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Post-Soviet historiography in post-Communist society:
the Ukrainian case

Dear colleagues, first of all, let me express my gratitude for such an opportunity to take part in the conference devoted to the problem of a sensitive political matter. I've just realized that at the conference I'm the only one person who represents a European country that is not welcome to join EU. From the other hand, while in Moscow or Sankt-Petersburg I always aware of the fact that Ukraine is not eager to join another alternative community consisted of former soviet republics like Russia, Byelorussia and Kazakhstan, of, so to say, Eurasian nature. So, Ukraine in the circumstances continues to justify its own name. "Ukraine" is literally translated as "on the edge", or "borderland", in other words, a "land between".

One of the features of Ukraine's history is that, according to professor Pritsak: "since the 15th century their territory has been a "borderland" between East and West, incapable of committing itself entirely to either side and

denied a free choice because it has been coveted by both”. One can investigate incidentally or not Ukraine’s western border coincides with the eastern border of European Union and, at the same time, with the invisible border between Orthodox and Catholic spheres of influence. Such a border always was very transparent. It fluctuated back and forth through the centuries. It refers to the Steppe frontier as well as to the western border separated, or, sometimes, united Ukrainian lands with the western sphere of influence.

As usual, Ukraine’s elite was trying to combine political and cultural traditions borrowed both from the west and from the east. It resulted with creation and existence different, **multiple types of identities** combined with flexible, equivocal sense of identity at whole. According to the opinion of P.R. Magocsi all the history of Ukrainian national development refers to two main types of identity –“inclusive” (complex and territorial-based) and mutually exclusive, built up on the basis of ethnocultural

and linguistic signs¹. Such an identities could easily be compatible with complex (inclusive) formations of overarching type for example, the Whole-Russian, or Slavic, but it came into conflict with up-to-date national (exclusive) identities – Polish, Russian, Ukrainian accordingly.

Observations on Ukrainian historical development have made some scholars conclude that due to constant perturbations and changes, the Ukrainian society acquired the traits of political culture oriented to survival and adaptation rather than independent development². Facing the danger of new changes it demands plasticity, transparency of social and cultural borders, flexibility together with uncertainty, trying to avoid following some certain schemes and models of further development. As a result the society did not face the problem of making a concrete choice but making a choice in general...

¹ Magocsi P.-R. The Ukrainian National Revival: A New Analytical Framework // Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism. 1989. Vol. XVI. No. 1-2. P. 45-62. Idem. A History of Ukraine. University of Toronto Press, 1998. P. 351-365.

² Molchanov M. A. Political Culture and National Identity in Russian-Ukrainian Relations. – Texas A& M University Press, 2002. – P. 166-206.

Historical memory has always played a decisive role in maintaining continuity in Ukrainian society fragmented along political, cultural and religious boundaries. Actually different interpretations of Ukrainian past reflected evolving and mutual relations of the different identities³. From the one hand, Ukrainian historiography for the past three hundred years at least has played the role of a cornerstone and retranslator of the national identity in its modern (mostly exclusive) and pre-modern (mostly inclusive) forms. From the other hand, Ukrainian historiography sometimes looks like a battlefield for different political and cultural orientations.

Nowadays Ukrainian historians have faced complicated and contradictory tasks. The social and political situation demanded of them the creation and dissemination of a new conception of Ukrainian historical process that could be able to consolidate a fragmented society on the basis of common historical memory, myths

³ Velychenko S. National History as Cultural Process. A Survey of the Interpretations of Ukraine's Past in Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian Historical Writing from the earliest Times to 1914. – Edmonton, CIUS. - 1992; Idem. Shaping Identity in Eastern Europe and Russia. Soviet-Russian and Polish Accounts of Ukrainian History, 1914-1991. - New York, St. Martin's Press, 1993; Kohut Z. The development of a Ukrainian national Historiography in Imperial Russia // *Historiography of Imperial Russia: The Profession and Writing of History in a Multinational State* / Ed. Th. Sanders. – Armonk, NY, 1999. – P. 453 – 473.

and national identity and close interrelation with political elite on this basis. At the same time the task of the intellectual modernization of historiography, its encounter with the world intellectual environment and its response to challenges of postmodernism dictated the necessity of “deconstruction” and demythologization of the national historical narrative, emanating from governmental and political institutions. Above all, moreover, it had to be solved by those who yesterday were concerned with the creation of a “new Soviet people” and an active struggle against “bourgeois ideology”.

