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Valeriu DECIU

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Valeriu DECIU¹

Abstract

Once the former USSR collapsed, countries like Ukraine have construed their own collective identity aiming to differentiate them from internal and external “others” in a nation building process. New territorial boundaries have been established over the mental ones, founding myths and heroes have been recovered or reinstated. This process looked successful for a while until a census unveiled a center-periphery cleavage formation. Meanwhile, Kiev’s centralizing policy had to face upheaval in the eastern part, and conflict is ongoing. Scholars have speculated mostly over ethnic and historical factors as well as Russia’s active involvement as main reasons for the shift in identity self-referencing of Donbas region’s inhabitants. This paper aims at examining this center-periphery cleavage formation from another standpoint: an internal political struggle between two regional clans that are still controlling the resources and hence hold political power in the so-called Donbas region from Eastern Ukraine. Without minimizing the influence of historical and ethnic factors, we posit that many eastern Ukrainians’ choice for identity self-referencing had shifted when their region started to decrease in terms of economic and political power on the central level. And the Donbas clans losing the central power control over fighting each other is along with historical and ethnic factors one of the main reasons for that.

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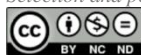
Collective identity, cleavage, conflict, nation-building, identity self-referencing.

¹ Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Doctoral School for Economics and Business Administration, Iasi, Romania, deciuvaleriu@gmail.com.

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Corresponding Author: Valeriu DECIU

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1. Introduction

What is the meaning of the term “nation”? Various scholars define it as an imagined political community, characterized by sovereignty and limitations [1], [2]. Why imagined? Because its members will never get to know in person all the other members of the in-group. By limitations, we mean that every nation has frontiers, over which we may find other nations.

Nationalism spreads nowadays all over the world, threatening to disintegrate some states and form new nation-states from their crumbles [5], [6]. As a form of political mobilization is normally studied within International Relations, but throughout the current article, we are only interested in the intra-state conflicts.

The very stringent issue nowadays is to reconcile the state sovereignty principle, as a protector of current territorial distribution, with the peoples’ self-determination principle, as a constant threat to the frontiers already established.

Nationalism is not to be understood only employing the related political ideologies. One has to consider also the previous extended cultural systems since for very few states the geographical frontiers match the cultural ones [5]. In most cases, heterogenous and multinational ethnic groups must coexist within present states.

For a state to possess a national interest, its society must either have relatively homogenous political preferences or at least internal institutions that synergistically array group attributes into a coherent collective order.

In ethnic and cultural terms, Ukraine has been a nationalizing state, since the bearing national majority seeks to promote and reinforce its identity upon the state institutions, symbols, and practices while attempting to assimilate the national minorities.

Whenever a new nation-state is formed, is confronted with territorial and cultural antagonisms. One of the reasons is the difference between the national civic identity and the ethnic one, by composition and aggregation principle [1].

2. Theoretical Background

Ethnicity is the basis of national identity, deeply rooted in historical and biological inheritances, and relatively stable. Hence ethnical tensions have natural causes. Not many other individuals or group characteristics are so stable and inherently conflictual. It is why nationalism is capable of mobilizing many individuals, by resorting to ethnic communities and

appealing to identity resources. Nationalists believe that the phenomenon is a given characteristic of collective identity which should not and cannot be overlooked.

According to Anthony D. Smith, an ethnical group has six main characteristics: [2] an own collective name, common birth myth, common historical memory, elements to differentiate from other cultures, a certain motherland allegiance and a feeling of solidarity from significant parts of the population.

Nationalists posit that the nation is the source of political power and loyalty to the nation overcomes any other type of loyalty; to be free, any human being has to identify himself with a certain nation; peace and justice are only possible if nations are free and unthreatened.

Civic nationalism, opposite from the ethnic one, supports the idea of a nation consisting of all those subscribing to the political credo, no matter their race, colour, convictions, gender, language or ethnicity. A nation is perceived as a community of citizens with equal rights, united by a zealous adherence to a shared set of values and political practices. Hence the binding agent of the nation, in this case is not the common origin, but the law.

Nationalist waves have a periodical tendency to appear. Elites are mostly responsible for their occurrence, when a generation is capable of turning traditions, beliefs and territorial belonging into modern nationalist speech. Other factors weigh in, too: cultural infrastructure of the community, economic development level and international situation.

Every state claims that it represents its people, so self-determination principle is a threat to them, even if it is coming from an NGO, who cannot claim to speak in the name of individuals outside their members' group.

