Polyphonic Dichotomies: Memory and Identity in Today's Ukraine

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Abstract: Today's conventional wisdom on Ukraine as a deeply divided country, trapped in a post-Soviet cultural crisis of East versus West, maintains a firm hold not only on the popular imagination, but on some scholars' thinking as well. In a politicized take on contemporary Ukrainian multiculturalism, supporters of the either-or tactic argue the need for a homogenizing nationalization process to cleanse the country of unfavorable influences. This article challenges the binary formula, arguing instead for a historical and nuanced approach to nation-building. It compares and contrasts Ukraine's varied regional experiences in light of memory theory, highlighting the effect on how the past is handled in each case. The final section focuses on the city of Kharkiv as representative of a gateway metropolis where diverse cultural currents mingle and co-exist. I submit that when history, memory and identity interact, the resulting formations are generally equivalent in their right to exist and to be understood as Ukrainian. Application of the frameworks of regionalism and memory studies to national identity in Ukraine suggests that nation-building in a vast and heterogeneous country must transcend the assimilating confines of ethno-linguistic bias and stereotyping. The country's unique range of existing identities includes fluid ones, and they merit a recognized and accepted place within the polyphony of contemporary Ukrainian self-definitions.[1]

[1] I am thankful to the anonymous reviewers of *Demokratizatsiya* for their insightful feedback,

"Our dialogue must exclude ultimatums. […] We need to accept the simple idea that we're all different. Though we live in one country, we differ from one another. There are objective reasons for this – history, above all. Here, for instance, Soviet rule arrived in 1917; in Galicia it happened only in 1939. Ignoring this fact will lead us nowhere."[2]
– Serhiy Zhadan, *Iedyni, ale ne odnakovi*

In Ukrainian studies of recent years, the formula of Two Ukraines – a conceptualization of the country as a synthetic and flammable combination of two predetermined conflicting entities – has arguably become "a universal explanatory mechanism, winning a near-absolute discursive power."[3] This proclaimed battle between the "pro-European West" and the "pro-Russian, anti-market East" has provided a convenient binary interpretative framework, quickly rendering a complex country temptingly simple: its internal dynamics could now be attributed to a straightforward skirmish between its good half and its bad half.[4] And despite the pleas for mutual understanding and acceptance, like the one by influential writer Serhiy Zhadan in the epigraph above, this alienating approach continues to seduce minds and secure loyalties on both sides of the chimerical frontier.

In the 1990s, Samuel Huntington explicitly identified Ukraine as a "cleft country," where East and West clash around an internal "fault line."[5] With time, this framework became enveloped in normative formulas that attribute a set of moral qualities to each side and, as a result, argue for the superiority of one over the other. Referring to this problematic delineation of the country, Tatiana Zhurzhenko termed it "the Huntingtonization of the Ukrainian political discourse."[6] The main beneficiaries of such Huntingtonization are political actors on both ends of the spectrum, who can use it to achieve their own goals. Sometimes, for instance, electoral support is best secured through the vague but persistent feeling of endangerment evoked by those represented as the Other.

The prevalence of static, bifurcated interpretations of Ukrainian

[2] Serhiy Zhadan. 2011. *Iedyni, ale ne odnakovi,* http://molotoff.info/rozdumi/interview/3405-gadan.html, accessed December 2, 2012. Parts of this interview can be found in my translation into English: *Ukraine: an Interview,* http://memoryidentity.wordpress.com/2012/07/10/ukraine-interview, accessed December 15, 2012.

[3] Andriy Portnov. 2010. *Uprazhneniia s istoriei po-ukrainski.* Moscow: Memorial, p. 69. My translation from Russian here and hereafter.

[4] These descriptive terms were used by Klaus Bachmann in *Rzeczpospolita* on 4 December 2004. Quoted in Portnov, *Uprazhneniia.*

[5] Samuel P. Huntington. 1996. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order.* London: Simon & Schuster.

[6] Tatiana Zhurzhenko. 2002. "The Myth of Two Ukraines." *Eurozine*, http://www.eurozine.com/pdf/2002-09-17-zhurzhenko-en.pdf, accessed June 11, 2011.

national identity has affected the thinking of intellectuals like Yuri Andrukhovych in less than convincing ways – for instance, to suggest that in twenty years the country will cease to exist.[7] In another example of this approach, Mykola Riabchuk, one of the founding fathers of the Two Ukraines scheme, recently stated that "the failure to develop an overarching civic national identity for both groups may result in an Ulster-style conflict between aboriginal 'nationalists' and settler 'unionists'."[8] Reducing the country to a doomed antagonism of neatly defined aboriginals and settlers is, of course, not only inherently alienating, but also generally inaccurate – both Ukraine-oriented and neighbor-oriented cultural currents have appeared on both sides of Ukraine over the past centuries. Referring to the provocative effects of such statements, historian Andriy Portnov warns: "The one-dimensional image of a Stalinist Zaporizhia and a fascist L'viv is *as of yet* far from reality."[9] In fact, as this article argues, the so-called identity crisis in Ukraine is but a short-sighted (and politically profitable) label attached to the distinctive pluralism that mediates the situation in the bilingual country today.

Interrogating the notion of proper or improper Ukrainians in favor of a nuanced, historicized and localized approach, this article examines some of the country's many self-identifications and positions them within the framework of memory studies. It contends that memory theory holds some of the important keys to understanding the processes in Ukraine today. The third and last part of the discussion focuses on the nation's second-largest metropolis, Kharkiv, as a curious case of a largely (but not exclusively) Russophone gateway city that maintains a Ukrainian identity. Chosen here for its recognized significance on the country's cultural arena, Kharkiv is one of the many places that fit within neither the East nor the West ideational confines. The goal of the proposed analyses is to take another step towards understanding some of the processes taking place in what may well be one of the most intriguing, yet least comprehended, countries in the post-Soviet space, as well as to mitigate some of the instinctual threat inherent to a black-and-white vision of people and events.

Fluid Identities: To Be Fixed?

From its very beginnings, eastern and western traits entangled within Ukraine in peculiar ways. As Ivan Rudnytsky pointed out, the Kievan State "combined a predominantly Eastern, Greek, Byzantine religious

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[7] Yury Andrukhovych. 2011. *Ukraïny cherez 20 rokiv ne bude,* http://www.polit.ua/articles/2011/04/05/andruhovich.html, accessed June 9, 2011.

[8] Mykola Riabchuk. 2011. "Ukrainian Identity and East Slavonic 'Ummah': Uneasy Emancipation," presented at the *Independent Ukraine: Twenty Years On* workshop, University of Cambridge, December 8-9, 2011.

[9] Andriy Portnov. 2011. *L'vovskaia provokatsiia na 9 maia, ili Shutki v storonu,* http://uroki-istorii.ru/blogs/andrei-portnov/1560, accessed June 9, 2011.

and cultural tradition with a predominantly Western social and political structure."[10] He called Ukraine "a legitimate member of both" East and West. Indeed, a number of works have addressed the intersection of these two concepts, as we understand them today, within the country.[11] During the Golden Age of Kiev, the lands of Rus' covered modern western, central and northern Ukraine, as well as Belarus and western Russia. But Rus' did not include today's eastern and southern Ukraine, which was inhabited by nomads. So throughout the centuries, different areas of the country accumulated different historical legacies as parts of the Polish-Lithuanian, Habsburg, Ottoman, Tsarist and Soviet territories. As a result of cultural memory rooted in these varying experiences, Ukraine today is peppered with diverse patterns of ethnic, linguistic and religious traits.

In an effort to tackle the situation and designate the "real" Ukraine in this polyphony, both academic and popular discussions in the past have focused on the implicit significance of ethnicity and language as signs of national identity. But in a country where different regions have been subject to differing external forces, and thus bear historically diverse collective memories, this approach sets up a preordained win-lose dichotomy, which results in the classification of some nationals as more Ukrainian – if not as better Ukrainians – than others. What has emerged from such sentiments is the formula of Two Ukraines – a thesis that assigns pro-Russian traits to one part of the country, pro-European traits to another part, and then sets these two imaginary entities up in a deeply combative dichotomy. This concept conveniently "reduced the repertoire of [people's] motivations for political choices and identifications to a simplified scheme, rendering exclusive ideas about the norm and about deviations from that norm."[12] Essentially, one of the main implications of the myth of the Two Ukraines is that "only one 'real Ukraine' can exist."[13]

To challenge this questionable claim, scholars have explored the notion of regionalism as an explanation for the country's curious setting. Peter W. Rodgers argues that "while academic debate has focused on the assumed importance of ethnicity and language as markers of identity, such

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[10] Ivan Rudnytsky. 1987. "Ukraine between East and West." In Peter L. Rudnytsky, ed., *Essays in Modern Ukrainian History.* Edmonton, Alberta: CIUS.

[11] See e.g. Ihor Ševčenko. 1992. "Ukraine between East and West." *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 16: 174-183. Ivan Rudnytsky. 1987. "Ukraine between East and West." In Peter L. Rudnytsky, ed., *Essays in Modern Ukrainian History.* Edmonton, Alberta: CIUS. Stephen White, Ian McAllister, Valentina Feklyunina. 2010. "Belarus, Ukraine and Russia: East or West?" *British Journal of Politics and International Relations (1369-1481)* 12: 3, 344-367. Chrystia Freeland, Stefan Wagstyl, Tom Warner. "East or West: Ukraine's Election could Alter Relations with Russia and Europe." *Financial Times.* October 12, 2004: 17. Sven Holdar. 1995. "Torn Between East and West: The Regional Factor in Ukrainian Politics." *Post-Soviet Geography* 36: 2, 112-132.

