

UKRAINIAN VOICES?

RECENTLY THERE HAS been much talk about the ‘decolonization’ of Ukraine. This is often understood as ridding the Ukrainian public sphere and the education system of Russian culture and language. The more radical decolonizers, also to be found in the West, would like to see the Russian Federation disintegrate into multiple smaller states—to finish the process of the collapse of imperial Russia that began in 1917 and was not completed in 1991, with the dissolution of the USSR. In the university context, it may also mean ‘decolonizing’ the thinking of the social sciences and humanities, whose approach to the whole post-Soviet region is seen as having been penetrated and distorted by a long-term form of Russian cultural imperialism.

When the biggest wave of decolonization in modern history took place after the Second World War, the focus was different. At that time, decolonization meant not just the overthrow of the European empires but also, crucially, building new developmentalist states in the ex-colonial countries, with a robust public sector and nationalized industries to replace the imbalances of the colonial economy through import-substitution programmes. The contradictions and failures of such strategies were explored in broadly Marxian terms in theories of under-development, debt-dependency and world-system analysis. Today, ‘decolonization’ is proposed for Ukraine and Russia in a context in which neoliberalism has taken the place of state-developmental policies and post-structuralist ‘postcolonial studies’ have displaced theories of neo-imperialist dependency. National liberation is no longer understood as intrinsically linked to social revolution, challenging the basis of capitalism and imperialism. Instead, it happens in the context of the ‘deficient revolutions’ of the Maidan type, which neither achieve the consolidation of liberal democracy nor eradicate corruption. If they succeed in overthrowing

authoritarian regimes and ‘empowering’ the NGO representatives of civil society, they are also liable to weaken the public sector and increase crime rates, social inequality and ethnic tensions.¹

It is not surprising, therefore, that talk of Ukraine’s ‘decolonization’ is so much about symbols and identity, and so little about social transformation. If what is at stake is the defence of the Ukrainian state, what kind of state is it? So far, Ukraine’s ‘decolonization’ has not led to more robust state-interventionist economic policies but almost precisely the opposite. Paradoxically, despite the objective imperatives of the war, Ukraine is proceeding with privatizations, lowering taxes, scrapping protective labour legislation and favouring ‘transparent’ international corporations over ‘corrupt’ domestic firms.² The plans for post-war reconstruction did read not like a programme for building a stronger sovereign state but like a pitch to foreign investors for a start-up; or at least, that was the impression given by Ukrainian ministers at the Ukraine Recovery Conference in Lugano last summer. Some naively hope that ‘war anarchism’ founded on the cherished horizontal volunteerism that has flourished since the Russian invasion, will substitute for the time-proven ‘war socialism’.³ More sober assessments warn of the conditions being created for state fragmentation and a political economy of violence. It remains to be seen what the Ukrainian government will do with the recently nationalized industrial assets of selected oligarchs—return them to their former owners, pay compensation or re-privatize them to transnational capital—but it is highly unlikely that they will form the backbone of a stronger post-war public sector. In all probability they will remain rather limited measures responding to the crises in specific industries.⁴

Ukrainian ‘decolonization’ is thus reduced to abolishing anything related to Russian influence in culture, education and the public sphere. Against this, it amplifies the voices articulating Ukrainian distinctive-

¹ As Mark Beissinger has established on the basis of a mass of quantitative data; see *The Revolutionary City: Urbanization and the Global Transformation of Rebellion*, Princeton 2022. For ‘deficient revolutions’, see Volodymyr Ishchenko and Oleg Zhuravlev, ‘How Maidan Revolutions Reproduce and Intensify the Post-Soviet Crisis of Political Representation’, PONARS, 18 October 2021.

² Anna Jikhareva and Kaspar Surber, ‘Ukraine Shouldn’t Become a Neoliberal Laboratory’, *Jacobin*, 17 September 2022; Peter Korotaev, ‘Ukraine’s War Economy Is Being Choked by Neoliberal Dogmas’, *Jacobin*, 14 July 2022; Luke Cooper, ‘Market Economics in an All-Out-War?’, ISE Research Report, 1 December 2022.

