Introduction: Studying Identity In Ukraine

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Introduction: Studying Identity In Ukraine

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While it is common wisdom that "identity matters" in Ukrainian politics, we still lack a robust understanding of precisely when and how it matters. Reflecting challenges facing the broader interdisciplinary field of comparative identity politics, authors frequently bring to their analyses very different notions of the nature of identity itself, skipping a rigorous examination of these notions in an effort to get right to documenting the effects of identity. Similarly, identity is frequently operationalized in quantitative studies without much discussion of the implications of selecting one particular measure over another or of what *precisely* each measure is reflecting, not to mention what might have changed over time. While we do have nuanced research on Ukrainian identity, it tends not to address the evolution of identity over time or the moments and conditions of identity change. Such issues are particularly important for current research since identities and their associated meanings may shift or "harden" during severe crises or conflicts like those that unfolded in Ukraine during 2013–14.

The five original articles that make up this special issue[1] all address these challenges, with important implications for how we understand Ukrainian politics after the EuroMaidan. They take advantage of five original data sources collected by the authors that capture the crisis period in different, innovative ways:

1. The Ukrainian Crisis Election Panel Survey (UCEPS) conducted in three waves over the course of 2014 by Henry Hale, Timothy Colton, Nadiya Kravets, and Olga Onuch, capturing the main period during which the conflict unfolded;
2. A three-wave panel survey carried out by Grigore Pop-Eleches and Graeme Robertson in 2013, 2015, and 2016, spanning the whole period before and after the EuroMaidan;
3. Pooled surveys from 2012, 2014, and 2017 designed by Volodymyr Kulyk and the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) to capture shifts in the meaning of identities over time;
4. A targeted four-part survey of the population of the Kiev-controlled Donbas, the population of the non-government controlled areas, the internally displaced in Ukraine, and those displaced to Russia, carried out by Gwendolyn Sasse at the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) in 2016; and
5. A survey of southeast Ukraine from April 2014 conducted by KIIS and a database of statements regarding identity and politics compiled by Elise Giuliano.

This special issue thus examines how we conceptualize, operationalize, and measure national, ethnic, linguistic, and regional identities in conflict contexts using (though not exclusively relying on) quantitative data.

Together, these studies ask: What can the case of the political crisis and ongoing conflict in Ukraine teach us about how political identities change and how they influence political preferences and behaviors, taking into account possible endogeneity? They revisit methodological, empirical, and theoretical puzzles that are central concerns in social science research:

1. In conflict contexts, what are the sources and effects of the salience of different dimensions of identity, and how can we theorize and measure salience?
2. What is the role of linguistic, national, and other ethnic identities in shaping rank-and-file political preferences and behavior, and how do they relate to geographical locations?

3. As a crisis unfolds, do identities shift or harden, or are new identities being constructed? If so, how and by whom?

The case of Ukraine and generalizability

In 2014, an internal political crisis in Ukraine escalated into an international one as the neighboring Russian Federation annexed the Crimean Peninsula and then supported separatists in the east of the country. Russian and separatist leaders have justified annexation, violent conflict, and resistance to diplomatic resolutions (the so-called Minsk I and II accords, in particular), as protections for the rights of ethnic Russians and Russophones residing in Ukraine. Events caught Ukrainian and Western politicians and analysts by surprise, and the international diplomatic community has struggled to formulate a coherent response. The United States, the European Union, and other countries imposed sanctions on Russia, and Cold War–like rhetoric has returned to international affairs.

What is needed is a deeper understanding of the processes on the ground. A central worry is that the ongoing crisis will cause (or has already resulted in) identity polarization, which may shape political behavior long into the future and facilitate the further diffusion of armed conflict in the region. Theorists often link the hardening of ethnic, linguistic, and national identity to the aggravation of conflicts (Posen 1993; Connor 1994; Fearon and Laitin 2003), thereby strengthening the widespread assumption that identity is central to the crisis and conflict in Ukraine. The latter claim, though, still remains a matter of conjecture rather than empirical evidence. This view is usually grounded in observations that Ukraine is a deeply divided post-colonial society where identity cleavages have long been salient, may have hardened, and will continue to polarize the population (Riabchuk 2002; Sakwa 2014). And yet, open fighting has not spread to other eastern, majority-Russophone, or plurality-Russian regions. Ukrainian citizens have rallied around moderate policy proposals (decentralization), shunned right-wing politicians and parties, and peacefully elected a new president and new parliament (Hale et al. 2015). Moreover, there is some indication that civic identity is gaining ground at the expense of ethno-nationalist identity (Kulyk 2016; Onuch and Sasse 2016; Onuch and Hale 2017).

