1. Introduction

Ukraine has long been seen as a deeply divided country—historically, linguistically, politically, and culturally (cf. Zhurzhenko 2014, Riabchuk 2012): torn between close, especially cultural and economic, ties with Russia and Soviet nostalgia on the one hand and the growing desire to promote Ukraine's cultural and historical uniqueness as well as independence from Russia on the other hand. In this light, the loss of Crimea and the outbreak of armed secessionist conflict in the Donbas in 2014 appear »like a self-fulfilling prophecy« (Zhurzhenko 2014: 249)—which continues considering the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine since February 2022.

The case of Ukraine demonstrates the difficulties of creating and maintaining its own national identity—considering the country's history (cf. Kappeler 2014): Ukraine has long been ruled by other empires, especially the Polish kingdom, imperial Russia, and the Soviet Union. In this context, Ukraine faced assimilation politics which have had a lasting impact on the development of a national sense of belonging to this day. Parallel to other European countries, the Ukrainian consciousness developed in the 19th century, but nationalist aspirations were suppressed under foreign rule, especially in Soviet times. Although the country came into existence as the first Ukrainian titular nation-state during Soviet times, the Soviet regime sought to merge all nationalities into one. Only in the wake of the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991, did Ukraine have to consolidate itself as an independent (nation-)state. It had to outgrow its Soviet identity and instead create a new meaningful bond of social cohesion and anchor it sustainably in its society, while having a multinational population, among them ethnic Russians.

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783828851320-1 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

The loss of Crimea to Russia, the outbreak of armed conflict in the Donbas region in 2014, and its escalation into an open Russian war against Ukraine in February 2022 demonstrate the costs of creating and strengthening Ukraine's national sense of belonging. After having experienced Russification under imperial Russian and Soviet rule, independent Ukraine's nation-building had been polarized between Ukrainization and preserving the past hegemony of the Russian language and culture (cf. Kappeler 2014): On the one hand, (local) pro-Russian powers, among them, former president Viktor Yanukovych (2010–2014), sought to keep and strengthen the commonalities and ties with Russia, especially by fostering the Russian language and close economic cooperation. On the other hand, most Ukrainian presidents have promoted the society's Ukrainization, in particular using pro-Ukrainian linguistic policies. At the same time, most Ukrainian presidents had also intensified cooperation with Western partners, especially with the EU, US, and NATO, while also keeping (profitable) ties with Russia as one of Ukraine's most important economic partners and creditors (cf. Stewart and Umland 2012, Movčan and Radetzkaja 2015). However, the country's moderate Ukrainization and seesaw policy with regard to foreign policy have been seen increasingly critically by the country's Russian minority and Russia, especially under Putin. The main criticism is that the Ukrainian state is said to increasingly discriminate against its Russian(-speaking) minority by enforcing Ukrainization politics on them (cf. TASS 2022). This criticism was at the center of the outbreak of the secessionist movement in the Donbas in spring 2014 and its support by Putin.

Against this background, I state that the outbreak of an armed conflict in the Donbas and its escalation into Russian war against Ukraine in February 2021 have to be understood as a conflict about Ukraine's position in the world: more precisely, about belonging and its independence from Russia. We therefore need to understand Putin's perspective on history: In a speech from summer 2021, Putin highlights (once again) that Ukrainians, Belarusians and Russians are one and the same people, forming a historic unity and thus expresses his concern about Ukraine and Russia drifting increasingly apart (cf. Putin 2021). In December 2021, a few weeks before the outbreak of open war, Putin stated that he regretted the

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783828851320-1 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

dissolution of the Soviet Union as a tragedy (cf. TASS 2021). Among other things, he emphasized a »major humanitarian tragedy« as millions of ethnic Russians had been cut off from their Russian »homeland«, finding themselves in a collection of newly founded states from one day to the next (Osborn and Ostroukh 2021). Putin therefore sees it as Russia's responsibility to support and defend Russians all over the world, but also Russian speakers for long (cf. Kuzio 2017: 290). As he equates the Soviet Union with »historical Russia« (ibid.), he revealed his perception on the dissolution as mainly a setback for Russian power (cf. Osborn and Ostroukh 2021). At the same time, Putin repeatedly criticized NATO, and in particular the US' hegemony within it, for not respecting Russia's security considering its Eastern expansion in the previous decades and in particular by inviting Ukraine to join the alliance (cf. Putin 2022). In his speech on 24th of February in 2022, Putin criticized the NATO countries for supporting »far-right nationalists and neo-Nazis in Ukraine« (ibid.). Therefore, Putin legitimized Russia's war against Ukraine by stressing the need to »demilitarise and denazify Ukraine« because Ukraine posed a threat as it would be preparing for war against Russia in the near future (cf. ibid.). In addition, Putin stressed in this speech that Soviet citizens were not asked when the USSR was terminated by politicians (cf. ibid.), most likely aiming to question contemporary post-Soviet borders, as done with Crimea and the Donbas republics in 2014, which Putin views as ›historically Russian‹ (cf. Harris 2020: 603).

