



**Mykola Riabchuk**

## Ukraine: the not-so-unexpected nation

Ukraine's "Orange Revolution" directed the world's attention to a nation formally brushed off as a Russian satellite state. The international press portrayed Victor Yushchenko's democratic challenge to the fraudulently elected Victor Yanukovich as the birth of Ukrainian independence. But though there's no doubt that Ukrainian civil society has come of age, is the independence movement as young as all that? Mykola Riabchuk gives a historical overview of Ukrainian relations with Russia, and argues that talk of an East-West divide along pro- and anti-Russian lines simplifies the reality of a culturally and ideologically eclectic nation.

A year ago, the Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma wrote, or at least put his name to, a book with the curious title, "Ukraine is not Russia". Critics were quick to make fun of it: "Good for Mr Kuchma! Rather than wasting two presidential terms he's made an important discovery: the country he rules – believe it or not – isn't Russia after all!" With the Ukrainian "Orange Revolution" having drawn the attention of the whole world towards what was believed to have been just a "Russian backyard", and with the Kremlin apparently uncomfortable with the prospect of a democratic Ukraine influencing authoritarian Russia, a new joke has emerged on the streets of Kyiv: "Did you know? Putin is writing a book! 'Russia is not the Ukraine!'"

The uneasy relationship between the two "brotherly" nations, at best described as a "fraternal rivalry" (if not a "mortal friendship"), has come to a head in recent months as Ukrainians bravely took a stand against the electoral fraud and creeping dictatorship, while Russians did their vain best to interfere on the side of the corrupt authoritarian government. International media seemed to discover, with great surprise, that the Ukraine is not Russia. The headlines were striking: "The Rise of a Nation" (*The Wall Street Journal*), "A Nation Is Born" (*The Financial Times*), "The Awakening of a Nation" (*The Times*), "We Are a Nation" (*The Independent*). These were undoubtedly an improvement on the headlines of 1991, when the nation emerged as a state after the collapse of the Soviet Union: "Nasty Ukraine", "A Nowhere Nation", "An Unwanted Child of the Soviet Perestroika". However, Ukrainians have never believed they were a "nowhere" or a "new-born" nation – no more than the Caribbean islands were "discovered" by Columbus.

### **The Kyivan Rus' controversy, or Who is 'big brother'?**

The Ukrainian historical narrative, broadly accepted with some amendments by the whole nation, stems from the fundamental twelve volume "History of the Rus'-Ukraine" by Mykhaylo Hrushevsky, a prominent scholar and first president of the short-lived Ukrainian National Republic (1917–1920), which was eventually conquered by the Bolsheviks. The title of his canonical work

points at the direct continuity between the contemporary Ukraine and the medieval state (and civilization) of Kyivan Rus'. This loose conglomerate of East Slavonic principalities emerged in the ninth century on the territory of contemporary Ukraine, Belarus, the easternmost regions of today's Poland, and the westernmost regions of today's Russia. Kyivan Rus' reached the height of its imperial might in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and collapsed under the Mongol and Tatar invasion in 1240. Since the nineteenth century and the emergence of modern Ukrainian and Russian nationalisms, the quasi-imperial legacy of Kyivan Rus' has become one of the most contested issues in Ukrainian-Russian relations.

Russian "nation-state" nationalism had the advantage of relying on the imperial historical narrative elaborated and promoted officially throughout the eighteenth century. It adhered to the dynastic model of history, which secured the otherwise dubious continuity between the Grand Duchy of Kyiv and the Moscow Tsardom. In terms of territory and ethnicity, Muscovy was on the margins of the Kyivan Rus' empire, and probably had little more legitimate claim to its legacy than, say, Romania to ancient Rome. After the collapse of the Kyivan Rus', the bulk of its territories (today's Belarus and Ukraine) came under Polish and Lithuanian rule. Only the Eastern Rus' territories fell under the Tatar protectorate, and were eventually unified under the Moscow regime and emancipated from the "Tatar yoke".

