British imperial policies figured so prominently in the nation’s history as to impede and even jeopardize the formation of a separate,

7 Sakwa 97.

8 Sakwa 30.

9 On this debate see Szporluk and Sakwa; also Alex Pravda “The Politics of Foreign Policy” in *Developments in Russian and Post-Soviet Policy*, 3rd edition, eds. Stephen White, Alex Pravda and Zvi Gitelman (London: MacMillan, 1994) 213–220 and Francis Fukuyama “Varieties of Russian Nationalism” in *Legacies of the Collapse of Marxism*, ed. John H. Moore (Fairfax, VA: George Mason University Press, 1994) 56–66.

secular national identity. Why is the question being raised with respect to Russia? Perhaps, the very specificity of the ethnic component in Russian political culture should be addressed to answer this question.

Another facet of the puzzle arises if we take the formula for granted and attempt to construct an inventory for Russian "imperial" consciousness, i.e., endeavour to specify its chief elements with at least a crude degree of approximation. Very soon we will need to acknowledge that we cannot move much farther than the sixteenth-century "Third Rome" metaphor of the monk Philotheus or the famous "Autocracy, Orthodoxy, Nationality" formula proposed by Count S.S. Uvarov more than 150 years ago. The specific content of "Russianness" is absent in both cases. If Russians have problems distilling their national identity from the amorphous imperial mindset, we need to ask how a situation like this became possible in the first instance? Why does the Russian national identity appear to be entangled and confused with non-Russian elements? If this is really the case, then does it mean that Uzbek, Georgian and Belarusian cultures are equally present in the Russian national consciousness as undistinguishable facets of the "all-Russian" identity? Or should we speak about Orthodox Christians only? Perhaps, we need to include all Russian-dominated territories? All *once*-imperial possessions and spheres of influence? Any attempt at an empirical clarification of the "imperial identity" thesis immediately unfolds *ad absurdum* and leaves a social scientist incapable of solving a trivial problem that is repeatedly solved without reflection in day-to-day communications: how to tell a Russian from non-Russian in what used to be the late Soviet Union?

The very formulation of "empire legacy" has been greatly influenced by the Western experience in dealing with the post-imperial shocks of this century. However, the Russian empire differed substantially from Western empires that were based on overseas colonial possessions. Russia did not have overseas colonies. Some of her "internal colonies" (Finland, Ukraine, Estonia or Latvia) were developed better than Russia's own hinterland. Finally, Russia managed to incorporate local élites into the imperial structures of governance to an unprecedented degree. All of this makes "post-imperial shock" in Russia truly unique and all attempts to draw parallels with the West rather futile.

I will try to propose another way of looking at the problem of Russian national identity. My approach relies more heavily on ethnocultural rather than sociopolitical or socioeconomic views on what constitutes national identity. By necessity, in this framework the predicate "national" will have to be treated in a generalized fashion, encompassing not only contemporary phenomena of nation-

building, national integration and the rise of modern nationalism,¹⁰ but also the pre-modern manifestations of a shared sense of common ancestry, a common trans-group identity, language and culture, and, possibly, even a more or less unified state formation that separates the community in question from others. In this wider conception of “national” we obviously deviate from the social science mainstream, incorporating a phenomenon that Anthony Smith prefers to describe with a term “*ethnie*” rather than “nation” or “nationality.”¹¹

The underlying reason for broadening the scope of the term is to illustrate continuities in Russian political culture and Russian national identity—continuities that cannot be contained within the time frame of the last two centuries but go back much further than usually acknowledged. If this is so, one may be prompted to ask, why not substitute “ethnic” for “national” in the proposed description of the Russian identity? Because it is not properly ethnic either. It cannot be neatly characterized by categories employed in Smith’s analysis of the *ethnie*—nor by other familiar methods of cultural anthropology. Thus Russian linguistical identity is blurred to allow accommodation of significant segments of Belarusian and Ukrainian populations. Territorial attachment is not clear. Folkways are often undistinguishable not only from other Eastern Slavs, but also from some other non-Slavic nationalities, such as Udmurts, Mordvins, and even Bashkirs and Tatars. I might add that the Russian language does not even have a vernacular word to communicate the concept of nation: it simply borrows the term from Latin. The confusion may be illustrated by the oft-cited “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality”: in fact, there is, strictly speaking, no “nationality” in the Russian original wording. The Russian *narodnost’*, as used by Count Uvarov, connotes a much wider spectrum of phenomena than the Latin-derived “nationality.”

