

A POST-IRONIC

ELEGY TO

NATIONAL

IDENTITY?

The Liminal Ordeal of Ukraine
Through the Prism
of Digital Culture

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“Am I joke to you?” wonders a giant virion edited into a photo from a mass rally that erupted in Kyiv on June 17, 2020. Reportedly having started as a protest against police misconduct, the rally rapidly turned into a violent clash between Ukrainian nationalists and supporters of an allegedly pro-Russian political party.

This is the description of an Internet meme posted on a Ukrainian meme account. Apart from expressing ironic support for lockdown restrictions, it seems to illustrate a disquieting nationwide trend. Existing side by side with patriotic mobilization, the virus of national indifference has been tormenting Ukraine since the proclamation of its independence. Should it be countered or instrumentalized? What type of national identity does a *liminal* country need?

Instead of attempting to provide definitive answers to such questions, this paper examines the labyrinthine discourse on Ukrainian national identity through a new lens. Although the flourishing digital culture of Internet memes is extensively dismissed as unserious and intrinsically absurd, it can serve as a springboard for exploring a population's national sentiments—or lack thereof. This is especially applicable to Ukraine, where the polyphony of contesting narratives translates into what I refer to as the *liminal* identity of its citizens. Resorting to bombastic parodies, allegories, and even offensive humor, Ukrainian netizens construct a burlesque hyperreality inhabited by hypertrophied political figures, reframed national identity attributes, and archetypal symbols of *the self* and *the other*.

By analyzing the common oeuvre of anonymous Ukrainians, this paper aims to shed light on various dimensions of Ukraine's liminal



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perspective—namely, its liminal memories, liminal identity, and liminal position vis-à-vis the West and the East. Accordingly, in the first chapter, I provide several illustrative examples of how digital culture reflects the Ukrainian population's ambiguous stance on its Soviet past. I then proceed by reflecting on transgenerational *hybrid* memories to explore the multi-layer structure of Ukrainian mnemonic warfare.

The second chapter elucidates the role of the «self» in Ukrainian digital mythology. In this chapter, I explore the pervasive lack of netizens' sense of national pride, and dwell on the phenomenon of *national indifference*. I also trace how the *inclusive identity* zeitgeist was captured by President Zelensky's rhetoric and how it eventually led to the reinvigorated debates over the choice between two national identity models.

In the last chapter, I examine how the collective unconscious of Ukrainian netizens perceives *the other* to explain the contrarian motives of those who refuse to echo the orthodox pro-European narrative. I also touch on Ukrainians' visions of the state's future

international role, most notably in the context of Ukraine's never-ending transition between the East and the West.

Through these chapters, this paper reveals that the identity-building process of Ukraine is still unravelling, while the digital landscape offers a fertile breeding ground for Ukrainians to project their liminal imaginary through the semiotic system of Internet memes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: LIMINALITY

Liminality can be defined as the stage of transition, in-betweenness, being neither here nor there. Borrowed from cultural anthropology, the concept originally referred to tribal rites of passage and was later extrapolated to describe social thresholds, undermining the categorical distinctions upon which the established structures and hierarchies rely.¹

In recent years, there has been an increasing trend of applying a framework of liminality across a range of problems associated with international relations. In her paper “*The challenge of liminality*”, Maria Malksoo argued that engagement with liminality in international relations theory might enable scholars to overcome binary oppositions and clean-cut categories, thereby allowing them to capture the particular, contingent, and idiosyncratic context of international realities.² Furthermore, Bahar Rumelili explored the utility of applying a liminality perspective to the study of transitional identities.³

1 Victor Turner, “Liminality and Communitas,” in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969): 94-113,

2 Maria Malksoo, “The challenge of liminality for International Relations theory”, *Review of International Studies*, 38 (2012): 481-494. doi:10.1017/S0260210511000829

3 Bahar Rumelili, “Liminal identities and processes of domestication and subversion in International Relations” *Review of International Studies* 38 (2012): pp 495-508



"THE CONCEPT OF THE "MEME" AS A UNIT THAT CARRIES CULTURAL IDEAS, SYMBOLS, OR PRACTICES THROUGH COPYING AND IMITATION ORIGINATES FROM RICHARD DAWKINS' "THE SELFISH GENE"

Thus, the concept of liminality is beneficial in case studies of international actors who elude the traditional identity categories,⁴ inter alia, of Ukraine, which is located at a crossroads of different and mutually exclusive identities. Though much scholarly work has been devoted to Ukrainian national identity,⁵ the existing literature has not paid due attention to the liminal imaginary of Ukraine, particularly to the country's ontological division between two models of national identity.

The present paper aims to fill this gap and examine the juxtaposition of contesting narratives through the lens of the Ukrainian digital culture, thus contributing to the general knowledge of Ukraine's liminal perspective.