Up to the end of the seventeenth century, this relatively weak and largely oriental state played virtually no role in European history, and laid no claim to the Kyiv Rus' legacy, or even the name "Rus". The idea of continuity had simply not existed on the intellectual level – as the brilliant American scholar Edward L. Keenan has proved in his primary source studies. The situation began to change after 1654, when the Cossack Uprising – the Great War of Liberation – in the Polish (Catholic) dominated Ukraine resulted in the de-facto independence of the Left Bank of Ukraine. Together with the Right Bank city of Kyiv, the Cossack republic, called Hetmanate, moved under the protectorate of the Moscow Orthodox Tsar. Ironically, it was Ukrainian intellectuals (mostly clerics) who invented the idea of continuity between Kyivan Rus' and the Moscow Tsardom. Peter the Great decided to westernize the country, and engaged a huge number of people from his most western province – the Ukrainian Hetmanate, which at the time still enjoyed significant cultural and political autonomy. Hordes of clerics and scholars, musicians and artists, bureaucrats and adventurers were driven to St. Petersburg, the new "western" capital of the Empire, which changed its name from Muscovy to Russia, making a clear claim to Rus' legacy.

The Ukrainians, who forged the idea of continuity, pursued a very particular, if not personal, goal. They wanted to stress the historic centrality of their own country ("Little Russia") vis-à-vis the rest of the Empire ("Great Russia"), and therefore elevated their own stakes and credentials within the imperial hierarchy. In their scholastic model, Little Russia (Ukraine) was a parallel to Little Greece (Greece proper), while Great Russia was a parallel to Greater Greece (the Greek colonies in the Middle East, North Africa, Caucasus and the Crimea). The two major medieval institutions – the ruling dynasty and the Church – had largely facilitated, and benefited from, the idea of continuity.

By the end of the eighteenth century, however, the relation of Great and Little Russia had been inverted. Great Russia had become a strong, centralized empire whose center was the western St. Petersburg, while Little Russia had become provincial, and ultimately lost its autonomy. In the nineteenth century,

modern Russian nationalism inherited not only the early imperial idea of continuity (Kyivan Rus' as the cradle of the Rus'-sian Empire), but also the late imperial idea of the superiority of Great Russia over Little Russia (as well as over all other neighboring territories within the Empire). In this nationalistic scheme, Ukrainians were treated as Russians whose culture and language had been corrupted by the protracted Polish influence. The absorption of Ukraine by Russia (the Right Bank of Ukraine was annexed at the end of the eighteenth century, after the partition of Poland) was meant to make amends for this historical "injustice", while the forceful imposition of Russian language and culture upon Ukrainians was merely the "acculturation" of local peasants.

The scheme was apparently challenged by modern Ukrainian nationalism, which emerged not in Western Ukraine, as is commonly thought, but in the easternmost city of Kharkiv. A modern university was founded in the city as early as 1804; scions of the Cossack gentry living there still cherished memories of the glorious past, and remnants of the Hetmanate autonomy persisted. Like all their East European brethren, Ukrainian nation-builders were inspired by the ideas of Herder, and employed the same elements to construct a modern national identity. They emphasized the uniqueness of Ukrainian culture and language, and glorified national history, with its "Golden Age" in Kyivan Rus' and "Silver Age" in the Cossack Republic. They compiled dictionaries and collected folk songs, published grammars and Cossack chronicles, and employed the vernacular instead of the dominant clerical Slavonic in poetry, prose, and drama. They were not separatists or even autonomists, but they paved the way for the modern political movement. Rather than the official title "Little Russians", which was degrading, or the historical "Rus'ky" ("Ruthenians"), which had been usurped and monopolized by the Muscovites (who thereby became "Russians"), they called themselves "Ukrainians".

Both Ukrainians and Russians had their own reasons to monopolize the Kyivan Rus' legacy and make it a cornerstone of their national identity. Besides the mythology of glorious past and thousand-year-old history that many nations strive for, Kyivan Rus' provided both Ukrainians and Russians with the opportunity to marginalize the other – albeit for different purposes. For Russians, it was a convenient way to legitimize the (re-) absorption of Ukrainian and Belarusian lands and the (re-) assimilation of the local, "inferior" people into the Russian nation. For Ukrainians, stressing their own separateness from Muscovy and representing themselves as the direct and genuine heirs of Kyivan Rus' was the best way to de-legitimize the Russian invasion and assimilationist policies. In this scheme, Muscovites were a marginal off-shoot of the Rus'-Ukrainian people, with a questionable Slavic identity – corrupted by the extensive absorption of Finno-Ugric tribes and strong oriental, Mongol-Tatar influences.