The deep roots of Russia’s ethnocultural identity lie in the ancient Eastern Slavic state of Kyivan (Kievan) Rus’. “The Lay of Igor’s Host” (twelfth century) reflects the contemporary élite’s view on the Rus’ian national idea, raising it to a self-conscious, critical level. The main themes of the poem are: (a) a sense of kinship, unity and cultural affinity among all of the Eastern Slavic tribes; and (b) understanding of the precarious character of this unity and the associated urge to keep and defend it, if necessary.

It is possible to go deeper than the earliest literary monuments and look at

¹⁰ See Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983); Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Eli Kedouri, *Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

¹¹ See Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

Russian folk songs, legends, and myths for traces of initial self-understanding. The *bylina* provides a good point of reference. The oldest cycle of the Russian *byliny* was created during the ninth to eleventh centuries in the lands dominated or influenced by the Kyiv principality. Most of the legendary events described in the cycle centre on Kyivan lands, within the boundaries of what acquired the name Ukraine. They also call for unity and internal peace for the sake of protecting the homeland against invaders.

It is now rarely disputed that Kyivan Rus' gave birth to three modern nationalities (Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian) with their separate languages, literatures and cultures. Each may legitimately claim not a part but the whole of the Rus'ian heritage. Nevertheless, the implications of this heritage for the construction of national identities at present is not the same for these three nations. While the low level of a separate national consciousness among Belarusians presents no problem for sharing the Kyivan, imperial and Soviet legacy with others (i.e., Russians or Ukrainians or even Lithuanians), the same attitude hardly prevails among the nationally conscious Ukrainians, for whom almost the whole history of their nation is read as a never-ending struggle against an inescapable "imperialist" Russian dominance. Consequently, attempts by Russians to claim the joint Russian-Ukrainian heritage for themselves have been either fiercely denied or at best looked upon with deep suspicion as some kind of a neo-imperialist propagandistic manoeuvre.

The difficulties Russians encounter after the break-up of the Soviet Union are of a completely different nature. Having grown accustomed to thinking about Russia as a series of successive states—Kyivan Rus', Muscovy, the Russian empire, the Soviet Union, and the present Russian Federation—Russians tended to dismiss the distinctions between themselves and other Eastern Slavs as something insignificant. The processes of Belarusian and Ukrainian ethnogenesis, which came to a more or less pronounced completion in the fifteenth–sixteenth centuries, were hardly noticed at all by the Great Russian population at the time. For the majority of them, the differences among Eastern Slavs were no more important than differences between, say, Northern and Southern Russians. This attitude was reinforced by the old ethnonyms used for Ukrainians and Belarusians: *malorossy* ("Little Russians") and *byelorusy* ("White Russians") respectively. Therefore, the Russian approach to sharing the joint Eastern Slav legacy was that of "big brother": in the traditional Russian view, there could be no pretender to this legacy other than themselves. Only after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, when the situation finally became problematized, did a search begin in earnest for a mutual understanding with Ukrainians and Belarusians.

