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Journal of Eurasian Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/euras

Identity and power in Ukraine

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 October 2011

Accepted 26 June 2012

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the coercive and legitimate forms of power in Ukraine. It describes the crisis of legitimacy in Ukraine as a contradiction between a blatantly cruel system of capitalism dominated by a few oligarchs, and the lingering remnants of a Soviet mentality. Two strategies are used by the Government to stoke the crisis. First, increased identification with ethnic or regional groups are instrumentally used by the Government to take attention from economic and class issues. Second, the incorporation of a Soviet meaning of power into the new national identity and presentation of it as core norms, beliefs, and values of the people of Ukraine competes with alternative Ukrainian identity concepts. The paper analyzes five main features of the Soviet meanings of power – political, social, and economic paternalism, perception of power as source of profit and violence, and the dual reality of power with the gap between official narratives of power and a real life. The process of incorporation of the Soviet concept of power into national identity is facilitated by the process of national identity formation that helped to preserve the Soviet perception of power, because of the absence of a new ideology, a lack of critical assessment of the Soviet past, an absence of the vision of outcome, an embryonic culture of democracy, and contributions of all the presidents to the preservation of the Soviet meaning of power. People justify the system as legitimate and fair for many reasons: out of historic habit and deemed moral obligations, self-interests and/or a fear of sanctions, identification with the ruler, zones of indifference, an absence of will and self-confidence, desire to support a strong leader based on ambiguity intolerance, hierarchy – enhancing ideologies, and a general tolerance of injustice. The obedience of subjects is connected with the strength of will of the subjects and the social structures of the society. In Ukraine, the society is not united, not organized, has no identity of “us”, no civic accountability, nor even any real interest in such matters. Civil society levels are very low, as reflected by limited opportunities for civic responsibility and participation and few demands from the society.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Asia-Pacific Research Center, Hanyang University



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Twenty years after independence, Ukraine has yet to build a democratic society and develop a distinct national idea. Instead it rests on its Soviet past as reflected in the continuing Soviet mentality and structures. At the same time, power and wealth are concentrated in the hand of a few oligarchs placing a majority of the people below the poverty line and stripping them of rights and economic opportunities. This paper suggests that Ukrainian society is in crisis of legitimacy, resting on the contradiction between

the capitalist-based monopoly of a few oligarchs and the preserved Soviet ideology. To increase its legitimacy, the Government is using both the politics of ethnic divisions and a validation of the regime based on a noxious mix of 19th century capitalistic oppressive norms with Soviet-style norms of paternalism, infancy, and craving for a strong leader. Thus, the Ukrainian Government incorporates the Soviet-based meaning of power into the developing national identity, thereby reducing the ability of people to oppose or resist the established regime.

Starting with a short overview of the theories of power and legitimacy as well as a description of different types of power, the paper then will briefly discuss the use of coercive power by the Ukrainian government. An in-depth analysis is then offered, concentrating on the legitimacy crisis in Ukraine. The author describes two strategies used by the Government, moderating the crisis: (a) group justification and manipulation of ethnic divisions and (b) providing legitimizing ideology and system justification. The former will be analyzed through a review of the existing literature, while the latter will be discussed based on results of interviews conducted by the author. In the conclusion, a model of legitimation and moderation of similar crises will be proposed and its comparative dimensions will be discussed.

1. Theoretical foundations

The classic definition of power characterizes it as the ability of one party to influence the behavior of the other party and the ability of the other party to achieve its objectives (Cartwright, 1959; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Festinger, 1953, 1954; French & Raven, 1959; Kelman, 1958). Thus a group or individual in power can posit a threat to other groups or individuals by creating the conditions in which the superordinate group will feel inadequate to deal with a current situation or satisfy their needs. The degree of this threat depends upon the degree of power which can be exercised within the system and can be increased in stressful or ambiguous situation. A person or group in power can possess two groups of values: welfare values (necessary conditions including well-being, wealth, skill) and deference values whose necessary conditions including taking into consideration power, respect, and reputation. The rest of the people are dependent upon 'influencing power' for the satisfaction of their needs and desires or the fulfillments of their goals. The increase of influence of the leader depends on (1) acceptance of him by a group, (2) an increase in certainty of his opinion, (3) a decrease in certainty of other opinions, (4) increased acceptance of his role, and (5) increased perception of leader as an expert. Moscovici (1984, 1988) also describes power as involving dependence and coercion against people's will, changing people's will and beliefs through norms and social consensus.

This perception of power sees it as "given", self-perpetuating, durable, hard to change or alter by people who are dependent upon the good will, decisions, and support of government in a hierarchical system (a top down approach). It was challenged by Sharp (1973) who introduced the perception of power as something fragile.

Government is dependent on people's good will, listen to their decisions, and need their support (a bottom-up approach). The sources of power includes not only resources of a ruler, including authority (a right to command or direct and be obeyed), skills and knowledge, material resources and sanctions in disposal of a ruler, but also human resources (people who obey a ruler) and intangible factors (social and psychological factor including habits and attitudes toward submission, presence of ideology, common faith, etc). Sharp (1973) emphasizes that these resources depend on obedience and cooperation of the subjects and their contributions to the established system. The view of a group as a precondition of influence rather than simply an outcome was further developed by Turner (2005).

Scholars differ in defining the types of power. The classic typology of French and Raven (1959) includes five types: (1) reward power, based on perception that a leader has the ability to mediate rewards; (2) coercive power, based on perception that a leader can produce a punishment; (3) legitimate power, based on perception of legitimate rights of a leaders; (4) referent power, based on identification with a leader; and (5) expert power, based on acknowledgment of specific knowledge or expertise of a leader. Galam and Moscovici (1995) define three types of power: institutional power as a power to dominate the group, generative power as a group's capacity for mobilizing skills and multiplying resources, and ecological power that mobilizes and directs activities toward the outside world. Turner (2005) distinguishes a power 'over' and a power 'through' approach. A power over, a control as a capacity to compel actions from people who are not convinced in the validity of the specific belief or act, has two forms: legitimate authority based on the acceptance of a right of the ruler to prescribe specific beliefs, attitudes or actions; and coercion as a power over others against their will. A power through approach includes persuasion as power to convince people in the rightness of a particular order and shared belief in validity of a ruler. Thus, despite differences in typologies, the scholars agree that a leader can have power over others by virtue of resources under her or his control or a power that results from mobilization and inspiration to follow the path outlined by a leader. The former can be defined as a coercive power and the latter as a legitimate power.

Legitimate power rests on internalized values and acceptance that a leader has legitimate rights to influence people who have an obligation to accept this influence. Sharp (1973) distinguishes three bases of legitimate power: cultural values that give leader a right to power ("eternal yesterday" (Weber, 1918/1968) including age, caste, intellect); acceptance of a social structure; and designation by a legitimate agent. Theories of justice (Adams, 1963; Homans, 1961; Lerner, 1980; Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978) and theories of legitimacy of power (Blau, 1963; Dornbusch, 1975; Easton, 1965; French & Raven, 1959; Linz, Stepan, & Linz, 1978; Lipset, 1959; Weber, 1918/1968; Zelditch, 2001; Zelditch & Walker, 1984) describe legitimacy as acceptance of the structure (system of power) as "right" by both advantaged and disadvantaged groups. This acceptance results in the stability of the system of power.

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