[12] Portnov, *Uprazhneniia,* 71.

[13] Zhurzhenko, "Myth."

attention may have been misplaced."[14] He asserts that in Ukraine, one's place of residence – home region – is the real determinant of national identity, "crosscutting, rather than reinforcing, other cleavages such as ethnicity and language." Regrettably, however, the power and popularity of the myth of Two Ukraines so far has "replaced any serious study and discussion of regionalism." A number of regional frameworks have been proposed and amended by scholars in the past decades: two, four, five, eight, ten, eleven regions.[15] However, the duplex prototype, East and West, preferred mostly by those who focus exclusively on elections statistics, seems to retain its original attraction for its supporters.[16] This is partly due to the fact that its proponents tend to exhibit a "lack of even minimal empathy towards the voting motivations of millions of their fellow countrymen,"[17] reducing regional political choices to the aboriginal/settler dichotomy explained by nothing but the subjects' mental or moral development. The concepts of memory or diverse pasts rarely enter such commentary, which tends to rely primarily on value judgments.

At the same time, Paul S. Pirie has accurately observed that there is "a variety of strategies of ethnic self-identification which do not fit into the simple paradigms of 'russification' and assimilation."[18] The pluralism of self-definitions that permeates the country today has been seen as salvaging by some historians (e.g. Portnov) and as feckless by others (e.g. Riabchuk). To further our understanding of the situation, let's examine some facts and numbers. Together, Ukrainians and Russians account for over 95 percent of the country's population. Two decades ago, according to the 1989 census, 72 percent saw themselves as Ukrainian, and 22 percent as Russian. If we fast-forward to the beginning of the current century, the

[14] Peter W. Rodgers. 2008. *Nation, Region and History in Post-Communist Transitions: Identity Politics in Ukraine, 1991-2006.* Stuttgart: Ibidem, p. 34.

[15] Lowell W. Barrington. 2004. "One Ukraine or Many? Regionalism in Ukraine and Its Political Consequences." *Nationalities Papers* 32: 1, 53-86 (p. 57). Hryhoriy Nemyria. 2000. "Regionalism: An Underestimated Dimension of State-Building." In S.L. Wolchik and V. Zviglyanich, eds., *Ukraine: The Search for a National Identity.* Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield, 183-198. Rodgers, *Nation,* 55.

[16] In engaging with this prototype, I am well aware of the complexities of designating "East" or "West" Ukraine as standardized entities. In fact, one of my main arguments is that Ukraine neither has nor needs homogeneity. Even within these two invented regions, substantial social, political and cultural variations can be observed. By consciously adopting the binary language of the myth in question, I propose to undermine it on its own terms.

[17] Portnov, *Uprazhneniia,* 72.

[18] Paul S. Pirie. 1996. "National Identity and Politics in Southern and Eastern Ukraine." *Europe-Asia Studies* 48: 7, 1079-1104 (p. 1079). In this study, Pirie proposes four differing routes to self-identification: strong identification with one group, strong identification with two or more groups, marginal identification with two or more groups (e.g. cosmopolitanism), and, finally, pan-ethnic strong identification with an entity that encompasses several groups at once (e.g. Canadian). Situational identity, which depends on circumstances at any given moment, also finds its way into this research.

2001 census tells us that Ukrainians now comprised 77.8 percent of the population (37.7 million people), and Russians 17.3 percent (8.3 million).[19] In light of the fact that migration of ethnic Russians back to Russia has been fairly insignificant, three million people seemingly vanished during the twelve years between 1989 and 2001.[20] Or, as Rodgers points out in his analysis of these numbers, by 2001 they came to define themselves as Ukrainian. He sees this as "evidence of the fluidity of identities in Ukraine and the difficulties encompassed when forcing individuals to choose between two separate categories of 'Ukrainian' and 'Russian' in a national census."[21] In reality, these categories are blurred for many people, and the line that separates them comes in varying degrees of clarity. A neatly halved country, as painted by alarmist scenarios like the Two Ukraines, does not exist.

Open, blurred, fluid, shifting, multiple, ambivalent, weak, mixed, dual, situational – all these adjectives have been used by scholars to depict the characteristics of national identities in Ukraine. These apply in particular to East Ukraine, where such self-understandings are most common: "This mixed/dual identity was heavily concentrated in the urban areas of southeastern Ukraine, accounting for 51 percent in the Donbas region and 43 percent in Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhia."[22] An important study usually cited in this context is a 1997 survey with over ten thousand respondents, who identified as 69 percent Ukrainian and 20 percent Russian when asked for clear-cut and definitive replies (with 6 percent listing themselves as "both"). This split the respondents roughly along the lines of the 1989 census, where the division was 73 percent to 22 percent. However, when the survey's second question offered more nuanced and situational terms, its results were quite different: given a set of gradated options, 56 percent identified as Ukrainian, 11 percent as Russian, and nearly 27 percent as both Ukrainian and Russian. These latter 27 percent included 14.3 percent who felt "equally" Ukrainian and Russian, 7.4 percent who felt "more" Ukrainian and 4.9 percent who felt "more" Russian.[23] Relying on Paul R. Spickard's contestation of the notion of identity as two boxes – "either one has a given ethnicity or one does not" – Pirie argued that "census statistics which force individuals to select

[19] The Ministry of Statistics of the USSR, 1991: 134–136. Quoted in Rodgers, *Nation,* 34-35.
[20] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out that some sources have assessed the Russian return migration from Ukraine to be as high as 800,000 people. Even at these highest estimates, this number would account for about a quarter of the 3 million census shift. However, it is certainly not to be dismissed.
[21] Rodgers, *Nation,* 35.
[22] Mikhail Pogrebinskii, ed. 1997. *Politicheskie nastroeniia nakanune vyborov*. Kiev: Centre for Political Research and Conflictology. Quoted in Rodgers, *Nation,* 37.
[23] Andrew Wilson. 2002. "Elements of a theory of Ukrainian ethno-national identities." *Nations and Nationalism* 8: 1, 31-54.

only one nationality help to reinforce" this erroneous idea.[24]

Acknowledging such nuances does not imply an assumption that other people in Ukraine do not have definite and fairly uniform notions of their nationality. As seen in these statistics, 27 percent of fluid self-definitions cover just over a quarter of all respondents. This share rises sharply towards the east, where the political borders have functioned for centuries as internal rather than external boundaries. Holders of fluid identity do not appear to be a majority, though their number is certainly sizeable. Likewise, it would be incorrect to assert that there are no observable differences among Ukraine's regions. With such a collection of varied pasts over a large area, some divergences are all but unavoidable. The argument here, rather, is that these differences are neither static nor homogenous, nor do they threaten the nation by default. Polyphonic presences in Ukraine are not inherently divisive, unless purposefully misused. Denis-Constant Martin remarked that identities arise in part from self-identifications and in part from external ascriptions.[25] Some existing manipulations with such ascriptions are examined in the next section.

In his study of southern and eastern Ukraine, Pirie argued against the common perception of national identity as "neatly compartmentalized," seeking instead a wider recognition of the population's shifting or multiple national identities.[26] The Russian-or-Ukrainian paradigm was found to be a "highly debatable" simplification of a multifaceted reality, highlighting this divide as more imaginary than real. Pirie's work dismissed the assumption that each person holds a single overarching identity, which stays absolute throughout his or her life. Instead, research "demonstrated the dynamism of processes of self-identification and the possibility that each individual can possess simultaneously several competing identities."[27] This notion did not fall on deaf ears. For instance, a 2010 study of language practices in the city of Kharkiv explicitly noted: "It is assumed that an individual may have mixed or overlapping linguistic identifications, which may or may not coincide with ethnic identification."[28]

Other recent studies also contest simplistic conceptualizations of identity in Ukraine, particularly in terms of ethnicity or language. A survey carried out by Andrew Wilson and his colleagues in 1998 among Ukrainian respondents showed that "there was little support for any fixed or exclusivist model of Ukrainian identity. Only 3.9 per cent defined identity by

[24] Pirie, "National Identity."

[25] Denis-Constant Martin (University of Bordeaux) in his "The Political Configuration of Identities" lecture on January 31, 2013, University of Cambridge.

[26] Pirie, "National Identity," 1080.

[27] Rodgers, *Nation,* 43.

