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Understanding the Conflict in Eastern Ukraine: The Role of Cultural Context

Abstract: The aim of the paper is to explore the cultural context of the conflict in eastern Ukraine. From this perspective, the conflict in Donbas has to be seen not only in the context of a political game, socio-economic transition and geopolitical interests, but also in the light of a cultural conflict rooted in history. According to Ukrainian researcher Mykola Riabchuk, Ukraine is divided, not between ethnic Russians and Ukrainians, but between two different types of Ukrainian identity. These profound differences have been exacerbated by the events of the “Euromaidan” and, subsequently, the violent conflict between the separatist forces of the self-declared Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics on the one hand and the post-revolutionary Ukrainian government on the other. This article focuses on how the cultural divisions of Ukrainian society have been used since the beginning of Ukrainian independence by the political elite as a tool of symbolic politics, contributing to the mass mobilization of Ukrainian society and the outbreak of a violent conflict.

Key words: Ukraine, Donbas, conflict, cultural divisions, Revolution of Dignity

Introduction¹

Most contemporary armed conflicts not only revolve around different interests but are accompanied by different kind of clashes in the symbolic arena. Religion, collective identity, language, beliefs, values, symbols, attitude to the past and visions of the future may be considered as sources of conflict, but also as “weapons of war,” helping to mobilize and legitimize military actions. The phenomenon of war is rooted in a specific culture and cultural perception of society, and, associated with the experience of past conflicts, defines the framework for interpreting events and giving specific meaning to them. Furthermore, cultural content, such as symbols, myths, values and ideas, which are identifiable

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by the members of particular societies, are eagerly exploited by warring factions as ammunition during the struggle (cf. Jacoby, 2008; Kaufman, 2001; Scherrer, 2003). Therefore, focusing on the relations of war and culture contributes not only to the understanding of the mechanisms of these relations, but also the causes and course of specific wars.

The conflict in Eastern Ukraine, also known as the war in Donbas, has been taking place since April 2014 between the new Ukrainian authorities, elected as a result of mass social protests, known as the Euromaidan and the Revolution of Dignity, and the separatists from two eastern provinces of the country who are supported by the Russian Federation (Onuch, Sasse, 2016; Yekelchuk, 2015). One might perceive the war in Donbas in the context of Ukrainian-Russian relations, geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the “West,” and the struggle between the Ukrainian political elite which is strongly related to economic and regional structures (cf. Katchanovski, 2016; Sakwa, 2016; Wilson, 2016; Wood et al., 2015). Other commentators and scholars perceive and interpret the outbreak of violent conflict in Ukraine through the prism of the “identity war” between “Eastern” and “Western,” “Pro-Russian” and “Pro-European” or “Creole” and “National” Ukraine (Riabchuk, 2015a; Voznyak, 2014; cf. Wilson, 2016, p. 632; Zhurzhenko, 2014, p. 249).

Being aware of this complexity, I believe that an analysis of the Ukrainian crisis from the perspective of a conflict that is being waged in a certain cultural context, and in which the cultural content is used by the various players to defeat their enemy, can contribute to a better understanding of current events. This article focuses on how the cultural divisions of Ukrainian society from the beginning of Ukrainian independence are used by the political elite in the process of gaining and maintaining power. Regional antagonisms and prejudices were an effective factor in mobilizing voters in the political campaigns. Also, in the latest events, fixed intra-state stereotypes and collective fears related to them have proven to be an effective tool of symbolic politics, contributing to the mass mobilization of Ukrainian society, and the outbreak of a violent conflict.

Divided Ukraine: Identity and Politics

The diversity and heterogeneity of Ukrainian society is sometimes reduced to a simple division: ethnic (Ukrainian majority and the Russian minority), linguistic (Russian language and Ukrainian language) or reli-

gious (Orthodox Ukraine and “Catholic” Ukraine or differences between the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyivan Patriarchate). The line of such a division is sometimes drawn along the line of the Zbruch River or the Dniepr River, which divides the state into Western and Eastern Ukraine. From this point of view, the bipolar geographical/regional divide correlates with ethnicity, language and religion (cf. Shulman, 1999, p. 1012).

