

3. State of Research on National Belonging in Ukraine

This chapter provides an overview of the social-scientific discussion on national belonging in Ukraine. I will briefly outline the evolvement of the Ukrainian nation and, linked to it, of the Ukrainian sense of national belonging. I will thereby explain the historical, political, and social circumstances which have influenced Ukraine's development.

Concerning Ukraine's nation building, it is striking that Ukraine lacked statehood for most of its history which had a long-lasting impact on Ukraine's nation-building (cf. Kappeler 2014): After the dissolution of the medieval multi-ethnic empire Kievan Rus' at the end of the 13th century, which was partly situated on contemporary Ukrainian territory, Ukraine experienced a long history of foreign rule. The Ukrainian nation emerged slowly because of the fragmentation of (today's) Ukrainian territory between the Polish Kingdom (later the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth) as well as the Russian and Habsburg Empire. The country's long division into Polish and temporarily Habsburg ruled West- and Russian and later Soviet-ruled East-Ukraine further complicated the emergence of the Ukrainian nation. Whereas the evolvement of Ukrainian national belonging had been hindered under the Polish and Russians, it developed faster and stronger under Habsburg rule. While cultural differences between Ukrainians and the Polish supported the evolvement of the Ukrainian nation, the assimilation pressure under the Polish hindered it at the same time. In the case of the Russian Empire, the commonalities between Ukrainians and Russians and the Empire's assimilation pressure, restricting, for example, the Ukrainian language, are among the reasons

that complicated the evolvement of the Ukrainian nation. In contrast, the cultural differences as well as the experience of greater autonomy and political, democratic participation in the Habsburg Empire supported the evolvement of national belonging in Western Ukraine after the end of the Polish rule there. Ukraine also experienced a few attempts of early state-building during the rise of the Cossacks⁹ in Central-Eastern Ukraine in the 17th and 18th centuries and in the aftermath of World War I (WWI), which, however, all failed. After WWI, (Eastern and Central) Ukraine was granted its own nation-state within the Soviet Union (USSR), but it actually functioned more as a quasi-state. In the context of World War II (WWII), (again) Polish-ruled West-Ukraine was conquered by the Soviets so that contemporary Ukrainian territory was united into one state for the first time. Following the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, the sovereign Ukrainian nation-state finally emerged. Overall, the Ukrainian nation emerged slowly in confrontation with foreign rule in the 19th and 20th centuries, but the Ukrainian nation-state did not successfully develop of its own will until 1991 (cf. Kappeler 2014, 2011b: 5–8). Against this background, the question arises of what constitutes Ukrainian national belonging.

Considering the late creation of the Ukrainian nation-state and particularly the experience of assimilation pressure under foreign rule, the meaning of ›being Ukrainian‹ was grounded in ethno-cultural characteristics at first, such as language and culture (cf. Kulyk 2016: 590). During the Soviet era, the ethnic foundation of ›Ukrainianness‹ prevailed further

9 The Cossacks were a society of free warriors of predominately Eastern Slavs that emerged in the 15th century at the autonomous steppe border between the Russian Empire, the Crimean Khanate and the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and who, among other things, offered military and diplomatic tasks to the surrounding rulers (cf. Kappeler 2013: 11ff). In the course of the 16th century, the Cossack Hetmanate evolved, an autonomous state-like society of the Cossacks that is seen as a predecessor of contemporary Ukraine from a Ukrainian perspective (cf. Kappeler 2013: 35–39, 2014: 8, 54–71). The Cossack history of Ukraine and its role in Ukrainian national belonging will be further discussed in chapter 5.5.1. Other examples of earlier state-building attempts were the ›Ukrainian People’s Republic‹ (1917–1920) in the East and the ›West Ukrainian People’s Republic‹ (1918–1919) in the aftermath of WWI (cf. Kappeler 2014: 8, 171–177).