[28] Margrethe B. Søvik. 2010. "Language Practices and the Language Situation in Kharkiv: Examining the Concept of Legitimate Language in Relation to Identification and Utility." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language 201*, 5-28.

language."[29] A close look at the election results in 2000 concluded that the split between those in favor and those against Ukrainian statehood in no way coincided with ethnic or linguistic divides.[30] Such divides, for instance, fail to explain why large numbers of ethnic Russians voted for Ukrainian independence in December 1991.[31] Along these lines, an essential study was carried out by Lowell W. Barrington. He examined the 1998 public opinion surveys about the population's support for independence. His results indicated:

> [U]nlike other former Soviet states but like many countries in the West, the real impediments to unity in Ukraine may be related to where in the country one lives and how one is doing economically rather than who one is ethnically or what language one speaks.[32]

To further topple the oversimplified Ukrainian-Russian ethnic-linguistic paradigms that lie at the root of the Two Ukraines approach, scholars note that the prevalence of fluid identities in Ukraine has actually led to very low levels of support for Russian nationalist parties (with the notable exception of Crimea). For example, in the 2002 parliamentary elections, only in Crimea did a party called Russian Bloc gain over 4 percent of the vote; its all-Ukrainian percentage was only 0.73 percent.[33] Indeed, Ukraine's Russians tend to vote for non-nationalist, left-wing candidates. In this context Pirie pointed out that it is

> … an unfortunate tendency to assume the national consciousness and homogeneity of the Russian minority and the Ukrainian majority, and to regard the Russians as something akin to the fifth column in Ukraine. […] In reality, because of a large number of demographic and historical factors, the national orientation of individuals officially classified as Russians in different parts of the country is often only tenuously so.[34]

[29] Wilson, "Elements," 44.

[30] Sarah Birch. 2000. *Elections and Democratisation in Ukraine.* London: MacMillan.

[31] Hryhoriy Nemyria. 2000. "Regionalism: An Underestimated Dimension of State-Building." In S.L. Wolchik and V. Zviglyanich, eds., *Ukraine: The Search for a National Identity*. Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield, 183-198.

[32] Lowell W. Barrington. 2002. "Region, Language, and Nationality: Rethinking Support in Ukraine for Maintaining Distance from Russia." In Taras Kuzio and Paul J. D'Anieri, eds., *Dilemmas of state-led nation building in Ukraine,* 133.

[33] Andrew Wilson. 2006. *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 216.

[34] Pirie, "National Identity," 1080.

Here it might be helpful to recall Rodgers' assertion that "territorial identities [in the USSR] were promoted not only to the expense of Ukrainian national identity, but also to Russian ethnic and national identities."[35] Historian Yaroslav Hrytsak, in fact, observed that the Russians in Ukraine "have taken on certain local values and attitudes, which have created clear differences between them and the Russians in Russia."[36] Moreover, millions of Russophone Ukrainians (often erroneously merged with ethnic Russians in public and academic debates) form another cohort of multifarious self-perceptions within the country. Addressing the difficulties some of them encounter, *Telekrytyka,* an online publication dedicated to covering the Ukrainian media, in 2011 ran a column that remarked:

> Russophone Ukrainian patriots don't feel all too
> comfortable in their own country, which they love above
> all. They are alien among those who try to usurp the title
> of Ukrainian patriots first and foremost on the grounds
> of national and linguistic characteristics.[37]

The openness and fluidity of such self-perceptions, indeed, has earned them a series of scholarly attacks. "Ukraine remains an amorphous society with a weak sense of national identity" is the start of one of Wilson's abstracts.[38] The application of the term "weak" to anything that isn't rigid, in fact, happens to be a common conceptual human error. Many of the world's democratic leaders, for instance, have felt it on their own skin as they competed with candidates who professed less nuanced (and therefore assumed to be stronger) viewpoints on issues such as national security.[39] Recent presidential elections in the United States are a case in point.[40] Scholars who espouse a dismissive approach to the diversity of Ukrainian national identity models include Taras Kuzio, who has argued that identity itself is "largely absent in eastern-southern Ukraine."[41] Denoting historical regional differences as an undesirable and negative phenomenon, he maintains that they represent merely "an incomplete identity in transition."[42]

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[35] Rodgers, *Nation,* 38.

[36] Yaroslav Hrytsak. 1996. "Ukraina, 1991-1995rr: nova politychna natsiia." *Skhid* 4, p. 15.

[37] Mariia Kyrylenko. 2011. *Rosiis'komovnii ukraïns'kii patriot – khto vin?* http://blogs.telekritika.ua/?id=2637, accessed December 22, 2011.

[38] Wilson, "Elements," 44.

[39] Positioning the more nuanced opponent as a "softer" candidate is a classic move in the conceptual struggle between complete inflexibility and complete malleability of stance.

[40] Example of reasoning typical for this viewpoint: "Obama not 'strong on national security' because he opposed war 'when the entire world believed' Saddam had WMD," http://mediamatters.org/mmtv/200710070003, accessed November 8, 2011.

[41] Taras Kuzio. 1998. *Ukraine: State and Nation Building.* London: Routledge, 162.

[42] Taras Kuzio. 1996. "National Identity in Independent Ukraine: An Identity in Transition."

From this point of view, others observe, "Eastern Ukrainians turned into the worse part of the nation. Seen […] as people who lost their identity, they are perceived as the main obstacle for democratic transformation."[43]

Other historians, both local and international, have criticized this dogmatic approach, most notably Hrytsak in his "Twenty two Ukraines."[44] He argues that regional differences are normal in a country of this size, and that it is possible to delineate many more Ukraines if one wished to do so. As Rodgers contends, the "simplistic over-generalizations" of binary schemes wrongly represent "nation-building as a homogenizing and assimilatory process, underestimating the potential for the co-existence of multiple identities in modern societies."[45] Portnov, too, notes that the divergence of the Eastern Ukrainian identity from the expected "norm" in no way makes it "non-Ukrainian."[46] But there remains something strangely tempting about envisioning a fateful conflict in a country where, against all grammatical rules, national identity is a plural noun in a state of constant flux.

Speculations maintaining that the ethnic and linguistic divides across Ukraine fully explain the population's socio-political orientations[47] fit well with the alarmist scenarios of national conflict that will eventually split the country along unrealistically clear lines.[48] Some commentators have even stated that civil war in Ukraine is inevitable, as is the nation's disintegration.[49] But as Barrington observed, "Ukraine is a country in which ethnic tensions were thought to be a serious *potential* problem, yet where serious ethnic conflict did not develop."[50] This remained true even during some highly politicized language-based conflicts recently.[51] The rigid binary framework fails to account for this distinctive reality.

Moreover, one of the unfortunate results of the flawed Two Ukraines approach is the perpetual conceptual fog it casts over the country's eastern lands. In fact, the myth's discriminatory potential is among its most

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Nationalism and Ethnic Politics 2: 4, 582-608.

[43] Zhurzhenko, "Myth."

[44] Yaroslav Hrytsak. 2004. 'Dvadtsiat' dvi Ukrainy.' In Yaroslav Hrytsak, ed., *Strasti za natsionalizmom.* Kiev: Krytyka, 216-228.

[45] Rodgers, *Nation,* 52.

[46] Portnov, *Uprazhneniia,* 74.

[47] E.g. Dominique Arel and Valeriy Khmelko. 1996. "The Russian Factor and Territorial Polarization in Ukraine." *People, Nations, Identities: The Russian-Ukrainian Encounter (The Harriman Review)* 9: 1-2, 81-91. Dominique Arel and Andrew Wilson. 1994. "Ukraine under Kuchma: Back to Eurasia?" *RFE/RL Research Report* 3: 32.

[48] E.g. "Ukraine: The Birth and Possible Death of a Country." *The Economist*. May 7, 1994.

[49] E.g. Robert Seely. "Ukraine's Identity Crisis." *Moscow Times*. June 12, 1994.

[50] Barrington, "One Ukraine," 59.

[51] Serhiy Zhadan astutely describes the causes of this conflict as "a couple of imbeciles appearing and announcing that our biggest problem is language." See Zhadan, *Iedyni.*

ingrained traits. According to Volodymyr Kulyk, it builds a simplistic image of "the other" from Russian-speaking Ukrainians, while failing to account for a whole set of existing divisions in Ukrainian society.[52] A convenient blame framework is part of the myth's benefits. For example, Portnov observed:

> The politically profitable thesis of the Two Ukraines […] has absorbed a discriminatory potential towards a part of the country's population. [This potential is] rooted in the intellectual publications of the mid-1990s, when it was a reaction to the failure of the "Ukrainianization" project and a wish to reassign all responsibility for this failure.[53]

Another scholar who has consistently questioned representations of eastern Ukrainian identities as weak and essentially pre-modern, Zhurzhenko, has similarly concluded that the Two Ukraines discourse is often used for a particular goal: that of scapegoating East Ukraine for any difficulties in the nation-building processes in the past decades:

> The more problematic the perspectives of democratic reforms and nation-building become, the more the regional differences between the "two Ukraines" are turned into differences between two civilizations in the Huntingtonian sense.[54]

Like Portnov, Zhurzhenko argues that this myth was concocted to offer a plausible explanation for why the "national idea" of 1991 has failed, and who can be held responsible. Referring to Kuzio as representative of such thinking, she challenges his depiction of Ukraine as a mechanical combination of Estonia and Belarus, which suggests that, were it not for its eastern lands, the country would have joined the European Union by now.[55] This position serves yet another purpose: to elucidate which of the so-called Ukraines deserves more support from the West. Indeed, "in our times national myths have to be sellable not only on the domestic market."[56]

From a variety of factors – the need to explain certain national failures and the wish to appeal to international opinion – a sellable myth has emerged, one that has divided the country into a trendy, real Ukraine and

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[52] Volodymyr Kulyk. 2000. "Shshchyri ukraïntsi ta ïkhnii 'othering'." *Kryṭyka* 12, 28-31.