Russian national identity can only be curtailed and debilitated if its vital

links with the Kyivan Rus' heritage are severed. Not only is Kyivan Rus' the grandmother state for contemporary Russia, but all the sources of cultural authenticity flow from that historical period and from that geographical area. More than half of this area lies within the boundaries of the modern Ukrainian state (the rest comprises Moscovy's heartland: the Vladimir-Suzdal' principality; Kursk; Smolensk; the Pskov and Novgorod areas, as well as some proportion of contemporary Belarus). Contemporary Pskov and Novgorod *oblasti* are, in their turn, endangered by recently formulated claims of the nationalist Estonian government, which believes that some of these territories are properly Estonian lands and was pressing the Russian government to acknowledge Estonian rights for the sake of "historical justice." No wonder the ontological foundations of Russian national existence are felt to be threatened. This anxiety is translated into procrastination and backsliding when it comes to resolving territorial problems with Estonia or demarcating borders between Russia and Ukraine. Cultural-historical nostalgia, which lies behind this behaviour, should not be regarded as a threat in itself. It has little to do with the imperialist revanchism so often ascribed to it. However, it may be and *is* used by the Russian nationalist fringe precisely for imperialist purposes, which makes our task of analyzing the psychological and cultural foundations of Russian national self-conceptualization politically relevant.

Ukraine plays a special role for both ancient and contemporary Russian ethnonational identity. If we equate Kyivan Rus' with Ukraine, as some historians attempted to do,¹² it is hard, in fact, almost impossible, to distinguish *any* non-Ukrainian foundations in the Russian national identity, with, perhaps, the exception of the northern, Novgorod-dominated cultural area. In this case, Ukraine becomes a mirror where Russia seeks to find her own image from the most distant times to the present. The core of the Russian national identity reveals itself to be essentially Ukrainian.

If we concentrate exclusively on the differences between Ukrainians and Russians, and deny any interpenetration of their identities, we are forced to admit that these differences exist in a complementary rather than contradictory relationship. This means that differences are used as a tool of communication, not as a barrier to it. They enrich ethnocultural interactions and create a common cultural universe, which extends beyond the nation-state borders. In T.H. Eriksen's words,

Such an acknowledgement of differences can be labelled "complementarisation."

¹² For one example see Mykhailo Hrushevs'kyi, *The Traditional Scheme of "Russian" History and the Problem of a Rational Organization of the History of the Eastern Slavs* (Winnipeg: Ukrainian Free Academy of Sciences, 1965).

Here, the cultural differences communicated through ethnicity are considered a fact and frequently an asset. Whereas dichotomisation essentially expresses an Us-Them kind of relationship, complementarisation can be described as a We-You kind of process.... [E]thnicity entails the establishment of both Us-Them contrasts (dichotomisation) *and* a shared field for interethnic discourse and interaction (complementarisation).¹³

The We-You categorization provides the necessary means for a civilized solution of potential ethnic conflicts and, therefore, needs to be maintained and reinforced with any new occurrence of ethnocultural or ethnopolitical split. The very success of ethnogenetic processes which lead to a crystallization of distinct national or ethnic identities from a heretofore homogeneous group depends on the adoption of such attitudes by all parties concerned. However, a closer degree of proximity in interethnic categorization is also possible. The next logical step in the development of ethnic interaction may be the ability to see the Self in the Other and, reciprocally, the Other in the Self. Only closely related and mutually tied nations can develop these capabilities. As an example, one can think of the USA and Canada,¹⁴ Germany and Austria, Chinese island states or some pairs in Latin America. I believe that the same logic should be applied to the Russian-Ukrainian relationship.

The geopolitical dimensions of Russian national identity, often invoked in contemporary debates, are usually grandiose in scope. One relevant example is the resurrection of the early twentieth-century controversy between "Eurasianists" and "Atlanticists," which, in turn, carries on and modifies the nineteenth-century debate between "Slavophiles" and "Westernizers."¹⁵ For "Eurasianists," Russian destiny is defined by its geostrategic location and self-ascribed role of a bridge between Europe and Asia. "Atlanticists," on the contrary, unambiguously side with the Euro-Atlantic community, thus continuing the quest started by Peter the Great. The latter do not much differ from their intellectual predecessors, the nineteenth-century Westernizers, who also looked at Russia as, potentially, a normal European power, though somewhat delayed in its development. My understanding of the problem shies away from the global points of reference. I believe that the genuine sources of Russian national identity still lie where they have always been: neither in Asia or Western Europe but solely within the

¹³ Thomas H. Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (London: Pluto Press, 1993).