An analysis of national belonging in Ukraine is topical and also important in a broader sense because the fragmentation of national belonging, secessionist aspirations among the population and the contestation of belonging which can lead to war are characteristic of our contemporary world. The case of Ukraine thereby illustrates the relevance of national belonging in (armed) conflicts: The fragmented[1] sense of national belonging in Ukraine can be seen as the breeding ground for the conflict's outbreak as well as a powerful resource within the conflict which the parties

1 The fragmentation of Ukrainian belonging is manifest in the variation of its strength and elements of Ukrainian belonging, especially regionally, and that other affiliations challenge belonging to Ukraine (cf. Kulyk 2016, Zhurzhenko 2014, Riabchuk 2012). This will be discussed in more detail in the third chapter.

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783828851320-1 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

involved seek to influence in their favor. In (hybrid) wars, means of influencing national belonging include violence, economic and informational means, discursive practices, propaganda, politics of memory, state social programs as well as cultural, scientific, or sporting events (cf. Kataiev 2018: 29, 31f).[2] Consequently, belonging becomes a ›military weapon‹ in a conflict. In particular to strengthen social cohesion among a country's population to legitimize actions within the conflict, but also to harm the other side because the formation of an ›us versus them attitude‹ legitimizes hostility towards others or manipulates the other party's sense of belonging.

Basing my analysis on biographical narrative interviews, which are analyzed according to Grounded Theory methodology, I aim to answer two questions: First, *how is national belonging of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) constituted*? Second, *which impact has the armed Donbas conflict had on their sense of belonging to Ukraine*? The qualitative approach chosen facilitates examining the evolvement and maintenance of national belonging under difficult conditions, like in the face of an armed conflict.

Concerning the argumentative structure of this study, I first present the theoretical, social-scientific discussion on national identity and belonging (chapter 2). This serves to familiarize with the common theoretical concepts used in this study field to develop the necessary vocabulary for the analysis. From this, I present the current state of research on national belonging in Ukraine (chapter 3) in which I will embed my findings. Next, I will outline the methodological background of the study by introducing the approach of biography research and of narrative interviewing for data collection as well as the methodology of Grounded Theory for analysis (chapter 4). This chapter is rounded off with a reflection on the methodologies used, including their benefits for studying national belonging, and on research ethics. The core of this study are the findings of my analysis (chapter 5): Each sub-chapter highlights one aspect, identified in the data as relevant for national belonging in Ukraine. Finally, I summarize

2 Schreiber defines the conflict in the Donbas as hybrid warfare that is characterized by the fact that conventional as well as unconventional, symmetrical and asymmetrical as well as military and non-military means of conflict are used openly and covertly. However, to what extent this justifies a new concept of war or has always been part of warfare is still up for debate (cf. Schreiber 2016).

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783828851320-1 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

the results to reconstruct contemporary national belonging in Ukraine and reflect on the impact the armed Donbas conflict has had on it (chapter 6). In addition, the implications of the findings and impetus for further research are discussed. The analysis has been updated in line with the escalation of the Donbas conflict into an open war against Ukraine by Russia in February 2022, as the study was finished in summer 2021.

Overall, I argue that contemporary Ukrainian national belonging is based on a mixture of markers of belonging, among other elements, on the Ukrainian language and culture, historical memory, a pro-democratic attitude as well as activism. In contrast to previous studies, I argue that ancestry, or ethnicity, does not play an important role anymore. Ukrainian national belonging has always been based on demarcation and emancipation from Russia as Ukraine's historic ›other‹. Since Russia is considered to be Ukraine's enemy due to the conflict, the aforementioned elements of national belonging serve to highlight Ukraine's linguistic, cultural, historiographic, economic, and political uniqueness and to promote emancipation from Russia. The anti-Russian foreign policy orientation, combined with a pro-EU attitude, mark the tip of Ukraine's emancipation from Russia. In this context, I argue that the relevance of all markers of belonging lies in demonstrating loyalty to Ukraine and concurrently in creating a distance to Russia, which is increasing in relevance in its visibility. In addition, I argue that national belonging in Ukraine has been strengthened by the ongoing armed conflict or war in the country since 2014. Current research shows in this context how the war is bridging cleavages among the population; thus, the war contributes to Ukraine's nation-building. Lastly, I argue that Ukrainian national belonging is not necessarily exclusive to other ethnic, religious, or local affiliations.

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783828851320-1 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND

https://doi.org/10.5771/9783828851320-1 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY-NC-ND