MEME

The concept of the "meme" as a unit that carries cultural ideas, symbols, or practices through copying and imitation originates from Richard Dawkins' *"The Selfish Gene"*.⁶ Dawkins' metaphor proved to be an eloquent one for the phenomenon of viral digital items, as they share common characteristics and mutually create awareness of each other.⁷ As such, Dawkins' concept gave birth to the term *Internet meme*, which Dawkins referred to as «a hijacking of the original idea.» In the present paper, I use Ryan M. Milner's (2012) definition of the Internet meme. That is, I consider memes to be "multimodal artifacts, where image and text are integrated to tell a joke, make an observation, or advance an argument."⁸

The conceptualization of the Internet meme as an instrument of participatory digital culture has been extensively applied in the realm of international relations studies. Although much of the focus has been on American issues, the Internet meme scholarship has also covered the discourses of other countries and regions. For instance, in 2013, Ekdale and Tully explored Kenya's new self-vision as embodied in the figure of a memetic vigilante named Makmende.⁹ In 2014, Pearce and Hajizada examined the role of memes in the confrontation between the Azerbaijani government and its opposition.¹⁰ Moreover, several scholars have used Internet memes in their investigations of digital dissidence in China.¹¹

Nonetheless, there is still a lack of research on the Ukrainian meme

4 Shota Kakabadze, "Georgia's Liminal Identity or the Never-ending Stage of Transition", *The Ideology and Politics Journal* (2016): 51–85.

5 Roman Horbyk, "Ideologies of the Self: Constructing the Modern Ukrainian Subject in the Other's Modernity", *Kyiv-Mohyla Humanities Journal* 3 (2016): 89 – 103. <http://kmlh.ukma.edu.ua/article/viewFile/73970/69411>.

Taras Kuzio, "National Identity and History Writing in Ukraine", *Nationalities Papers* 34, no. 4 (2006): 407–427

6 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1976)

7 Limor Shifman, *Memes in digital culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014)

8 Ryan. M. Milner, "The world made meme: Discourse and identity in participatory media" (PhD thesis, University of Kansas, 2012)

9 Brian Ekdale, & Melissa Tully, "Makmende Amerudi: Kenya's collective reimagining as a meme of aspiration", *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 31, no. 4 (2013): 283–298

10 Katy Pearce & Adnan Hajizada, "No laughing matter: Humor as a means of dissent in the digital era: The case of authoritarian Azerbaijan", *Demokratizatsiya* 22(2014): 67–85.

11 Shanshan Du, "Social media and the transformation of "Chinese nationalism": "Igniting positive energy" in China since the 2012 London Olympics". *Anthropology Today* 30, no.1 (2014): 5–8

culture. One of the few attempts was made by Wiggins, who tried to analyze the digital discourse regarding the Crimean crisis by examining the ratio of *directionally Russian* memes to *directionally Ukrainian* memes posted on the RuNet Memes Twitter account.¹² However, Wiggins' analysis did not focus exclusively on Ukraine. In the current paper, I will refer to his findings and will compare the memetic patterns of the nationally mobilized Ukraine of 2014 with those I have observed in 2020.

This paper is not meant to examine how Internet memes can become tools of informational warfare that are weaponized by anonymous government-subsidized internet trolls, nor does it aim to depict meme templates as a lens for exploring cultural globalization.¹³ Instead, it attempts to explore how Internet memes reflect Ukrainians' liminal stances towards diverse dichotomies, such as the nationalism–"national indifference", West-East, and ethnic–civic national identity splits.

METHODOLOGY

For my investigation of the liminal imaginary of Ukrainians, I conducted a qualitative content analysis of Internet memes posted by several Ukraine-based meme pages (both Ukrainophonic and Russophonic) from January to June 2020. The date range chosen for analysis coincides with the COVID-19 outbreak, which itself can be perceived as a profoundly liminal phase. By triggering the disruption of usual routines, social frustration and uncertainty, the «state of exception» reawakened individuals to their identities. This occurred in tandem with other landmark developments in the Ukrainian national discourse (e.g., the controversial New Year's speech of President Zelensky, "The Shevchenko's Quantum Leap" exhibition). Such events have created a propitious opportunity for Ukrainian netizens to express their sense of national identity.

The content posted on the platforms relevant to this study constitutes, for the most part, Internet memes suggested by subscribers. As such, one may conclude that ordinary Ukrainians (as opposed to communication professionals pursuing commercial or propagandistic interests) produced the memes analyzed in the present work. The self-made nature of digital culture makes it an accurate reflection of anonymous users' stances, as they are not constrained by censorship or norms of political correctness. However, netizens' common oeuvre should not be viewed as a representation of the views of the entire Ukrainian population, as the audience of the examined accounts predominantly comprises students.