¹⁴ See Seymour M. Lipset, *Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

¹⁵ See Vladimir O. Pechatnov, "Russia's Current Perception of America" in *Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia in a World of Change*, eds. Allen C. Lynch and Kenneth W. Thompson (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994) 207–223.

cultural area demarcated by the borders of Russia's grandmother state Kyivan Rus'—now within the independent territories of Ukraine, Belarus and Russia.

The sense of East Slavic unity has not been lost since "The Lay of Igor's Host" was written. Through all the vicissitudes of Ukrainian-Russian and Belarusian-Russian relations, through all the anger towards the imperial (subsequently Soviet) rulers who occupied Moscow's Kremlin and St. Petersburg's palaces, the three peoples were able to separate the particular from the universal and the transient from the essential. More often than not, individual identities were shaped by the understanding of a common destiny. In the field of literature, stories inspired by the perception of this communion have been created by representatives of all three fraternal nations. Take the late medieval ages. Khrystofor Filalet, Ivan Vyshens'kyi, Iov Borets'kyi, among other polemicists who fought against the Brest Union with the Roman Catholic Church (1596), can serve as witnesses to this on the Ukrainian side. Bohdan Khmel'nyts'kyi's turn to the Russian tsar as a natural ally in the Ukrainian-Polish war of 1648-54, and Aleksei Mikhailovich's reluctant acceptance of the risky proposal were very much driven by the same sense of ethnocultural unity, perhaps, more than by considerations of *Realpolitik*. In Russian and Ukrainian literature of the last two centuries examples abound not only of close cultural affinity and attachment, but interconnectedness and interpenetration that go so far that they sometimes cause difficulties in deciding the "true" national allegiance of an author in question (e.g., Glinka, Danilevsky, Kostomarov, Hrebinka, Korolenko and many others). When the Ukrainian and Russian literatures finally separated into more or less autonomous and distinct cultural phenomena, the Ukrainian theme dominated in Russian historical fiction.¹⁶ No one else but the founder of the new Ukrainian literature (and, some people might argue, of contemporary Ukrainian nationalism), Taras Shevchenko, wrote his own personal diary in Russian! The trend toward interconnectedness which began in the 1820s, continued even after the 1917 Revolution in the newly devised form of Socialist Realism. Ukrainian protagonists filled Soviet Russian literature as late as the 1960s, while Russia and Russians were always present, in a positive way, in Ukrainian novels, verses, and scenarios from Tychyna to Pavlychko and from Dovzhenko to Balayan.

Discussions continue about the "Russianness" or "Ukrainianness" of Nikolai Gogol'/Mykola Hohol'. With respect to Mykhailo Drahomanov, there is the question whether he was one of the founding fathers of Ukrainian nationalism or, on the contrary, one of the "Russophiles" who "abandoned" the

¹⁶ See S.I. Mashinskii, *Istoricheskaia povest' Gogolia* (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1940), particularly the first two chapters.

Ukrainian cause, “betraying” it to an “imperial nation.”¹⁷ In my view, it is more important to understand the phenomenon of marginal Ukrainian-Russian ethnicity for what it was—an exemplary case of cultural marginality—rather than attempt to artificially “pull” this or that historical figure into either an unconditionally Ukrainian or decisively Russian side.