(cf. *ibid.*): At first, the Soviet rulers designed a nationality regime which ascribed every Soviet citizen a single nationality (cf. Brubaker 1994: 48, 53, 55f). Nationality was thereby »based on descent, not on residence« (ibid.: 55). Nationality, used as a synonym for ethnicity during Soviet times, was one's legal status, bureaucratically used, for example, in passports or as a statistical category in censuses and surveys (cf. *ibid.*: 48, 53, 55f). Based on this, Soviet rule established (more or less) autonomous homelands for all its different peoples (cf. *ibid.*: 52). To summarize, the creation of an ethno-national federalism, the promotion of the Ukrainian language and culture as well as the systematic filling of management positions with members of the Ukrainian political cadre (so-called ›Korenizatsiia politics‹) were among the most important pillars of the Soviet nationality regime (cf. Kappeler 2014: 190f). Considering the assimilation politics of Russification under Tsarist Russian rule the Soviet nationality regime thereby (partly) promoted *Ukrainization*¹⁰ (cf. *ibid.*, see chapter 5.3 on language). However, the Soviet nationality regime changed gradually from the 1920s, reaching its peak between the 1960s and 1970s, when the idea of creating a homogeneous ›Soviet people‹ out of the heterogeneous population came to the fore (cf. Boeckh 2011: 349): The politics of ›Sovietization‹, included, among others, the promotion of Russian as the statewide language and the emigration of ethnic Russians to other Soviet states. The Soviet nationality concept remained relevant for the self-identification of Ukrainians even after the dissolution of the USSR. For example, it was still used in scientific research and state censuses, which continued to (re)produce automatic responses about national self-identification in terms of ethnicity (cf. Wilson 2002: 32).

The social-constructivist perspective on nations reveals its relevance when considering the Soviet nationality regime to be examples of Anderson's model of ›official nationalism‹, a state reaction to dealing with upcom-

10 *Ukrainization* is a policy orientation seeking to promote the development of both the Ukrainian language and culture in Ukraine. In this context, it can also be understood as assimilation politics towards the non-ethnic Ukrainian population in Ukraine. Historically, *Ukrainization* has taken place since Ukraine's independence in 1991 as well as in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic under Bolshevik rule in the 1920s and early 1930s in order to strengthen Soviet rule in the newly established Soviet Union.

ing popular nationalist movements among the population (cf. Anderson 2005a: 88–93, 113f, 159). While the Soviet regime tried to erase nationalism at first by granting its different peoples certain rights, the regime changed to a more suppressive mode with its Sovietization politics (cf. Brubaker 1994: 49, 54).

Following independence, self-identification as Ukrainian gained more salience among the population and Ukrainian national belonging gradually became more civic at the same time (cf. Kulyk 2016: 591). However, this outcome did not necessarily have to happen. Since newly established states require new political identities, state creation and its accompanying nation-building process can challenge former identities and loyalties (cf. Harris 2020: 594f, 598). This is particularly true when ethnic markers of belonging serve to »fill the legitimacy gap left by the disintegration of previous political ties« (ibid.: 597). The wave of ethno-nationalist mobilization which lies, among other developments, at the core of the Soviet Union's dissolution, could also have smoothed the path to more ethnic nation-building in Ukraine—leading to difficulties, considering the multi-ethnic population and the Soviet nationality regime's legacy of inherent, unsolved tensions and antagonisms among different peoples (cf. ibid.: 597). The decision to grant citizenship to all permanent residents regardless of their ethnicity created the inclusive, civic foundation of the contemporary Ukrainian nation(-state) (cf. Zhurzhenko 2014: 253). However, the case of Ukraine demonstrates the intertwining of civic and ethnic notions of belonging. The double character of Ukrainian belonging stems from civic nation-building with ›soft‹ Ukrainization, as pursued by the administrations of the first two presidents of independent Ukraine, Leonid Kravchuk (1991–1994) and Leonid Kuchma (1994–2005) (cf. Besters-Dilgers 2011: 375–382, Kappeler 2014: 270–274; Kulyk 2018: 7, 2011: 633): For instance, although Ukrainian had replaced Russian as the country's official language, it was only moderately promoted through educational institutions, like schools and universities. Therefore, the majority of the ethnic Russian as well as Russian-speaking Ukrainian population could combine their sense of belonging to the new Ukrainian state with »their Russian/Slavic/Orthodox or even pro-Soviet cultural affiliations and local identities« (Zhurzhenko 2014: 253). Nevertheless, Ukraine, was diagnosed

as having a weak sense of national belonging at the turn of the millennium due to competing notions of ›Ukrainianness‹ (cf. Wilson 2002: 31).