BACKGROUND AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The notion of Ukraine as a "divided country" (a byword for its conflicting collective memories and antagonistic identities) has become a widespread refrain in the Ukrainian political discourse. The proverbial heterogeneity of identities is rooted in the country's past. From centuries of external rule, Ukrainian history was subsumed under the narratives pursued by whichever power had seized its territory. The Soviet administration

12 Bradley E. Wiggins, "Crimea River: Directionality in Memes from the Russia–Ukraine Conflict", *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 451–48

13 Limor Shifman, Hadar Levy, Mike Thelwall, Internet jokes: The secret agents of globalization? *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* 19, no. 4 (2014)



"THUS, THE TUMULTUOUS EVENTS OF 2013- 2014 UNDERScored UKRAINE'S "PERPETUAL" LIMINALITY OF A COUNTRY TORN BETWEEN THE EAST AND THE WEST..."

aimed to create a monolithic population, united by class struggle rather than national ideals. Because of this, Ukrainians suffered linguistic and demographic Russification, which, in turn, eroded the Ukrainian national identity.¹⁴ As the Soviet-born generations of Ukrainians have absorbed the supranational ideals of Soviet times, Ukrainian identity-building was challenged and continues to be challenged today.

After proclaiming independence in 1991, Ukraine received a long-awaited opportunity to develop a self-defined national story. However, the mission of constructing national identity fell on the shoulders of the "party of power," which consisted of former communist Nomenklatura. Therefore, the symbols of Ukrainian nationhood acquired a rather complimentary nature. Soviet mythology was expanded to encompass nationally colored narratives, though it was not radically revised, let alone demolished.¹⁵ Bearing in mind that Ukrainian citizenship was automatically granted to all permanent residents of the republic, this laid the foundation for future divisions. Specifically, because of this inclusive citizenship and the presence of a significant number of Russophones and ethnic Russians in Ukraine, the nation faced difficulties in 2014 when trying to replace its civic identity model with an ethnic one.

The Revolution of Dignity, triggered by the Yanukovich administration's decision to suspend the signing of an association agreement with the EU, aimed to put an end to Ukraine's multi-vectored foreign policy, developed into violent protests, an outburst of patriotic sentiments, and, eventually, the toppling of the government.¹⁶ The ethnic and ideological polarization of Ukrainians was instrumentalized by Russia, which deployed its military to annex Crimea and launch an asymmetric proxy war in Donbass. However, some intellectuals perceived the conflict in the East as a logical outcome of the *Two Ukraines* paradox.¹⁷ According to this popular yet oversimplified narrative, resonating with Huntington's "clash of civilizations"¹⁸ theory, Ukraine constitutes a «cleft country» comprising a pro-European nationalist West and a Soviet-nostalgic Russified East.

Thus, the tumultuous events of 2013–2014 underscored Ukraine's «perpetual» liminality of a country torn between the East and the West, with additional «transitional»¹⁹ liminality. The crisis has given rise to a contentious debate on national identity models, which has taken several unexpected turns under the current cabinet.

14 Rogers Brubaker, "Nationalizing states revisited: projects and processes of nationalization in post-Soviet states", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 32, no.11 (2011): 1785-1814

15 Tatiana Zhurzhenko, "A divided nation? Reconsidering the role of identity politics in the Ukraine crisis", *Die Friedens-Warte* 1, no.1 (2014): 249-267

16 Ibid.

17 Mykola Riabchuk, "Ukraine: One State, Two Countries?", *Transit Online* 23 (2002). <http://www.eurozine.com/pdf/2002-09-16-riabchuk-en.pdf>; Mykola Riabchuk, "Two Ukraines" Reconsidered: The End of Ukrainian Ambivalence?, *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 15, 1 (2015).

18 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

19 Sierk Ybema, Nie Beech & Nick Ellis, "Transitional and perpetual liminality: An identity practice perspective", *Anthropology Southern Africa* 34 (2011): 21-29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23323256.2011.11500005>

THE PAST: THE TRAP OF CONTESTING MEMORIES

One joke video posted on a popular meme account starts as a typical “Stay home” social advertisement. An infected person grabs a door handle, and it immediately turns red. A second person touches a contaminated surface, becoming a (literally) red-handed carrier himself. He, in turn, calls an elevator, making the call button a new hotspot for the red virus. This triggers a chain of infections, and the city is quickly blanketed in red. Then, suddenly, the Soviet National Anthem starts playing, and the viewer sees crowds marching beneath red banners towards the Kremlin.

If not for the pervasiveness of the subject of the Soviet Union in Ukrainian digital culture, this video might be interpreted as one of many illustrations of the worldwide trend towards securitizing the emergency measures taken by national governments—the fear of ubiquitous Leviathan using the “state of exception” to legitimize the curtailment of civic freedoms, thus laying the foundation for a dystopian dictatorship. However, on Ukrainian meme platforms, references to totalitarian regimes of the past are not limited exclusively to the current pandemic context. Smiling Stalin posing with a “Nolivesmatter” banner in his hands and creatively reappropriated Soviet propaganda posters are just a couple examples of how the blend of dread and fascination with the Soviet Union is manifested in the common oeuvre of Ukrainians. Another example is particularly illustrative: in February, several memes appeared that featured former US State Secretary Henry Kissinger wearing a red scarf and the forage cap of a Soviet pioneer. The memes ostensibly ridiculed the gullibility of misled Odnoklassniki²⁰ users, many of whom had unsuspectingly reposted an apparently fake interview in which a «famous American diplomat» claimed that «the dissolution of the Soviet Union was the biggest crime of the United States» and praised the “Soviet individual” who has always been one step ahead of the West²¹