Cleavages are key lines of conflict within a polity, according to Rokkan, - opposition lines inside the society and fundamental sociological phenomena. Alongside such lines, territorial units emerge and come into being by social action and conscience as distinct regions from the ethnic, linguistic or religious standpoint. Such a region becomes a reckoned political notion when its inhabitants perceive it as a distinct element on the conceptual map of national politics, defined by particular geographical terms.

There are three main characteristics of any cleavage [3]: a cleavage must include a social division according to social, cultural and economic characteristics; people that are forming that separate entity must have their own assumed collective identity; a cleavage must be expressed in organizational terms such as political parties or groups of interest.

European Union is somehow responsible for generating new ways of considering the political territory outside the Westphalian model once it has

promoted an integrative institutional project that reaches the sub-national levels of governance directly. All over Europe, we can see nowadays new political identities developed and informally institutionalized.

When attempting to identify the sources of political division and regional cleavage in Ukraine, scholars have considered mostly language and ethnicity, former neighbourhoods or old frontiers with Russia, Poland, and Austrian-Hungarian Empire. Others have considered political and economic factors such as economy and trade structure as playing a crucial role in political regional identities formation [4].

Without ignoring any of these factors' contribution to the cleavage process, we try to emphasise that beside economy structure, there is another factor that weighs in, the elites. We posit that only after the two prominent political clans from Donbas lost their grip on the central power, a big part of the regions' inhabitants shifted in identity self-referencing, deepening the centre-periphery cleavage that leads to the upheaval.

3. Argument of the paper

The Russian-Ukrainian relationship is a very special one. They claim each the same historical past and had common resources during the USSR period. An inter-state conflict probability is rather low, even if the civil conflict is ongoing. It is hard to predict though Russia's actions since great powers always behave differently from other states. Internal instability has several risk factors that may turn the conflict into an inter-state one: balance of powers, strategic cultures, structural instability which include arbitrary delimitations of ethnical groups.

In the post-soviet era, Ukraine has strived to build a nation, along with political and economic reforms, whereas Donbas has formed ever since its own political identity with distinct ethnicity and language. Compared to the regional norm of the former USSR countries, Ukraine's political system has been more pluralistic than others' due to the country's cultural diversity. In turn, the power of regional identities has politicized social and economic issues, slowing down neo-liberal reforms.

Civil society is very weak in Ukraine and elites play a very important role in the political system forming because democracy appeared at the same time with party competition. The social common basis for collective identity formed cleavage alignments due to the introduction of free elections before Rule of Law and civil society. Communism as a way of organizing the society has affected the entire region on every level from individual to states without a comparable analogy, with a weakening effect on civil society.

Ukraine's constitutional system is from its establishment less presidential than in Russia or Belarus, and no subsequent regime has been completely authoritarian. Instead, even if freedom of speech was not restricted directly, mass media was in the hands of the oligarchs and served their agenda.

Donbas region, inhabited since the eighteenth century by Russians and Ukrainians, is nowadays home for over six million people living in the most industrialized area, but completely depending economically on the Russian market. Very few of these inhabitants have participated in the 2014 elections, and we shall see why.

The term Donbas refers to the mining area comprising Donetsk and Lugansk oblasts as well as a part of Rostov oblast, but it has never been a distinct administrative unit as such. Since its establishment by John Hughes in the nineteenth century, it had a powerful regional identity, becoming in the twentieth century a major industrial centre, with growing population and political influence to match its industry. Since the latter years of communism, small entrepreneurs appeared from the ranks of state-owned large companies and by siphoning the state money and fighting with each other, gathered more money and power progressively, especially in the years after USSR collapsed. As a result, two main clans were formed out of these elites, one in Donetsk and one in Dnipropetrovsk.

The Donetsk clan, which was more pro-Russia, became the most powerful one starting with 2000, when its representative Viktor Yanukovych became president, and retained power until Euromaidan events. Donbas assumed a distinctive role in Ukrainian politics, its elite drawing a very clear division line even from the rest of Eastern Ukraine, with whom it shares the language, ethnic and economic context. Main struggle was carried with the rival clan from Dnepropetrovsk that gave Iulia Tymosenko and current president Petro Poroshenko. The last clan adopted a pro-EU speech to differentiate from the Donetsk clan, and following the Euromaidan events and 2014 elections they finally got the upper hand over their rivals.

