#### Research Paper

# The Nation in Ukraine's History Textbooks: A Civic, Ethnic or Cultural Cast?

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#### Contextualisation

This article combines insights from political science, history and sociology on the nature of nationalism in Eastern and Western Europe with empirical data on current educational practices in Ukraine. Although it is generally acknowledged that education is the major vehicle of state-led nation-building processes, not many scholars of nationalism have paid attention to education, nor have educationalists been much interested in examining the role of education in the transmission of patriotic values. This article is part of the growing body of literature that bridges the gap between these disciplines.

Abstract: This article examines nation-building politics in the history textbooks of contemporary Ukraine. It argues that the textbooks advance a cultural conception of the Ukrainian nation based on the Ukrainian language. The choice for the Ukrainian language instead of other identity markers is explained by (1) the inability of Ukraine's current political institutions to provide alternative foci of identification, (2) the prevailing conviction amongst the political elite that language and nationhood are intimately related and (3) the need to distinguish Ukrainians from their 'elder brethren', the Russians. On the one hand, the finding that Ukraine adopts a cultural understanding of the nation supports Hans Kohn's civic-West / ethnic-East argument. On the other hand, this result does not exclude the possibility that the Ukrainian nation will increasingly define itself in civic terms, as Ukraine grows older.

### Introduction: A New Nation - The Ukraine

In our increasingly smaller world of internet, call centres in India, distant travels and ongoing European integration it is easy to overlook countervailing trends that have occurred in the past 15 years. Not far from Western Europe, new countries have come into being, creating new borders that have posed obstacles to travelling, international trade and the transfer of information and that can thus be said to have made the world larger instead of smaller. Of course, we are referring here to the disintegration of Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union into a plethora of new, much smaller states. Many of these states have never been independent before. Faced with unaccustomed and therefore unpredictable populations, the governing elites of these states are likely to feel insecure about the continued existence of their states as independent entities. They deem it essential to equip their populations with feelings of patriotism and loyalty to the state and its institutions, as that would, in their view, be the only effective vaccination against popular unrest and political instability. Hence, they have put great effort into developing and carrying out policies of nation-building (Green 1997), in much the same way as Western states did in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

This article examines the nation-building strategies in one of these new states, namely post-Soviet Ukraine. Ukraine is an interesting case as it is the second most populous Soviet successor state (48 million inhabitants) and because it has large Russian minority (18% of the population) and an even larger group of Russian-speakers (approximately 50% of the population). How are the authorities trying to secure the loyalty of these potentially rebellious groups? The analysis focuses on history textbooks, first of all because history provides the architects of nation-building with an almost infinite source of historical events to underpin and justify a nationalist discourse. Selection and interpretation of events are the key activities in this process. The use of history in schools, moreover, has the capacity to exert a powerful influence over both individual and collective minds (Phillips 1998).

An important question is what kind of nation-building policies are pursued, or, to be more specific, how the Ukrainian nation is portrayed in the textbooks. Is this nation conceived of in ethnic or civic terms? The idea that there are two different kinds of nationalism - ethnic and civic - was originally formulated by Kohn (1944). In his view, civic nationalism emerged from the ranks of the bourgeoisie at the end of the 18th century, and aimed at a radical transformation of the traditional class and caste society. Drawing on the works of enlightenment philosophers like Rousseau and Montesquieu, this new revolutionary ideology sought to abolish particularisms, privileges and dynastic rule and create national political communities in which members voluntarily participated and all citizens would be equal before the law. Its message was that it did not matter to which ethnic, linguistic, occupational or local group individuals belonged, as long as they subscribed to a set of political principles and institutions. Justifying centralisation and unification, this ideology greatly facilitated 19th century nation and state-building processes in the states where it became the dominant ideology. Having relatively advanced economies, these states also had the capacity to enforce regulation and bring about changes. Kohn considered England, France, The Netherlands, Switzerland and the United States to be the typical examples of civic states.