In his analysis, Stephen Shulman highlights the existence of two competing versions of ethnic national identity in Ukraine at the turn of the millennium, which he names *Ethnic Ukrainian* and (ethnic) *Eastern Slavic* identity (cf. Shulman 2004).¹¹ The ›Ethnic Ukrainian‹ identity emphasizes Ukrainian ethnicity, culture, and language as the foundation of ›Ukrainianness‹ (cf. Shulman 2004: 38, 41; 2005: 68f). Considering the inclusion–exclusion character of national identity and belonging (see chapter 2), Ukraine has had to define its identity in contrast to Russia due to their ethnic-cultural commonalities and as Russia was the ideological center of the USSR (cf. Kuzio 2001: 346). Large cultural and historical differences as well as negative experiences under Russian rule are stressed as reasons (cf. Shulman 2004: 39f, 2005: 68f). Consequently, the revival of the Ukrainian culture and language as well as breaking ties with Russia are prioritized within Ukrainian nation-building from this perspective (cf. Shulman 2005: 68f). Closer cooperation with Europe is, in contrast, favored by highlighting close political, economic, and cultural ties from a historiographical perspective (cf. *ibid.*: 69).¹² In contrast, the ›Eastern Slavic‹ identity is based on the conception that Ukraine and Russia are considered to be ›brotherly peoples‹ or form an ›Eastern Slavic unity‹ (with Belarus) due to their commonalities of language, religion, culture, and their close historical ties (cf. Shulman 2004: 39, 41). This interpretation was essential in imperial Russian and Soviet historiography

11 Since Ukrainian society has been polarized between these two notions of ethnic identity in Ukraine for so long (cf. Bredies 2010: 2, Brudny and Finkel 2011: 820, Zhurzhenko 2014: 249), Shulman's concept will be briefly introduced. Besides Shulman's concept, there are also other works on how Ukrainian society is similarly divided between a pro-Ukrainian versus a pro-Russian or Eastern Slavic identity (see, for example, Riabchuk 2012, Brudny and Finkel 2011). Shulman's terms are used here as they are easy to grasp.

12 The term ›Europe‹ is used synonymously with the ›European Union‹ by Shulman. In this context, the European states are treated as a homogeneous whole, ignoring any differences. Besides this, Schulmann also omits that both Ukraine and Russia (partly) belong to Europe from a territorial point of view. However, since ›Europe‹ is treated as a political/cultural term, Russia is not considered to be part of Europe in contrast to Ukraine.

and continues to shape Russia's current perception of Ukraine (cf. Harris 2020: 606). Because Russians have been part of Ukraine for centuries, it is argued that the Russian culture and language are rooted in Ukraine (cf. Shulman 2004: 39). Therefore, Ukraine is conceptualized as a »fundamentally bi-ethnic, bi-lingual and bi-cultural nation« (ibid.). »Eastern Slavic« national identity does thus not consider Russia but Europe to be the »other« (cf. ibid.: 40). Despite the prevalence of the civic nature of national belonging in Ukraine at the turn of the millennium, Shulman shows that »Eastern Slavic« national belonging prevailed over the »Ethnic Ukrainian« one at the same time (cf. ibid.: 36, 53). His analysis points out the distribution of both identities along ethnic, linguistic, and regional lines: Ukrainians who consider themselves ethnic Russian speak Russian as their everyday language and live in the Southern and Eastern regions, in Kyiv or Crimea, were more likely to demonstrate an »Eastern Slavic« national identity (cf. ibid.: 43f). In contrast, Ukrainians who consider themselves to be ethnic Ukrainian, speak Ukrainian and live in Western and Central Ukraine, tend to demonstrate the »Ethnic Ukrainian« identity (cf. ibid.: 45f).¹³

Over time, Ukrainian national belonging has become more civic and, at the same time, more ethnic Ukrainian in Shulman's sense due to the impact of the »Orange Revolution« in 2004/5 and the »Euromaidan« in 2013/14.