[53] Portnov, *Uprazhneniia,* 71.

[54] Zhurzhenko, "Myth."

[55] Taras Kuzio. 2002. Presentation at the round table on Ukrainian parliamentary elections, University of Toronto, CREES, 8 April. As paraphrased by Zhurzhenko.

[56] Zhurzhenko, "Myth."

a second, wrong kind of Ukraine, that must be cleansed of its historical baggage and converted into a purer nation. Rejecting this view of regional differences as a haphazard phenomenon to be corrected, and of nation-building as a homogenizing and assimilatory process, Barrington, Pirie, Portnov, Rodgers, Zhurzhenko and others have claimed that multicultur-alism and fluid identities do not form a pitfall by default. Instead, these traits are an asset that should have its own place on the national arena. As Portnov maintains,

> The challenge facing the Ukrainian society and elites nowadays is how to perceive regional diversity not in confrontational and mutually exclusive terms, but as a wealth of differences; how to recognize "the other" not as a threat, but as an opportunity.[57]

East and West Ukraine, of course, are not the only areas of the country in existence. A vast land lies between them, known in academia as "the Other Ukraine."[58] All of its parts, as well as both of the artificially branded Two Ukraines, share an important trait that unites them under one nation's auspices: the innate human need to have their respective, differing, genuine stories heard, acknowledged, and accepted.

A Shared Longing

As we have seen, in the hierarchy of regions established within the new, post-Soviet political geography, some are commonly presented as more advanced than others in terms of cultural and political inclinations. In Ukraine's commonly misapprehended eastern lands, in particular, mixed remembrance trajectories have formed fluid identities now commonly questioned by observers in the West. These observers include both external and internal critics, the latter being perhaps most vicious in their evaluation of the perils of multiculturalism.[59] By examining the nature of such identi-ties and the way they have been handled in contemporary scholarship, one

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[57] Portnov, *Uprazhneniia,* 103.

[58] This topic deserves coverage of its own. For instance: "The existence of the 'Other Ukraine' is what makes polarization of Ukrainian society difficult, as does its amorphousness." See Andrew Wilson. 1999. "Section One: The Political System." In *Ukraine: Challenges of the Continuing Transition* conference report, http://www.dni.gov/nic/confreports_ukrainechlnge.html#sec_one, accessed November 14, 2011.

[59] David Ley notes, however, that "The most damaging opposition to multiculturalism has been populist rather than intellectual, and has frequently been associated with the interna-tional rise of nativist parties on the right." See David Ley, "Postmulticulturalism?" In Lisa M. Hanley, Blair A. Ruble, and Allison M. Garland, eds. 2008. *Immigration and Integration in Urban Communities: Renegotiating the City.* Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 177-196 (p. 181).

can begin to replace the outdated binary formula with a more complex, more realistic and, naturally, more gradated one.

As a result of the duplex thinking this article has set out to query, East Ukraine is relatively marginalized on the latest symbolic map of the country, as redrawn after 1991. Furthermore, "the division between Western and Eastern Ukraine is presented by some Ukrainian intellectuals as a symbolic boundary dividing the democratic European future of Ukraine from its hated totalitarian past."[60] This advanced-backward dichotomy is built on yet another erroneous opposition, that of Ukrainian-Russian and Ukrainian-European integration as mutually exclusive alternatives. This is currently a "dominant paradigm of Ukrainian geopolitics," which assumes that "a less 'Russian' Ukraine automatically makes it more 'European,' and vice versa."[61] By setting up a fallaciously exclusive choice between the two, this conceptual opposition contributes to the country's polarization. In fact, it essentially constitutes a "moral delineation [of people] based on the ethno-linguistic principle."[62] The attachment of value judgments to languages and ethnicities is one of the most unfortunate outputs of existing Ukrainian dichotomies.[63] In 1995, apparently without troubling itself with mental disability considerations, *The Economist* characteristically went so far as to dub the country's variegation "schizophrenia."[64]

In reality, any discord between Ukraine's regions springs largely from a healthy human need to be heard and acknowledged in one's position and one's suffering. The myth of a split Ukraine is just that – a myth – not only due to a myriad of other existing societal gradations, but also because this longing is shared among its population. As mentioned earlier, different parts of the country espouse historically diverse collective memories. World War II, for instance, often pitted West and East Ukrainians against each other. Today, not a single narrative of those traumatic events remains unchallenged. When someone's sense of their past and of their losses is denied its share of authenticity, it is fairly natural to become defensive. It is thus important for the contemporary scholar of post-socialism to be able to examine and question history without refuting the legitimacy of the respective human experience itself. Experience forms the premise of memory, establishing its basis of existence and its influence over its carriers' perceptions. But how does memory enter a discussion of national identity?

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[60] Zhurzhenko, "Myth."

[61] Tatiana Zhurzhenko. 2004. "Cross-border Cooperation and Transformation of Regional Identities in the Ukrainian-Russian Borderlands: Towards a Euroregion 'Slobozhanshschyna'? Part 2." *Nationalities Papers* 32: 2, 497-514 (p. 511).

[62] Portnov, *Uprazhneniia,* 73.

[63] Examples of such delineation can be seen in the following typical associations: democracy and civic society are connected with speakers of Ukrainian, while corruption and shadow economy – with speakers of Russian. (Ibid.)

[64] "Post-Soviet Schizophrenia." *The Economist*, February 5, 1995, p. 27.

As social and political changes swept across the post-socialist regions of the world in recent decades, memory studies acquired a particular relevance in rapidly transforming territories. This field examines the functions of memory in society, where perceptions and loyalties are affected and defined through shared or conflicting storylines of varying factual precision. These storylines, both verbalized and internal, tend to grow perilously sharp edges in the aftermath of trauma and turmoil. One can observe such edges in Ukraine today.

The post-Soviet region, rife with multilayered narratives, is a particularly fruitful area for those interested in what, why and how people choose to remember or forget. Though an extensive body of literature is dedicated to memory studies, much of it remains beyond the scope of this article.[65] The field relies in part on the concept of collective memory, as advanced by French philosopher Maurice Halbwachs.[66] It refers to a pool of shared recollections that are assembled, maintained and imparted by two or more members of a social group. Through the efforts of a number of scholars, this notion has evolved since its introduction in the first part of the 20th century. Jan Assmann, for instance, expanded collective memory "to the realm of the social" by differentiating between communicative (everyday) memory and a more advanced cultural memory, which fulfills a transgenerational storage function. With cultural memory, Assmann asserted, "the depths of time open up."[67] Marie-Claire Lavabre offered a temporally-oriented observation as well: memory, she noted, reflects the present state of the past.[68] This uneasy present state of the past in Ukraine breeds the shadows we've been seeing there.

According to some scholars, when the layer of collective memory is cracked – for instance, by an incomplete or failed recovery from extensive socio-political distress – a vacillating trauma can emerge. Inhabitants of the resulting cultural space are often unable to transcend the primitive "framework of knowledge functionalized as bonding memory."[69] This primal bond may be the only serious barrier between the regions of Ukraine nowadays. Applying memory theory to Slavonic studies, Alexander Etkind

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[65] For a comprehensive overview of some important texts, see Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Daniel Levy, eds. 2011. *The Collective Memory Reader*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[66] Maurice Halbwachs. 1925. *Les Cadres sociaux de la memoire*. [The social frameworks of memory] Ed. Gerard Namer. Paris: Albin Michel, 1994. It has been noted, however, that both explicit and implicit references to group-based recollections existed long before this term was coined. See e.g. Nicolas Russell. 2006. "Collective Memory before and after Halbwachs." *The French Review* 79: 4 (March): 792-804 (p. 793).

[67] Jan Assmann. 2006. "What is Cultural Memory." In Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies*. Rodney Livingstone, trans. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 9.

[68] Marie-Claire Lavabre. 2010. "Historiography and Memory." In Aviezer Tucker, ed., *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography*. Oxford: Blackwell (362-371).

[69] Assman, *Religion,* 21.

classifies the current times as a post-revolutionary era – a continuing attempt at recovery from a state of "permanent revolution" that started in 1917.[70] The Soviet Union's vague finale (which contrasts sharply with the German regime's complete capitulation in 1945) complicates the crucial work of mourning. The post-traumatic national culture therefore "works in repetitive, vacillating movements," which continually "reconstruct the shock of the past, as it supposedly happened."[71] Recall the abovementioned sharp edges of storylines that can develop under such circumstances.

This may be why some sections of Ukrainian society are at odds today – not due to language, ethnicity, or religion, as much as due to a heightened focus on conflicting and competing interpretations of history, where the acceptance of the other version(s) automatically seems to endanger your own. These narratives' current functionalization as bonding memory exerts its toll on Ukrainians and their loyalties. But when viewed through the prism of memory theory, which affords recognition to individual and collective experiences of historical events, all of these interpretations gain a right to exist. Unlike Spickard's boxes, they do not cancel each other out.[72]

Ignoring this consideration leads to inherent discrimination of any narrative other than one's own. Let's take a closer look at what is generically termed West Ukraine – a geographically valid but politically superficial concept that fails to differentiate between the different backgrounds of the regions it claims to cover.[73] For historical reasons, nationalism budded here long before the Soviet era. It ripened under the fairly liberal Austrian rule, not least due to the population's confrontations with Polish authorities. The West Ukrainians' struggle for their strong sense of national belonging continued under Soviet rule. Most of the country's western territories

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[70] Alexander Etkind. 2004. "Hard and Soft in Cultural Memory: Political Mourning in Russia and Germany." *Grey Room* 16, 36-59.