³ Aris Roussinos, ‘Did Ukraine Need a War?’, *UnHerd*, 1 July 2022.

⁴ Cooper, ‘Market Economics in an All-Out-War?’.

ness. This is combined with attacks upon—or, as in Zelensky's banning of eleven political parties in March 2022, the repression of—the voices of those who oppose this process or are simply labelled, usually misleadingly, as 'pro-Russian'. In this way, Ukraine's 'decolonization' becomes a version of (national-)identity politics—that is, a politics centered around the affirmation of belonging to a particular essentialized group, with a projected shared experience. Here—thanks to the increased global interest in Ukraine, but also to the physical relocation of Ukrainians to Western countries where they can enter more actively into international debates—Ukrainian scholars, intellectuals and artists face a dilemma. Either we allow ourselves to become incorporated as just another 'voice' in a very specific field of institutionalized identity politics in the West, where Ukrainians would be just the latest addition to a long queue of a myriad of other minority voices. Or instead, starting from the tragedy of Ukraine, we set out to articulate the questions of global relevance, search for their solutions, and contribute to universal human knowledge. Paradoxically, this requires a much deeper and more genuine engagement with Ukraine than happens now.

Recognition for whom?

The critics of contemporary identity politics point to a fundamental contradiction: 'Why do we look for recognition from the very institutions we reject as oppressive?'⁵ The oppressive situations faced by women, black people and others involve complex social relations, institutions and ideologies, reproduced within the warp and weft of capitalist relations. The black, gay and women's liberation movements that arose in the 1960s and 70s fought to challenge the oppressive social order as a whole. While those oppressive relations persist, the question of universal emancipation has long since disappeared; instead, contemporary identity politics serve to amplify the particular voices that are deemed to require representation solely on the basis of their particularity. Instead of social redistribution, this politics calls primarily for recognition within the institutions which are not themselves put into question.⁶ Moreover, because the groups that identity politics tends to essentialize are always internally diverse, it inevitably amplifies the more privileged voices who

⁵ Chi Chi Shi, 'Defining My Own Oppression: Neoliberalism and the Demand of Victimhood', *Historical Materialism*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2018.

⁶ Nancy Fraser, 'From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a "Post-Socialist" Age', *NLR* 1/212, July–August 1995.

are legitimated to speak on behalf of the oppressed group that they may not really represent. In this way, it tends to reproduce and even legitimate fundamental social inequalities.

Needless to say, it is not Russian recognition that Ukrainian identity politics is seeking. The idea of talking to Russians, even unambiguously anti-Putin and anti-war Russians, is constantly under attack. As one Ukrainian politician put it, ‘good Russians do not exist’.⁷ Instead, Ukrainian identity politics primarily targets the West, which is held to be culpable for allowing the Russian invasion, trading with Russia, ‘appeasing’ Putin’s regime, providing insufficient support for Ukraine and reproducing Russian imperialist narratives about Eastern Europe.⁸ Yet if the West is to be blamed for Ukraine’s suffering, it could relatively easily redeem itself by providing unconditional support for ‘the Ukrainian’ and unconditional rejection of ‘the Russian’. For this politics, the problem is Russian imperialism, not imperialism in general. Ukraine’s dependency on the West tends not to be problematized at all.

Ukrainians, then, should be accepted as an organic and indispensable part of the civilized Western world. Indeed, Ukrainians turn out to be not just the same as Westerners, but even better than them. Defending the frontier of Western civilization, dying and suffering for Western values, Ukrainians are more Western than those who live in the West.⁹ However, if Ukrainians are valued primarily for being on the front line of the war with Russia, what positive contribution might the country make, beyond being more consistently anti-Russian? Is it only about recognition within the same unchallenged Western structures, trying to be more of the same? Is there anything else, besides occasionally beating Russia on the battlefield? There are hints to be gleaned from both directions: the West looking at Ukraine and Ukrainians looking at the West. Notably, they talk about different things. The Western gaze on Ukrainian politics usually takes a dichotomizing form. The bad aspects, when they are not perceived as a direct result of Russia’s malicious influence, mostly derive from the local elites and ‘corruption’. The good sides come from Ukraine’s civil society, which (surprise!) is usually strongly

⁷ Iryna Podolyak, ‘Why Russians Are to Blame for Putin’, *Visegrad/Insight*, 16 March 2022.