Outside these countries, and particularly in states with multi-ethnic populations, small middle classes and poorly developed infrastructures, a nationalism of an ethnic kind struck root. Based on the philosophies of Johann Gottfried Herder, this nationalism developed in reaction to civic nationalism and conceived of nations as organic wholes bound together by communalities of language, descent, religion and customs. According to Kohn, ethnic nationalism gained the upper hand in Central and (South-) Eastern Europe (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia and the Ottoman empire).

In recent years, the civic-West/ethnic-East dichotomy has attracted a great deal of criticism. Kuzio (2001; 2002), for instance, argued that Western nations are no different from Eastern nations in that they also rest on strong ethnic foundations. The civic institutions in Western states have been constructed on these foundations and cannot be disentangled from them. Drawing on writings of Kaufmann (2000) and A.D. Smith (1998), he advances an evolutionary model that relates the proportional mix of civic and ethnic practices in a given state to the age of that state - i.e. the younger the state, the less opportunity it had to develop civic structures and the more ethnic it still is (Kuzio 2002: 21, pp 29, 35). This sharply contrasts with Kohn's view that the ethnic or civic character of a nation is regionally determined. Others contend that the ethnic category captures too many different concepts. They assert that the cultural elements in this category (language and religion) should constitute a separate dimension, as a cultural nationalism is in principle open to outsiders

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The discrepancy between the share of Russians and that of Russian-speakers can be explained by the massive Russification of Ukrainians in the Soviet period. Of all the Soviet nationalities, Ukrainians proved particularly vulnerable for assimilation to the Russian language as their language, Ukrainian, is closely related to Russian and was held in low esteem for well into the 20th century. In fact, many Russians still do not recognise Ukrainian as a distinct language, considering it instead as a peasant dialect of Russian.

whereas a national identity based on kinship or race is not (Kymlicka 1999; Nieguth 1999; Nielsen 1999; Shulman 2002). Despite these criticisms, the ethnic-civic distinction remains a powerful, appealing classification shaping the minds of many politicians, journalists and academics to this day (for examples of the latter, see Greenfield and Chirot 1994; Hagendoorn and Repels 2000; Kolstoe 2000a).

In line with the ethnic-civic framework, one would expect Ukraine to opt for ethnic or cultural strategies of nation-building. Indeed, it can be claimed that two factors are particularly conducive to this choice. First, the age-long domination of Ukraine by other regional powers (Russia, Poland, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire) and the imposition of their institutions are not likely to have contributed to mass identifications with political symbols. As the current political institutions do not have deep historical roots in the population or in indigenous interest groups, the propagation of a civic national identity resting on political principles runs the risk of being considered artificial or implausible by the population. Second, in the Soviet days ethnicity had official status and played an important role in public life. Soviet passports mentioned a person's ethnicity (natsional 'nost') and some ethnic groups enjoyed preferential treatment because of their poor social positions. In addition, non-Slavic groups were hardly ever admitted to state security bodies and to the higher ranks of the army and the police. Will the Ukrainian authorities promulgate an ethnic understanding of the Ukrainian nation, given the importance of ethnicity in the Soviet period?

## **History Textbooks and the Ukrainian Education System**

Before examining the textbooks it must be noted that the education system is highly centralised in Ukraine. Although in theory schools are free in the choice of textbooks, in practice only one textbook is used per class throughout Ukraine (Popson 2001; Janmaat 2002). The textbooks used for this study belong to the core curriculum and can thus be found in nearly every pupil's school bag. Their widespread and officially promoted use is likely to have a thorough impact on the historical opinions and national identity of the newest generation of Ukrainians<sup>2</sup>. This makes history textbooks a particularly interesting object of study for the student of Ukrainian nation-building policies.

I used the following textbooks for the analysis:<sup>3</sup>

Grades 7-8: H. Ya. Serhienko and V. A. Smolyi, Istoria Ukrainy: s drevneishikh vremen do kontsa XVIII veka (Kyiv: Osvita, 1985), 256 pp This is a history of Ukraine from ancient times to the end of the eighteenth century.