[71] Etkind plausibly asserts that as long as the current leadership fails to work through the complicated and, at times, terrifying past – for instance, though public apologies and monuments – "the struggling civil society" will remain "possessed by the unquiet ghosts" of the previous era. Alexander Etkind. 2009. "Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied: Magical Historicism in Contemporary Russian Fiction." *Slavic Review* 68: 3, 631-658.

[72] In a fascinating literary allusion, Zhadan's novel *Voroshylovhrad* (2010) features a surreal fable about children who cannot decide which of their two open empty houses to bury; instead, they bury a living animal. In my analysis of this scene, proposing that the two houses represent identities, I contend: "Their grave mistake is the assumption that adopting a narrative means discarding (burying) its alternatives, and that establishing a national identity is a zero-sum game. This common but faulty binary scheme overlooks the historically conditioned pluralism embedded in today's Ukrainian society." See Tanya Zaharchenko. 2013. "While the Ox is Still Alive: Memory and Emptiness in Serhiy Zhadan's *Voroshylovhrad.*" *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes* 55: 1 (March-June).

[73] For more on this, see Lowell W. Barrington and E.S. Herron. 2004. "One Ukraine or many? Regionalism in Ukraine and its Political Consequences." *Nationalities Papers* 32: 1 (March): 53-86.

were incorporated into the Soviet Union only in the late 1930s. Recall here direct repressions after World War II, and the preparedness of western Ukrainians to expel and externalize the communist experience appears hardly surprising.

An important point in this context is that people here, too, suffer under the Two Ukraines framework. Its discriminatory potential, like most sentiments rooted in intolerance, goes both ways. Similar accusations of not being "properly" Ukrainian, this time due to corruptive effects of Poland or the West, have been directed at the country's western lands. Such allusions cite, for example, Galicia's history under foreign powers – particularly, the influences of the Polish and Habsburg cultures. A case in point is the notorious statement by the Minister of Education and Science Dmytro Tabachnyk, who publicly claimed that residents of Galicia have "nothing in common" with the rest of Ukraine.[74] Given the long history of the national struggle in this part of the country, such callous words are naturally tinted by the area's past experience, fitting perfectly into the principal narrative of oppression and resistance that bonds the carriers of collective memory here. A tagline to a recent documentary film aptly pinpointed this continuum by referring to Galicia as "a land where the Second World War never ended and where children grow up with the burden of fighting the battles of their grandparents."[75] The media readily exploit the Two Ukraines discourse as well: some observers note that President Yanukovych maintains his support in the rest of Ukraine in part by painting the West as ultra-nationalist. It has been suggested that his party might be covertly funding radical right-wing organizations for this very reason.[76] According to such discourse, it is not the East but the West that is alien to the rest of the country. This is a reversed carbon-copy of the same divisive paradigm.[77]

Intricate and often tragic events stand behind, and legitimate, many of the narratives of the West. Likewise, the viewpoint of those who hail from the East warrants its own sense of acknowledgement and validity – a sense sought by, and frequently denied to, the easterners over recent decades.[78] It is important to recognize that unlike the western borders, "the

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[74] Dmytro Tabachnyk. 2009. S*hansy Ukraïny na vyzhyvannia,* At http://tsn.ua/ukrayina/ tabachnik-shansi-ukrayini-na-vizhivannya-porivnyanni-z-polshcheyu-1939-roku.html, accessed November 15, 2011.

[75] From the tagline to "Three Stories of Galicia" (2011).

[76] Zhadan, *Iedyni.*

[77] International actors are also responsible, to a degree, for continued depictions of the non-overlapping duality of identity in Ukraine. Such forces may include a certain fraction of the Ukrainian diaspora concerned with sustaining a manageable narrative of enemies versus friends, or the Russian authorities' interest in maintaining influence in Ukraine in part by depicting some of the country's citizens as exclusively Russian.

[78] For a study of sentiments expressed by Eastern Ukrainians about this issue, see Peter

Ukrainian-Russian border was never a zone of open confrontation, ethno-national conflict, separate memory, and especially ethnic cleansing."[79] The area therefore naturally generated a different set of local narratives.

Working hard to leave socialism in Eastern Europe behind, the contemporary world may be tossing the baby out with the bathwater when it deprecates the people whose identity includes pieces of the now-denounced past. Research in East Ukraine shows that people are often "very keen to stress that eastern Ukrainians should not be 'blamed' for failing to reject any associations with all things Russian."[80] Instead, they seek recognition of their particular place within the country, along with this position's geography, its baggage, its complications and associations, and its resulting sense of self. A common notion of the past in these lands is rooted in "a shared Soviet history, with its hopes, failures, horrors and crimes, where Ukrainians were not just victims of an imposed external power but also active agents of their own history."[81] This in no way means a willful attachment to all things Soviet; rather, it may be seen as a refusal to renounce a chunk of one's formative experiences just because their political setting was problematic.

In the multidirectional clash of concepts embodied by the Two Ukraines paradigm, the East may be somewhat more difficult to explain or represent. It remains unfashionable within the currently dominant trends of thinking, which are arguably informed by post-Cold War inclinations as much as by the post-Soviet ones. As Zhurzhenko points out,

> In the "national democratic" ideology (which today represents the mainstream ideology in Ukraine given that the communists are more and more marginalized and the cynical oligarchic party does not care about ideology) Eastern Ukraine can be considered only as a "proto-nation" which has to "catch-up" with Western Ukraine.[82]

But what is the story behind this so-called "proto-nation"? Is it, indeed, an unfortunate fluke that inconveniently encompasses millions of people, or does it have a place among the country's many experiences?

The regional version of Ukrainian identity in the East developed

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Rodgers. 2006. "Understanding Regionalism and the Politics of Identity in Ukraine's Eastern Borderlands." *Nationalities Papers* 34: 2.

[79] Volodymyr Kravchenko. 2010. *Kharkov/Kharkiv: Stolitsa Pogranich'ia.* Vilnius: European Humanitarian University, 7.

[80] Rodgers. 2006. "Understanding Regionalism," 161-162.

[81] Zhurzhenko, "Myth."

[82] Ibid.

without complete renunciation of the Russian culture, although the area simultaneously produced a multitude of influential intellectuals dedicated to the idea of national revival.[83] The region's geopolitical location resulted in the creation of "a material and spiritual culture which absorbed the various dimensions of the national-cultural elements of both" countries.[84] But speaking Russian has not turned Russophone Ukrainians into Russians. Instead, it gave most of them a particular basis of self-understanding that encompasses a variety of things at once.

As Volodymyr Kravchenko points out, the Ukrainian-Russian border generally "did not generate symbolic events or places of exclusive memory […] that would fit into conflicting narratives" between the two countries.[85] His book *Kharkov/Kharkiv: Stolitsa Pogranich'ia* (2010) is only the latest work in a series of scholarship that explores the position of East Ukrainian cities as frontiers of "borderline, flexible identities."[86] Scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s approached the Ukrainian-Russian border as an "ethno-contact" zone, noting its "interpenetration of cultures" and the neighbors' mutual perception as "our own other."[87] With time this situation is said to have created an atmosphere of "unique ethnic tolerance," which became an element of "local mentality."[88] Cross-border identities that shift between Russian and Ukrainian, or combine both cultural elements, are character-istic of the region.[89] Yet, at the same time,

> The discourse of "unfinished nation-building" often represents such identities simply as a distorted, degenerated Ukrainian identity, a heritage of the colonial past under foreign dominance. From this standpoint, the shared cultural traditions, beliefs and linguistic similarities in the Ukrainian and Russian borderlands

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[83] For instance: "The historical narrative of Slobozhanshchyna kept its subversive 'nationalist' potential even in Soviet times, and at the end of the 1980s a significant part of the Kharkiv intelligentsia (especially the humanitarians) was sympathetic to Narodny Ruch and supported the idea of Ukrainian national revival." See Zhurzhenko, "Cross-border Cooperation: Part 2," 508.

[84] Volodymyr Kravchenko. 1993. "Slavnykh pradidiv velykykh…" In Dmytro Bahalii, *Istoria Slobidskoi Ukrainy*. Kharkiv: Delta. Kravchenko remarks: "Bahalii was the first one to provide scientific ground to the issue of colonization of Sloboda Ukraine as a meeting and interaction of the two settlement flows."

[85] Volodymyr Kravchenko. 2010. *Kharkov/Kharkiv: Stolitsa Pogranich'ia.* Vilnius: European Humanitarian University, 7.

[86] Kravchenko, *Kharkov/Kharkiv*, 6. See also Tatiana Zhurzhenko. 2010. *Borderlands into Bordered Lands: Geopolitics of Identity in Post-Soviet Ukraine*. Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag.

[87] Mykhailo Karasikov. 1994. "Slobozhans'ka mental'nist': myf chy real'nist'?" *Kul'tura ta etno-etika* 3, 19-20.