⁸ Olesya Khromeychuk, ‘Where Is Ukraine?’, *RSA*, 13 June 2022.

⁹ George Packer, ‘Ukrainians Are Defending the Values Americans Claim to Hold’, *The Atlantic*, October 2022.

supportive of ‘the West’ while often being generously supported by Western donors and, of course, contributing to Western self-esteem.

Some even claim that the Russian invasion has had a positive democratizing effect on Ukraine.¹⁰ Before, the talk was usually precisely the opposite: the repressive tendencies in Ukrainian politics were recognized, but the Russian threat was to blame. What could one expect from a country that suffered from external aggression? If only the story of wartime democratization were true. There is some survey evidence that more Ukrainians support democratic values in the polls; there is no less extensive evidence that Ukrainians still prefer a strong leader rather than a democratic system and do not tolerate wartime dissent.¹¹ Ukrainians responded to the invasion with a burst of mutual help and horizontal cooperation, but is that untypical for a society under an existential threat? Whether and how Ukrainian volunteerism will be institutionalized after the war is a big question; the previous wave of volunteerism at the start of the Donbass war in 2014 turned out to be driven by informal personalist initiatives and did little to sustain an organized civil society.¹² Meanwhile, Ukrainian politics carries on in the background, shutting down opposition parties, monopolizing television broadcasts, vigilantism that typically goes unpunished, expanding databases of ‘traitors’—some funded by US donors—and attacks on those dissenting from the patriotic consensus. Are we really now in a position to give lessons on democracy and civic activism? Some Ukrainian oligarchs have been weakened, as rockets, drones and artillery rain down on their property, their TV stations broadcast government content and their loyal MPs vote in unison with the pro-presidential party. But even if they don’t regain their power after the war, it seems much less likely that their place will be taken by the self-organized Ukrainian people than by transnational capital, Zelensky’s personalized regime and the thin *gratin* of NGO civil society.

¹⁰ Nataliya Gumenyuk, ‘Russia’s Invasion Is Making Ukraine More Democratic’, *The Atlantic*, 16 July 2022.

¹¹ US National Democratic Institute, ‘Opportunities and Challenges Facing Ukraine’s Democratic Transition’, August 2022; Iryna Balachuk, ‘Majority of Ukrainians Want Strong Leader, Not Democracy during War—KMIS’, *Ukrainska Pravda*, 18 August 2022.

¹² Anton Oleinik, ‘Volunteers in Ukraine: From Provision of Services to State- and Nation-Building’, *Journal of Civil Society*, 18 September 2018.

Or should the world learn from our economy? This is actually a view arising from the Ukrainian gaze on the West. The middle-class Ukrainian refugees who have been starting new lives in the EU this year circulate scathing stories on social media about old-fashioned European bureaucracy and ‘poor’ service. But what stands behind the ‘better’ Ukrainian service sphere are the lowest wages in Europe and ever-poorer protection of labour rights. Ukraine’s digitalization has advanced, but this is a typical laggard’s advantage: Ukraine was forced to digitalize because the state institutions have been so inefficient—another reason why so much volunteerism and international aid is needed. However, emergency responses are hardly a long-term solution.

That’s about it. These are not Ukraine’s unique advantages; this is not why the Western elite currently cares so much about Ukraine. There has indeed been something of a legitimacy deficit there, increasing over the past decade; its symptoms include declining rates of support for the traditional parties, the rise of populist movements and new direct-action protests—Black Lives Matter, MeToo—by the oppressed. In a sense, all are responses to the crisis of representation. All are saying: ‘You—politicians, global elites, whites, men—do not represent us. You cannot speak for us.’ Historically, the major Western states have been quite successful in neutralizing these criticisms through the formalistic inclusion of selected members of the marginalized groups, a ‘solution’ which excluded any larger challenges to the existing order. From the universal viewpoint of the oppressed, this tokenistic solution was always deficient; it alleviated the representation crisis without solving it.