In fact, the diversity of Ukrainian society is much more complicated and cannot be tied to simple polarizations. Although Russians are the largest ethnic minority in Ukraine (17.3% in 2001, according to the *All-Ukrainian population census* data; and 6% in 2017 according to the Razumkov Centre survey, conducted in all regions of Ukraine except Crimea and the occupied areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts [*Osnovni zasady i shlyakhy formuvannya spil'noyi identychnosti hromadyan Ukrainy*, 2017, p. 26]), the country is inhabited by numerous groups of Poles, Belarusians, Hungarians, Tatars, Moldovans, Jews and Bulgarians. In addition, many citizens of Ukraine have a problem assigning themselves categorically to one particular ethnic group (Wilson, 2002, p. 32; cf. Kulyk, 2013). Dual ethnicity and polyethnicity, as well as distancing from ethnic self-identification is still an important aspect of ethnic identity formation in Ukraine, as the latest surveys have shown (*Osnovni zasady...*, 2017, p. 26).

The issue of linguistic divisions in Ukraine is also highly complex. Instead of a simple bipolar division into Ukrainians and Russians, Wilson (2002, pp. 35–36) distinguished three main language-ethnic groups: Russophone Russians (approximately 20–21%), Russophone Ukrainians (33–34%) and Ukrainophone Ukrainians (40%). Obviously, this division should be complemented by a mosaic of other national minorities who are increasingly keen to use their own language (cf. Charnysh, 2013, p. 1). Besides, there is a large bilingual (both Ukrainian and Russian-speaking) population in Ukraine (Riabchuk, 2012, p. 443), as well as those who use the “surzhyk” – i.e. different varieties of the Ukrainian-Russian and Russian-Ukrainian dialects (Wilson, 2002, p. 36; cf. *Osnovni zasady...*, 2017, p. 27). It is also difficult to draw a clear geographical border between Ukrainian-speaking Ukraine and Russian-speaking Ukraine, although in fact the Ukrainian language prevails in the west and in the centre of the country, and Russian in the east and south; generally speaking, the rural population in all regions prefer to speak Ukrainian, and the urban population – also in the centre – Russian or “surzhyk” (Olszański, 2014, p. 11;

cf. *Osnovni zasady...*, 2017, p. 27). What's more, according to surveys, "there is no direct correlation between the preferred language of everyday communication and the political or geopolitical orientation of the specific person" (Portnov, 2015, p. 725; cf. Kulyk, 2016).

This is because some researchers talk about not ethno-linguistic divisions, but rather – identity divisions of Ukrainian society (cf. Kulyk, 2016). According to Ukrainian intellectual and political analyst Mykola Riabchuk (2015a, p. 138), there is an ideological line between different types of Ukrainian identity: "European" and "East Slavonic." Both Ukrainian nations "considered themselves as 'Ukrainian', but refused the same 'authentic' status to their regional/linguistic-cultural alter ego" (Riabchuk, 2015b). The geographic centers of these two nations are Lviv and Donetsk, which developed contradictory identity projects. Both projects correspond with different visions of the Ukrainian nation's past and future, and refer to different civilizational patterns. However, as researchers note, this bipolar division into "two Ukraines" should be treated with caution, rather as an analytical model than as a reflection of the divisions of contemporary Ukrainian society (cf. Portnov, 2016, p. 108; Zhurzhenko, 2014, p. 249).

Nonetheless, it should be noted that the cultural differences between the regions since the beginning of Ukrainian independence translate into the political choices of their residents. Residents of western Ukraine are more active and more likely to support civic movements postulating democratization of the country according to a Western model than residents of south-eastern Ukraine. As Mark Beissinger (2014 cited in Petro, 2015, pp. 28–29) notes, participants in the Orange Revolution of 2004 were eight times more likely to be from Western Ukraine, and 92 percent claimed Ukrainian as their native language. Also, in the 2013–2014 protests known as the Euromaidan, Western Ukrainians played a prominent role. In Western regions, support for the protests reached 80 percent (Petro, 2015, p. 29). These regions consistently supported pro-Western candidates in presidential elections: Leonid Kravchuk rather than Leonid Kuchma in 1994, Kuchma rather than the communist candidate Petro Symonenko in 1999, Yushchenko in 2004 and Tymoshenko in 2010 (cf. Marples, 2015, p. 11).