One may perceive the unprecedented popularity of this video and its ilk as another demonstration of the wave of nostalgia sweeping the generation of Soviet-born Ukrainians. According to a survey conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in May 2020, 33.5% of Ukrainians miss the Soviet Union.²² Their longing to return to the Soviet «golden age» is often the object of derision for meme authors. One such meme depicts an Atlas-like giant with an image of ice cream photoshopped into his face as he carries the terrestrial globe; the meme is captioned with the phrase, “In the Soviet Union, life was better”. The meme alludes to the «legendary» Soviet ice cream, which is widely held by Soviet admirers to be «the only true» and «the best in the world,» thus epitomizing the romanticized «stability of life in a great superpower, taking care of ordinary people.»

Scholars who have applied the postcolonial paradigm to the study of Ukrainian identity argue that the omnipresence of such sentiments

²⁰ Odnoklassniki (OK.ru) is a social network service for classmates and old friends, popular in Russia and former Soviet Republics.

²¹ “Kissinger’s Interview about USSR is Fake and was Disseminated by Progressnews based on a Russian Satirical Edition”, *Myth Detector*, 22 October, 2019

²² “Оцінка радянського минулого: травень 2020” [The Evaluation of the Soviet Past: May 2020], *Kyiv International Institute of Sociology*, 22 June 2020. <http://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=950&page=1>



"THE CONCEPT OF UKRAINE'S DUAL ROLE AS BOTH A COLONY AND A COLONIZER UNDERSCORES ITS LIMINAL IDENTITY—NOT ONLY IN A CHRONOLOGICAL SENSE BUT ALSO FROM AN ONTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE."

represents the ongoing process of Ukraine’s emancipation from the imagined community constructed by Soviet “colonizers.”²³ However, another point of view suggests that the category of postcolonial consciousness cannot apply to Ukraine because Soviet administrations perceived it as belonging to the imperial core.²⁴ The concept of Ukraine’s dual role as both a colony and a colonizer underscores its liminal identity—not only in a chronological

sense but also from an ontological perspective. Nevertheless, it fails to explain the ambiguous stance towards the Soviet past of the meme authors, who were born after the collapse of the USSR.²⁵ Most Ukrainian meme authors do not have first-hand experience living under Soviet rule. Thus, they can be perceived neither as bearers of the post-Soviet mindset who have fallen victim to communist propaganda nor as revanchists praising the times of imperial might.²⁶

The roots of the younger generation’s ambivalent attitude towards Soviet times can be traced to the apogee of the memory war over the Soviet legacy, or the so-called “Communist Symbol Ban” of 2015. This law penalized people with up to 10 years in prison for

using or displaying Soviet symbols. Though this eventually resulted in the phenomenon of Leninfall²⁷ (i.e., the iconoclastic demolition of monuments to Lenin), this intrinsically paradoxical way of promoting democracy sparked heated discussions throughout Ukrainian society.²⁸ Disenchanted with the dogmatic nationalist discourse pursued by Petro Poroshenko’s administration, the young generation grew tired of the permanent demonization of the Soviet past. Standing in direct contrast to the views expressed by their Soviet-nostalgic family members, the

²³ Stephen Velychenko, “Post-colonialism and Ukrainian history”, *Ab Imperio* 1 (2004): 391-404;

Richard Sakwa, “Ukraine and the postcolonial condition”, *openDemocracy*, 18 September, 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/ukraine-and-postcolonial-condition/>

²⁴ Yaroslav Hrytsak, “The Postcolonial is not Enough”, *Slavic Review* 74, no. 4 (2015): 732-737

²⁵ Olena Nikolayenko “Contextual Effects on Historical Memory: Soviet Nostalgia among post-Soviet Adolescents”, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 41, no. 2(2008): 243-259

²⁶ Michael Urban, The Politics of Identity in Russia’s Postcommunist Transition: The Nation against Itself, *Slavic Review* 53, no. 3 (1994): 733-765

²⁷ Anastasiya Pshenychnykh, “Leninfall: The spectacle of forgetting”, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no.3 (November 2019): 393-414, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549419871345>

²⁸ Kathryn McDonald, “Leninfall, Identity, and the Role of Government in post-Maidan National Discourse”, *Humanity in Action*, May 2017. https://www.humanityinaction.org/knowledge_detail/leninfall-identity-and-the-role-of-government-in-post-maidan-national-discourse/

binary identity politics of the government and its use of uncomfortable dichotomies “Ukrainian patriot / pro-Russian traitor” left the frustrated young generation at a crossroads.

The young generation’s contested memory is not limited to post-Euromaidan Ukraine. In 2018, Sanshiro Hosaka²⁹ measured the multilayered historical memories of Ukrainians and introduced the concept of the so-called *hybrid memory*, encompassing both nostalgia for the Soviet Union and positive acceptance of Ukrainian independence. Interestingly, Hosaka emphasized that *hybrid memories* were more prevalent among young people than among older people. Thus, he concluded that. “Soviet-model historical memories are not merely vestiges of the communist era that will gradually phase out with time but appear to be a robust value system that has been reproduced through generations.” This liminal perspective of young Ukrainians manifests in the pervasive post-irony of their digital culture: they are critical enough to doubt not only their families’ yearning for the mythologized Soviet past with suppression and terror under a utopian façade but also the prevalent nationalist narratives. Thus, they tend to mock both sides of the mnemonic battle.