Today, the Ukrainian resistance is exploited in a broadly similar way, to give greater credibility to Western superiority. Ukrainians are presented as fighting and dying for what too many Westerners do not believe anymore. The noble fight brings (literally) new blood to its crisis-ridden institutions, wrapped in increasingly identitarian ‘civilizational’ rhetoric. The Western leaders repeatedly call for unity against the Russian threat. Substantive differences with political regimes in Russia, China or Iran obviously exist. However, the representation of the war in Ukraine as an ideological conflict—of democracy against autocracy—works poorly. The inconsistencies of the treatment of Russia, on the one hand, and Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel, on the other hand, are too great. And Putin too has been trying to instrumentalize the ‘decolonization’

narrative, presenting the September 2022 annexation of south-eastern regions of Ukraine as a righteous struggle against Western elites who robbed most of the world and continue to threaten the sovereignty and ‘traditional’ cultures of other states. But what can he offer to the Global South beyond recognizing its ‘representatives’ as equal to the Western elites, on the basis of their self-proclaimed identities? The Western elites are trying to save the fraying international order; the Russian elite is trying to revise it to get a better place in a new one. However, neither can clearly explain how exactly the rest of humanity wins from either outcome. This is what ‘multipolarity’ may look like—the multiplication of national and civilizational identities, defined against each other but lacking any universal potential.

Ukraine’s universal significance

The question for Ukrainians is whether being a part of this self-defeating escalation of identity politics is really what we need. This year, there has been a huge surge of events, panels and sessions related to Ukraine, Russia and the war, and a high demand for ‘Ukrainian voices’ in these discussions. Certainly, Ukrainian scholars, artists and intellectuals should be included in international discussions—and not just about Ukraine. The problem, however, is not the quantity but the quality of such inclusion. We have seen how outdated arguments—least those of primordial nationalism, weirdly combined with teleological claims for the superiority of liberal democracy—are legitimated.¹³ We can already see the tokenism phenomenon, typical of contemporary identity politics, when a symbolic inclusion of ‘Ukrainian voices’ does not mean revising the structures of knowledge aligned with Western elite interests, beyond sharpening their guilt for appeasing Russia. Furthermore, the formalistic representation of tokenized ‘Ukrainian voices’ helps silence other ‘voices’ from Ukraine that are not so easy to instrumentalize. Are we really to believe that the English-speaking, West-connected intellectuals, typically working in Kiev or Lviv, and who often even personally know each other, represent the diversity of the 40-million-strong nation?

¹³ Alexander Maxwell, ‘Popular and Scholarly Primordialism: The Politics of Ukrainian History during Russia’s 2022 Invasion of Ukraine’, *Journal of Nationalism, Memory and Language Politics*, vol. 16, no. 1, October 2022.

The solution is obviously not to include even more ‘voices’ but to break with the fundamentally flawed logic of escalating national-identity politics. Earlier, a distinctly colonial relation emerged between Western and East European scholars, including Ukrainians. We used to be typically the suppliers of data and local insights to be theorized by the Westerners, who would then reap most of the fruits of international intellectual fame. The sudden interest in Ukraine and the ‘decolonization’ moment offers an opportunity to revise this relationship.

Identity politics is a self-defeating game. Being recognized just for our ‘Ukrainianness’ means we are going to be marginalized again with the next geopolitical realignment. Instead of claiming to be the ‘voices’ of a people we cannot truly represent—that is, be held accountable by them—we should aim to be included on the basis of the contributions we can make to the universal problems facing humanity, in escalating political, economic and environmental crises. In-depth knowledge of Ukraine and the whole post-Soviet region can be especially helpful here because some of the most detrimental consequences of these crises have manifested themselves in our region, in the sharpest and most tragic forms.

