



Ukraine twenty years after independence: Concept models of the society



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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to create an overview of the Ukraine twenty years after independence by presenting prevailing conceptual narrative models of Ukraine employed by Ukrainian and foreign experts. Based on the analysis of 58 interviews of Ukrainian political and intellectual elites and foreign experts, the study revealed several categories of conceptual narrative models employed by respondents: (1) a state without a national idea and a common identity; (2) a country in an unfinished transition and degradation; (3) a divided society; and (4) Ukraine as a colony or “wild capitalism”. The analysis of these categories helps to assess conflict potential in Ukraine and discuss some ideas for conflict prevention and resolution.

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Twenty years ago Ukraine gained its independence and started its path toward a free market economy and democratic governance. Where it is now after the change of four presidents and the Orange Revolution? There is a vast literature on the process of development and the various aspects leading up to the current political, economic, and socio-cultural situations in Ukraine. This paper aims to create a comprehensive view on Ukraine after twenty years of independence by presenting prevailing conceptual narrative models of Ukraine employed by Ukrainian and foreign experts. In addition to assessing the potential for conflict in Ukraine, this paper also discusses some ideas for conflict prevention and resolution.

Several international organizations have recently rated Ukrainian's economic and democratic performance. According to the Freedom House Annual Report 2011, the level of civic society in Ukraine scored at 2.75, democracy scored 4.61, and corruption scored 5.75 (all scores are on the scale from 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level). The Report further states that national political power in Ukraine is consolidated in the hands of President Yanukovich, who regained control over the cabinet, the security service, and the prosecutor general after the restoration of the constitution in October 2010 to its pre-2004 state. Despite President Yanukovich's pledge to increase the autonomy of local governments, his actions and policies resulted in the strengthening of centralization of political power. The Freedom House Report also emphasized antidemocratic trends that impacts civic society and freedom of media including political pressure, arrests, and administrative detentions of NGO activists and journalists. As the report states, “a combination of societal apathy and lack of capacity among NGOs prevented them from effectively resisting the year's antidemocratic trend” (Freedom House, p. 591). This increase of negative socio-political tendencies in Ukrainian Society, particularly in the field of democratic rights and liberties was also affirmed in a NATO report (Malan, 2011).

According to Pew Forum research, the approval of change to democracy in Ukraine dropped from 72% in 1991 to 30% in 2009, a decline of 42% – the biggest fall among all post-Soviet countries. Approval of change to capitalism also declined from 52% to 36% positioning Ukraine in the fourth place from the end, after Hungary, Lithuania, and Bulgaria. Moreover, 69% of respondents prefer

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a strong leader over democratic government (20%), again the biggest gap in Europe. Moreover, the preference of having democratic leaders declined from 57% in 1991 to 20% in 2009. 55% percent of Ukrainians disapprove of democracy (the biggest disapproval rate in Europe) and the support for multiparty system declined from 72% in 1991 to 30% in 2009. Ukrainian respondents declared that economic prosperity was more important for them than democracy (74% vs. 50%). According to the report “78% of Ukrainian respondents, more than seven-in-ten say that if they had to choose, they would prefer a strong economy than democracy (12%), the biggest gap in Europe” (Pew Forum, 2009). Nan described this culture as “individualist, protectionist and survivalist...Successive governments using quasi-democratic parliamentary systems have simply re-enforced this position to the extent that the majority now see democracy as a discredited system that has bought nothing positive” (Nan, 2011).

The promise of the President to combat corruption as a major problem in Ukraine also has failed: “Glaring conflicts of interest among senior officials in the new government, combined with further delays in the passage of anticorruption legislation, fueled public skepticism about the leadership’s pledges to combat graft in 2010” (Freedom House, 2011, p. 585). According to Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index, in 2010 Ukraine was ranked 134 out of 178 surveyed countries (Transparency International, 2010). The Heritage Foundation’s 2010 Index of Economic Freedom put Ukraine on 162 place out of 179 surveyed states (Heritage Foundation, 2010). Corruption was reported as a major national problem by 70% of respondents, followed by pollution (64%) and crime (56%) (Pew Forum, 2009).

