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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Stellungnahme / comment

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Halling, S., & Stewart, S. (2015). *Identity and violence in Ukraine: societal developments since the Maidan protests*. (SWP Comment, 19/2015). Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik -SWP- Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-425725>

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Identity and Violence in Ukraine

Societal Developments since the Maidan Protests

Steffen Halling and Susan Stewart

Since the Maidan protests erupted at the end of 2013 Ukrainian society has witnessed a deep transformation, in which polarising as well as consolidating tendencies can be identified. The “Revolution of Dignity” and Russia’s violation of the country’s territorial integrity have strengthened Ukrainian identity in a way that has enhanced social cohesion. But these developments and the accompanying violence have at the same time heightened pre-existing conflicts. Only a lasting stabilisation can prevent these social fractures from widening yet further. To that end Ukrainian and external actors will need to engage in processes of conflict management and social reconciliation.

While Ukraine has in many respects become a different society since the Maidan, its political actors pay little heed to the implications of these changes. As well as setting the stage for future difficulties in the post-war phase, the transformation is already affecting how the growing number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) is treated and deepening the rift between the Donbas and the rest of Ukraine.

Consolidation through the Maidan

The Maidan movement established a consensus concerning shared goals (such as effective action against corruption) and an idea of solidarity among citizens that extended across large parts of Ukrainian society. Its determined opposition to the regime of President Viktor Yanukovich was decisive, striking a chord with a large

proportion of the Ukrainian population – even in the east, where support for Yanukovich had plummeted in the course of his presidency. However, most of the Maidan participants came either from Kyiv itself or from the western and central regions, and largely ignored the significantly greater indifference or even resistance to their movement in the east and south. This contributed to the ability of the so-called separatists in the Donbas to rely – at least at the beginning – on a certain degree of support among the population there. And the movement in Kyiv tended to class protesters in the east, who saw themselves – in terms of their dissatisfaction and the methods they used – in the Maidan tradition, more as adversaries than as allies.

The consolidating moment of the Maidan brought forth a civil society movement that today strives not merely to replace

(some of) the elites, but to achieve lasting change in the political and economic system. The movement comprises many different organisations and loose groupings, most of which only emerged in the course of the Maidan. One representative example is the “Reanimation Package of Reforms”, an alliance of individuals and NGOs working to stimulate the reform process and monitor the implementation of adopted measures. In this regard the will of civil society and political actors to cooperate with one another is crucial. While individual parliamentarians and government officials maintain good relations with representatives of civil society, many politicians and civil servants are extremely sceptical about involving such actors in the political process. The newly emerged groups also find it difficult to coordinate sensibly and effectively with their allies in the regions, because the new actors in the capital still have to learn how to cooperate closely, while the civil society structures in the regions are significantly weaker. Despite these difficulties, there is steadily growing cooperation between Kyiv and the regions and between individual regions. At the same time, a number of the more prominent activists are now members of the Ukrainian parliament, where they seek to influence politics from within.

Societal Divisions

As well as consolidating Ukrainian society, the Maidan also brought to light a number of differences. Many still refer to it as the “Euromaidan”, because it began as a protest against President Yanukovich’s refusal to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union. Many Maidan participants believed that opposition to Yanukovich and support for the EU convergence process were inseparable, because it would have been impossible to implement the values represented by the European Union under a regime like his. But not all opponents of the former regime followed that logic, and some expressed great scepticism about the

European Union even during the Maidan protests.

Attitudes towards the European Union have grown even more complex in the interim. Support for joining the European Union has grown since the Maidan, if only because Moscow’s actions in Crimea and the Donbas have made the alternative – cooperation with Russia in the Eurasian Economic Union framework – a great deal less attractive, if not inconceivable. At the same time there has also been increasing disappointment with the European Union, whose response to Russia’s aggression has been perceived as weak and inadequate. This applies in particular to the military aspect: Many Ukrainians feel that if the West acknowledges that the conflict is about more than just Ukraine and affects the security of Europe as a whole, it should also be willing to participate militarily, if not directly then at least by supplying defensive weaponry. There is also deep-rooted suspicion that the European Union and especially Germany might be willing to make a deal with Russia at Ukraine’s expense.

A second polarising element of the Maidan concerns the politics of history. The Kyiv protests included many participants who view the era of Soviet rule as purely negative. This interpretation of history, which is especially prevalent in western Ukraine, came to be symbolised by the large-format portrait of the nationalist partisan Stepan Bandera that was prominently displayed throughout the active phase of the Maidan protests. Bandera (1909–1959) is celebrated as an independence fighter and national hero in western Ukraine, but despised as a traitor and Nazi collaborator in the south and east. Some Ukrainians became persuaded that the Maidan was a gathering of “Bandera followers”, an image avidly propagated by official Russian media. These diverging perceptions have a polarising effect and hinder reconciliation between parts of the eastern population and the rest of society. Differences over the Soviet past are also

found within eastern Ukraine, however, as evidenced for example by the controversy over the destruction of the Lenin statue in Kharkiv in September 2014.

A Growing Culture of Violence

Although the protests began peacefully, violence was increasingly used on both sides of the barricades after Berkut special forces attacked demonstrators at the end of November 2013. The participation of Maidan supporters in violent clashes has raised a series of questions with which society has yet to deal, relating *inter alia* to the myth of a peaceful Ukrainian nation and the legitimacy of violence as a means of addressing conflict.