Grade 9: V. H. Sarbei, Istoria Ukrainy: XIX - nachalo XX veka (Kyiv: Heneza, 1996), 223 pp. A history of Ukraine in the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries.

Grade 10: F. H. Turchenko, Noveishaia istoria Ukrainy: Chast' pervaia (1917-1945 gody) (Kyiv: Heneza, 1994), 340 pp. A history of Ukraine from 1917 to 1945.

Grade 11: F. H. Turchenko, P. P. Panchenko and C. M. Tymchenko, Noveishaia istoriaUkrainy: Chast' vtoraia (1945-1995 gody) (Kyiv: Heneza, 1995), 342 pp. A history of Ukraine from 1945 to 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Naturally, teachers may completely ignore the textbooks in their history lessons, in which case their impact can be expected to be minimal. However, having been socialised in an environment that required the teaching of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine and that strongly discouraged own initiative, teachers currently are unlikely to have developed their own styles and contents of teaching. Indeed, the author of this study found a history teacher closely following the textbook when he attended one of

her classes in the eastern city of Donets'k in November 1998.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The attentive reader will notice that the book titles are given in Russian. This is because I read the Russian translations of the Ukrainian originals.

## **Operationalising the Terms Civic and Ethnic**

The next question that commands our attention is how the terms civic and ethnic can be operationalised; how can we determine which textual excerpts indicate a civic and which extracts an ethnic understanding of nationhood? To begin with the civic version, I stated before that voluntary participation in and identification with certain political institutions are fundamental to the civic idea of nationhood. In other words, central to that idea is the notion of a regime, polity and/or set of political institutions as home-grown creations, originating from the people, of and for the people. Hence I will regard depictions of regimes as indigenous manifestations rooted in the people as instances of a civic understanding of the nation. Now how do we measure the ethnic dimension? In view of the aforementioned criticism on the ethnic category as embracing too many different identity markers, I will disconnect the cultural markers of language, religion and customs from this category and hold them to constitute a separate dimension. Consequently, I will take narratives on the Ukrainian language, on religion or on (Ukrainian) traditions and customs as instances of a cultural definition of the nation, and narratives on kinship, descent, ancestry and 'blood' as examples of an ethnic interpretation of the nation. Shulman (2002) in fact employed the same threefold classification in his study of popular conceptions of nationhood in Western and Eastern nations.

## **Analysis of the Textbooks**

Let us now turn to the textbooks themselves. An examination of these books reveals that four former regimes or socio-political movements are portrayed as 'truly Ukrainian' - and therefore as indigenous. Two of these, Kyiv Rus' and the Cossack state, appear to lie in a distant past. Kyiv Rus1 had - as its name suggests - Kyiv as its centre and was the early mediaeval empire that united all orthodox East-Slavic tribes. At the peak of its power in the 11th century, it stretched from the Finnish Gulf in the north to the Black Sea in the South and from Slovakia in the West to the Volga River in the East. In the 13th century it collapsed under the invasions of the Mongols. The textbook for grades 7-8 mentions Kyiv Rus' explicitly as the predecessor of the modern Ukrainian state (pp 75, 76). In doing so, it echoes the famous Ukrainian historian Mykhailo Hrushevs'kyi, who argued that Kyiv Rus' stood by itself and bore no relation to the later Russian Tsarist empire in Moscow. Precisely on this point, Ukrainian historiography clashes with Russian historiography, which does hold Kyiv Rus' to be the precursor of Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union and modern-day Russia. Both sides therefore try to appropriate the history Kyiv Rus'.

