

The Implications of the Nationalist Movement on Inter-ethnic Political Tensions in Eastern Ukraine

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Abstract

Ukraine is one of the former Soviet Union states that gained independence in 1991. Ukraine's long history is inextricably linked with conflict, particularly following the Bolshevik invasion of 1921-1922. Under Soviet rule, the Ukrainian people endured considerable suffering across social, economic, and political spheres. One of the darkest chapters in Ukraine's history is the Holodomor. This event ultimately catalysed the Ukrainian independence movement. The Holodomor also engendered an anti-Soviet (Russian) sentiment, as it was regarded as an act of genocide against ethnic Ukrainians. Anti-Russian campaigns intensified following Ukraine's independence and manifested in the Ukrainization movement. However, this movement inadvertently fostered inter-ethnic tensions among Ukrainian citizens, particularly those of Russian ethnicity. The research employs a traditional literature review methodology, involving qualitative data collection and analysis. The conclusion that whilst the Ukrainian Nationalist Movement indeed has implications for political tensions between ethnic Ukrainians and Russians, this is largely attributable to the Ukrainian government's failure to accommodate the aspirations of national minority groups, such as ethnic Russians, in policy-making processes.

Keywords : Holodomor, Inter-ethnic, Political tension, Ukrainization

INTRODUCTION

The history of Ukraine as a sovereign state with a monarchical form of government commenced in the 9th century CE, marked by the establishment of the Kievan Rus Empire, with its capital in Kiev. The Kievan Rus Empire reached its zenith in Eastern Europe under the reign of Vladimir I Sviatoslavich and Yaroslav I of the Rurik Dynasty. In the 13th century CE, Ukraine experienced an invasion by the Mongols, which subsequently led to the demise of the Kievan Rus kingdom. From the 14th to the 18th century CE, the territory of Ukraine was successively controlled by Lithuania, Poland, and Russia (Kappeler, 2014).

During 1649 to 1764, Ukraine was also governed by the Cossack Hetmanate. Subsequently, it returned to Russian Imperial control in the following years. In the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution, Ukraine, which had recently declared itself an independent state, was once again invaded by the Soviet Union in 1921. By 1922, virtually the entire territory of Ukraine, from south to east, had fallen under Soviet control. Upon incorporation into the Soviet Union, Ukraine became one of the regions designated for collective farming under Stalin's Five-Year Plan. From its inception, this programme engendered various issues, primarily in the economic and food sectors, which were disproportionately detrimental to the Ukrainian populace. As a consequence of the Collective Agriculture Policy, or the Law of Five Spikelets, Ukraine experienced the most catastrophic famine in its history, known as the Holodomor.

The conflict in Eastern Ukraine is inextricably linked to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (The Associated Press, 2015). Ukraine had gained independence from the Russian Empire in 1918, but in 1921, the Bolsheviks initiated an invasion of Eastern Ukraine and began to wage war in the region for annexation by the Soviet Union (DW News, 2022). Following the fall of the Soviet Union, on 22 August 1991, Leonid Kravchuk officially declared Ukraine's independence, which was subsequently reaffirmed through a referendum on 1 December 1991,

resulting in a victory for the pro-independence faction. However, certain regions, particularly in Eastern Ukraine, disagreed with the referendum outcome (Plokhly, 2023). This dissent stemmed from ethnic disparities between Western and Eastern Ukraine, prompting the eastern regions to request special autonomy guarantees, which were subsequently deferred by the Ukrainian government until 2014 (Miller et al., 1998).