Ukraine thus represents a highly promising setting for advancing our understanding of identity politics. It is a case with potential payoffs not only for area specialists and policymakers but for comparative studies of identity politics. When calling on scholars to better measure identities and their political relevance, it is interesting that Brubaker and Cooper's (2000, 26) influential study

refers to research done in post-Soviet Ukraine as an example of unfortunate superficiality: “the very categories ‘Russian’ and ‘Ukrainian,’ as designators of … distinct ‘identities,’ are deeply problematic in the Ukrainian context.” They explain that simple binary understandings of phenomena such as ethnicity and language tell us little about the existence of a sense of “groupness,” not least because the boundaries between them are highly porous. The ongoing crisis in Ukraine provides a laboratory in which the potential evolution of a sense of groupness among ethnic Russians, Russophones, residents of particular regions or subregions, and other groups—or, in fact, the absence of such groupness—should be observable in real time.

Recent research emphasizes how economic crisis has shifted identities and behavior in the United States (Allen and Ainley 2011; Disch 2011; Kolodny 2011) and the Eurozone (Van der Meer et al. 2012). Similarly, electoral divisions, the radicalization of political identities, and a deepening of religious cleavages have been observed following waves of mass protest in Greece and Egypt (Dalacoura 2013; Ellinas 2013; Rowe 2013; Weber 2013; Byman 2014). Few studies have been able to capture shifting identities and political preferences as they crystallize, with scholars being reduced to inferring causal mechanisms from data obtained before and after the crisis. The current situation in Ukraine provides a sterling opportunity to study these processes as they unfold.

The aim of this special issue is twofold. First, we showcase cutting-edge quantitative and qualitative research on identity politics in Ukraine. Second, we identify what we believe to be productive directions for further research on Ukraine and propose new theoretical and methodological approaches for understanding complex and multifaceted identities and their political effects beyond the case of Ukraine.

The special issue is divided into four sections. The first three are comprised of original articles that examine: the implications of how we measure identity empirically; how identity has changed in Ukraine before and after the 2014 crisis; and the effects of the crisis and war on the identities of those most directly affected, namely the displaced people who fled the war and those who were left behind in the two parts of the Donbas. The fourth section features reactions to these articles from three political scientists who have made important contributions to understanding identity politics in and beyond Ukraine: Dominique Arel, Lowell Barrington, and Oxana Shevel.

How do we study identity in Ukraine and beyond?

The problem of measurement has long plagued social scientific efforts to understand the impact of ethnic identity on important political outcomes since different measures of identity that are frequently taken to be capturing the "same thing" can often be measuring distinct things, meaning that the substitution of one for the other might lead to major differences in findings. To better understand how sensitive causal claims about ethnicity's effects are to the particular ways in which it is operationalized, Onuch and Hale demonstrate the importance of taking seriously the multidimensionality of ethnicity that is essential even in a country that is regarded as deeply divided, as is Ukraine. In particular, drawing on relational theory, they argue that Ukrainian ethnicity is best understood in terms of four distinct dimensions that only partly overlap but that each reflect distinct relationships to the social world and hence distinct implications on political views and behavior. These are: individual language preference, language embeddedness, ethnolinguistic identity, and nationality. Choosing one variable over the other when assessing "ethnicity's effects" can make the difference between concluding ethnicity is insignificant or a major influence, they show through an examination of support for NATO membership, participation in the EuroMaidan protests, and expectations of a Russian invasion as of 2014. They also highlight the oft-neglected importance of including the right array of control variables if one hopes to interpret ethnicity's effects precisely.

Studying identity change over time

What is the effect of a critical juncture, such as a moment of mass mobilization or the outbreak of war, on identities? Do we see dramatic shifts? Do entrenched identities harden? Or do we see little change and the maintenance of status quo? Taking advantage of a unique panel survey in Ukraine conducted directly before (2013) and after the EuroMaidan (2015 and 2016), Pop-Eleches and Robertson analyze the relationship between ethnicity, language practice, and civic identities on the one hand and political attitudes on the other. Their work highlights that while ethnic identities and language practices seem to change little over the period under study, in line with Kulyk's findings in this issue, there is a significant increase in the number people thinking of Ukraine as their "homeland." Pop-Eleches and Robertson also report that identity in general, and language practice in particular, remain powerful predictors of political attitudes and that people are more likely to shift attitudes to reflect their identities rather than modify their identities to match their politics.