At first, the unity of Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians was understood and described in religious rather than ethnic terms. The struggle against the numerous attempts to Catholicize Western Ukrainian and Belarusian populations animated discussions of the issue even after the formation of Russian Empire. Confessional, not ethnocentred, content had been ascribed to Russian nationality in Count Uvarov's formula. However, early in the modern period a cultural underpinning of the phenomenon was stressed by the Slavophiles, most of whom were writers and philosophers. In music, the great Russian composers—Glinka, Tchaikovsky, Borodin, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov—drew on the joint Russian-Ukrainian heritage, specifically seeking inspiration in the early Christian and even pagan history of Kyivan Rus'. In the fine arts, Russian painters actively explored ancient Rus' mythology, *byliny* and fairy tales, as well as themes from medieval Ukrainian history, the Cossack period being a favourite. Ukrainian thinkers, writers, playwrights, composers and artists reciprocated, never hesitating to take whatever they deemed necessary from the jointly developed cultural stock and adapting that to the Ukrainian national idea which, at least in its initial formulation, had never run contrary to the idea of Eastern Slav unity. It was not by chance that the first Ukrainian group created to advance the cause of national liberation was named after the Bulgarian-Greek monks Cyril and Methodius who had devised the ancient Rus' alphabet. Not by chance the libretto of the greatest Ukrainian opera “Taras Bul'ba” was adopted from the vernacular Ukrainian or “Little Russian” text of Gogol's. And, finally, no one should be surprised by the fact that several creators of modern Ukrainian nationalism in the late-nineteenth-century Galicia (Drahomanov, Franko, Pavlyk) consistently stressed their sympathies for the Russian people and Russian culture, fiercely attacking less significant figures who attempted to draw a sharper line between Russian and Ukrainian nations.

No wonder Russians through the centuries perceived Ukraine as the closest Other, almost a mirror image of the Self. The creation of an independent Ukrainian state in December 1991 initially shocked many Russians beyond the borders of Ukraine. Only slowly, over the last five years, did the Russian people

¹⁷ See Mykhailo Molchanov, *Derzhavnyts'ka dumka Mykhaila Drahomanova* (Kyiv: Institute of Public Administration and Local Government, Cabinet of Ministers, Ukraine, 1994).

and politicians learn to live in a federation without Ukraine and to deal with Ukraine as a separate entity. Political repercussions of the initial uneasiness with respect to Ukraine are still felt in the disputes over the status of Sevastopol or the division of former Soviet assets abroad.

It is important to stress that, for a variety of reasons, it was Ukraine, not Belarus, that performed the important function of “complementarisation” for the Russian people in general and Russian national identity in particular. One reason behind this was, obviously, the descentance of Russian statehood from Kyivan Rus'. It has not been difficult to trace this descentance historically, institutionally and genealogically. After all, the same dynasty that sat on the Kyivan throne took over the Moscow principality and subsequently created Russian tsardom. This helped to justify the incorporation of Ukraine into the Russian Empire by presenting it as a legitimate instance of the “gathering” of ancestral lands. Just as Novgorod, Pskov, Vladimir and Suzdal' (all currently parts of Russia proper) had served their term as vassal territories under Kyiv, so Kyiv should have returned under the protectorate of Moscow—the new home of the same ruling family. Yet, state continuity is only one aspect of the explanation. Another involves the cultural and ethnic bonds of kinship among Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians.

The proximity of the Eastern Slavic languages helped Russians to perceive them as virtual territorial dialects of the same vernacular—the role they played in the initial stages of ethnic differentiation. Thus, the Russian tradition of statehood was reinforced by the tradition of ethnocultural continuity which could have been easily mistaken for something belonging to a singular nation, though differentiated into important regional subgroups. Basically, this was (and remains) the common bias in Russian imperial and nationalist historiography. Both ignore the threshold of ethnogenesis reached by Ukrainians and Belarusians as early as the fourteenth century. Both perceive Ukrainians and Belarusians as varieties of the same Great Russian nation. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. Yet, even distinct nations may feature intermingled identities.

The traces of national distinctiveness that could have delineated a Belarusian “otherness” vis-à-vis the Russian people and Russian culture lacked the degree of sharpness which would be expected from the “complementary” Other. Belarus was simply not different enough. Current events emphasize this truth as well. Take for example the success of the Belarusian referendum on closer ties with Russia (14 May 1995), in which almost 83% of the voters supported the idea of economic integration; the signing of the Treaty on the Russian-Belarusian Community (2 April 1996); and President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's personal commitment to the “new Slavic unity.”