THE PRESENT: WHO ARE WE?

As outlined above, the post-ironic culture of Internet memes provides people with a way to articulate their contrarian desires for the forbidden fruit of semiotic disobedience,³⁰ resulting in attempts to counter “orthodox” memory narratives. However, it also serves as a tool that people can use to vocalize their national identity. A significant number of the analyzed memes are inspired by the symbols of Ukrainian national imagery. Though they are imbued with patriotic pathos, they appear to be intrinsically ambiguous. For example, one meme features a depressed young man wondering, “Why keep living?” It continues with images of vyshyvanka, hopak, the UPA’s (Ukrainian Insurgent Army’s) red-and-black flag, and an irredentist map of Ukraine encompassing Russia’s Kuban and Belgorod Oblast. The next picture features the same young man breathing a sigh of relief as he claims, “Now I know.” Interestingly, it is unclear whether the (intentionally) poorly made meme is a sincere expression of a hypertrophied national feeling or a carnivalesque parody.

In his work “*Poe’s Law, group polarization, and argumentative failure in religious and political discourse*,” Scott F. Aikin introduces the concept of the so-called Poe’s Law. He formulates this law as follows: “For parodies of extremism, there will be consistent confusion of the parodies for sincere commitments to the views expressed.”³¹ Aikin’s notion seems to apply to the liminal space of Ukrainian digital culture. By presenting painfully accurate caricatures of nationally colored jokes, news articles, and videos, meme authors generate a hyperreality where sincerity and irony become

29 Sanshiro Hosaka, “Hybrid Historical Memories in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine”, *Europe-Asia Studies* 71:4 (2019): 551-578, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2019.1578863>

30 Sonia K. Katyal, “Semiotic Disobedience”, *Washington University Law Review* 84, no. 2 (2006)

31 Scott F. Aikin, “Poe’s Law, group polarization, and argumentative failure in religious and political discourse”, *Social Semiotics* (2012): 301-317, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2012.719728>

conflated and confused.

Hiding from the responsibility of candor, young Ukrainians tend to avoid overt manifestations of political sympathies and national sentiments. In 2014, Shifman³² argued that anger is a significant anchor of Internet memes, while happiness can be expressed only ironically. In 2016, her position was supported by Wiggins,³³ who noted that the memes he had analyzed in light of the Crimean crisis lacked an impassioned perspective. Differently, in modern Ukrainian digital culture, the emotional palette tilts neither toward the negative nor the positive. Instead, it seems that only apathy and national indifference underlie the subversive and edgy humor.³⁴ However, it could be that the apolitical stances and pervasive satire of the Ukrainian national identity are due to the liminality of the latter’s model itself.



"SOME OF THE MEMES RELATED TO IDENTITY ISSUES FEATURE ICONIC 19TH-CENTURY POET TARAS SHEVCHENKO, “THE SPIRITUAL FATHER OF THE REBORN UKRAINIAN NATION.”

Some of the memes related to identity issues feature iconic 19th-century poet Taras Shevchenko, “the spiritual father of the reborn Ukrainian nation.”³⁵ The figure of Shevchenko personifies the intact spirit of Ukrainians who are fighting for independence and the right to choose their own fate. Shevchenko’s image was highly politicized during the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution, as his portraits were hung on occupied city halls and protesters chanted verses from his poetry.

For meme authors, Shevchenko is a vivid archetype and a point of reference for commenting on the dynamic nature of Ukraine’s national identity. Netizens reflect on Ukraine’s indecision between various geopolitical vectors and ideological extremes, as such indecisiveness resonates with their inability to choose a side in the mnemonic conflict. Thus, they place Shevchenko into intentionally preposterous cultural contexts, making him mimic and adapt to outlandish situations. For instance, in one meme, Shevchenko is depicted as a Big Brotherish character as he turns his judgmental look to the modern Ukrainians who

32 Shifman, *Memes in digital culture*

33 Wiggins, “Crimea River: Directionality in Memes from the Russia–Ukraine Conflict”.

34 Tara Zahra, “Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis,” *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 93-119

35 George G. Grabowicz, *The Poet as Mythmaker: A Study of Symbolic Meaning in Taras Shevchenko* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982).

lack a sense of national solidarity. Shevchenko has even appeared as a Japanese anime protagonist starring in title sequences accompanied by his poems in the form of karaoke lyrics.