During his tenure, Yanukovych, strongly financed by oligarchs such as Rinat Akhmetov, formed a cabinet only from Donetsk politicians, manipulated the legal system, controlled banks and the parliament, to the benefit of the Donbas clan. The Donbas oligarchs, such as Rinat Akhmetov, Ihor Kolomoyski or Victor Pinchuk seized the large eastern industry and milked it for their benefit, without investments or modernization, and hence the Ukrainian economy performed very poorly.

The Orange Revolution from 2004 didn't entail a structural or institutional change and only elites were rotated. Yanukovych embraced a

more nationalistic speech which helped him to win and consolidate power in 2010 elections.

The most obvious effect of the power shift at the expense of the Donbas clan was the change in people's identity self-referencing, as we may notice from Tables 1 and 2 hereunder:

Table 1. Identity self-referencing as Ukrainians in % before and after the shift in power

Region (oblast)	before	after
Lugansk	58,0	51,9
Dnepropetrovsk	79,3	71,6
Donetsk	56,9	50,7
Total	77,8	72,7

Table 2. Identity self-referencing as Russians in % before and after the shift in power

Region (oblast)	before	after
Lugansk	39,0	44,8
Dnepropetrovsk	17,6	24,2
Donetsk	38,2	43,6
Total	17,3	22,1

The timing of the shift in self-referencing shows that there is a direct connection between Donetsk clan losing central power and Donbas decrease in importance on the central political power on one hand and identity self-referencing shift of the population, giving the clear sign of cleavage deepening and flare to follow soon after. Since the political role of the elites in Ukrainian politics is paramount, it is logical to connect these events with an interest shift of the Donbas clan.

We submit therefore that the cleavage centre-periphery's elements were present all the time throughout the period elapsed from Ukraine's independence: ethnic, religious, linguistic, and economic. But only when Donbas elites changed interest the cleavage became critical and produced upheavals.

4. Arguments to support the thesis

There is scepticism regarding a clear division of Ukraine based only on language or ethnicity [4], since there are more revealing patterns of voting, both centrally and regionally. Everywhere in Europe regions have become important political identities leading to political culture differences beyond the demographic factor [5]. This is valid also for Donbas, where the clan that controlled the regional and national politics for more than twenty years had a decisive role in forming and deepening the east-west cleavage within Ukraine, adding political and economic factors to cultural and historical ones.

Political attitudes can only be explained partially by ethnicity, language, and development level. There is a critical dimension of the elites' contribution to be considered, as well. The political culture of the masses has been shaped alongside the economic structure in the soviet era, during the industrialization. Even if the political meaning of these structures has been modified over time and Donbas area played an important role in Ukraine's independence from USSR, in the very next period the region has evolved from a business hub to the assumed main role in the national politics.

Immediately after losing the central power to the Dnepropetrovsk clan, the Donetsk elite has changed attitude towards Kiev's centralizing policy and the central-periphery cleavage became critical. Ethnicity and language became from subjacent themes the most defining identity markers of the recovered regional identity.

Once again, timing is striking. An important part of the Donbas population changed their identity allegiance group, from Ukrainians to Russians, in a very short time span. All the other factors were existing before the big shift and there was no significant change in the recent past. The only thing that changed dramatically was the loss of central power for the Donbas elites.

5. Arguments to argue the thesis

Once the independence was achieved in 1991, distinct regions have occurred in Ukraine highlighting significant ethnic minorities, the most important being the Russian one, with a high weight in Dnepropetrovsk, Odessa, and Harkov, and a crushing majority in Crimea. In different parts of Ukraine, there are other quasi-important minorities such as Hungarians, Polish, Belarussians, Jewish, Romanians, and Bulgarians. Another identity

cleavage is of religious nature, since some western minorities are catholic, while the rest are split between Moscow and Kiev patriarchies.

When discussing political influences on Ukraine's national level, language and ethnicity are considered to play the major role. Both are clear division lines acting as predictable factors for political attitudes. But there is an important difference between them: language division is meant to be more definite than the ethnic one since many Russian speakers are self-referencing themselves as Ukrainians and vice-versa.

As well, deep-rooted cultural factors weigh in, shaped throughout ancient ages when Ukraine was divided among different empires. Consequently, regional populations have inherited different religious practices and attitudes toward the state. These inherited cultural factors are indeed relevant to the identity construction long before the adoption of contemporary ideas about ethnicity and language.