Ukraine was better suited for the role of Other due to the peculiarities of its

national history which brought modernization (and nationalism) to the Western Ukrainian territories before the awakening of national consciousness in Russia. Ukrainian otherness is both complementary to the Russian inner self and reflective of its ethno-psychological motions. Even in their fallacies Russian and Ukrainian nationalist historians mirror each others' statements: for the former, there has been just one, Great Russian nation, encompassing all Eastern Slavs within a single totality; for the latter, there has been, analogously, just one, Ukrainian nation, with only renegades called Russians and Belarusians.

Traditionally Russians perceived Ukrainians as *culturally* distinct in terms of the closer ties the latter had with their common Kyivan ancestry; their firmer embedding in Rus' soil; their more carefully preserved traditions and customs, going back to the pagan dawn of the Eastern Slavic tribes. The presentiment of otherness, at least initially, had little to do with "hard" ethnic characteristics. Though unarticulated on a conceptual level, it manifested itself as a kind of mindset subconsciously or semi-consciously shared by representatives of the educated classes.

From the beginning, Russian perceptions of Ukraine and Ukrainians was ambivalent. On the one hand, Russians were proud to dominate the empire and considered Ukrainians more like junior partners than equals. On the other hand, the traditional Russian attitude toward Ukrainian distinctiveness involved something resembling an inferiority complex which no amount of imperial grandeur could really conceal. Ukraine was not just the Other part of the Self, it was a truer, more genuine, more authentic part. It was an umbilical cord connecting the so-called Greater Russia to its own beginnings. In a sense, Ukraine was perceived as more "truly" Russian than Russia proper. The differences between Ukraine and Russia were attributed to an imaginary lag in Ukrainian development: Russia was looked upon as moving faster and paving the way to modernity for Ukraine which lagged behind. The "progressivist" interpretation helped to justify Russification practices: if Ukraine was a true but conservative part of the Self, other, more mobile parts, should take the lead in adapting the whole body to the requirements of the age. Thus, the rootlessness of imperial Russian culture was excused by its perceived mission of "pulling up" the "older parts" of the nation and "modernizing" them.

The assault on Ukrainian culture in nineteenth-century Russia may be explained by bureaucratic necessities of routinization, normalization, centralization, etc., engendered by "normal" imperial development. However, there is more to it than that. Indeed, most empires were able to accommodate ethnocultural diversity without much difficulty. As for the tsarist government itself, it never tried anything close to the anti-Ukrainian crusade with respect to the Finns, Poles, Armenians, Georgians, Estonians, Latvians, or Tatars. What

can explain this unusual concern and the choice of its specific target? The answer is, probably, to be found in the supreme closeness of Ukrainian and Russian cultures, and also—in the stubborn assertion of distinctiveness by the Ukrainian educated élite. There could have been only two solutions to the problem: either overcome the egoistic Russian claims to the whole of the Eastern Slavic heritage or suppress the ethno-cultural development of the “junior brother” in order to nurture the convenient, non-contradictory, and complacent image of the Self. Imperial Russia chose the second option and its straightforward rigidity was subsequently repeated in the “drawing together” of the “Soviet” nations.

There was also another tendency in Russian-Ukrainian relations. It is usually overlooked by scholars preoccupied with studies of dominance and subordination on a large scale. However, if one looks closer at the processes of social mobility, one may find some evidence of incremental political and cultural Ukrainianization of Russian society and polity. It was achieved through assimilation and incorporation of, first and foremost, the Ukrainian élite, as well as the common folk and various products of the Ukrainian national genius. In this way, Ukrainians worked to strengthen the other nation through the development of a common Russian and Ukrainian ethnocultural field. Leaving aside the repercussions this might have had for Ukraine’s own national development, I doubt that this process should be described only in terms of “domination” and “exploitation.” If imperial analogies may still be employed, the essence of the exchange between Russia and Ukraine can hardly be presented in the same or similar terms as, say, the exchange between France and its African colonies. A closer analogy that comes to mind is rather that of the Roman Empire and ancient Greece. The dynamics of cultural development, conscious borrowing and spontaneous adaptation was basically the same, with the exception that the initial push to this process had not been given by invasion and conquest by an ethnic stranger, but arose naturally on its own as an aspect of the ethnogenetic processes responsible for creating both nations.