Even more than Kyiv Rus', the Cossack state of the 17th century is portrayed as a typically Ukrainian regime. The aforementioned textbook portrays this short-lived state as a brave and successful attempt by Ukrainians to shed Polish rule. Given that the Cossack army was largely composed of peasants that had escaped from the serfdom of the Polish landed nobility, the struggle of the Cossacks against the Poles in 1648-1654 is presented as both a national and social uprising. The book clearly identifies these peasants as (proto-)Ukrainians, equating the fate of the Ukrainian nation with the misery of the peasantry and its exploitation by foreign overlords. In 1654, the Cossack leader Bogdan Khmelnyts'kyi signed a treaty with the Russian tsar, in which the latter promised to protect the Cossacks and respect their autonomy in exchange for the recognition of his authority. The textbook is ambiguous about this treaty, describing it as an unfortunate but necessary event, as it meant that the young Cossack state had to surrender some authority in order safeguard the attainments of the Liberation War. The final abolishment of the Cossack state by Tsarina Catherine the Great at the end of the 18th century is deplored and seen as yet another example of suppressive Russian imperialism.

If we now turn to the two political movements of the recent past that are represented as truly Ukrainian, then it is their ephemerality and powerlessness that catch the eye. The first of these movements is the Ukrainian National Republic (UNR), whose chaotic existence stretched from November 1917 to March 1921. During this period, it never managed to gain control of all Ukrainian lands, mangled as it constantly was between Germany, Austria and the Bolsheviks, and after WWI between Poland and the Soviet Union. The peace treaty of Riga in 1921 between the two latter parties sealed its fate. According to the textbook for the 10th grade, the UNR and not the Bolshevik regime was the political body that legitimately represented the Ukrainian people. It substantiates this claim by pointing to the results of the November 1917 elections to the Central Rada (the parliament of the UNR), which purportedly showed that the Ukrainian nationalist parties captured 75% of the vote and the Bolsheviks just 10% (p 37).

The second movement in the 20th century that is regarded as a specifically Ukrainian force is the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN). During WWII, this military organisation was primarily active in the Western part of Ukraine (the region that belonged to Poland before the war). After the invasion of the Germans in the Soviet Union, it soon split into two factions with one branch collaborating with the Nazi regime and being integrated in the German army and one branch developing into a guerrilla movement fighting both the Soviets and the Germans. This last branch, headed by Stepan Bandera, is extolled by the afore-mentioned textbook for its patriotism and courage. It alleges that the OUN-Bandera underground was much more effective in combating the Germans than the Soviet partisans and, to corroborate this claim, quotes a secret German document that supposedly said that "Except for the OUN-Bandera group, there is not one resistance movement in Ukraine that is capable of presenting a serious danger to us" (p 302). In addition, the book claims that the Bandera movement enjoyed widespread support among the population and advocated democracy, human rights, and the equality of all nationalities living on Ukrainian territory.

The treatment of the Soviet era is conspicuous. The textbooks consistently portray the Soviet regime as a foreign force that subjugated Ukraine against the will of its population. Thus, the book for the 10th grade underlines that the social base of the Bolsheviks was weak in Ukraine and that their power could only be established by means of "violence and deceit" (p 58). Another telling characteristic of the book is that it is completely silent about the inclusion of many Ukrainians in the Red Army. The book seizes every opportunity to depict the Soviet Union as a state that was hostile towards the Ukrainians. Thus, the Soviet authorities are accused of forcefully confiscating food and other products, sending millions of Ukrainian youth to the front as cannon fodder and of reinstating the totalitarian regime of the past. What is more, the book quotes Khrushchev who allegedly said that: "Stalin seriously considered deporting all Ukrainians, along with the Volga Germans, Crimean Tatars and some Caucasian peoples, but at the last minute he cancelled that plan because the Ukrainians simply were too numerous" (p 325).

On the one hand, the slashing of the Soviet regime is understandable. After all, the present regime needs to distinguish itself from its predecessor and what better way is there to justify current state independence than to argue that the previous state was oppressive. On the other hand, the almost total discredit of the Soviet Union is somewhat surprising, considering the fact that the communists, ironically, were much more forthcoming to the Ukrainian national idea than the Tsarist Empire ever was. The communists established the Ukrainian Soviet Republic (which had a seat in the UN), codified and standardised the Ukrainian language and furthered its use in public domain in the 1920s. Contemporary Ukraine is in fact the heir of that Soviet republic with the exact same territory.