It was a clear attempt by the subjugated nation to turn the tables on the subjugators. They largely mimicked the imperial myth, which claimed that Ukrainians were corrupted, or Polonized and Catholicized, Russians. Ukrainians responded that it was the Russians who were corrupted, orientalized Rus'-Ukrainians. Within this scheme, the Ukrainian language could be denigrated as Polonized Russian, but Russian could also be denigrated as orientalized and Bulgarized (through clerical Slavonic) Ukrainian.

The ideological struggle, however, was anything but fair. The imperial myth was supported by the powerful state that included the army, a police and state

apparatus, imperial culture and education, the mass media, scholarship, and international diplomacy. The Ukrainian myth, meanwhile, was promoted by a tiny group of patriotic intelligentsia, who were up against the highly repressive empire and the high level of illiteracy among the predominantly peasant population. There had never been any Ukrainian education in the Russian empire, and virtually no Ukrainian publications were permitted after 1863.

Thus it is not surprising that the Western Ukraine took the lead in the nation-building process. This relatively small part of the country had been lucky enough to avoid Russian dominance. At the end of the eighteenth century, after the partition of Poland, the territory was ceded to Austria. The Poles, however, remained the dominant social strata in the region. But the Ukrainians ("Rusyns", as they called themselves at the time, derived from the historical "Rus") practiced different religious rites and had a strong sense of "otherness". In the second half of the nineteenth century they were exposed to Western freedoms (however imperfect at the time) granted them by the constitutional Habsburg Empire. By the end of the century they had developed a fairly strong ethnic identity; virtually all national-civic institutions were in place, including political parties, schools, periodicals, religious organizations, women's and youth organizations, sports clubs, trade unions and credit unions, cooperatives, and so on. Nevertheless, they adopted the East Ukrainian version of nationalism, with its vision of a "Greater Ukraine" and commitment to Kyivan Rus' and the glorious age of the Cossacks.

When the rival Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires collapsed at the end of the First World War, West Ukrainians were much better prepared to take their destiny in their own hands than the Easterners. Although both the West Ukrainian National Republic at Lviv and the Ukrainian National Republic at Kyiv proved to be short-lived, they collapsed for very different reasons. The West Ukrainians proved to be well-organized and disciplined, with rather conservative policies aimed mostly at the preservation of the "old Austrian order". They enjoyed the broad support of the population and were defeated only because the Poles were much stronger – both numerically and logistically, thanks to Western support. East Ukrainians proved to be inefficient, were split into numerous factions, and were chaotic in their leftist reforms. They had only limited support from the anarchic and unpredictable peasants, and were defeated because of their own weakness rather than the strength of the Bolsheviks.

The Ukrainian 'awakening' of 1917–1920 was not completely for nothing. For the first time, Russia was made to recognize the Ukraine as a separate nation, and even to grant it a quasi-sovereign status as a Bolshevik state within the Soviet "federation". The Kyivan Rus' myth was substantially modified. Officially, the Soviets adopted the concept of Kyivan Rus' as the "cradle of three brotherly peoples", in other words Ukrainians, Russians, and Belarusians. The stakes, however, were far from equal. The Russians were still distinguished as the "big brother" and the "first among equals". Both the Ukrainian and Belarusian histories were overtly teleological – the main if not only goal of these peoples was to overcome historical obstacles and re-unify with greater Russia. Their assimilation was encouraged by the idea of the "new historic community – the Soviet people", which meant a sort of Communist melting pot, primarily ideological, but with an obvious Russian cultural and linguistic core.

It is hardly surprising that the Russian historical myths remained largely unchallenged at the international level, despite their strong nationalist leaning.

They received broad currency in the academic community, which accepted them as the "objective truth". Any attempts to present an alternative view were either silenced or discredited as Ukrainian (Polish, Belarusian) and therefore "nationalist". Both the Russian state and Russian émigré scholars contributed greatly to this state of affairs.

After 1991 the situation began to change. On one hand, a set of new nations (including the Ukraine) emerged from obscurity, encouraging younger scholars to revise old imperial dogmas and stereotypes. On the other hand, Russia itself emerged for the first time as a nation–state rather than an empire, prompting scholars to re–model its history as that of today's people within today's territory, rather than following the imperial history of the ruling dynasty stemming from the foreign (Ukrainian) city of Kyiv. Of course, from the scholarly point of view, there is little reason to believe that the people of Kyivan Rus' had a contemporary Ukrainian identity and spoke something like the contemporary Ukrainian language. However there are even fewer reasons to believe that these people had the identity of modern Russians and spoke modern Russian. Connections exist between Russia and Rus' as they do between York and New York, Britain and Brittany, or Romania and Rome. However, one should recognize that the phrase "Kievan Russia" instead of "Kyivan Rus'" is as meaningless as "Ancient Romania" instead of "Ancient Rome".