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the emerging independent states faced complex challenges in defining their national identities and international alignments. The post-Soviet space became a critical geopolitical arena where Russia sought to maintain its sphere of influence while former Soviet republics pursued varying degrees of Western integration (Akchurina & Della Sala, 2022). Throughout multiple diplomatic instances, Russia systematically articulated adversarial perspectives towards North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member states. This geopolitical tension became particularly pronounced in early 2003 when Ukrainian political parties strategically conducted parliamentary opinion polls to explore the potential NATO membership as a mechanism to mitigate Russian interventionist approaches in Ukraine's security and economic domains (Oktaviano & Burhanuddin, 2023). Russia's involvement in precipitating ethnic tensions in Eastern Ukraine can be interpreted as a strategic mechanism designed to maintain geopolitical influence over Ukrainian foreign policy decision-making processes, reflecting the complex post-Soviet relational dynamics between the two nations (Kolosov & Sebentsov, 2020)

Serhiy Kudelia critically examines the heterogeneous nature of ethnic Russian populations within Ukraine, demonstrating that their political orientation and collective identity cannot be reduced to a simplistic binary narrative. The research reveals a nuanced spectrum of perspectives, wherein certain segments of the Russian-speaking demographic advocated for closer geopolitical alignment with Russia, while simultaneously, other components of this population were progressively integrating into the broader Ukrainian national consciousness, thereby challenging essentialist interpretations of ethnic demarcation and political allegiance (Kudelia, 2014)

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, utilising the traditional literature review method. The adoption of this literature review method aims to compare, identify congruence, and explore divergences from relevant previous studies to uncover the latest research findings (Gorard & Taylor, 2004). The primary data sources in this research comprise literature such as books and scholarly journals related to Ukrainian history, political developments, national identity, and ethnicity in Ukraine. Meanwhile, secondary data are obtained from various sources, including websites and mass media clippings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Holodomor as a Catalyst for Ukrainian Nationalist Movement

The Ukrainian Nationalist Movement was reinvigorated following Ukraine's declaration of independence on 22 August 1991. This movement, known as Ukrainification, aimed to reconstruct Ukrainian identity after liberation from Soviet influence. The roots of this movement can be traced back to 1720 through labour union activities during Tsar Peter I's reign, although it was subsequently suppressed during the Soviet era (Miller, 2003).

The Ukrainification movement was significantly influenced by the Holodomor catastrophe, a consequence of Stalin's Collective Agriculture Policy. This policy led to a devastating famine from 1932 to 1933. It is estimated that the Holodomor caused five million

deaths in the Soviet Union, four million of whom were Ukrainians. In Ukrainian historiography, this famine is perceived as targeting Ukrainian farmers who resisted collectivisation, indirectly attacking Ukrainian villages, which were integral to Ukrainian culture. The famine was not caused by food scarcity but by the chaos of collectivisation.

Ukrainian farmers actually possessed adequate wheat supplies; however, Soviet authorities imposed high wheat quotas and confiscated food, leaving villagers with insufficient sustenance. A 1932 law criminalised the theft of social property as a capital offence, resulting in executions for even minor grain thefts. The famine only concluded after the 1933 harvest. The Holodomor also represented a profound demographic catastrophe for Ukraine. This calamity is measured not only in millions of deaths, deportations, and widespread repression but also in major disruptions to population structures including age demographics, social hierarchies, ethnolinguistic communities, and family units. The mass mortality of children and the drastic decline in birth rates during and after the Holodomor left an indelible mark on Ukraine's demographic trajectory, depriving an entire generation of potential parents for subsequent generations (Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, 2020).

The impact of the Holodomor was evident in the age distribution of the post-famine population. In 1939, compared to 1926, the percentage of children under 15 years old decreased from 37.2% to 33%, while the proportion of individuals aged over 60 years declined from 6.2% to 5.8%. These demographic groups were particularly vulnerable during the 1932-1933 genocide. The traditional Ukrainian family structure underwent significant changes, marked by a notable decrease in birth rates. In 1926-1927, there were 519 births per 100 women, whereas in 1938-1939, this figure dropped to 387 (Holodomor Museum, 2022).

The traditional Ukrainian village was devastated, and Russian settlers were brought in to repopulate the Eastern Ukrainian regions that had been depopulated due to the Holodomor. This catastrophe continues to inflict deep trauma on the Ukrainian people, given that the Holodomor resulted in the loss of millions of Ukrainian lives (Malko, 2021). It was from this event that the Ukrainian national struggle movement began on a massive and systematic scale, no longer limited to the working class.