Cultural borrowing changed the character of the Russian (and Soviet) élite, while incorporation of the Ukrainian “human element” changed its composition.¹⁸ Linguistically-russified Ukrainians occupied key positions in the government and military, education and science. From the late medieval ages, Ukrainians actively sought diverse careers in the “metropole,” were indeed

¹⁸ On the gradual Ukrainianization of the Soviet elite in Ukraine see Bohdan Krawchenko, *Social Change and National Consciousness in Twentieth-Century Ukraine*. London: Macmillan, 1985. However, Krawchenko does not see the analogous process unfolding in Moscow center, neither does he trace its effects on Russia proper or the Soviet Union as a whole.

recruited by central institutions and groupings of all kind, and had an important say in Russian politics and society as a whole. Historically, the Ukrainian aristocratic families—Rozumovskys, Vyshnevetskys, Skoropadskys, Glinkas and others—were highly visible in the upper echelons of the Russian nobility. The high-ranked Ukrainian clergymen—Feofan Prokopovych, Stefan Yavorskyi, Simeon Polots'kyi and more than seventy others—helped reform the Russian Orthodox Church and developed cultural and educational establishment of the Empire from 1700 to 1762. Ukrainian Orthodox monasteries remained strongholds of the Orthodox faith and raised a number of church leaders and ideologues for the whole of Russia thereafter. Ukraine had its own capitalists of indigenous ethnic origin: the Rodzyankys, Tereshchenkys, Symyrenkys being the most prominent.¹⁹ Finally, communists never lacked Ukrainian representation in the Party's hierarchy: not only in Ukraine proper, but in Moscow centre and other parts of the Soviet Union as well. Ukrainians constituted a high percentage of the Red Army brass; a KGB career starting in Ukraine and ending in Moscow was not unusual. Significant groups of linguistically assimilated Ukrainians continue to play an important role in Russian politics today: be it in the State Duma, the Federation Council, the presidential apparatus or ministerial bureaucracy.

Understandably, such factors had to leave deep traces on the national culture and national mentality of the Russian people. Ukraine has served as a mirror for Russia for so long that many Russians finally lost the ability to draw the line between the real Self and its mirror image. It now seems that, from the very beginning, a uniquely Russian national identity had no chance of developing. Its borders were blurred by the Eastern Slavic neighbours: their common ancestry and Orthodox religion. The post-Petrine period added imperial confusion to what had been already thoroughly confused. The identity of Russia proper was increasingly supplanted by an amorphous attachment to all three Eastern Slavic nations taken together. The declaration of independence of Ukraine, in this sense, benefitted Russians more than Ukrainians. Russia finally has an opportunity to delineate its national contours with at least the minimal degree of sharpness required for modern, post-imperial nation-building.

Now for the first time in many centuries a true dialogue between Russia and its former subjects is possible. Of course, it will be haunted by the spectre of the past. Following the logic of (re)creating the narcissistic Self, V. Zhirinovskii and the forces he represents are trying to redraw the borders of identity and reabsorb the obviously uncomfortable ethnocultural otherness of the former

¹⁹ See Orest Subtelny, *Ukraine: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988).

