

THE IMAGE OF AN EASTERN AND WESTERN UKRAINE: MYTH OR REALITY? ¹

We may begin this considerations recalling the well known – but still true and important – fact of the abundance of physical and metaphorical borders which give to Ukraine its particular character, without necessarily negating its homogeneity as a nation. Indeed, it was the place of historical borders between the Latin, Orthodox and Muslim worlds, the border between the steppe and the forest, also having been part of the Russian, the Austro-Hungarian and Soviet empires. To the point of becoming a border, which is to say to integrate –within the state itself – the idea of rupture or margin, as it is suggested by the very origin of the term “*Ukraine*”. As Yaroslav Dashkevitch has written: “The border always existed, but its contours were constantly in flux, weakened now on one side, now on the other, without ever being truly fixed or impermeable. It was a frontier on fire, until the middle of the sixteenth century”.

Behind this vision, there is clearly a large number of assumptions. One of these is the following: Ukraine could not exist as a unified entity separate from Russia, but would be perfectly capable of existing as a unified state within the Russian Federation. Does this mean that, for example, the reunified Germany can overcome its difficulties, but the Ukraine cannot overcome its own internal differences? We can certainly see the usefulness of this idea when it comes to contesting the legitimacy of the country’s independence.

In this context, we will begin with some examples – clichés or realities – that can be seen as characterizing the Eastern and Western parts of Ukraine. After that, we will look at the use made by the propaganda of the idea of partition, asking at the end where the unification factors of the nation and the real boundaries are.

Historical Heritage: Some Examples

Historically, Western Ukrainians maintain a particular relation with the idea of centralized power. Their history participates in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, their life was strictly connected with the capitals of the Empires to which they belonged –

¹ A paper dealing with the same subject has been published by Annie Daubenton in French, in “*Politique étrangère*” (3/2002), with the title “*Les rapports russo-ukrainiens: Empire ou démocratie?*”. This article may be read on internet.

Vienna, Prague, Warsaw, Budapest or St. Petersburg. Subsequently Western Ukraine manifests a historical distrust for all that concerns centralized authority, and considers it better to distance itself from all kind of centripetal power.

Up to our days, Galicia has been conscious of the role it plays in the edification of the state. I think for instance of those projects and discussions that took place in L'viv with the purpose of bringing together a number of political and economic decision-makers from Central and Western Europe, with those of Kiev.

An effort was also made at L'viv to establish direct relations with other parts of the country, without necessarily having to pass through Kyiv. In this respect, Western Ukraine can be seen as assuming a double role: on the one hand, it bridges the gap between Ukraine and the Western countries, and on the other it reconciles territories within the country.

The tantamount role of Western Ukraine should also be mentioned in the area of publications, books, reviews, translations : it is through these publications that the nation's language, literature, and debate of ideas are expressed. This phenomenon of Western dominance in terms of cultural diffusion in Ukrainian language has been considerably accentuated in recent years and it is certainly due to the impact of Western Ukraine if now the main intellectual debates and publications take place in Ukrainian language. Moreover, given that Ukrainian is not a common international language, the world of Ukrainian letters has received a dynamic impetus towards almost simultaneous translations into other European languages. Though it looks like a paradox, one might say that the "marginality" of the language has facilitated intercultural exchange and communication.

If the Western part of Ukraine is organized around a main center, L'viv, the same cannot be said about the Eastern part, where at least three centers are extant: Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk and Donetsk. Each of these cities has a distinct history and its economic alignment with Kyiv, and thereby – particularly at the present moment – with Russia. But their roles, evidently, cannot be reduced only to that. Certainly, national identification is far more hesitant in these cities than in their Western counterpart, a situation which is reflected in many publications. Yet the idea of the return to Russia is far from being a popular option.

Another commonplace: has the West more xenophobic attitudes than the East? Sociologists having conducted studies and opinion polls about "attitudes towards foreigners and differences in general" discovered that, on the contrary, the East was far more isolated, and resistant to difference than the Western population, more

accustomed to communicate and exchange with its western neighbors.