For example, how can we discuss the contemporary civic revolutions that are breaking out around the globe at an accelerating speed without Ukraine—the country where three revolutions happened during the life of one generation and brought hardly any revolutionary changes? They embody the contradictions of poorly organized mobilizations with vague goals and weak leadership in the sharpest form; the same problems that populist responses to the Western crisis of political representation have encountered.¹⁴ Oppositionist parties come to power amid high expectations of change but typically fail even to start any major reforms. For decades, Ukraine was dominated by the cynical politics of the rival ‘oligarchs’, with record-low levels of trust in government that eventually led to a staggering 73 per cent vote for a TV star, a complete novice in politics. Does it sound familiar? Or what about the relevance of the notorious ‘regional cleavage’ between Ukraine’s ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ regions to the concerns about the growing polarization in the United States or post-Brexit Britain? Ukrainians—and, of course, East Europeans

¹⁴ Mark Beissinger, ‘Revolutions Have Succeeded More Often in Our Time, but Their Consequences Have Become More Ambiguous’, CEU Democracy Institute, 8 April 2022.

in general—have been living with systematically underfunded public-health institutions long before the Covid pandemic made this a widely recognized problem.

These are just some of the topics that would allow a more productive deprovincialization of discussions of Ukraine. It should not make us vulnerable to charges of ‘Ukrainesplaining’—the ungrounded expansion of regional-specific frameworks to contexts which they fit only poorly. During the formative years of the classical social sciences, a handful of countries served as paradigmatic cases to explore fundamental processes. England was a model for discussions of the emergence of capitalism, while France was the foremost example of the dynamics of social revolution. The concepts of Thermidor and Bonapartism helped to illuminate the dynamics of political regimes in many other countries. Italy gifted us with concepts of passive revolution and fascism.

These were the models for the period of capitalism’s progressive expansion and modernization. If now, however, the world is experiencing a multi-sided crisis with no way out, shouldn’t we look for the paradigmatic cases in other parts of the world—those that have been experiencing similar crisis trends, earlier and deeper? For example, the country that jumped from the European agrarian periphery to the cutting edge of space exploration and cybernetics in the space of just two generations—and then, in the life of the next, turned into the northernmost country of the Global South, with the sharpest decline of GDP and a devastating war; the country that flew to the stars and may now be bombed into the Middle Ages. Thirty years ago, we believed that post-Soviet countries would catch up with Western Europe and that Ukraine would be like Finland or France. By the mid-1990s, we tempered our ambitions and aimed rather to catch up with Poland or Hungary. It would be an exaggeration to say that the West may yet be catching up with the self-destruction of the post-Soviet countries; but we could turn out to be your future, not the other way around.

The call to see Ukraine as a paradigmatic case of the far-reaching global crisis requires a completely different perspective on the country itself. It means abandoning the typical post-Soviet teleological liberal-modernization story—which, in the guise of ‘decolonization’, requires us to interiorize a far inferior colonial position. Instead, we need to recognize that we could be proud of once being part of a universal movement.

Ukraine was crucial to the greatest social revolution and modernization breakthrough in human history. Ukraine was where some of the most significant battles of the Second World War took place. Millions of Ukrainian civilians and soldiers in the Red Army contributed huge sacrifices to defeat Nazi Germany. Ukraine was a world-renowned centre of vanguardist art and culture. The mass murders and authoritarianism of the state-socialist regime are universally acknowledged; but to exploit them to depreciate the scale of Soviet achievements is to cast Ukrainian labour, blood and suffering as meaningless. Moreover, it allows Putin to continue instrumentalizing Soviet history not only for domestic but for global audiences, who watch the ongoing war not through the eyes of the Western elites but of those whom they have oppressed for centuries. We should claim our past in full to claim a better future. The narrow 'decolonization' agenda, reduced to anti-Russian and anti-communist identity politics, only makes it more difficult to voice a universally relevant perspective on Ukraine, no matter how many Ukrainians would sympathize with it.