Voting patterns in Donbas and Crimea stand out as being nearly the converse of those in Galicia. The differences manifest themselves also "in the visceral rejection of the ethnic nationalism that is popular in regions of western Ukraine like Galicia, and in the affirmation of a Ukrainian iden-

tity that is inextricably linked to Russian culture” (Petro, 2015, p. 28). In 2004, the opponents of the Orange Revolution were overwhelmingly from the East, primarily from Donetsk, and three times more likely to speak Russian at home (Beissinger, 2014 cited in Petro, 2015, p. 29). The same pattern re-emerged in 2014. In the east of Ukraine support for the protests reached only 30 percent and 20 percent in the south (Petro, 2015, p. 29).

Different electoral preferences are related to a different political culture rooted in the different history of the regions (cf. Osipian, Osipian, 2012; Portnov, 2016). The Western provinces had been part of the Polish-Lithuanian state (*Rzeczpospolita*) and, after 1867, of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Hence, the influence of the Western model of civilization, promoting values such as the rule of law, local governments, the European educational system, independent judiciary, and a contractual relationship between rulers and subjects. This was conducive to the emergence of nationalist tendencies chosen for the all-Ukrainian project of nation-building. In these areas, the colonial Russian/Soviet policy met with different practices of political, social and cultural traditions, making it difficult to incorporate these areas into parts of the Russian and then Soviet empire. Years of “Sovietization” and the brutal policy of fighting attempts not only to revive Ukrainian nationalism, but also all manifestations of civilizational “otherness,” deepened the reluctance towards “Russianness” (cf. Olszański, 2014, p. 9; Kiryukhin, 2015).

In the south-eastern regions of Ukraine, the assimilation of Russian traditions and institutions was a lot easier. These lands of the former Great Steppe were annexed to the Russian Empire by the end of the eighteenth century. In the Donbas, with Europe’s largest coal basin and the related local industry that developed, integration with the Russian state proceeded without hindrance, especially since many Russian settlers arrived there (Petro, 2015, pp. 22–26). As a result, the “Eastern” region, “which includes the current regions of Crimea, Dnepropetrovsk, Donetsk, Kharkov, Kherson, Lugansk, Odessa, Nikolayevsk, and Zaporozhe, forms a relatively compact ethnic and cultural community that is distinguished by the strong influence of Russian culture, even where the majority of the population defines itself as Ukrainian” (Petro, 2015, p. 20). Ukrainian pro-Russian/Soviet identity was institutionalized in the years of the Soviet Union. As a result, according to Taras Kuzio, “a quarter of Donetsk residents identify themselves as belonging to a Soviet cultural group” (2010, pp. 291–292).

However, it should be noted that support for Ukrainian nationalism gradually moved from Western to Central Ukraine. Starting from the 2000s, the electoral base of the liberal-democratic, pro-Western forces expanded to Central Ukraine, as shown by the result of the presidential elections in 2010 and 2014 (see election maps in Vasylchenko, 2005; cf. Kuzio, 2010, p. 291). The main dividing line has shifted eastwards and now, according to research conducted by Volodymyr Kulyk (2016; cf. Marples, 2015, pp. 11–12), lies between the Donbas and the adjacent east-southern regions.

From Cultural Conflict to Armed Violence

The existence of different projects of identity which claim the right to define what is modern Ukraine and who is a contemporary Ukrainian since the beginning of independence, created the potential conditions for conflict and the disintegration of the state. Nevertheless, for nearly 25 years after Ukraine's independence, these divisions did not result in an open conflict. Despite strong regional differences, different political preferences and the existence of various narratives concerning Ukrainian identity, the will for territorial integrity and to build a common Ukrainian state prevailed (cf. Wilson, 2000, p. 169).

However, in Ukraine, just as in other former Soviet republics, identity categories were used by the political elite in the process of gaining and maintaining power (Castells, 1997; Zhurzhenko, 2014, pp. 251–252). The construct of “national identity” has proven to be a convenient tool to take control of state institutions as an effective weapon in the fight against communist ideology. The “national-democratic project” contributed to the international and internal legitimacy of the post-Soviet nomenclature. Also, the regional division of Ukraine and the threat of its disintegration were used in order to legitimize and perpetuate the power of the post-Soviet political elites. Atomized and mired in stagnation and economic problems – society was an easy object of manipulation. Since the early 1990s, the cultural conflict between the two projects of Ukrainian identity was used in a political game, hindering intra-Ukrainian dialogue and contributing to deeper divisions between the mythologized “East” and “West” (cf. Riabchuk, 2002; Zhurzhenko, 2014).