This polarization of positions was clearly visible during the April elections of 2002. The Reformist party, “Nasha Ukraina”, had the support of about 60 % of the Western population, whereas the Presidential block had closer to 6 %. In the East, these figures were somewhat reversed. In the East, the Reformist block had about 6 %, the Presidential block about 20 % and the Communists are close to 35 %.

Some political interests made use of this situation, suggesting that it was simpler to deal only with one part of the country, transferring this disparity on a territorial plan.

The Idea Of Partition As An Instrument Of Propaganda: A So-Called Non-Viability Of Independence

Since its independence, the argument concerning a quasi insurmountable partition of the country has been reactivated at regular intervals. During the years 1992/1994, it was put forward as a major obstacle to the formation of a united state and hence of independence. We can even pose the following ironic question: after having handed over its nuclear arsenal, should Ukraine proceed by handing over a part of its territory? The question of territorial discontinuity was, in any case, a pressing concern.

During these years, several hypotheses have been put forward and a project was even begun to organize the administration of the country according to the model of the German “Länder”. We can imagine where the danger lays: on one side, a State marked by strong particularities; on the other side, a State too young to risk a territorial break-up.

This threat of breaking-up was unquestionably brandished during those years by many commentators, mainly from the West who could not see any viability in a state in which nearly each region could be annexed by a neighboring state.

Public opinion had come out overwhelmingly in favor of independence in December of 1991. But in light of the economic fiasco, which followed, the road of independence began to seem much less attractive to a people who could see no direct benefits in their daily lives.

Finally, a kind of “Jacobin” system was put in place. For this decision, Ukraine is today paying another price than it was expected : a centralized power structure now held integral control over the country, without any safe-guard, an axis of centralized political authority used the hierarchical power structure, while the local or regional powers continued to exert their influence through the clan and economic-oligarchic structures.

Is Individualism A Strength?

At this point, it may be useful to note that, while Ukraine is not a federation, its regionalism is far more pronounced than in the Federation of Russia. On the other side, the Ukrainian state can be said to control the territory in a manner often described as authoritarianism.

Indeed, the State exercises its power, for better or for worse, to the point of provoking further regional isolation. Consequently the regions become self-enclosed, relying upon the law of the least risk, with few communication or cooperation amongst themselves. By way of illustration, at Dnipropetrovs'k, an enterprise with 35 employees counts 9 specialized accountants whose main function is to examine changes in jurisdiction, to avoid conflict with the central authority, but also to exploit any juridical gap. In Kharkiv, the national citizenship is equally uncertain. Neither identified themselves as Russian or Ukrainian, many prefer to call themselves "cosmopolitan" or "European". Odessa too is another region that considers itself as a world apart.

Consequently, it is often individualism that is reinforced. As the Ukrainian proverb says:

"Moja xata z krajiu. Ničogo ne znaiu" I don't know anything; my house is really on the very fringe)

So that is anytime this answer given in response to authority as well as to the demands of civil society movements.

But despite the pressures and mode of influences, the individual is often unpredictable when it comes to elections. The April elections of 2002 represented a decisive sanction of Ukrainian authorities. Even if the commentaries that followed minimized the parliamentary defeat of the pro-presidential block, many Russian leaders declared that the country was clearly divided, and that certain consequences might be follow as a result.

The Idea of a Divided State

A significant event in the development of this strategy occurred in august 2002 in Belarus when president Putin, on official visit in the country, mentioned casually that Belarus might do well to rejoin the Russian Federation. President Lukashenko was visibly upset and judged the suggestion as a national affront.

The Kremlin, however, did not withdraw the comment, but went one step further, by suggesting that certain regions in Belarus could take the form of "Gubernii", as they were under the reign of Catherine II. The same idea was put forward by a deputy

of the Duma (M. Lukin, head of the Commission of international relations) several days later, when he declared: “It’s a divided nation and its aspiration should be satisfied”. Moreover, he added that, respectful of public opinion, there would be a referendum to consult the population. He concluded: “The divided people will answer positively”.