One may consider this eclectic and even heretic depiction of a sacred symbol of Ukrainianess as an insult to national honor. However, anonymous meme authors were not the first to produce such content. The issue of the importance of national cultural heritage moved towards the center of the public discourse in February 2019 when a controversial exhibition (dubbed “The Shevchenko’s Quantum Leap”) took place at one of Kyiv’s metro stations.³⁶ Displayed by the Shevchenko National Museum, the exhibition included a series of posters by illustrator Oleksandr Hrehov that represented Shevchenko as various pop culture characters ranging from David Bowie to Harry Potter. Many believed the exhibition to be a progressive breakthrough in public diplomacy and a reinvention of Ukrainian unifying totems. Still, “The Shevchenko’s Quantum Leap” further attested to the sensitive nature of the ongoing national discourse; in less than a week, the portraits were cut down by far-right activists who accused the artist of being Ukrainophobic.

This incident illustrates the two contesting narratives present in Ukrainian society. Many Ukrainians are convinced that the national heritage must be treated delicately and, thus, should be preserved in its pure

form, protected from external influences. For them, any shift away from tradition is seen as infringing on the sacrosanct symbols of Ukrainianess and fostering an ambiguous space bound to be utilized by Russian aggressors. In contrast, supporters of the opposite view recognize the fluid and evolving nature of Ukrainianess. They argue that instead of being kept in its original form, the national imagery should be developed in tandem with changing global cultural contexts.

A substantial contribution to the promotion of the second narrative—which is perceived as synonymous with treason by advocates of the sanctity of national imagery—can be credited to President Volodymyr Zelensky. Understandably, the figure of a comedian-turned-president epitomizes the ambiguous position of many Ukrainians, as the post-ironic aesthetics themselves occupy

a unique niche within the ecosystem of Ukrainian meme culture. The president frequently appears in images that are manipulated so that he appears extremely short and even childish. In addition to having a blatant comic effect, such images highlight Zelensky’s status as an inexperienced, immature, and “amateur president.”

36 “Quantum vandalism: In Kyiv, Taras Shevchenko’s posters exhibition was spoiled”, *Opinion*, 18 February 2019, <https://opinionua.com/en/2019/02/18/taras-shevchenko-posters-exhibition/#>

However, the most popular meme featuring Zelensky is the so-called “Who am I?” meme, which is still widely used to refer to experiences related to Ukraine’s identity crisis. The meme emerged after the president’s 2020 New Year’s address, which started with Zelensky suggesting that Ukrainians “honestly answer themselves an important question: Who am I?”³⁷ It was not this single phrase that caused an uproar. Rather, it was the overarching message of Zelensky’s speech. By calling for unity without any regard for language, political views, beliefs, or ethnic descent, Zelensky encroached upon the sacred convictions of the Ukrainian national idea.

The president’s unconventional claim that national identity does not matter at all elicited a vigorous debate within Ukrainian society. Understandably, this debate is aggravated by the ongoing war in Donbass, which requires citizens to take an adamant stance on Ukrainians’ separateness from Russians. Zelensky’s *reductio ad absurdum* equating language with a range of deliberately trivial issues (e.g., astrological signs, eating habits and whether one watches Game of Thrones), sparked a violent reaction from liberals and conservatives alike. The president was repeatedly charged with “mankurtism” i.e. alienation from ethnic roots and culture, ignorance of the past. Some nationalist intellectuals called him an evangelist of a post-Soviet identity, claiming that he was downplaying the achievements of national revival. He was even dubbed a “Kremlin’s agent.”, allegedly exaggerating the divisions within Ukrainian society to legitimize the surrender of occupied regions.

However, Zelensky’s post-Westphalian narrative erased the ethnicity-based self-other distinction and seemingly reflected the liminal stances of a considerable part of the population—most notably, those who produce Internet memes. The preference for universal values over national symbols (“*It makes no difference; at which monument you are waiting for the girl you love*”) was perceived by many as a vulgar emotional manipulation. However, such sentiments are quite appealing for those who consider themselves apolitical, as well as for Soviet-nostalgic citizens. In an effort to “counter polarization,” Zelensky addressed the ontological dichotomy that still plagues Ukrainian society: the interstitial position of Ukrainian national identity between *ethnic* and *civic* models.³⁸

The first vision was characteristic of Poroshenko (Zelensky’s predecessor), whose electoral campaign was based on the motto of “Army, language and faith.” This vision presupposed an ethnic national identity defined by a common culture and heritage. Poroshenko’s model strengthened the country’s stance against Russian propaganda, but also highlighted social divisions, thereby ostracizing dissidents. Meanwhile, civic identity (the alternative tacitly suggested by the current president), appears to be more inclusive than Poroshenko’s mono-ethnic ideal. However, Zelensky’s civic identity makes the country more vulnerable to Russian aggression, since it replaces the notion of ethnic solidarity with that of institutionalized “national indifference.”

37 “Zelensky’s New Year address: Everyone should answer the question: who am I?“, *UNIAN*, 1 January, 2020, <https://www.unian.info/society/10816211-zelensky-s-new-year-address-everyone-should-answer-the-question-who-am-i.html>

38 Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (Reno : University of Nevada Press, 1991) - 227



"MANY UKRAINIANS ARE CONVINCED THAT THE NATIONAL HERITAGE MUST BE TREATED DELICATELY AND, THUS, SHOULD BE PRESERVED IN ITS PURE FORM, PROTECTED FROM EXTERNAL INFLUENCES."