Regional antagonisms proved to be an effective factor in mobilizing voters in the political campaigns also during the presidential elections in

2004. Ukrainian society, dissatisfied with the direction of economic and political transformation and the incompetence of the authorities began to demand changes (cf. Razumkov Centre's data cited in Konieczna, 2005, p. 22). A broad national democratic base was consolidated under the leadership of the very popular former Prime Minister, Victor Yushchenko. He clashed in the last stage of the elections with the incumbent Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich, former governor of the Donetsk Oblast. According to the official Central Election Commission results announced on November 23, the runoff election was won by Viktor Yanukovich. However the election results were challenged, since the election was claimed to be marred by massive corruption, voter intimidation and direct electoral fraud. The subsequent events led to a political crisis in Ukraine and major civic protests, known as the Orange Revolution.

According to Tadeusz Olszański, the main axis of confrontation of Victor Yanukovich and Victor Yushchenko was to preserve the existing rules of the political game, or opening the possibility of a significant change (Olszański, 2005, p. 5). However, regional divisions and fixed intra-Ukrainian stereotypes were often used by both candidates to discredit the opponent. Both for Yushchenko and Yanukovich, Ukraine's regional division coincided with the moral distinction between "true" and "fake" Ukraine (Riabchuk, 2015a, p. 146; Wolczuk, 2007; Zhurzhenko, 2014, p. 254). The Orange Revolution is defined by Shulman (2005) as a clash of two competing nationalisms, "ethnic Ukrainian" and "eastern Slavic." Shulman concluded that the former supported domestic reform and integration into Europe, while the latter was less supportive of reform and more cautious towards Ukraine's integration with the West. Orange Revolution protestors, who were pro-Western advocates of democratization and opponents of authoritarianism in Ukraine, were contrasted with their opponents, who looked nostalgically to a paternalistic Soviet past (Kuzio, 2010, p. 290). Hence, supporters and opponents of the anti-regime protests were divided not because of ethnic and linguistic categories, but a cultural collective memory related to identity and visions of the future of the Ukrainian state.

The final winner of the 2004 election, Victor Yushchenko attempted to build a new nation on the exploits of anti-Soviet, national heroes such as Stepan Bandera who was a leader of the nationalist and independence movement of Ukraine, and Roman Shukhevych, a military leader and general of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). Both Bandera and Shukhevych were awarded the posthumous title of Hero of Ukraine by

the President, which was a very controversial decision and aroused protests not only among international public opinion, but in Ukraine itself (Marples, 2015, p. 15). Under Yushchenko's presidency, a new national narrative connected with the experience of the collective tragedy of the Ukrainian nation, was universally propagated (cf. Kiryukhin, 2015, pp. 64–65). His most resonant initiatives in the field of identity and memory politics included the establishment of a Museum of Soviet Occupation, the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the Holodomor and the institutionalization of “state memory politics by creating the Institute of National Remembrance and assigning the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) additional functions such as controlling archives, conducting historical research, and popularizing the new official approach to the Soviet past” (Zhurzhenko, 2014, p. 254).

The attempt to realize a project of identity based largely on restoring “national dignity” and re-interpreting the past was received by a large part of Ukrainians as a threat to their identity, values and traditions. Replacing elements of the Russian-Soviet identity narrative with Ukrainian elements met strong opposition, especially among the inhabitants of the southern and eastern parts of the country (cf. Kulyk, 2016, p. 593). Furthermore, the “Orange Camp” turned out to be divided and failed to deliver on its promises. The winner of the presidential election in 2010 was Viktor Yanukovich. The new Ukrainian authorities tried to weaken the pro-Western, pro-market, and pro-democratic orientation and “replace it with the Russian-Soviet-East Slavonic identity, profoundly anti-Western and anti-liberal, that is well established in Russia and Belarus,” Riabchuk claims (2012, p. 445). The new government launched a gradual re-Sovietization of Ukrainian symbolic space, commemorative practices, and textbooks (Riabchuk, 2015a, p. 147). In August 2012, President Viktor Yanukovich signed a language law, which enabled local councils to elevate the status of any minority language spoken by at least 10% of the population to “official” and allow it to be used in governmental, educational and cultural institutions alongside Ukrainian. Although the new law was in full accordance with the norms of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, it caused huge protests, mainly in the west of the country (cf. Pogrebinskiy, 2015, p. 95).