When V. Putin assumed the leadership of Russia, he underlined the importance of the foreign countries of so-called “near abroad” in the diplomatic area as well as the primary importance of an integrated network of energy resources in the Russian new military doctrine. Several months earlier, a constitutional amendment has been passed at the Federal level with the aim of “recruiting new subjects into the Russian Federation”. By virtue of this legislation, they began to institutionalize a process for consulting by referendum the populations, susceptible to enter in the Federation.

This last development holds a double significance for Ukraine. The idea of the divided country could be used to justify Russian intrusion.

Historically, the “Gubernii” were placed under the responsibility of a “gubernator”. Surprisingly enough, “Governor” was the nickname given to Mr. V. Chernomyrdin, the Russian Ambassador in Ukraine, as early as his nomination became actual in spring 2001.

If one cares to look at the tremendous effect that this “ambassador” has provoked in the country, it is possible to say that Ukraine received its “gubernator”, even before any question was solved of becoming a “gubernia”.

European Integration and The Risk of Another Iron Curtain

Today, Ukraine witnesses the European enlargement to Central European countries. The risk is – to be sure – that Western and Eastern Ukraine will finally be united, but placed in front of a new barrier. As it has been said by an intellectual from L’viv: “The Polish people, 70 kilometers away, are on a standard of living being at least ten times higher than here. Several years ago, I thought the end of the world was at 70 kilometers far from here, and I don’t wish to live again that experience”.

A recent study – “The vision of the other” – was conducted with the support of the Friedberg foundation, concerning the image of Poland as seen by the Ukrainians and vice-versa. The results showed a diametrical opposition: Poland is conceived of in a positive light by 50 % of Ukrainians, in a neutral manner by 38 % and negatively only by 12 %. Whereas 11 % of the Polish population have a positive view of the Ukrainians, 39 % are neutral and 50% hold a negative image of their Ukrainian neighbors, in view, particularly, of events linked to the Second World War.

Factors of Cohesion, Factors of Discontinuity

A factor of non-coherence is the absence – for instance – of even a single newspaper that can truly claim a national audience. As a result, every region has its own newspaper, often of low quality and financially supported by the local political and economic powers. A weekly with the quality of a “Zerkalo Nedely” (Daily mirror) is hard to buy outside the capital, much harder to find than the “Izvestija”.

We should also draw attention to the fact that in the case of political manifestations, communications are often suspended, preventing any effective protest, particularly on the part of the youth. Even worse, is the economic under-development of the Western regions, in strong contrast with the financial concentration in Kyiv and those regions where the economic relations with Russia are getting closer and stronger every day.

We shall also underline these cultural difficulties in connection with the contrast given by the consideration of our time as an era of “national rebirth”, while the greatest talent, often also the youngest, are obliged to emigrate.

However, to draw a conclusion, one should not forget that the Ukrainian State exists since ten years – a short period in political, social and economic terms, a period which marks a considerable accomplishment taking into account all the difficulties the new nation had to cope with. In this period– especially during the government of Mr. Yushchenko – it has been proven that the State is indeed viable, that it is even in a condition to pay its debts without receiving help from international institutions. The Russian language imposes itself in the media, but a new generation is emerging which has been schooled entirely in Ukrainian, and learns its own history.

In terms of Eastern/Western division, the question of independence and sovereignty has constantly been at stake. The former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Boris Tarasiuk, said that Ukraine is now “a Russian political zone”. He is not the only expert to have radically formulated its anxiety. A writer said that Ukraine has become a society of limited liability, a kind of “Ukraine Limited” (Ltd).

However, recent events indicate that the population can be mobilized, even at the time of election, to prove that they do not accept the idea of unlimited power, the myth of the “iron hand” that the post-communist societies are supposed to need. In this, we may hope that the Right and the Left Bank of Dnypro have already begin to get nearer, on the point to close the gap between them.