As Tara Zahra pointed out, “Once imagined, indifference to nationalism became as real and meaningful a category as the nation itself.”³⁹ Zahra examined the alleged “passivity” of Central and Eastern Europeans who refuse to co-opt to nationalist discourses. In her works she elucidated the concept of “national indifference,” which can be seen as an antipode to integral nationalism, “circumventing an illusionary hierarchy of nations with a fluid relocation of identities.”

Paradoxically, as we see in Zelensky’s civic identity model, «national indifference» can become an identity-building instrument. Thus, the subversiveness of fluid national identities to the exclusionary nationalist practices of the ethnic identity model⁴⁰ makes the two models mutually contradictory, once again demonstrating the liminality of Ukraine’s perspective.

THE FUTURE: QUO VADIS?

From the moment Ukraine proclaimed its independence, it has had to make geopolitical choices: West or East, democracy or authoritarianism, the EU or the EACU. The liminal ordeal, which has been imposed by Ukraine’s in-between geographical location and historical experience of being subjugated to external powers, has prompted Ukrainians to develop black-and-white thinking and draw a clear line between *the self* and *the other*. This is because doing so was imperative for Ukraine’s survival as a nation. Ukrainians’ strong ethnic solidarity and acute awareness of who the enemy is enabled them to preserve their national heritage, language, and identity, despite the assimilation efforts of the Soviet administration and its predecessors.

Nowadays, although the common understanding of Russia’s assertive stance towards Ukraine has tipped the scales in favor of Europe, we still witness the erosion of adherence to national narrative canons. In other words, the population increasingly refuses to make choices. Despite the clear security threat posed by Ukraine’s north-eastern neighbor, there is still a sense of growing geopolitical apathy of Ukrainians, which has implications for the state’s foreign policy.

Ukrainian digital culture appears to be an illustrative manifestation of the blurred self-other dichotomy: drawing from the “directionality” methodology suggested by Wiggins, we could classify most of the memes posted on both Ukrainophonic and Russophonic meme accounts as either «neutral» or «indeterminate». One video spoofs a pretentious newscast informing people of a February 14th Zelensky-Putin phone call. Instead of the leaders’ dialogue, one hears the voice of a Surzhyk-speaking child discussing a playground skirmish, followed by boisterous laughter (allegedly Putin’s). Thus, in contrast to the distinctively pro-Ukrainian narratives of the memes described by Wiggins,⁴¹ present-day post-ironic jokes do not have a straightforward message of animosity. Neither Zelensky nor Putin is praised or demonized. When national heroes vanish from popular perception, national enemies vanish as well. Rather than

39 Zahra, “Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis”

40 Ibid

41 Wiggins, “Crimea River: Directionality in Memes from the Russia-Ukraine Conflict”.



"THUS, THIS SENSE OF SOLIDARITY HAS TO DO WITH A CIVIC NATIONAL IDENTITY, HOWEVER, NOT WITH AN ETHNIC ONE."

“naming and shaming” an aggressor, meme authors ridicule the grotesque situation itself.

Reluctance to distinguish between friends and foes occasionally leads to identity categories that hardly fall within one national discourse or another. In May, digital platforms were flooded with black humor memes satirizing the recklessness of some netizens who had violated social distancing norms while bragging about their traditional «shashlik» parties on Instagram. Every meme was accompanied by the intrinsically ironic caption “*the Slavs*” and a thumbs-up emoji as netizens pretended to express admiration for the fearlessness of the compatriots. The «the Slavs» label may be seen as a euphemism of a collective mentality that mingles with the «post-Soviet mindset» described above. However, the concept of the Slavs is also related to the narrative of “the cradle of the three brotherly peoples,” which some Ukrainian scholars⁴² consider a Soviet-era artificial construct routinely exploited to defend the historical affinity of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. However, this type of humor should hardly be securitized as a sign of Ukrainians’ exposure to Russian propaganda. The sense of solidarity with the peoples of neighboring nations who share a historical past does not necessarily indicate support for the aggressive stances of their governments. Thus, this sense of solidarity has to do with a civic national identity, however, not with an ethnic one.

Nevertheless, one may consider another rather alarming meme. By using self-deprecating humor, it parrots clickbait headlines. “Putin FLINCHED when he saw it: you won’t believe how close to Europe Ukraine is!” the caption states. It is accompanied by a photo of a man throwing out his fishing rod into a huge puddle right beneath the city hall of a Ukrainian city. Whereas the laughingstock is clearly the prosaic potholes and local authorities’ incompetence, this meme also indirectly mocks Ukraine’s pursuit to join the EU, implying that the country, with its rather low standards of life and poor governance, is far from being considered for membership.