Opposition to the government's language policy boosted the electoral fortunes of radical nationalist groups. According to Kiryukhin, a national discourse focused on fighting against the enemy became the most common type of Ukrainian nationalism. This narrative “emphasizes the fight

for the political and social rights of ethnic Ukrainians against the corrupted government and the oligarchs, and, at the same time, the fight for extending the living space of ethnic Ukrainians who are ‘constrained’ in their own country” (Kiryukhin, 2015, p. 65). The cult of national heroes and idea of ethnocracy are important elements of that movement. After 2004, Ukrainian far-right parties gained wider support in Ukraine and in the parliamentary election of 2012 the far-right party Svoboda won 10 percent of the votes. According to the official Party Manifesto from 2009, the goal of the party was to build “a powerful Ukrainian State based on the principles of social and national justice” (*Prohrama*, 2009). The party requested a radical lustration, aimed at eliminating the employees of state structures who were active before 1991. This was accompanied by a request for the total decommunization of public space (monuments, names of streets and places, etc.) and the demand for an apology from the Russian government for their communist crimes. The political manifesto of that party was extremely anti-liberal, both in economic as well as political terms and this was the main reason for its great success, Olszański claims (2012, p. 1; cf. Charnysh, 2013, p. 3).

The competition of two types of “radicalisms,” national and post-Soviet, was not conducive to the stabilization of the political situation in the country. From the end of 2013, these profound differences were exacerbated by the events of the Euromaidan. The Euromaidan uprising brought thousands of Ukrainians of many different political views together in Kyiv, not only to protest President Yanukovich’s decision to postpone the EU Association Agreement, but also to denounce domestic corruption and repression. Since there was no immediate institutional or political response to people’s hopes and demands, the protests began to grow and spread throughout Ukraine. The government’s decision to use violence against the protesters marked the beginning of a dramatic cycle of political mobilization and escalation (cf. Onuch, Sasse, 2016; Kuzio, 2015). In February 2014, President Yanukovich was forced out of office and the following month, Russia annexed the Crimea. This was followed by the “Russian Spring” – the launch of a separatist rebellion that targeted the eight Russophone oblasts of Eastern and Southern Ukraine that traditionally favored stronger relations with Russia than with Europe (Sakwa, 2016, p. 155; cf. Osipian, Osipian, 2012). Pro-Russian and anti-government demonstrations in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts of Ukraine escalated, and in May 2014 the separatists, supported by the Russian Federation, were able to declared the sovereignty of the People’s Republic of

Donetsk and People's Republic of Luhansk (O'Loughlin, Toal, Kolosov, 2017, p. 125). The conflict in Donbas quickly descended into a war, when the acting Ukrainian President, Oleksandr Turchynov, vowed to launch an "anti-terrorist operation" (ATO) against separatist movements (Wilson, 2016; Wood et al., 2015). It should be borne in mind that with almost 10,000 deaths, over 20,000 injured, more than 1.6 million people displaced domestically and internationally and almost four million in need of humanitarian assistance (European Commission 2017), the Ukrainian conflict has become the largest humanitarian tragedy that Europe has witnessed since the wars in the Balkans in the 1990s.

Culture as Ammunition

To create the image of the enemy, legitimize violence and mobilize people to fight, participants in the events in Ukraine use symbols, discourses, images and military models rooted in the past. The Eastern Ukrainian separatists are trying to mobilize people to fight under the banner of a common Russian-Soviet narrative identity and fear of Ukrainian nationalism. Symbols used by the participants in the so-called anti-Maidan in Kharkiv, Donetsk and Luhansk were both flags of the USSR as well as the white-blue-red flag of modern Russia, sometimes with a golden double-headed eagle. After the proclamation of the "sovereign" People's Republics, the Russian flag disappeared and their own symbolism – albeit referring to the Russian cultural universe – was developed. The hallmark of the separatists was also pinned to clothing – the black and orange St. George's ribbon, a symbol that refers to the tsarist and Soviet military decorations, and which is used in the post-Soviet area to expose the relationship with the Russian/Soviet national identification (Stryjek, 2014, pp. 40–41). The development of nationalism which refers to the Eastern Slavic, Russian and Soviet categories is ideologically and organizationally supported by the structure of *Russian World* (*Russkiy Mir*), a Russian government-funded organization aimed at promoting the Russian culture and language, and values that challenge the Western cultural tradition (Kudors, 2010; Yablons'kyi, 2014). The identity politics pursued by the People's Republics "drew on neo-Soviet symbols and narratives (such as the Great Patriotic War), conservative Russian Orthodox values, and the communist ethos of hardworking people who 'feed the rest of Ukraine', as well as on the