Ethnic Dynamics in Ukraine

During the Soviet era, policies prioritising Russian immigration, coupled with efforts to encourage Ukrainian emigration, resulted in a decrease in the proportion of ethnic Ukrainians in the population from 77 per cent in 1959 to 73 per cent in 1991. After independence, this trend reversed, and by the early 2000s, ethnic Ukrainians constituted more than three-quarters of the population. Russians remained the largest minority, now comprising less than one-fifth of the population. Other ethnic groups include Belarusians, Moldovans, Bulgarians, Poles, Hungarians, Romanians, Roma (Gypsies), and various other groups (Kappeler, 2014).

Beginning in 1989, Crimean Tatars, who had been forcibly deported to Uzbekistan and other Central Asian republics in 1944, began returning to Crimea in significant numbers. By the early 21st century, they represented one of the largest non-Russian minority groups (Williams, 2016).

According to the 2001 census, 67.5% of Ukraine's population identified Ukrainian as their mother tongue, while 29.6% identified Russian. However, a comparison of data between ethnicity and mother tongue reveals significant discrepancies between stated ethnicity and language used. Overall, 77.8% of Ukraine's population identified as ethnic Ukrainians, and 17.3% as ethnic Russians. Several other ethnic groups each accounted for less than one per cent of the country's population, such as Crimean Tatars (0.5%), Bulgarians (0.4%), Hungarians (0.3%), Jews (0.2%), and Roma (0.1%) (State Statistics Committee of Ukraine, 2004).

Among ethnic Ukrainians, 85.2% declared Ukrainian as their mother tongue, while 14.8% declared Russian. Among ethnic Russians, 95.9% declared Russian as their mother tongue, and 3.9% declared Ukrainian. A high percentage of individuals from some national

minorities declared Russian as their mother tongue, including 88.5% of Greeks, 83% of Jews, and 64.7% of Germans. Conversely, 71% of Poles declared Ukrainian as their mother tongue (State Statistics Committee of Ukraine, 2004).

The census also noted a high degree of correspondence between language and ethnicity among Hungarian and Romanian minorities, at 95.4% and 91.7% respectively, as well as among those who identified as indigenous Crimean Tatars at 92%. It is noteworthy that in 1996, based on the Ukrainian Constitution of that year, national identity was divided into two groups: indigenous people and national minorities (Mulcahy, 2016).

Political Dynamics Among Ethnic Groups in Eastern Ukraine

Eastern Ukraine comprises the regions east of the Dnipro River, including the provinces of Donetsk, Kharkiv, and Luhansk. The majority of the population in these three provinces is ethnically Russian and uses Russian as their mother tongue. Although the inhabitants of Eastern Ukraine are predominantly ethnic Russians, the idea of Ukrainian independence received full support from Eastern Ukrainians in the 1970s. This was considered natural, given their underdeveloped economic conditions under Soviet rule at the time. However, support for Ukrainian independence began to decline towards the end of 1991. The primary factor in this declining support was also attributed to deteriorating economic conditions, with industries crucial to the Eastern region experiencing bankruptcy when Ukraine began declaring its independence. Declining public welfare led to the emergence of mafia groups (Solchanyk, 2001).

Before comprehensively addressing social and economic issues, the movement for Ukrainification began to be translated into Ukrainian government policies. From the 1990s to the 2000s, the government mandated schools in Ukraine to adopt Ukrainian as the language of instruction. Educational books were produced in Ukrainian, although it was somewhat difficult for people in Eastern Ukraine to adopt Ukrainian as the language of instruction alongside Russian as their mother tongue. Between 1990 and early 2003, Eastern Ukraine successfully accepted and used Ukrainian as the language of instruction in educational and governmental settings. Thus, it can be said that ethnic Russians as a national minority were able to adapt to this Ukrainification movement (Axford et al., 2017).