Soviet republics into the amorphous "Great Russian" body. A paternalistic attitude towards Ukraine and other Russified areas of the former Soviet Union (now exposed to "re-nationalization" practices of the newly independent states) forms an important aspect of the political position of Gennadii Ziuganov and other "patriots," both on the left and the right of the Russian political spectrum. Occupying the populist centre, Aleksandr Lebed' champions policies animated by distinctly similar feelings, as is evident in his proclaimed intent to defend the interests of ethnic Russians and Russophones living in the "near abroad." Governmental policies follow suit, as witnessed by the creation of \$27 million fund to support Russian minorities and Russian-language publications in other NIS countries.²⁰

It is worth remembering that the debate on dual citizenship rights for ethnic Russians living in Ukraine (22% of the whole population) plagued diplomatic relations between Ukraine and Russia until the end of January 1995, precluding the signing of a comprehensive bilateral accord on friendship and cooperation. Now Sevastopol and the Crimea serve as Trojan horses, complicating technical problems with emotional issues of identity. Crimea is predominantly Russian and has a symbolic significance for the Russian state, which continues to pay close attention to all developments in the peninsula. Sevastopol is not just the base of the Black Sea Fleet, but "the city of Russian [military] glory," which, again, charges the issue emotionally. But, more importantly, Ukraine as a whole is not just an apostate "junior partner." It is an ever present point of reference, a true sociopolitical mirror for contemporary Russian politics. It is the country that demarcates not just the political, but the cultural borders of the modern Russian national identity. That is why

Russians have no less a Ukrainian problem than Ukrainians have a Russian problem. If Ukrainians suffer from a sense of inferiority, Russians suffer from a sense of superiority. If Ukrainians resent Russians for dominating them, Russians resent Ukrainians for rejecting them. Not surprisingly, misunderstandings, tensions, and conflicts have increased exponentially with the collapse of the empire and the emergence of the two states, Ukraine and Russia, both suffering from sever anxiety about their own identities.²¹

In this paper I attempted to look into the cultural sources of this complicated relationship: the Russian perception of Ukraine as a significant Other, almost a true mirror image of the Russian national Self. This perception blurs the borders separating Russian and Ukrainian national identities and

²⁰ *OMRI Daily Digest*, 7 July 1995.

²¹ Alexander J. Motyl, *Dilemmas of Independence: Ukraine After Totalitarianism* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1993) 103–104.

hampers their development. I believe that the "sense of superiority" allegedly espoused by Russians conceals a fear of cultural orphanhood which, in turn, is based upon the deep cultural schism that occurred in the post-Mongol period when Ukraine embarked on a path of autonomous ethnocultural development. With the establishment of an independent Ukrainian state, the familiar borders of Russian national identity were shattered: what used to be a hinterland, became a frontier. The idea of common ancestral bonds and a golden age of undisturbed fraternity among the Eastern Slavic nations was effectively cast off by political practice (if not by intellectuals), thus changing its status to a myth.

Post-Soviet history has once more revealed that the Russian attitude towards Ukraine, contrary to popular opinion, might be more accurately explained by Russia's lingering attachment to an immature "common" identity rather than as an imperialist or neo-colonialist project of a fully developed nation. Maturation of Russia's national identity is possible and desirable. It may be achieved when Russians abandon their previously held "mirror image" of Ukraine and learn to deal with their former "junior partner" as a fully independent counterpart, an actor in its own right. After all, the jointly developed ethnocultural field of the Eastern Slavs may be revived through international relations of a new kind, e.g., the establishment of a tightly knit community of nations within the larger arena of international contacts. The Russian-Belarusian Community will actually test this assertion.

In the meantime, a new Russian national identity must be forged on a truly civic, non-imperial basis if all the subjects of the Russian Federation are to remain together in the future. The unstable peace in Chechnia presents an immediate concern and overshadows the relatively calm Russian-Ukrainian relations. However, the Ukrainian-Russian borders are culturally vulnerable, making them more difficult to define and easier to overstep than even Russia's internal borders. Further cultural analysis of the development of Russian national identity is necessary to satisfy both academic interests and pragmatic policy needs. The Ukrainian nexus must remain a focal point of these studies.