notion that the Russian language and culture needed ‘protection from the Ukrainian nationalists’” (Zhurzhenko, 2014, p. 255).

The old Soviet stereotypes of the inhabitants of eastern Galicia as traitors, fighting the Red Army on the side of the Third Reich, were activated again and, as a consequence of the war in Donbas, became an element of “information warfare” and propaganda activities. According to Tatiana Zhurzhenko (2014, p. 255), “popular clichés and stereotypes about the ‘fascist threat’ posed by ‘nationalist’ Galicia” poisoned the public discourse from the Orange Revolution. Therefore, participants in Euromaidan and later, the supporters of the post-Maidan government are portrayed as “nationalists,” “fascists” and even “Nazi sympathizers” who discriminate against ethnic Russians and Russian speakers who have strong historical ties to Russia, the Russian language and traditions (Kuzio, 2015, p. 116). The new authorities in Kiev came to be called a “fascist junta” and “banderivtsi” (Olszański, 2015, p. 3).

Indeed, during the protests on the Maidan, symbolism taken from the tradition of the formation fighting for the independence of Ukraine, from Sich Riflemen to the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), was enthusiastically used. Nationalist discourse, using clear language and patterns of heroic struggle for freedom, corresponded to social demands during the revolution (Stryjek, 2014, p. 36). Although at the beginning of the protests, the OUN/UPA’s formal greeting *Slava Ukraini! Heroyam slava!* (*Glory to Ukraine! Glory to [her] Heroes*) was taken ambiguously, by many with reluctance, and shouted only by radical nationalists, as the events unfolded it became widespread (Olszański, 2015, pp. 5–6). The symbolic space of Ukraine, of course, with the exception of the Crimea and Donbas, was dominated by the blue and yellow state flag (cf. Buyskykh, 2016). During the protests (though more often in Lviv than in Kiev) the nationalist red-and-black banner, the symbol of the struggle of the radically nationalist OUN, then adopted by the UPA was also used (Stryjek, 2014, pp. 36–39). However, according to Tatiana Zhurzhenko (2014, p. 261; cf. Ishchenko, 2016), “the mass identification with the symbols of radical Ukrainian nationalism does not necessarily mean support for its ideological doctrine; it is rather an expression of a defensive identity in the face of aggressive Russian propaganda.”

Similarly to the separatists, Ukrainian nationalists, claiming the right to the arbitrary decision of who is a “true” Ukrainian, and who is not, use stereotypes and clichés towards Ukrainians from the east and south of the

country. Donbas is portrayed as “Soviet” and therefore an “alien” region of Ukraine (Petro, 2015, p. 27; cf. Portnov, 2016). “The residents of the south-east and everyone in general who does not support the mainstream narrative are labeled as ‘Moskals’, ‘Little Russians’, a ‘fifth column’” Pogrebinskiy claims (2015, p. 96). It is accompanied by “anti-Russian hysteria.” The Russophobe organizations are legitimized by the government and its activists are co-opted into the power structures (*ibid.*, p. 97).