But what if we drill deeper into the complexities of ethnic minority group identification? What change—if any—can we identify? Kulyk describes a "shedding" of "Russianness" in post-EuroMaidan Ukraine. In particular, Kulyk

critiques "lingering essentialism" in how observers perceive ethnic groups and a "pragmatic preference" for "one clear measure of ethnicity." These, he argues, lead people to over-rely on census data and survey questions that borrow wording from the census in measuring "nationality." This concept, he shows, is deeply problematic as it is currently used. Kuyk then elaborates on the specific case of ethnic Russians, showing how they (and those who speak Russian) have increasingly come to feel more Ukrainian. This is reflected in three nationwide surveys that span the period 2012–17. Moreover, he shows that the meanings people attach to "nationality" and the notion of native language have changed significantly over time. Overall, he reports far-reaching changes in ethnonational identification and language practice that can be understood as a popular shift away from Russianness, a trend that he describes as a bottom-up de-Russification.

Studying vulnerable populations during times of conflict

What happens to the identities of individuals who are literally caught in the cross-fire of conflict? When people directly experience war, or are forced to leave their home or country, how does this experience affect their self-identification? Sasse and Lackner's unique study traces the declared identities and their self-reported shifts in identity and belonging of the current and former population of the Donbas region. The study is based on original survey data covering four segments of the former Donbas population: those currently residing in the government-controlled Donbas; those in the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics"; those who fled from the Donbas region to other parts of Ukraine; and those who fled from the Donbas to Russia. The survey data map the parallel processes of a self-reported polarization of identities and the preservation or strengthening of civic identities. Language categories matter for current self-identification, but they are not cast in narrow ethnolinguistic terms, and feeling "more Ukrainian" and Ukrainian citizenship include mono- and bilingual conceptions of native language (i.e., Ukrainian and Russian).

And, finally, what about those individuals who populate the zones immediately surrounding a conflict's sites of violence? Such people can be faced with dramatically changing contexts. In such areas, does a sense of belonging to the state's titular group or to the state itself shape one's likelihood of supporting separatism from that state? Elise Giuliano's contribution focuses on ethnic Russians in the eastern region of Kharkiv, investigating whether ethnic affiliation is related to popular support for separatism. Using survey data collected just before the outbreak of large-scale violence in the Donbas as well as a qualitative database of statements from locals, she finds two opposing trends. On the one

hand, ethnic Russian respondents were divided on issues related to separatism, with only a minority (or at most a plurality) backing a separatist position. They did, though, support separatism in larger numbers than did other ethnic groups. In addition, she reports that the central drivers of support for separatism were local socio-economic concerns exacerbated by a sense of abandonment by Kyiv, not Russian language and pro-Russia foreign policy issues. She concludes that what may superficially appear to be ethnolinguistically motivated separatism actually involves primarily motives related to perceived deprivation.

Author biographies

Elise Giuliano is a Lecturer in the Political Science Department at Columbia University and academic advisor of the MA program at The Harriman Institute. Her research focuses on the intersection of politics and identity and the formation of popular attitudes. Her award-winning book, *Constructing Grievance: Ethnic Nationalism in Russia's Republics* (Cornell University Press, 2011), examines minority support for nationalist separatism in Russia's ethnic republics. She has also published on Islam in Russia and the popular response to natural disaster in Russia. Currently, Giuliano is researching popular attitudes in east Ukraine. She has done field research in Kharkiv and published on the origins of support for separatism in Donetsk and Luhansk. Giuliano serves on the Advisory Board of the Association for the Study of Nationalities (ASN) and is a member of PONARS Eurasia. She has taught at Barnard College and the University of Miami and was a post-doctoral fellow at Harvard University, the University of Notre Dame, and Columbia University. She received a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Chicago.

Henry E. Hale is Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at George Washington University (GW), the author of *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), and co-editor of *Beyond the Euromaidan: Comparative Perspectives for Advancing Reform in Ukraine* (Stanford University Press, 2016). His previous work has won two awards from the American Political Science Association. During 2009–12, he served as director of the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies (IERES) at GW's Elliott School of International Affairs, and he is currently editorial board chair of *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*.