The Orange Revolution in 2004/5 had an ambivalent impact on national belonging in Ukraine as it further strengthened both the civic and ethnic Ukrainian side of it. The existence of competing notions of national belonging stimulated the development of an inclusive, liberal notion of »Ukrainianness« (cf. Brudny and Finkel 2011: 814). This smoothed the way for the emergence of a liberal, pro-democratic, and pro-Ukrainian political opposition by 2004 (cf. Riabchuk 2012: 444), which the Orange Revolution could draw upon. The trigger for it was the accusation of election manipulation by the acting prime minister Viktor Yanukovych who sought to become the country's next president at that time. The social movement succeeded by bringing pro-Ukrainian and pro-democratic

13 However, this classification only holds true when excluding those Ukrainians who prefer a civic conception of »Ukrainianness« (cf. Shulman 2004: 43f).

forces to power under Viktor Yushchenko as the new president (2005–2010) (cf. Kappeler 2014). Subsequently, the country experienced a push for democratization, e. g. concerning freedom of opinion and the media (cf. *ibid.*: 321). Moreover, the state sought to strengthen an inclusive, civic sense of national belonging, but concurrently aimed to place it on strong ethno-cultural foundations (cf. Kulyk 2016: 593). In line with Anderson's (2005a) concept of state ›prescribed‹ nationalism, the promotion of the Ukrainian language (cf. Kulyk 2016: 593), the creation of Ukraine's own, independent historiography as well as culture of remembrance were at the core of Yushchenko's presidency (cf. Bredies 210: 2). Consequently, it became more difficult for non-ethnic Ukrainians to identify themselves as Ukrainian (cf. Kulyk 2016: 593). However, the democratic impetus of the Orange Revolution fizzled out due to internal cleavages and power struggles among the ›orange‹ politicians (cf. Riabchuk 2012: 444, Kappeler 2014: 322), smoothing the way for a different style of politics. The new president Viktor Yanukovych (2010–2014) exerted an authoritarian governing style and strengthened the ›East Slavic‹ notion of belonging. For example, he deprived the parliament and courts of power, suppressed the opposition, and restricted basic civil rights and the media (cf. Riabchuk 2012: 445), thereby complicating Ukraine's transition from a socialist to a democratic country. Furthermore, Yanukovych strengthened the ›East Slavic‹ identity that was commonplace among his electoral base in his home region, the Donbas (cf. *ibid.*, Brudny and Finkel 2011: 828, Shevel 2014: 157), especially by upgrading Russian as another official language (cf. Guttke and Rank 2012: 11f). Yanukovych thereby actively revised the official historiography and its teaching in schools (cf. Shevel 2014: 157). Retrospectively, it seems that the opposing politics under Yushchenko (2006–2010) and Yanukovych (2010–2014) deepened cleavages among the population. Nonetheless, the Orange Revolution sustainably strengthened both the civic (cf. Bureiko and Moga 2019: 142) and the ›Ethnic Ukrainian‹ side of Ukrainian belongingness, which the social movement Euromaidan was able to draw upon years later (cf. Kulyk 2016: 593). Brudny and Finkel (2011: 820) explain this as (Western) Ukrainian nationalism being »forced to evolve from its ethnic, authoritarian, exclusionist and xenophobic roots to become much more liberal, democratic, inclusive, and civic in its nature« due to

the competing notions of belongingness. At the same time, the »negative non- and anti-Russian self-identification supported the development of pro-democratic attitudes and values as a constituting component of the Ukrainian national identity« (ibid.: 829).