Reviewing the four political constellations, we can conclude that the current authorities locate 'truly' Ukrainian regimes above all in the distant past. The more we approach the present, the

less former regimes are regarded as legitimate representatives of the Ukrainian nation. The Soviet regime is certainly not seen that way.

If Soviet rule is clearly not held to be a constitutive element of the Ukrainian nation, then what about the cultural elements of language and religion? It appears that the textbooks single out the Ukrainian language as the foundation of the Ukrainian nation. Thus the book for the 9th grade calls the Ukrainian language "the cementing and unifying force of national culture" (p 106). In addition, it explicitly states: "the membership of the Ukrainian nation was above all determined by the native [i.e. Ukrainian] language" (p 107).

In discussing the fate of the Ukrainian language, the books give special attention to three periods. The first of these is the time of national awakening in the second half of the 19th century. This episode is presented as a battle for the preservation of the Ukrainian language and - at a later stage - for its advancement in public and official domains in defiance of Tsarist repression. The second period that is highlighted is the Ukrainianisation campaign undertaken by the Bolsheviks in the 1920s. The book for the 10th grade is ambivalent about this policy. On the one hand, Ukrainianisation is appreciated, as it "attracted many representatives of the Ukrainian intelligentsia to the process of cultural rebuilding, who sincerely attempted to serve the nation and to contribute to its social-economic and spiritual revival" (p 194). In a similar manner, the book values the achievements such as the reduction of illiteracy, the mass admission of Ukrainians into the student population and the increase of Ukrainian-language education, publications and official documents. On the other hand, it is argued that Ukrainianisation was not strong enough to have a lasting impact on the language regime in the most important sphere of public life, the Communist Party bureaucracy, where Russian remained the dominant language. However, the harshest criticism on the Ukrainianisation campaign was that its initiators did not see it as a goal in itself: for them, the book argues, it was only a tool to indoctrinate the population with the communist ideology. The third period under scrutiny is the post-war era. In this period Ukrainian is steadily ousted from public domains in favour of Russian. The book for the 11th grade interprets this policy of Russification as a deliberate attempt by the authorities to de-nationalise Ukrainians and transform each of them into a Homo Sovieticus, in accordance with the official policy of the "merger of Soviet nationalities". It bemoans the constant reduction of Ukrainian-language education and condemns the prevailing attitude in the 1970s, stimulated by the authorities, that saw Ukrainian as "superfluous" (p 125).

This leaves us, finally, with an ethnic understanding of the Ukrainian nation. Do the textbooks emphasize descent, ancestors or blood as the principle ingredients of the Ukrainian nation? The answer to this question is no: I have not once encountered depictions of the Ukrainian nation in these terms. A brief review of citizenship policies confirms that the current regime does not support an ethnic understanding of nationhood: after independence all residents of Ukraine, irrespective of their ethnicity, were granted state citizenship, and in the following years the ethnicity category was removed from their passports.

## **Discussion - Language as Defining Identity Marker**

Given the centrality of the Ukrainian language as a marker of national identity in the textbooks, one may safely conclude that the Ukrainian nation is foremost promoted in a cultural sense. Although the books do fall back on former regimes and political movements as sources of inspiration for a Ukrainian national identity, these regimes or movements were in a too distant past, and the recent ones were too short-lived to justify a claim that the Ukrainian nation is depicted in civic terms. This impression is only reinforced by the fact that the most influential recent ruler - the Soviet Union - is portrayed as a foreign force imposed on Ukraine, a regime in which Ukrainians had no part. Moreover, it is questionable whether

representations of long-gone regimes as truly Ukrainian do in fact reflect a civic notion of nationhood. Wilson (1998: p 25), for instance, contends that "myths of foundation" and "polity myths" serve to prove "the nation's long and continuous tradition of statehood". For Ukrainian historiography, he argues, this is particularly important as it has to compete with a powerful rival - Russian/Soviet historiography - in the struggle to win the hearts and minds of the Ukrainian people. In similar vein, Koulouri (2001) asserts that many contemporary states - and certainly those in south-eastern Europe - are looking for predecessors in the (distant) past, if possible with territories larger than the current state territory as that could underpin irredentist calls for the recovery of 'lost national homeland'. Thus, references to bygone 'national' regimes may well be inspired by other motivations than a desire to construct a civic conception of nationhood.