[88] Olga Boldetskaia (Filipova). 1997. "Osobennosti pogranichnogo regiona i ikh vlianie na etnonatsionalnuiu identichnost'." *Region: problemy i perspektivy* 3, 53-58 (p. 54).

[89] Liudmila Chizhikova. 1988. *Russko-ukrainskoe pogranichie: Istoria i sud'by traditsionno-bytovoi kultury XIX–XX veka.* Moscow: Nauka.

are reduced to mere remnants of the "imperial" past.[90]

Unsurprisingly, the regions' different paths through time have led them to different standpoints *in* time. And while people in the West can, in general, successfully follow the Baltic model of excising the communist past, the dissimilar historical experience of the East renders this option unviable. This situation locks the country between two divergent models of one of memory's most vital elements: working through trauma. As a result, "the 'East' is not able to externalize completely the communist experience, and 'the West' has obvious difficulties with appropriating it as a part of its own national history."[91] What is happening in Ukraine today, then, can be illuminated by memory theory, which examines how people deal with their past, as well as their successes and failures in doing so.

In fact, at least some of the problems facing the country at the moment stem from a lack of general understanding of how cultural memory functions. As a result, the reflections of its functions are often misinter-preted as reflections of people themselves, consequently polarizing those whose memory differs, often for reasons beyond their control – such as the geographical location of their experience of history's events. In this context, Portnov's summary of modern East European trends of thinking seems applicable: like their neighbors, many Ukrainians fall prey to

> … a tendency to blame one's unsightly actions on circumstances, and the unsightly actions of others – on traits of their character (including national characteristics); an inability at least to attempt to understand "the other" and, at the same time, a desperate desire to be understood, heard, and comforted.[92]

This "desperate desire" is what most Ukrainians have in common, regard-less of their language, ethnos and home region. It is a shared longing that lies at the roots of traumatic memory. To appease it, a mutual effort will be required. And, as Zhurzhenko emphasizes, "it will be successful only when Eastern Ukrainians are treated as equal − not as an object of re-nationalization but as people whose right to have a distinctive version of Ukrainian identity is recognized."[93]

This recognition is important for Ukraine's future, not least due to the sheer number of people inhabiting the country's eastern lands. Pirie

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[90] Zhurzhenko, "Cross-border, Part 2", 512.

[91] Zhurzhenko, "Myth."

[92] Andriy Portnov. "O moral'nom i politicheskom smysle pokaianiia." *Uroki Istorii XX Vek,* http://urokiistorii.ru/blogs/andrei-portnov/2456, accessed November 7, 2011.

[93] Zhurzhenko, "Myth."

suggests: "Since the majority of the population of Ukraine is concentrated in the South and East, this region will always hold the key to political power."[94] These highly urbanized areas, indeed, are the most densely populated. Therefore borderline, local and regional identities play as crucial a role in contemporary Ukraine as traditional national identity does. An astute observer noted that modern Ukrainian society, like rings of a tree's trunk, retains the different types of identities that have emerged in the course of its history.[95] Creation of a homogenous and all-embracing Ukrainian self, then, might require an excision of some of these rings. How necessary, or even feasible, is this procedure?

In 1991, along with people all over the country, the overwhelming majority of eastern Ukrainians voted in favor of state independence. As the Soviet era receded, Ukraine sought and voted for the national alternative. Today's disagreements aren't about the existence of this desire itself. Rather, the difference lies in *how* the national alternative was visualized around the vast country; what traits were attributed to it as essential by people with different pasts. Indeed, "[t]he crucial point is that the democratic-minded Eastern Ukrainians imagined this alternative not as a state with a 'titular Ukrainian nation' tolerant towards its national minorities, but rather as a supraethnic community."[96] To understand what stands behind such concepts and where they originate, let us turn to one of the country's eastern regions: Sloboda Ukraine. Its main city, Kharkiv, East Ukraine's largest metropolis and Ukraine's second-largest, epitomizes the multiculturalism this text has attempted to formulate and examine.

Sloboda: The Roots of Fluidity

Sloboda was a term used for each of the five Cossack military units that settled the area in the 17th century.[97] It reportedly comes from the word *svoboda* – freedom, referring to the fact that the original Sloboda settlers had rejected both the state of Bohdan Khmelnytsky and the Polish Commonwealth, defying the two ruling grand narratives of the time. A military fortress, which later became the city of Kharkiv, was built here in the mid-1650s.[98] A series of Tsarist patents gave the settlers rights and privileges that distinguished them from the neighboring Russian and

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[94] Pirie, "National Identity," 1100.

[95] Serhii Plokhy. 2006. *The Origins of the Slavic Nations: Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[96] Zhurzhenko, "The Myth."

[97] The territory of historic Sloboda corresponds to the present-day Ukrainian oblast' (province) of Kharkiv and parts of the Sumy, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts, as well as parts of the Belgorod, Kursk, and Voronezh oblasts of Russia.

[98] For a historic overview of Sloboda, see Dmytro Bahalii. 1993. *Istoriia Slobidskoi Ukrainy.* Kharkiv: Delta. Orig. pub. 1918.

Cossack populations, and "this legal status [provided] the basis for the formation of a distinct local identity."[99] Rodgers echoes this fact in his research on identity politics:

> Indeed, an ethnographic study of the Russian-Ukrainian borderlands in the late 1980s found that the population of the region had a culture, local traditions and a mentality, which is difficult to define as either Russian or Ukrainian.[100]

From its beginnings, the Kharkiv *polk* stretched along the fluid and transparent borders of today's Russia and Ukraine. Together with the semiautonomous Cossack regions of *Zaporizhia* and Don, Sloboda formed a large frontier zone between the neighboring lands. Later, the Ukrainian-Russian border (unlike the country's western borders – with Poland, Hungary and Romania) would be considered an internal one in the Russian Empire, and then in the Soviet Union. Consequently, Kravchenko calls the modern line between Ukraine and Russia "a mental construct with a symbolic character," pointing out that it had never quite coincided with the geographic distribution of relevant ethnicities. [101] Likewise, Zhurzhenko notes that this boundary is a "cultural and political construct" – one that has a "symbolic role."[102]

To understand East Ukraine today, one needs to perceive it, above all, as a region faced with the daunting task of transforming from a historically internal border to an external one. Many of those caught in this process have voiced a "sense of frustration that 'their' voice is not being heard, drowned out by 'nationalist' interpretations of Russian-Ukrainian relations."[103] Kravchenko has gone so far as to point out that a general "political indifference" appears to be the region's hallmark trait.[104] He echoes Kuzio and many others in this belief, but it isn't quite the case. It would be more accurate to recognize that "individuals in Ukraine's eastern borderlands

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[99] Volodymyr Kravchenko. 2009. "Kharkiv: A Borderland City." In John J. Czaplicka, Nida Gelazis, Blair A. Ruble, eds., *Cities after the Fall of Communism: Reshaping Cultural Landscapes and European Identity*. Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Centre Press, 219-253 (p. 220).

[100] Rodgers, *Nation,* 74.

[101] Kravchenko, *Kharkov/Kharkiv,* 7.

[102] Tatiana Zhurzhenko. 2004. "Cross-border Cooperation and Transformation of Regional Identities in the Ukrainian-Russian Borderlands: Towards a Euroregion 'Slobozhanshchyna'? Part 1." *Nationalities Papers* 32: 1, 207-232. An important disclaimer in this context would be that not all scholars or all inhabitants of the region would agree with this description. The area's heterogeneity includes those who subscribe to the opposite opinion, and might claim that there's nothing symbolic about the delineation they see as fundamental.

[103] Rodgers, "Understanding Regionalism," 171.

[104] Kravchenko, "Kharkiv: A Borderland City," 221.

are not per se against playing a role in the politics of identity in Ukraine. Rather, they desire a negotiation of the content of such an identity."[105] Indeed, many in the region appear disillusioned about the political process in part because they feel it does not represent their views. Individuals have expressed "a dislike at being classified as 'bad' Ukrainians on account of speaking the Russian language. […] These people feel that they are 'no more and no less' Ukrainian than Ukrainian-speakers from L'viv."[106] The struggle to be acknowledged as Ukrainians in their own right has become one of the region's continued trials.

It is essential to repeat, however, that just like the West is a concept that homogenizes a diverse population, the East stands for a variety of positions as well, including within Sloboda itself. As mentioned earlier, fluid identities account for about half the residents' self-perceptions. The rest vary across the Ukrainian-Russian scale, including both of its far ends, unlike the proponents of the Two Ukraines would have us believe. An example of a staunchly "Ukrainian" stand in its traditional sense is presented by a Kharkiv university professor who prefers to remain anonymous. He has stated that, in his opinion, the only true Ukraine is represented by Galicia, and consequently all of his efforts "are aimed at turning the rest of the country into Galicia, or at least as close to it as possible."[107] Thinking of Ukrainian identity along somewhat similar lines, Kharkiv poet and scholar Rostyslav Melnykiv believes that "language and, consequently, linguistic national identity have been, and remain, of particular importance for the proper functioning of […] geopolitical formations."[108] At the same time, his colleague, writer and poet Sashko Ushkalov, also a Ukrainian-speaker, answered when asked about the role of language in establishing one's nationality: "A Russophone writer born in Ukraine is Ukrainian. There's no question about it."[109] Another prominent Kharkivite, Ukrainophone writer and poet Zhadan, protested the doubting of Russian-speaking Ukrainians as "real" Ukrainians in a piece entitled "Opiat' ob Gogolia," written in support of a Russophone Kharkiv poetess Anastasia Afanasieva.[110] The variety and co-existence of all these views in one city demonstrate two things. First of all, that there is no such thing as a homogenous "pro-Russian East." And secondly, that no "Ulster-style conflict" naturally threatens Ukrainians who hold differing opinions. They often maintain mutual respect, despite the efforts of some commentators

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[105] Rodgers, "Understanding Regionalism," 171.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Anonymous. 2011. Interviewed by Tanya Zaharchenko, online, October 13.