The ›Euromaidan‹ in 2013/14 also had an ambivalent impact on national belonging: While it strengthened both the civic and, concurrently, the ethnic side of Ukrainian belonging (cf. Kulyk 2023: 984), the Euromaidan also played a key role for the following military struggles about Crimea and the Donbas Ukraine has been facing since then. The trigger for the movement was President Yanukovich's (2010–2014) unexpected refusal to sign the planned EU association agreement. In the light of Ukraine's traditional seesaw policy with regard to foreign policy (cf. Movčan and Radeztkaja 2015), Putin is said to have had a lever to exert economic as well as political pressure on Ukraine due to its economic dependence on Russia (cf. Kappeler 2014: 276f) as he guaranteed Yanukovich financial support in the form of low gas prices and the purchase of Ukrainian government bonds worth 15 billion dollars just before Yanukovich's refusal to sign the EU association agreement (cf. Walker 2013b). Although the population had not been too pro-EU at that time (see chapter 5.7. on Ukrainian-EU relations), his decision sparked the development of the greatest social movement so far in Ukraine. Although Yanukovich's regime sought to suppress the protest movement violently, his escape to Russia smoothed the way for the movement to succeed. A new pro-democratic and pro-European government came into power in May 2014, which, among other things, revitalized the EU Association Agreement.

Since Ukraine is repeatedly considered to be a »linguistically, culturally, religiously, politically, and regionally« deeply divided country (Riabchuk 2012: 443), the loss of Crimea and the outbreak of armed conflict in the Donbas appear »like a self-fulfilling prophecy« (Zhurzhenko 2014: 249). In this context, Erika Harris highlights the Soviet legacy on unsolved »regional and ethnic conflicts« as a source of separatism in post-Soviet states (Harris 2020: 599). Elise Giuliano (2018), however, stresses that it was not ethnic or ethno-cultural identities but rather local concerns combined with the feeling of abandonment by the capital Kyiv that triggered the secessionist movement in the Donbas. Zhurzhenko (2014: 250), in

contrast, explains both conflicts with the opportunistic and instrumental use of politics of belonging by internal and external elites. The armed conflict in the Donbas therefore appears accordingly as a »war of identities« (ibid.): between Ukraine, which seeks to emancipate itself from Russia to »leave its ›little Russian‹ status behind«, and Russia, which seeks to restore its former glory under a new Russia-led alliance (Harris 2020: 607).¹⁴

Regarding the loss of Crimea and the outbreak of armed conflict in the Donbas in 2014, the strengthening of the population's sense of belonging to Ukraine since then has been notable (cf. Kulyk 2016, 2018; Bekeshkina 2017, Haran 2018, Kulyk 2023), especially its civic nature (cf. Bureiko and Moga 2019, Kulyk 2023). This finding is surprising as most »mainstream scholarship teaches us to expect the mobilization and polarization of ethnic identities« (Kulyk 2023: 984). At the same time, the meaning of feeling Ukrainian changed. On the one hand, this went hand in hand with an increase in Ukrainian nationalism, for example, with regard to national symbols like the anthem and flag (cf. Kulyk 2016: 588, 607; 2023: 984), most likely because Ukrainian nationalism has changed from ethnic exclusionism to inclusiveness (cf. Haran 2018: 5). On the other hand, belongingness to Ukraine is accompanied by increased alienation from Russia (cf. Kulyk 2016: 588, 607). Because Russia is viewed as an enemy, support for further cooperation with Russia has decreased among all regions (cf. Bekeshkina 2017: 31). Thus, the conflict »facilitates the embrace of nationalist beliefs in general and anti-Russian attitudes in particular« (Kulyk 2016: 603f) since Ukraine holds Russia responsible for the conflict (cf. Fischer 2019: 18). Overall, the changes within Ukrainian national

14 The term ›Little Russia‹ refers to a perception which was developed during the Russian Empire and continues to be persistent and particularly strong in contemporary Russia and which considers Ukrainians and Belarusians to be one and the same people with Russians, namely ›Eastern Slavs‹. In this context, Ukrainians and Belarusians are not considered to be distinct people or nations, but only a regional branch of the ›Eastern Slavic‹ people, subordinated to the Russians. Whereas Russia used to call itself ›Great Russia‹ in the past, Ukraine has been called ›Little Russia‹ and Belarus' has been called ›White Russia‹. By calling itself (Great) Russia, it presents itself as the legal successor to the medieval multi-ethnic Kievan Rus' Empire (cf. Kuzio 2001: 344, 2017: 290; Subtelny 2011: 20, Harris 2020: 606, Kappeler 2011a: 192f, Wilson 2015: 79).

belonging can be understood as »de-Russification« (cf. Onuch et al. 2018: 82, Kulyk 2023: 984). However, viewing Russia negatively does not necessarily go hand in hand with alienation from the Russian people, as the majority of Ukrainians (still) maintain a positive attitude towards Russians, even among respondents with a strong Ukrainian identity (cf. Kulyk 2016: 600f). Hence, as Kulyk stresses, national belonging in Ukraine will not necessarily be anti-Russian in the future (cf. *ibid.*: 606).