Why have the authorities embraced a cultural definition of the nation based specifically on the Ukrainian language? This is an intriguing question, as one might argue that in doing so the current regime risks alienating the large group of Russian-speakers. There are three reasons for this choice. The first reason has already briefly been addressed. The dissemination of a civic national identity based on the current political institutions will probably not touch the right chord with the population, because they are either completely new or hastily transformed former Soviet bodies. After independence most of the personnel in these institutions remained in office, including the political elite, who turned from devoted communists to national democrats overnight. The population did not fail to notice this metamorphosis and its attitude towards politicians has not basically changed since the coming of independence. The lack of trust in politicians and in state institutions is still rampant. Politicians are regarded as exclusively motivated by power and money. Indeed, the widespread corruption, the severe economic crisis and the authorities' crackdown on independent media have sooner fanned this distrust in recent years than soothed it. In these circumstances the chances for the development of a civically inspired national identity, in which the population takes pride in state institutions and feels part of a political community. seem dim.

The second reason why the emphasis is on language is the prevailing conviction that language and nationhood are intimately related. Without a separate language, there will be no Ukrainian nation and therefore no Ukrainian state, it is believed. Remarkably, even the Russophone elite that is now governing the country (i.e. the people in government and the presidential apparatus that Kuchma recruited from his Russian-speaking home-town of Dnipropetrovs'k) appears to subscribe to this view (Kolstoe 2000b). The conviction that language and national identity are closely related finds its origin in the experience with the intense Russification of the post-war period, which demoted Ukrainian to a language of family, folklore and countryside. According to Arel (1994), this experience sparked a fear of cultural extinction that proved so strong that it completely dominated post-independence nation-building policies.

The final reason for the insistence on language as an identity marker and not, for instance, on religion is that the Ukrainian language allows Ukrainians to distinguish themselves from Russians, the 'elder brother1 nation with whom the Ukrainians have many things in common -including the experience of having lived together in one state for so many centuries. The need to differentiate themselves from precisely the Russians is therefore all the more pressing. Religion cannot serve this purpose as the majority of Ukrainians professe the same religion as most Russians (i.e. Russian orthodoxy).

Finally, what does the finding that Ukraine embraces a cultural understanding of nationhood in its history textbooks tells us about the validity of the ethnic-civic framework? At first glance it would appear to support this framework. After all, Ukraine as an Eastern state adopts a cultural and not a civic idea of the nation (remember that cultural elements were included in the ethnic category in the original framework). Yet, does this mean that Ukraine is destined to

hold on to this interpretation of the nation forever? Could Ukrainian national identity not gradually absorb civic features as the country develops its own history and as its population becomes accustomed to its political institutions? If this were to happen, the aforementioned evolutionary model of Kuzio would prove right. Indeed, evidence from Western Europe and specifically Ireland suggests that Kuzio's model might have more explanatory power than Kohn's ethnic-civic idea. According to Kissane (2000) and Kohn himself (1944: 474), Irish nationalism acquired a distinct ethnic character at the end of the 19th century. However, since its independence in 1921 Ireland evolved from a relatively poor, agricultural backwater into a modern Western state with a solid democracy and an advanced service economy. Would anybody argue that ethnic conceptions of nationhood still prevail in modern Ireland?

### **Future Research Areas**

Yet, before any definite conclusions can be drawn about the validity of Kuzio's model, more countries have to be examined. For instance, what image of nationhood have Norway and Finland, two other young Western states, advanced in their education systems in the first 30 years of their existence? How have these nation-building projects evolved since then and how do they compare to the current nation-building projects of Slovakia and Macedonia, two countries that like Ukraine have never been independent before? This is the research agenda I am committed to as a post-doctoral fellow at the Institute of Education and in the years to come.

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