Ethnic tensions in Ukraine became particularly apparent in the political sphere, especially in the election of leaders considered capable of representing the voices of national minorities, particularly ethnic Russians in Ukraine. Prior to the 2004 Ukrainian Presidential Election, elected leaders always had close ties to Russia or were still under Russian influence, which differed from the composition of the Ukrainian Parliament, which was largely comprised of opposition groups to Russia. In November 2004, when the second round of the presidential election was held to choose between two presidential candidates, Viktor Yushchenko and Viktor Yanukovych, the majority of ethnic Ukrainians supported Yushchenko as the Ukrainian presidential candidate, but Yanukovych was ultimately declared the winner of the election. Yanukovych's victory left ethnic Ukrainian citizens dissatisfied and led to protests over the election results, which were considered fraudulent or indicative of vote manipulation, given that Yanukovych only had a support base from ethnic Russians. These protests then resulted in a mass movement known as the Orange Revolution, which was attended by more than 1 million demonstrators in Maidan. The Orange Revolution demanded the annulment of the election results and called for a re-election. Yushchenko's camp also filed an appeal with the Ukrainian Supreme Court, which was subsequently approved with a re-election held on 26 December 2004. The results of this re-election then made Yushchenko the winner, and he was officially inaugurated as the president of Ukraine in January 2005 (Wilson, 2006).

Political tensions were again experienced in Ukraine when President Yanukovych, elected in 2004, suspended the signing of the agreement for Ukraine to join the European Union on 21 November 2013. This suspension was met with a wave of protests known as Euromaidan on the same day, followed by anti-government demonstrations that lasted from December 2013

to February 2014 (Schmid & Myshlovskaya, 2019). Since the declaration of independence in 1991, the Ukrainian people have strived to free themselves from Russian influence in socio-cultural, economic, and political spheres. These steps were indeed translated into the Ukrainification movement and the opposition stance of the Ukrainian Parliament in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) organisation or the Commonwealth of former Soviet states, although Ukraine itself was one of the founding countries of the CIS (Sakwa, 2008). Due to the massive protest movement from the people, Yanukovich decided to flee to Russia. Yanukovich's decision to flee and the impeachment plan proposed by the Ukrainian Parliament instead brought about new protests from ethnic Russian Ukrainians, culminating on 7 April 2014 with the forced occupation of government buildings in Donetsk, marking the beginning of the Separatist Movement in Eastern Ukraine, known as the Donbass War of 2014 (Schmid & Myshlovskaya, 2019).

Russia's Involvement as an External Party in Ethnic Political Tensions in Ukraine

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the separatist movement in Eastern Ukraine was caused by cultural and ethnic differences, with almost the entire southern and eastern regions of Ukraine inhabited by Ukrainians with Russian ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. The Ukrainian government itself, at the beginning of independence, sought to eliminate the influence of Russian culture in the political and social life of the Ukrainian people through the Ukrainification programme. The implementation of this programme began through educational institutions, where students and teachers were required to use Ukrainian as the language of instruction in teaching and learning activities. All forms of literacy had to be filled with the Ukrainian language, and this movement became the first issue that made people in the Eastern region feel discriminated against (Portnov, 2016).

The Holodomor is a historical event that triggered trauma among the Ukrainian people towards Russia, which is considered the "main heir" of the Soviet Union. This trauma then resulted in anti-Russian sentiment manifested in the Ukrainification policy, which sought to minimise Russian influence socially, economically, politically, and culturally. However, Ukrainification could not help Ukraine become economically and politically empowered (freedom to determine domestic and foreign policies). Therefore, the plan to join the European Union was solely to remove Ukraine from Russian influence (Wilson, 2006). However, without proper planning, Ukrainification actually resulted in division between ethnicities and regions in Ukraine, which weakened Ukraine from within.

Russia itself, as the party accused of conducting propaganda and agitation in Eastern Ukraine, has provided many rebuttals. One of these came from the Russian Ambassador to Indonesia, Lyudmilla Vorobieva, in her interview with Helmy Yahya. According to Vorobieva, the separatist movement in Eastern Ukraine is the result of the Ukrainian government's indifference to its own citizens. Long before the issues of the European Union and NATO became Russia's focus, Ukraine already had its own internal problems. These ranged from socio-cultural and political discrimination to economic inequality. Russia's attitude so far has only been as a good listener for the residents of Donetsk and Luhansk, which Vorobieva cannot deny is possible due to ethnic similarities (Yahya & Vorobieva, 2022).