[108] Rostyslav Melnykiv. 2011. Interviewed by Tanya Zaharchenko, online, October 22.

[109] Sashko Ushkalov. 2011. Interviewed by Tanya Zaharchenko, Kharkiv, April 17.

[110] At http://afanasieva.wordpress.com/press/zhadan, accessed October 4, 2012.

to pit them against each other.[111]

The country's "national project," and those who study its history, cannot afford to ignore places like Kharkiv. So far, true to its foundational beginnings, the city has resisted all attempts to force it into a clear-cut cultural entity under a single grand historical narrative.[112] Not least due to this purported defiance of monochrome definitions, Sloboda Ukraine is often refused the right to consider itself Ukrainian under the faulty Two Ukraines framework.[113] Kravchenko connects this (mis)perception, at least in part, to the foundational beginnings of Sloboda, and particularly of the city of Kharkiv:

> From the point of view of the Cossack Hetmanate, Kharkiv represented a permanent threat; it was the center for the concentration of "traitors," political dissidents, and deserters, whose claims to be Cossacks could be doubted. Different Cossacks' hetmans, starting with Bohdan Khmelnytsky, regardless of their foreign political orientation, aimed to liquidate the Sloboda settlement, or at least put it under their control. Each time, these attempts failed.[114]

Some elements of this "dissidents and deserters" image of Sloboda residents have left their traces in the country's narratives. So it isn't surprising, concludes this historian, that in response, Kharkiv's inhabitants habitually distance themselves from all political centers and struggles for power. Elsewhere, he points to the area's "progressive marginalization."[115]

In light of this situation, some may note that the city's largely de-politicized nature yields the unfortunate result of decreasing its influence on other parts of Ukraine. Nearby, a politically-ascendant Donetsk and a previously-powerful Dnipropetrovsk ostensibly continue to feed the stereotype of East Ukraine, while Kharkiv's strong cultural currents seem to remain beyond down-to-earth politics, and therefore end up overlooked in the stereotype's formation and sustenance.[116] As mentioned earlier, Ukraine's eastern lands are anything but homogenous. Cities like Donetsk

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[111] For a more detailed discussion, see Tanya Zaharchenko. 2012. "Kharkiv motifs: Three variations. Research." *Historians-in-UA*. April 5. http://www.historians.in.ua/index.php/dyskusiya/210-tania-zakharchenko-kharkovskye-motyvy-v-trekh-varyatsyiakh, accessed January 20, 2013 (in Russian and Ukrainian).

[112] It can be argued that this position has become a myth-making narrative project of its own.

[113] For a good analysis of this, see "Partitura dlia 'dvukh' Ukrain." In Portnov, *Uprazhneniia,* 69-103.

[114] Kravchenko, "Kharkiv: A Borderland City," 220.

[115] Ibid., 238.

[116] I am thankful to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to these dynamics.

and Dnipropetrovsk may, indeed, appear somewhat closer to the clichés this article has attempted to tackle, due to their own set of cultural and historical experiences.[117] But an open-minded visitor can make important discoveries here. A case in point would be the experience of Yury Andrukhovych, who was mentioned in the beginning of this article. In the 1990s, Andrukhovych published an essay in which he thanked God for his hometown in West Ukraine, given that the country's eastern cities barely differ from each other.[118] With time, however, he heeded the idea behind his friend Zhadan's call: "Donbas is hardly known inside the country. […] One needs to come here, look around, explore, and then make your conclusions."[119] As a result, in 2006 Andrukhovych courteously noted in an internet conference: "I have reconsidered my ignorance regarding Donetsk, Zaporizhia and Luhansk."[120] Furthermore, following a visit to Dnipropetrovsk, he humorously withdrew his earlier judgment on the pages of a recent book: "I was completely wrong back in 1994. […] Now I must fall to my knees and beg [the residents of Dnipropetrovsk] forgiveness for that old frivolous nonsense."[121]

The false stereotype of a culturally-impoverished East Ukraine does not reflect the actual complexity of the eastern lands. Unfortunately, the links of oligarchy to cities like Donetsk and Dnipropetrovsk understandably continue to evoke defensive reactions from other parts of the country. But if narratives of the past were examined on their own in any one region, they may appear fairly monolithic (and sometimes, even authoritarian).[122] It is their interaction that leads to the emergence of hues that render the nation's map meaningful. The myth of the Two Ukraines collapses not just because of its antagonistic simplifications, but also because it presupposes an internal border where there is none. Voices from various parts of the nation constantly intermingle and influence each other.[123] Their interaction

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[117] For a comprehensive analysis of the Donetsk regional identity, see Oksana Mikheeva. 2007. "Ne vse tak prosto z tymy ukraïntsiamy…" *Otechestvennye zapiski* 1: 97–106. Portnov is currently preparing a series of similar analytic texts on Dnipropetrovsk, his hometown.

[118] Yury Andrukhovych. 1999. *Dezorientatsiia na mistsevosti.* Ivano-Frankivsk: Lileia-NV.

[119] Zhadan, *Iedyni.*

[120] At http://andruhovych.info/internet-konferenciya-andruxovicha-na-majdani, accessed October 1, 2012.

[121] Yury Andrukhovych. 2011. *Leksykon intymnykh mist.* Chernivtsi: Meridian Czernowitz.

[122] A recent column on "Paradoxes of Ukrainian democratic thinking" by savvy commentator Victoria Narizhna includes a reference to "pro-Ukrainian totalitarianism." http://www.historians.in.ua/index.php/avtorska-kolonka/421-vsi-proty-protyvsikhiv-abo-paradoksy-ukrainskoho-demokratychnoho-myslennia, accessed February 2, 2013. At the same time, Portnov warns against ascribing too much depth and tolerance to the "situational pluralism" anywhere in Ukraine. http://www.urokiistorii.ru/memory/place/2010/11/pamyatniki-vov-ukraina, accessed February 17, 2013.

[123] Some Soviet aesthetics, for instance, ironically seem to have found their way into today's monuments to Stepan Bandera, one of the leaders of the national movement in West Ukraine.

and confrontation – their polyphony – sustain the fluctuating processes of democracy in Ukraine. In this context we may heed Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper's credible warning about the "sheer ambiguity" of the term "identity."[124] But as the Martinican literary critic Édouard Glissant cautioned, "One should probably be suspicious of the notion of identity, but even more, of keeping silent about it."[125]

These days the function of the border between Ukraine and Russia is carried out by the entire eastern part of the Kharkiv oblast'. Zhurzhenko points to the two tendencies, construction and deconstruction of boundaries, which evolve there simultaneously.[126] She notes:

> The new reality of the Ukrainian-Russian borderlands is not determined only by Kiev and Moscow; the border regions claim to have their own voice, not only in terms of political and economic interests, but also in terms of the ideology of Ukrainian-Russian cooperation and its cultural and historical legitimization.[127]

This "own voice" could be the phenomenon which Mathijs Pelkmans, author of a book that focuses on the Russian-Georgian border, referred to when he noted:

> A view from the border highlights the contradictions and imperfections in the grand narratives of nations and states. […] along borders nationalizing policies are regularly defeated, ignored, or redirected.[128]

Sloboda does not just contest the grand narratives of the cultures that overlap on its lands; it reshapes them into a new storyline which could, perhaps, find some rationalization in the postcolonial concept of hybridization. The resulting zone forms a porous world where no tonalities are clear-cut, and where most people are therefore not too preoccupied with finding pure notes. Perhaps the ensuing flexibility of views is what Daphne

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"The pedestal is high, the hero is focused and determined, his glory is unquestionable. Other post-Soviet monuments to Bandera uphold the same motifs, which are familiar from Soviet monuments to revolutionary activists." (Ibid.)

[124] Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper. 2000. "Beyond 'identity'." *Theory and Society* 29: 1, 1-47.

[125] As translated and quoted by Denis-Constant Martin (University of Bordeaux) in "The Political Configuration of Identities" lecture on January 31, 2013, University of Cambridge.

[126] Zhurzhenko, "Cross-border, Part 1", 208.

[127] Zhurzhenko, "Cross-border, Part 2", 503.

[128] Mathijs Pelkmans. 2006. *Defending the Border: Identity, Religion, and Modernity in the Republic of Georgia.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 215.