The war also promotes the formation of the new narrative of historical memory, where the key theme is not, as previously, martyrdom (mainly the memory of the Holodomor), but the heroic struggle against invaders (especially against Russia, but also Poland and Hungary). Importantly, the new vision of World War II emphasizes the participation of Ukrainians of different nationalities in the joint fight against the enemy. This narrative corresponds to the needs of a country which is at war and trying to integrate an ethnically divided society into a single political nation (Olszański, 2016, p. 5; cf. Kulyk, 2016; Zhurzhenko, 2014). An expression of the new politics of memory are the Decommunization Laws, signed by President Petro Poroshenko on May 15, 2015, which include four acts: (1) On the condemnation of Communist and National-Socialist (Nazi) totalitarian regimes in Ukraine and a ban on the promotion of their symbols; (2) On access to the archives of the repressive agencies of the Communist totalitarian regime 1917–1991; (3) On the perpetuation of victory over Nazism in World War II 1939–1945; and (4) On the legal status of Ukraine’s fight for independence in the 20th century and to honor its memory. However, as long as there is no agreement concerning the past and future of the Ukrainian nation, patriotic consolidation around common heroes of the struggle for the independence of Ukraine will not be successful.

Conclusions

This paper discusses the cultural context of the Ukrainian conflict, as well as the role of the cultural conflict between two projects of the Ukrainian identity in hindering intra-Ukrainian dialogue and the intensification of political strife. It has been shown how stereotypes and symbols rooted in history have been used to mobilize mass protests, and then – armed struggle. Values, ideas, and ethno-linguistic categories dividing Ukrain-

ians began to be used instrumentally by conflicting parties for waging war, and became ammunition during the struggle. Although the cultural divisions of Ukrainian society, rooted in the history of the country, cannot themselves explain the outbreak of the conflict in Donbas, their analysis may contribute to a better understanding of current events.

It should be noted that, according to sociological surveys, before the outbreak of the protests in November 2013, there was no popular will for any divisions, either in the west of Ukraine, or in the centre and south-eastern regions (cf. Riabchuk, 2015a; 2012; Charnysh, 2013, p. 10). Despite this, Ukraine split into two parts. Although the ethno-linguistic criteria do not form the main axis of division, they proved to be an important tool in building the narrative corresponding to the times of war. Violent conflict has significantly exacerbated these internal contradictions. The war is not conducive to conciliatory attitudes; on the contrary – it favors stricter views and stereotypes.

The prospects for rapidly ending the intra-Ukrainian conflict and the reintegration of the south-eastern regions within the Ukrainian state seem distant. As researchers point out, it is necessary to create a broad concept of the “Ukrainian nation,” based on a “civil identity” rather than an “ethnic” one (Petro, 2015, p. 32; Zhurzhenko, 2014). Although officially the Ukrainian nation is described as a civil nation, according to Kiryukhin, “school curricula, the system of state holidays and social rituals, and the symbolic self-representation of the Ukrainian state have invariably included an ethnic component” (2015, p. 66; cf. Zhurzhenko, 2002). In such a state many citizens could face problems of self-identification and conflicts of identity. “National integration could be provided by economic achievements, pride in efficient national institutions, democratic citizenship, and rule of law, factors that will be difficult to achieve while identity cleavages and confrontations remain in place,” Riabchuk claims (2012, p. 446). Nonetheless, the divisions will remain in place as long as state policy tries to “press” all Ukrainians in a single model of “ethnic identity.”

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Zrozumieć konflikt na wschodzie Ukrainy. Rola kontekstu kulturowego

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest poznanie kontekstu kulturowego konfliktu na wschodzie Ukrainy. Z tej perspektywy konflikt w Donbasie należy rozpatrywać nie tylko w kontekście gry politycznej, transformacji społeczno-ekonomicznej i interesów geopolitycznych, ale także w świetle zakorzenionego w historii konfliktu kulturowego. Według ukraińskiego badacza, Mykoły Riabczuka, Ukraina jest podzielona nie tyle na etnicznych Rosjan i Ukraińców, ile pomiędzy dwa różne typy ukraińskiej tożsamości. Różnice te zaostrzyły się wraz z wydarzeniami „Euromajdanu”, a następnie w wyniku konfliktu zbrojnego pomiędzy separatystami z Donieckiej i Ługańskiej Republiki Ludowej a nowym rządem Ukrainy. Artykuł koncentruje się na tym, w jaki sposób podziały kulturowe ukraińskiego społeczeństwa od początku ukraińskiej niepodległości są wykorzystywane przez elitę polityczną jako narzędzie polityki symbolicznej, co pod koniec 2013 roku doprowadziło do masowej mobilizacji ukraińskiego społeczeństwa i wybuchu konfliktu zbrojnego.

Słowa kluczowe: Ukraina, Donbas, Rewolucja Godności, konflikt, podziały kulturowe