Last is the economic factor: specific economy configuration of each region shapes individual attitudes towards the market economy, and therefore western regions are more likely to accept reforms than eastern regions due to their industrial structure [4].

According to various scholars, the centre-periphery cleavage in eastern Ukraine was always existing, and its determining factors are ethnicity, language, religion, and economy structure; it was just a matter of time for the division line to become critical and lead to the ongoing unrest in the eastern part of Ukraine. In other words, it is a particular case of Huntington's theory revisited: conflict and cooperation patterns follow the division line between civilizations [5].

6. Dismantling the arguments against

Sharing a clear attachment to national identity is a sign of strong internal social order and a base for powerful and cursive politics. This is obviously not the case in Donbas region. The centre-periphery cleavage encompasses attitudes, interests and a solid organizational basis. We are talking about individual and institutional attitudes, elite's interests and regional organizations left the Party of Regions. Even if it is not adequately connected to people's values and identity, we think this is a clear case of Realpolitik.

We may notice in action the dynamic nature of identity in Donbas, even though we should talk about identification instead of identity. Identity is stable, built on an immovable relation with the "otherness" whereas identification is opening the frontiers of the "self" to include the "other".

Donbas population has built a new identity by using Kiev as the “other” while identifying with the neighbouring Russian population.

The corrupt and authoritarian behaviour of Kiev’s politicians has warded off the EU, and financial assistance became scarce and more conditional. Economy problems are more and more stringent, and the obsolete Donbas industry cannot address the issue. Their technologies are clearly behind the modern ones, and the only sector still providing is the metallurgical one, with very small margins.

The Donbas clan, once removed from central power, has re-aligned their interests with Moscow. The centre-periphery cleavage existed already, of course, but the situation became critical only after the Donbas clan lost their fight for central power with the Dnepropetrovsk clan. They couldn’t rely any more on Ukraine’s general resources and had to re-adjust their policy towards Russia, as their only alternative for retaining power and wealth in the long run. Their aim is gaining privileged access to the Russian market and forming a security community with the neighbouring Russian population to the east.

A security community is formed when there exist positive interactions, institutions and social education in the long run, motivating neighbouring populations to adopt similar orientations and engage in cooperation and politics coordination [6]. This generates trust and trans-frontier identity. All these conditions were formed for Donbas and corresponding Russian neighbourhood during USSR when they shared resources and had a common goal. Internal instability of Donbas is an obstacle to achieving this purpose, being associated with insecurity and risks. For that matter, there is no simple solution for the Donbas region in the current situation.

Without rejecting the influence of the other factors for the existing cleavage, such as ethnicity, language, culture, and economy, one should consider in our opinion the major influence of the elite in Donbas, namely Donetsk. The timing of the events shows that there must be a decisive influence from the mentioned clan in the region’s uprising against Kiev’s centralizing power. Until Donbas politicians lost control of central administration and resources, nothing significant happened even though identity conditions for a potential conflict were in place.

7. Conclusions

The national identity of Ukraine was built to unite. Large categories of historians, politicians, and journalists worked together with notable

success. They have recovered selectively historical episodes and proposed new myths and narratives starting with 1991 with the aim to build a new common identity. Civil society lacked cohesion though, and powerful regional identities manifested beyond borders, weakening the nationalizing approach of Kiev. Large chunks of the population have not identified themselves with the concept of the nation-state. Institutions designed to serve a single ethnic group made minorities to feel excluded, especially the significant Russian one, who radicalized the moment it was given “green light” by the Donbas elite.

Ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and economic factors cannot explain alone why the situation changed in such a short time since they existed long before that moment. Only when the Donbas elite lost the central power and re-aligned their interests, the cleavage became critical.

What can Ukraine do? The general answer is to follow their national interest, both internally and externally cautiously. Several actions might be considered for that.

First, find economic solutions directed to the population from Donbas so that these individuals will be less depending on the local financial and political elite.

Second, establish democratic reforms and institutions. Individual liberty is essential, so removing existing constraints and protecting fundamental individual rights is a must. Even more important is the responsibility for the “otherness”: identity concept should be extended by including the “other” until identification, seeking integration through co-optation. Ukraine must develop political institutions and practices designed to protect, represent and respect the “otherness” and allow active participation of minorities towards achieving a set of shared values and civic nationalism.

Third, seek international cooperation, from minimal sovereignty norms until high social values through international governance.

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