Berdahl refers to when she observes that, paradoxically, the ambiguity of the borderlands can end up creating clarity.[129] In the case of Sloboda, and of Kharkiv in particular, this clarity is the general plasticity of definitions (of course, not without exceptions) that stems from a lack of preoccupation with national or ethical issues. Consequently, "in everyday life, one can see the desire of the city's residents to 'have it both ways,' allowing the presence of not only Ukrainian and Russian identities but also any other identities."[130] This discourse of multiculturalism is among the region's top narratives, though some have expressed understandable concerns that tolerance is not always distinguished from indifference. Overall, however, formation of the identity of Sloboda Ukraine serves as "an alternative to the ethnically and linguistically determined 'national idea,' as a rejection of the false opposition of 'imperial Russia and colonial Ukraine'."[131]

Scholars continue to disagree on the further specificities of which culture the city belongs to. The demise of the Soviet Union has left the post-Soviet countries with a daunting task of having to define and re-define themselves and their relationship with their neighbors. These processes have been far from straightforward. *"*Doubtlessly, the local culture is different from the 'northern neighbor' […] but it still doesn't stop being Russian," writes one analyst about Kharkiv.[132] Others retort: "With every new push of the empire Kharkiv became less and less Ukrainian, but, interestingly enough, this hasn't made it culturally Russian – only the dominance of Russian language in its southern variation could be observed."[133]

Curiously, such debates employ Wilson's survey terms of "more" or "less" Russian or Ukrainian, as mentioned earlier. Regardless of which of these options each scholar – or resident of Ukraine – leans toward, what matters is that these gradations exist, and are in constant use. The alleged traits of Sloboda Ukraine are thus illuminated once more: "its tolerance of ethnic and cultural diversity and its natural bilingualism."[134] Local scholars remark: "Despite a mere 350 years of the history [of Sloboda], on our

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[129] Daphne Berdahl. 1999. *Where the World Ended: Re-unification and Identity in the German Borderland.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 232.

[130] Kravchenko, "Kharkiv: A Borderland City," 250.

[131] Zhurzhenko, "Cross-border, Part 2", 508.

[132] Stanislav Minakov. 2001. "Kharkov: Priznaki Zhizni." *Znamya* 5.

[133] Rostyslav Melnykiv and Iurii Tsaplin. 2007. "Severo-vostok iugo-zapada: o sovremennoi khar'kovskoi literature." *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie* 85, http://www.nlobooks.ru/rus/magazines/nlo/196/503, accessed April 1, 2011.

[134] Vladimir Grinev. 1998. "Sotsial'no-ekonomicheskie i kul'turno-istoricheskie aspekty regional'noi politiki v Ukraine." *Region* 2: 3, 13. Zhurzhenko, too, maintains that this area "very early became the meeting place of various cultures and peoples, therefore tolerance, ability to mutual understanding and dialogue defined the inhabitants of the Kharkiv region from the beginning of its historical life." See Zhurzhenko, "Cross-border, Part 2", 510.

imaginary literary map of the world this territory looks like a multilayered borderland of various cultures and even civilizations."[135] It thus becomes clear that, as a result of a number of forces, "Sloboda forms a space of interwoven and interrelated social processes that do not always fit into the interpretive framework of present-day national paradigms."[136] And it's not the only place in the country where this rings true. In such cases one usually has two choices: to work on adjusting the space, or to think of adjusting the paradigms.

Conclusion

The field of memory studies holds one of the main keys to understanding Ukraine today. Faced with a variety of past experiences, and hesitant about nuanced approaches that illuminate the complexities of individual stories, some observers have proposed the idea of Two Ukraines as a way to grasp the different ways contemporary Ukrainians process their past. Loaded with simplifications and value judgments, this confrontational notion fails to encompass the polyphonic country in its entirety.

Ukraine's eastern regions, in particular, remain simplified and under-represented in today's popular consciousness, both within the country and beyond its borders. This oversight spills over into other fields, such as literature. Serhiy Zhadan, one of the most important contemporary Ukrainian writers, formulates this as follows:

> One of the main problems of modern Ukrainian literature
> is the under-expression of the country's regions; writers
> talk mostly about Kiev or Galicia. […] As for me, I plan
> to continue working with East Ukraine.[137]

The world of human beings often operates in line with the fashions of time, and these fashions include mainstream thinking patterns. Today, more than twenty years into the post-Soviet era, denunciation of all things Soviet is a common strategy of dealing with the past. This mental censure sometimes loses perspective of all the complex things, such as the dissident movement, that originated in the fallen country. Like most other things in life, pasts come in gradations of color, not only in black-and-white. There is a fine line between deservedly denouncing a regime and denouncing human life affected by that regime's existence. This is part of the reason why Zhadan's recent novel *Voroshylovhrad*, for instance, has been seen as

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[135] Melnykiv and Tsaplin, "Severo-vostok."

[136] Kravchenko, *Kharkov/Kharkiv*, 9.

[137] http://v-variant.lg.ua/articles/24859-sergej-zhadan-ukrainskoj-literature-nuzhny-novye. html, accessed June 3, 2011.

an atypical and important "alternative paradigm to parting with the totali-
tarian past, rather than rupture and oblivion."[138]

Attaching the label of nationalism to the mere sound of Ukrainian or
the label of imperialism to the mere sound of Russian leads to one predict-
able result: resentment.[139] The geographical proximity of Russia, as well as
her politics in the past centuries, has affected East Ukrainians in tangible
ways. They have incorporated such influences into an authentic identity
of their own, usually retaining Ukraine as their country, but hoping that
their perception of their place within this country will be acknowledged
and recognized without an automatic inclination to correct or fix them.

In answering questions such as "Is the Russian language an imperial
legacy, imposed on the denationalized Ukrainians in the East, or is it rather
a legitimate part of their national identity as Ukrainian citizens?"[140] this
article has argued for the latter. The stripping of the past is akin to surgery,
and it is hardly surprising if the procedure's subjects rebel against it in
ways that are accessible to them – such as pulling away from the national
power debates altogether, and thus earning allegations of indifference. As
scholars who study the region insist, "It is not the 'national idea' itself
Eastern Ukrainians refuse to accept, but its anti-Russian message."[141]
Indeed, "individuals in these cities want to take part in the nation building
project, yet reject any attempts to wholly negate their region's specific
historical links with Russia.[142]

"Are these blurred boundaries likely to persist?" asks Wilson.[143]
But how grounded is the perception of "blurred boundaries" as a serious
problem whose persistence should be a cause for concern? Fortunately,
frequent commentator prophesies of civil war in Ukraine have proven to be
false so far, despite the odds raised by the recent language law controversy.
And if this were to change, the cause of conflict would be skillful political
manipulation rather than inherent intolerance. Conceptually divided into

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[138] Tamara Hundorova. 2011. "Voroshylovhrad i porozhnecha." *LitAkcent,* February 8, http://litakcent.com/2011/02/08/voroshylovhrad-i-porozhnecha, accessed July 1, 2012. See also Narizhna's contemplations about processing traumatic experiences: http://www.historians.in.ua/index.php/avtorska-kolonka/539-viktoriia-narizhna-sovok-zavzhdy-buv-sovkom, accessed January 20, 2013 (in Ukrainian).

[139] Equating the promotion of one of the nation's languages with oppression of the other ensures that people on all sides continue to defend their tongue. This keeps their focus away from the country's economic and social problems, explains Zhadan in *Iedyni.* "Stereotypes exist on both sides, and they in no way correspond to reality. […] I think [these stereotypes] are provoked by authorities and politicians, including oppositional ones. They benefit from a split Ukraine: Donbas and Galicia, with no understanding between the two. As long as this outlook survives, these politicians will remain in power."

[140] Zhurzhenko, "Myth."

[141] Ibid.

[142] Rodgers, "Understanding Regionalism," 171.

[143] Wilson, "Elements."

West and East, the real Ukraine – in all its vastness and diversity – breaks expectations and establishes itself as a vast, complex, yet sound country. Against this background, an astute and ironic observation rings true:

> The irony of these times … is that as actual places and localities become ever more blurred and indeterminate, ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places become perhaps even more salient.[144]

Should Ukraine be molded into a culturally and ethnically uniform nation? Some would say yes; others would disagree. The debate continues, highlighting (or contesting) the difference between nation-building and nationalization.

In their introduction to *Cities after the Fall of Communism*, John Czaplicka, Nida Gelazis and Blair Ruble apply Anselm Strauss' question "What time is this place?"[145] to the post-socialist city.[146] In a slightly odd reversal of this phrase, another question might be: "What place is this time?" This time – our time – is a place of a multitude of human identities, including flexible and open ones. It is a place of mixed remembrance trajectories and complicated, multifaceted pasts, which co-exist in "a world where growing cultural diversity within nation-states, and particularly within gateway cities, is an unavoidable certainty."[147] It is a place where authoritarian notions espousing identity correction should become as obsolete as the idea of ethnic cleansing. It is a place, too, where "a desperate desire to be understood, heard, and comforted" continues to form a crucial part of basic human needs, nourished by the myriad of traumatic events of the past century. Perhaps it's time to stop sanitizing, and start listening.

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[144] Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson. 1992. "Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference." *Cultural Anthropology* 7: 1, 6-23.

[145] Anselm Strauss. 1976. *Images of the American City*. New Brunswick: Transaction Books. Orig. pub. 1961.

[146] "Introduction." In John J. Czaplicka, Nida Gelazis, Blair A. Ruble, eds., 2009. *Cities after the Fall of Communism: Reshaping Cultural Landscapes and European Identity*. Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Centre Press.

[147] Ley, "Postmulticulturalism," 178.