Although the tendency of a growing sense of belonging to Ukraine among the population is not uniform across all regions, the »main dividing line has shifted eastwards and now lies between the Donbas and the adjacent east-southern regions« (*ibid.*: 607).¹⁵ In this light, Zhurzhenko (214: 250) does not see Ukraine as divided, but as a »two-speed country«, highlighting that Central, Southern, and to some extent also Eastern Ukraine are catching up with West-Ukraine in terms of national belonging. This becomes most prominent considering that self-identification as Ukrainian began to dominate in the predominantly Russian-speaking southern and government-controlled eastern regions for the first time following the outbreak of armed conflict (cf. Bekeshkina 2017: 9f, 31). This led, among other things, to a growing patriotic attitude among the population there (cf. *ibid.*) and pro-Western orientation (cf. Reznik 2023: 343).

Concerning the escalation of the armed conflict in the Donbas into a Russian war of aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, most scholars postulate further strengthening of Ukrainian national belonging, especially its civic side (cf. Kulyk 2023, Onuch 2022). At the same time, the resistance of Ukrainians to the Russian aggressor is said to stem from a »strong and encompassing« sense of belonging to Ukraine which »urged [Ukrainians] to take up arms and risk their lives« (Kulyk 2023: 975). While

15 Strong self-identification as Ukrainian is not evenly distributed among the population: Whereas national belonging has traditionally been more strongly consolidated in the west and center of Ukraine, it has been more contested in the southeast and especially in the eastern Donbas region, where the armed conflict has had a negative influence on identification with Ukraine (cf. Kulyk 2016: 595f). In addition, identification with Ukraine has traditionally been challenged by local identities, as affiliation with one's hometown and region has been strong among Southern and Eastern Ukrainians (cf. *ibid.*: 595). Consequently, the population in the separatist-controlled territories of Donbas has become increasingly alienated from Ukraine (cf. *ibid.*: 599).

this was surprising for many foreign observers, especially as resistance was also strong among ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking Ukrainians, scholars have already demonstrated there is increased civic belonging among the population, which is more salient compared to ethnic, linguistic, and regional identifications (cf. Kulyk 2023: 975, Onuch 2022).

Considering that Eastern Ukrainians from the Donbas, to whom the IDPs interviewed belong, feel less strongly affiliated to Ukraine, the question arises of how the outbreak of armed conflict in their region has influenced their sense of belonging to Ukraine. This question becomes even more relevant given that one's sense of belonging may change at certain biographical (turning) points (cf. Rosenthal and Bogner 2009: 14f), for example as crises and wars can disrupt the foundations of (national) identity, as they put »the parameters, meaning, and salience of identities to an extreme test« (Sasse and Lackner 2018: 140). In particular, experiencing crisis and violence leads to the formation of collective identities motivated by the threat faced (cf. Onuch 2022: 54). Against this backdrop, IDPs represent a specific, extreme case with which to examine the formation of national belonging and the factors that influence it. Despite some quantitative studies, such as that by Gwendolyn Sasse and Alice Lackner (2018), the views of Ukrainian IDPs remain less researched, except for the focus on the humanitarian consequences of the armed conflict in the Donbas.

Overall, this chapter has served to outline the evolvement of national belonging in Ukraine, with a particular focus on the historical, political, and social circumstances which influenced Ukraine's nation-building. In line with Grounded Theory, the literature review on national belonging in Ukraine serves to stimulate my analysis, especially to contrast the findings and to extend the analysis beyond the individual to the societal level.