In July 2011, Forbes placed Ukraine in fourth place among the world’s worst economies, stating that “Ukraine has rich farmland and generous mineral resources and could become a leading European economy — yet per-capita GDP trails far behind even countries like Serbia and Bulgaria. The U.S. State Dept. blames ‘complex laws and regulations, poor corporate governance, weak enforcement of contract law by courts, and particularly corruption’” (Forbes, 2011). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development stated that 35 percent of Ukraine’s population could be defined as living in poverty (on the basis of the World Bank’s threshold of income less than a dollar per day) (OECD, 2011, p. 6). The Pew Forum survey also shows that 62% of Ukrainian people feel worse off than under communism, placing Ukraine in second place in Europe after Hungary. 47% reported that they lost ground in the past 5 years while only 26% reported making progress (Pew Forum, 2009). According to the Institute of Sociology, 74% of respondents stated that there is high level of disorder and uncertainty in the society; 73.4% declared that they could not comprehend changes in the society, and 80% agreed that the majority of people do not believe in anything (Vorona and Shulga, 2010).

The situation in Ukraine after 20 year of independence has also been extensively discussed by Ukrainian and international scholars. Some focused on structural issues. For example, the uncertainty around the Ukrainian model of development was commented upon by Umland as follows: “It is universally acknowledged that Ukraine needs to fundamentally change its political, administrative, economic, social and education system. However, the question of which socio-economic model exactly Ukraine should embrace remains a matter of dispute and source of stagnation” (Umland, 2011). He also acknowledged a high social and cultural polarization, growing fragmentation of the Ukrainian society, and the rise of extremist organizations. These divisions within the country were also emphasized by Malan in a NATO report: “Since independence at the end of 1991, Ukraine has been divided between an anti-Russian, pro-European West and a more pro-Russian South and East. Ukrainian nationalism, anchored in the West of the country around Lviv (part of Austria-Hungary only a century ago and part of interwar Poland), is Western-looking, built against Russia as the significant rival, while the Eastern and Southern parts of the country see themselves as more organically linked to Russia” (Malan, 2011).

Other scholars focus on the absence of real political reforms, power, and the persistence of corruption. Kusio (2011) discusses four factors that contribute to the Ukrainian state’s immobility and corruption: political culture, weak political will and civil society, absence of institutions that can fight with corruption, weakness of ideology and dependency of political parties on business. D’Anieri concentrates on the factors that impede and contribute to consolidation of power in Ukraine. Thus, according to the scholar, regional divisions, the absence of a natural-resource-based economy, and the relative weakness of the post-communist security services obstruct concentration of power, while weak institutions, weak norms, and methods of putting down of competitors support concentration of power (D’Anieri, 2011). Nan also stresses the absence of the stability of power because of the internal competition of five clans within the Party of Regions and its impact on degradation of economy (Nan, 2011). The weakness of Ukrainian political system that sustains political populism is also described by Kuzio who states that “Ukraine’s political system remains weak, fractured, highly personalized, and ideologically vacuous, while the judiciary and media fail to hold politicians to account. Such an environment permits social populism to flourish across the entire Ukrainian political spectrum and does not punish politicians for writing one thing, saying another, and ignoring everything that went before” (Kuzio, 2010).

Thus, while various aspects of Ukraine are analyzed and discussed by the international organizations and scholars, there is no comprehensive description of the Ukrainian State and society after 20 years of independence that combines an examination of different features of the society. This paper seeks to rectify this by providing an inclusive depiction of Ukraine as viewed by Ukrainian and foreign experts. This paper also aims to assess potential conflicts in Ukraine and discuss several ideas for conflict prevention and resolution.

1. Methodology

1.1. Method

The main method of this research is a semi-structural interview consisting of 6 questions regarding: an assessment of the current situation in Ukraine, its national identity, the politics of language and history, history textbooks, and possible future

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