The former Soviet historians and structures turned out to be necessary to the new power consisted mostly of the former Soviet bureaucracy and, as far as possible, supported by it⁴. It is not an coincidental that in the government of independent Ukraine the post of vice-premier for humanitarian affairs in recent years was given to professional historians, chairs in the academic institutions.

⁴ Касьянов Георгій. Ще не вмерла українська історіографія. Проблеми методології // Критика. 2002. № 4.

Post-Soviet (official) historiography has preserved the entirety of institutes, personnel, publishing infrastructures, functionary and disciplinary hierarchy as well as its proximity to the government establishment and devotion to the canonized historical narrative. Basically, the methodological orientation of representatives of this trend appears to be the most amorphous and simultaneously contradictory. It inherited many traits of Soviet historiography from the times of "perestroika" combined with the national paradigm of Ukrainian historical thought and certain adaptations from Western Ukrainian and Soviet studies.

The next, in terms of by significance, place in modern Ukrainian historiography came to be occupied by the national-statist trend. It united the historians of a national – democratic orientation, who became the ideological successors of M.S. Hrushevs'ky, V.Lypyns'ky and their adherents of the mid -20th century. The institutional structures of this trend for the most part consist of non-government organizations and publications dating to the times of Soviet perestroika and were complemented with

new ones created with the participation and support of the Ukrainian Diaspora. A teleological, linear interpretation of the Ukrainian historical process since ancient times, opposition to the Polish, Russian and Soviet national “grand-narratives”, a colonial concept of Ukrainian - Russian relations⁵, and extremely negative attitudes to the Soviet historical legacy are especially characteristic of this trend.

Finally, the new generation of Ukrainian historians that emerged around the mid-90-ies, represent the third – modernistic trend in Ukrainian historiography. It developed on the basis of intellectual, financial and organizational aid of the Western academic community. It tends to be distinguished from both the post-Soviet and the national historiographies in its orientation toward the Western humanities and sociopolitical literature and a post-modern understanding of the historiographical process. As a rule these are people who put themselves forward as independent intellectuals transcending the limits of the

⁵ Velychenko S. The Issue of Russian Colonialism in Ukrainian Thought // *Ab Imperio*. 2002. # 1. P.323-366.

national paradigm. Their influence on modern Ukrainian historiography still remains insignificant.

In general, Ukrainian historians have created another, alternative version of the Soviet period based on the principles of national historiography that has almost supplanted Soviet interpretations of recent history. Nevertheless, the influence of the professional environment of historians on the historical consciousness of Ukrainian society could be more marked at the level of educational programs and textbooks, but more limited at the level of the ordinary reader, orientated to Russian-language cultural production where well-known imperial, and Soviet historical stereotypes are cultivated. It is possible to find in this environment the echo of archaic, pre-modern imaginations of the historical process, together with inevitable anti-Semitism and popular conspiracy theories. The contradictory nation-state policy of the previous regime, the general weakness of state and public institutions, absence of a culture of ideological pluralism and dialogue in society play a remarkable role in the

conservation of the Soviet historical identity and the Orthodox-Slavic basis that underlies it.

The historical consciousness of society in contemporary Ukraine remains mythologized to a great extent. It is home to an irreconcilable struggle of different, sometimes mutually exclusive projections of the past which have, except the national and political ones, also a regional dimension. The influx of Soviet films, newspaper publications and symbols reanimates a mythology of the Soviet period that actively resists the myths of the Ukrainian national paradigm in historiography. The attitude to Soviet problems in contemporary Ukrainian society is marked by a struggle between Soviet and national projections of the past, where there is too little place for modernists to eradicate the opposition between them for the benefit of a new system of values.