The imperial model of history is not just wrong from a scholarly point of view, it is also politically dangerous. It cultivates vanity among Russians, and encourages grass–roots revanchism that makes Russian politicians lay claim to neighbouring lands, populations, and histories, instead of focusing on the real past of their nation and on its contemporary problems.

### **"Divided we stand"**

One of the numerous effects of the imperial myth is the widespread belief among Russians that the majority of Ukrainians speak the Russian language and, what is a real mistake, that everybody who speaks Russian wants to re–join the empire. Such a belief leads Russian politicians to make false statements and badly reasoned measures that usually harm Russian interests. The latest example was the extensive involvement in the Ukrainian presidential elections of the Russian media, commerce, experts, politicians and president Putin himself, on the side of the allegedly pro–Russian candidate, prime minister Victor Yanukovich. The interference was too crude even for some ardent Russophiles. Putin's fairly high popularity ratings in the Ukraine halved within a few weeks, while every fifth ethnic Russian cast his or her ballot for the opposition candidate Victor Yushchenko, heavily demonized as "nationalistic" in a vicious propaganda campaign.

Of course, the 20 per cent support from the Russian minority is not a figure a national politician could be fully satisfied with. Yet such a figure is barely possible in ethnically divided societies – say, in Kosovo or Bosnia. Moreover, the opinion polls show that the pro–Yushchenko group consisted mostly of younger and better–educated people, in other words people who were better informed and less burdened with Soviet "anti–nationalist" (essentially "imperialist") stereotypes.

The major problem that the Muscovites fail to grasp is that even those people who voted for the "pro–Russian" Yanukovich (who, ten years ago, voted for the "pro–Russian" Kuchma), do not identify themselves politically with Russia

and have no intention to "re-unify" their country with a "Big Brother". The idea is simple: while Irish people speak mostly English but secede from England, and Belgian Francophones support relations with France and have tensions with their Flemish fellow-citizens, neither group is necessarily separatist or irredentist. However, Russian imperial mythology makes simple ideas incomprehensible.

Both the Russian ambassador in the Ukraine, Victor Chernomyrdin, and the mayor of Moscow, Yuri Luzhkov, made the rash decision to visit the Donbas city of Siverskodonetsk to participate in a congress of local nomenclature under pro-Russian and, by and large, separatist anti-Ukrainian slogans. Their visit made it onto the front pages of international media, and experts speculated once again on a possible split of the Ukraine, civil war, and Russian military intervention. A small number of sober voices pointed out that the whole event was a virtual simulacrum, a smoke screen designed to draw public attention away from the main problem – how and by whom were the elections falsified. The regional nomenclature may have had good reasons to be scared by the ongoing change of power in Kyiv, and to blackmail rivals with a "separatist threat". But the threat was a paper dragon.

The region, with its outdated heavy industry, in particular coal mines, is extensively subsidized by the rest of the country. Russia would never need Donbas, nor would it ever become self-sufficient. What's more, there is no grass-root "separatist" movement in the region – except in the Crimea, where the movement reached its height in the early '90s and since then has faded. The national survey, carried out on between 6– 9 December 2004, proved that Ukrainians support neither the establishment of an independent state in South-Eastern Ukraine (82.3 per cent and 8.8 per cent respectively), nor the autonomy of the Donetsk region (83.4 per cent and 8.1 per cent respectively), nor the separation of the Donetsk region from the Ukraine and adjoining Russia (86.2 per cent and 5.9 per cent respectively).

To comprehend the Ukrainian reality, one should note that according to the 2001 national census, of its population of 48 million, 77.8 per cent are Ukrainians, 17.3 per cent are Russians, and approximately 5 per cent have other nationalities. Since 1989, when the previous (Soviet) census was held, the number of Russians has decreased by 5 per cent, while the number of Ukrainians increased by the same amount. It was the first time in many decades that the percentage of ethnic Ukrainians increased – for the sole reason that after independence many people with mixed nationality re-identified themselves. Sociologists point out that the identity of many citizens is even more fluid. If opinion polls provide more options for self-identification, they find out that only 56 per cent of respondents define themselves as "Ukrainian only", and only 11 per cent as "Russian only". At the same time, 27 per cent identify themselves as "both Ukrainian and Russian".