The Implications of the Nationalist Movement on Inter-ethnic Political Tensions in Eastern Ukraine

The analysis reveals a complex interplay between historical trauma, ethnic identity, and nationalist movements in Ukraine, presenting a nuanced theoretical framework of national reconstruction in post-Soviet contexts. The Holodomor emerges as a pivotal catalyst for Ukrainian national identity, transforming collective memory into a powerful mechanism of social and political regeneration.

The demographic and cultural consequences of the Holodomor represent a profound disruption of Ukrainian social structures. The catastrophic population decline, characterised by

a significant reduction in children under fifteen and dramatic shifts in birth rates, created a generational trauma that fundamentally reshaped Ukrainian national consciousness. This demographic devastation can be conceptualised as a form of 'structural violence' that systematically undermined Ukrainian cultural reproduction. The theory of 'Traumatic Nationalism' emerges from this analysis, suggesting that historical traumas can serve as transformative catalysts for national identity construction. The Holodomor did not merely represent a demographic catastrophe but became a foundational narrative of Ukrainian resistance against Soviet oppression. The movement of Ukrainification can be understood as a direct response to this historical trauma, a mechanism of cultural restoration and collective healing.

Ethnic dynamics in Ukraine further complicate this narrative of national identity. The census data reveals a nuanced linguistic and cultural landscape, where ethnic identity does not always correlate directly with language use. The high percentage of ethnic minorities declaring Russian as their mother tongue, alongside the significant proportion of ethnic Ukrainians who speak Russian, illustrates the complex interethnic dynamics inherited from the Soviet era.

The political manifestations of these ethnic tensions are particularly evident in key historical moments such as the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan. These events demonstrate how ethnic identities intersect with political aspirations, with electoral politics becoming a critical arena for negotiating national belonging and challenging historical power structures. Russia's role in these dynamics presents a further layer of complexity. The Russian perspective, as articulated by the Russian Ambassador, frames the separatist movements as a response to internal Ukrainian discrimination rather than external intervention. This narrative highlights the intricate geopolitical negotiations of post-Soviet national identities. The theoretical model of 'Reconstructive Nationalism' proposed here suggests that national identity is not a static construct but a dynamic process of continuous negotiation. Traumatic historical experiences, demographic shifts, and ongoing political struggles contribute to an evolving understanding of nationhood. The Ukrainian experience illustrates how nations reconstruct themselves through collective memory, resistance, and the continuous reimagining of cultural boundaries.

The Ukrainification movement emerges as a critical strategy of national reconstruction, attempting to reclaim cultural agency through linguistic and educational policies. However, the analysis also reveals the potential limitations of such strategies, as these policies can inadvertently create new sites of ethnic tension and division.

CONCLUSION

The Ukrainian Nationalisation Movement is a movement motivated by the desire to be free from all forms of colonisation and discrimination experienced by the Ukrainian people throughout their history as a nation. However, this movement was not accompanied by awareness as a country with diverse ethnicities and tribes. Ukraine's focus on breaking free from Russian influence actually created social insensitivity in the making of political policies that should have been able to accommodate the aspirations of all Ukrainian people regardless of ethnicity. The goal of the nationalist movement itself is an effort to create a sense of love for the homeland and enthusiasm to fight for common interests as an independent country, but indirectly, the Ukrainian nationalist movement has divided the Ukrainian people into two large groups, namely, indigenous people and national minorities. Thus, it is undeniable that although social conflict could be avoided in Eastern Ukraine, political conflict between ethnicities became one of the factors causing the disintegration of eastern Ukraine.

It is also unavoidable that Russia played a role in the political tensions between ethnicities in Eastern Ukraine. However, Russia was only able to invade after Ukraine experienced an

internal armed conflict, which was certainly caused by differences in views between ethnicities towards a political policy.

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