According to a survey carried out by the Sociological Group “Rating”⁴³ in June 2019, 59% of Ukrainian citizens support the EU accession, while only 19% believe that Ukraine should join the Eurasian Customs Union. However, despite the overwhelming positivity towards Europeanisation, the meme author’s skepticism about Ukraine’s westward trajectory is not surprising and can be explained in terms of the national discourse. After the ideological shift induced by the 2014 Euromaidan protests, the idea of European integration became a geopolitical mantra for Ukrainian politicians, and they began preaching the EU membership as a panacea for all of the country’s problems. The nationwide narrative of «Ukraine’s civilizational choice» became a political cliché and sparked widespread suspicion that the EU agenda was intended to distract citizens’ from grievous domestic problems.

Thus, the dogmatic nature of Ukraine’s European integration discourse has also become fodder for memes. One such meme (presumably

42 Leonid Zaluzniak, *People of the Old Rus: An Imperial Myth or Historical Reality* (Kyiv: Pamiat stolit, 1996).

43 “59% of Ukrainians support the EU integration”, *European Pravda*, 10 July 2019. <https://www.euointegration.com.ua/news/2019/07/10/7098320/>

camouflaging its author's misinterpretation of liberal values and bigoted views or a desire to ridicule those having such views) is rather offensive. The poorly made meme represents an icon dubbed "Our Lady of Brussels," adorned with a rainbow ribbon and accompanied by a recycling symbol instead of a halo. Text that reads «the prayer for the EU membership» is attached to the icon. The burlesque character of the meme is intended to expose the trend towards «fetishizing the Western values», which a segment of the population still views as intrinsically counter to the Ukrainian mindset.

Alexander Kiossev introduced an unconventional perspective on the withering support for pro-European policy in Eastern European countries. He applied a postcolonial framework to the study of states that have "succumbed to the cultural power of the West without having been invaded." By doing so, he claims that the process of "hegemony without domination" is equally self-traumatizing to the states' national identity, thus leading to an inevitable burst of hostility towards idealized Western patterns. However, seeking to escape self-abasement, the population of the "extra-colonial" states might as well remain self-ironic towards the local culture, stigmatized as inferior to the foreign. As they produce "a torrent of adaptations, travesties and hybrids," they tend to deride both the local and the foreign.⁴⁴

Though Kiossev's stance could be perceived as exaggerating antagonism, his point about Europe becoming «both the subject of criticism and a civilizational superego, ... the recognition-granting gaze» for Eastern European states seems applicable to the mixture of awe and hostility towards European integration which is now felt by some of Ukrainians. Meanwhile, the category of "self-colonization" itself might serve as an apt metaphor for Ukrainians' stances towards both the West and the East. In this context, the country's divide between Europe and Russia is compounded by a bidirectional admiration-hostility complex and the continuous fight for the self-sufficiency of autochthony, thus resulting in a never-ending stage of transition.

CONCLUSION

On June 21, 2020, Kyiv welcomed the first-ever online Kyiv Pride. In addition to digital events, activists used drones to carry a sizable LGBTQ+ rainbow flag to the top of the iconic Mother Motherland monument, a Soviet symbol of the "Great Patriotic War." However, their celebration of equality was followed by another flag being lifted to the same monument – "Ukraine Stands for Family."⁴⁵ Joining the worldwide trend of «political compass» parody memes, Ukrainian netizens depicted this symbolic struggle by creating their own variant of the political spectrum, filling the four quadrants with images of the Mother Motherland holding different flags.

⁴⁴ Alexander Kiossev, "The Self-Colonizing Metaphor", *Atlas of Transformation*, <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/s/self-colonization/the-self-colonizing-metaphor-alexander-kiossev.html> [last accessed on 26.06.2020]

⁴⁵ "KyivPride gets creative during COVID-19 lockdown amid backlash", *Euromaidan Press*, 22 June 2020. <http://euromaidanpress.com/2020/06/22/kyivpride-gets-creative-during-covid-19-lockdown-amid-backlash/>

Later, another version of this meme emerged. Instead of choosing any quadrant, its authors drew a third ax. The «Me» caption, placed on an image of a lone drone flying outside the coordinate system has become a poignant symbol of young Ukrainians' frustration, which reaches far beyond political stances. The authors of innumerable Internet memes reflect on their identity crisis by masquerading sincere views as post-ironical travesties through presenting grotesque and murky images both of themselves and "the other."

Though it does not represent the position of the entire Ukrainian population, the ambiguous nature of many Internet memes provides conclusive evidence for the in-betweenness of the Ukrainian national discourse. Known under many names and guises (e.g., Hosaka's "hybrid memory," Ryabchuk's "postcolonial syndrome," Kiossev's "self-colonizing culture"), Ukrainian liminality is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, comprising contesting memories, fluid identities, and contradictory geopolitical orientations.

To domesticate its liminal identity, Ukraine must choose between the two identity models; that is, it must decide whether to tame its national indifference and return to the ethnic model or to instrumentalize it and continue along the civic model course. However, the most daunting challenge for the government will not be making the choice itself but rather establishing the legitimacy of its decision in the eyes of a heterogeneous population. Unlike meme accounts that are characterized by intimate anonymity, the world of politics does not allow one to escape responsibility for their views. This time, it is no laughing matter.

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