In terms of language, the situation is again ambiguous. According to the same 2001 census, 67.5 per cent of citizens define Ukrainian as their native language, 29.6 per cent cite Russian, and 3 per cent other languages. Sociologists insist that the census reveals the symbolical value of languages rather than its practical use. Opinion polls prove that about 40 per cent of citizens speak Ukrainian at home, about 30 per cent speak Russian, and another 30 per cent claim they speak both languages, "depending on the circumstances". Whatever these "circumstances" are, Ukraine is a largely bi-ethnic and bi-lingual country, where virtually everybody can understand both Ukrainian and Russian, and where two thirds of the population can

communicate fluently in both languages. The situation where one person converses in Ukrainian and the other in Russian is common in public, in parliament, on TV, and elsewhere.

There is no doubt that Ukraine is divided – linguistically, culturally, religiously, politically, and regionally. At the same time, there are no clear fault–lines facilitating a would–be split of the country that were so broadly advertised in both the Russian and international media. Different groups overlap, permeate one another; inter–group borders are blurred and easily crossed, shifted or even removed; various swing–groups facilitate the diffusion of various identities, their hybridity, and grass–roots dialogue.

The east–west division seems marked when one compares the westernmost city of Lviv with the easternmost city of Donetsk, with its primarily Soviet, but also robustly local identity. However, the contrast fades as one moves to the center: postmodern hybridity, or post–Soviet eclecticism, comes to the fore. To put it simply, the West is not 100 per cent orange, nor is the east 100 per cent blue. Lviv and Donetsk represent two opposite ends of the Ukrainian territorial spectrum. However, the Ukraine is divided ideologically, not geographically.

The ideological divide can be represented as two differing visions of the nation's future, and two differing conceptions of the nation's past. The projects are indeed incompatible and irreconcilable. The first can be roughly defined as "Ukrainian", or "European". It is based on the assumption that the Ukraine is essentially a European nation whose development was arrested and largely distorted by Russification and Sovietization, but which still strives to "return to Europe", its values and institutions, following the course of Poland, Lithuania, and other Central–Eastern European countries.

The other project can even more roughly be defined as "Little Russian", "Soviet", or "East Slavonic". The problem with definition arises from the fact that the project is far less developed and is much more fluid. Essentially, it fluctuates between old–fashioned imperial regionalism (psychological, cultural, and political) and a new sort of post–imperial "creolism", which explicitly asserts the superiority of Russian culture and language, and implicitly protects the superiority of urbanized Russophones over historically backward Ukrainophones. The project apparently lacks symbolic resources and coherent argumentation, being more of a transitional phenomenon (from colonial to post– or neo–colonial). In essence, however, it is highly conservative, Sovietophile, anti–Western, authoritarian, and Ukrainophobic.

This crypto–Soviet project, however vague, was supported in 1991, when two thirds of Ukrainians voted for an independent state presided over by ex–Communist leader Leonid Kravchuk; in other words, for the continuity of the *ancien regime* with some superficial changes. Only one third of voters opted for independence, with a president from outside the former nomenclature (either the former dissident Viacheslav Chornovil or a few minor candidates). In other words, opting for a radical break with the Soviet past and de–Communization and Europeanization along the Polish or Baltic lines. By 2001 the situation had changed, and in 2004 it reversed dramatically. Ukrainian identity has apparently strengthened, and civil society has definitely come of age. Today, almost two thirds of the population cast their vote for the pro–Western and pro–democratic candidate Victor Yushchenko, while only one third supported the crypto–Soviet regime of Kuchma and Yanukovich.

Ukraine's "return to Europe" will doubtless be no easy endeavor. Yet it is certainly an opportunity for Ukrainians, Europeans and, paradoxically, Russians, who may finally develop a new national identity to replace the outdated and increasingly unfeasible imperial one. So far, however, one graphic explanation of the difference between Ukrainians and Russians comes from a popular joke: "Just ask a Ukrainian and a Russian whether they would exchange their nukes for a nice house, a good car, and a round sum of money. A Ukrainian would agree happily, a Russian would refuse indignantly."

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