Volodymyr Kulyk is a Visiting Professor at Yale University and a Head Research Fellow at the Institute of Political and Ethnic Studies, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. He has also taught at Columbia and Stanford universities, Kyiv Mohyla Academy, and Ukrainian Catholic University as well as having

research fellowships at Harvard University, Stanford University, Woodrow Wilson Center, University College London, University of Alberta, and other Western scholarly institutions. His research fields include the politics of language, memory and identity, language ideologies, and media discourse in contemporary Ukraine, on which he has widely published in Ukrainian and Western journals and collected volumes. Dr. Kulyk is the author of three books, the latest being *Dyskurs ukraïnskykh medii: identychnosti, ideolohiï, vladni stosunky* (The Ukrainian Media Discourse: Identities, Ideologies, Power Relations; Kyiv: Krytyka, 2010).

Alice Lackner completed her BA in philosophy and sociology at the RWTH Aachen University and is currently enrolled in the MA programme "Sociology–European Societies" at the Free University Berlin. In her master's thesis, a comparative study of post-socialist countries and capitalist countries, she analyses the question of whether macroeconomic circumstances are reflected in people's attitudes towards income inequality.

Olga Onuch (DPhil Oxon), is a Lecturer (Assistant Professor) in Politics at the University of Manchester and an Associate Fellow at Nuffield College, University of Oxford. She is a Visiting Scholar at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University (2017). She specializes in the comparative study of protest politics, political behavior, and institutions in democratizing states in Latin America and Eastern Europe. A leading scholar on protest politics in Ukraine, she led the Ukrainian Protest Project in 2013 (funded by the British Academy) and was a Co-I in the Ukraine Crisis Election Panel Survey in 2014 (funded by the National Science Foundation). One of a few scholars who focus their analysis on the micro-foundations of mass protest participation in the two regions, Onuch analyzes the mechanisms of mobilization in her book: *Mapping Mass Mobilisations* (Palgrave, 2014). In her other published and forthcoming research, she has explored the role of social media in motivating and mobilizing protest participants, the significance of cross-class/cross-cleavage coalitions in increasing the likelihood of protest success, the phenomenon of post-protest polarization, as well as the relationship between protest and electoral populism. Onuch's regional expertise, in combination with a comparative focus, has allowed her to engage with a larger audience. Her research has been highlighted on the BBC World Service, Al Jazeera English TV, National Public Radio, Radio Free Europe, The Washington Post, The Guardian, AFP, and El Pais.

Grigore Pop-Eleches is Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University. He has worked on the politics of IMF programs in Eastern Europe

and Latin America, the rise of unorthodox parties in Eastern Europe, and on the role of historical legacies in post-communist political attitudes and regime change. His most recent book, *Communism's Shadow: Historical Legacies and Contemporary Political Attitudes* (jointly with Joshua A. Tucker), is forthcoming at Princeton University Press. His articles have appeared in a variety of journals, including *The Journal of Politics*, *World Politics*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *Comparative Politics*, *Journal of Democracy*, and *East European Politics and Societies*.

Graeme Robertson is Professor of Political Science at UNC at Chapel Hill. His work focuses on political protest and the competition between rulers and their challengers in contemporary authoritarian political systems. His recent publications include work on political institutions in authoritarian regimes, analysis of structural and political factors that shape regime dynamics, and studies of the factors that shape support for and opposition to autocrats. He has published articles in many academic journals including the *American Political Science Review*, the *American Journal of Political Science*, *The Journal of Politics*, and the *British Journal of Political Science*. His most recent book, *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes: Managing Dissent in Post-Communist Russia*, was published by the Cambridge University Press in January 2011. Graeme is currently working on a number of projects including a study of the Russian opposition in the aftermath of the 2011–12 election protests and an analysis of the effects of revolution and war in Ukraine.

Gwendolyn Sasse is the Director of the newly founded Centre for East European Research and International Studies in Berlin (ZOiS in German). She is also Professor of Comparative Politics at the University of Oxford and a Professorial Fellow at Nuffield College. Her research interests include post-communist transitions, comparative democratization, ethnic conflict, and migration. Findings from her recent Leverhulme Trust–funded project on "Political Remittances: The Political Impacts of Migration," have been published in *Comparative Political Studies*, the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, and *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. She is now working on a monograph on the theme of political remittances. At ZOiS she is overseeing a number of interrelated projects on the war in Ukraine. Her most recent book, *The Crimea Question: Identity, Transition, and Conflict* (Harvard University Press, 2007; paperback 2014), won the Alexander Nove Prize.

Notes

1. This special issue emerged from a methodological roundtable at the 2017 Annual Convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalities, as well as

smaller workshops and presentations at Harvard, George Washington, and Princeton universities and at the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) in Berlin, Germany. We thank all who participated in the discussions, commented on, and reviewed these articles.

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