The presence of a volunteer security force on the Maidan, many of them from military backgrounds, contributed to keeping the protest well-organised and solving the practical problems that arise where large numbers of demonstrators occupy a crowded public space. While few of the Maidan supporters questioned the use of violence by their own side, at least in response to attacks by government forces, the events on the Maidan ultimately paved the way for a culture of violence that for example facilitated the emergence of volunteer battalions originally located outside the regular command structures of the interior and defence ministries. One indication of growing brutalisation is the practice of “trash bin justice”, a kind of informal lustration where protestors dump unpopular politicians and officials in rubbish bins. Such phenomena encourage the acceptance of violence within society and make it more difficult to return to a peaceful normality. By inflaming suspicions that parts of Ukrainian society are fundamentally hostile to the population of the Donbas, they can also hinder reconciliation processes.

The partly violent protests that broke out at the end of 2014 in the regional capitals Zaporizhzhia and Vinnytsia were apparently driven by a symbiosis of attention-seeking political forces – the Radical Party and the

Svoboda Party – and demonstrators frustrated that the impact of the Maidan had not yet reached their region, especially at the level of the cadres. The violent elements of the Kyiv movement seem to have habituated some of its supporters to the idea of violence as a legitimate means of political protest. Moreover, Ukrainians find themselves confronted with violence and its effects on a daily basis in their own country, whether directly in the fighting in eastern Ukraine, through encounters with IDPs and returning soldiers, or via media reports.

The present developments reveal that Ukrainian society (including the elite) has failed during the twenty-four years since independence to learn to deal productively with conflicts or to resolve them through sustainable compromises. Looking ahead, there is therefore a danger that parts of society will follow the many examples from 2014 where violence was used in response to conflicts. This risk is greatest if fundamental economic and social reforms are not realised, or if their implementation leads to a significant deterioration in living standards. Especially if the elites escape suffering or are even seen to profit from reforms, the risk of violent protest is great.

At the same time, few actors in Ukraine are in a position to counteract the culture of violence. While awareness of the problem is growing, for example in church circles, the few initiatives for action to date have come almost exclusively from a civil society that is already overstretched with other tasks (supporting the army, caring for IDPs and promoting reforms). Especially with regard to IDPs, organised groups within society have already taken over some of the functions of the state. State representatives are not generally capable of assessing the consequences of the violence for society and initiating suitable responses, such as providing free psychological counselling. There is also a dearth of actors offering the resources required to help others come to terms with the violence they have employed or experienced.

Identity and Patriotism

Elements of consolidation have also emerged due to the repeated and ongoing violation of the country's territorial integrity. One clear indication of this is the observed strengthening of a Ukrainian identity whose principal point of reference is national sovereignty. Surveys show that the Ukrainian population's emotional connection to the nation increased sharply in the course of 2014; one can certainly speak of an acceleration of the Ukrainian nation-building process. While pro-Ukrainian attitudes are more prevalent in the western, central and northern parts of the country than in the east and south, it should be noted that a majority of Ukrainians in all these areas identify with the Ukrainian state and support its independence. In fact, the strongest growth in pro-Ukrainian attitudes is found in the eastern parts of the country, where more than two thirds of the population now favour Ukrainian statehood.

This underlines how regional differences have as a whole declined in importance in the course of the crisis, and that despite regional specifics Ukrainian society is today more united than before. Whether a particular group prefers to speak Ukrainian or Russian plays a subordinate role here. This emerging new national consensus is associated with growing approval for European integration, whereas support for joining the Eurasian Economic Union has fallen steadily in recent months. Before the beginning of the Maidan protests in November 2013, 41 percent supported EU membership, while 38 percent were in favour of joining the Russian-led Customs Union. One year later, in November 2014, the gap had widened to 64 versus 17 percent.

However, the strengthening of national identity and patriotism in the country as a whole is contradicted by a development observed above all in the areas directly affected by the fighting, the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The population of the Donbas has a particularly strong regional identity founded primarily on social charac-

teristics, whereas ethnic and national categories have been secondary in the past. Support for Ukrainian independence was correspondingly much less deeply rooted in this region. Although rejection of Ukrainian statehood has fallen here too, above all during 2014, the proportion of those who are neither for nor against Ukrainian independence has significantly increased. Even before 2014 the population of the Donbas had an ambivalent relationship with the Ukrainian nation-state. The last credible surveys from summer 2014 show approximately one third of the population respectively supporting, rejecting or remaining neutral/undecided on Ukrainian statehood. At the same time, the Donbas is the only region where a relative majority (45 percent) favour the Russian-led Customs Union.

It is in itself nothing new to find diverging attitudes on fundamental questions of Ukrainian statehood in the Donbas, especially given the increasing political instrumentalisation of supposed regional and ethnic/cultural differences during the past ten years. But the population had not hitherto experienced violent clashes between "pro-Russian" and "pro-Ukrainian" demonstrators of the kind witnessed in March 2014 in Donetsk. Even if Russia is primarily responsible for the escalation since then, the population of the Donbas in particular has been exposed to a stark societal polarisation that both prepared fertile ground for and reinforced external propaganda and disinformation. The conflict potential that became visible after the Maidan, which runs mainly along ideological lines, has inevitably intensified in the course of the fighting.

Whilst other regions have been less affected by societal polarisation of this kind, cities like Odessa and Kharkiv also demonstrated that diverging political views harbour potential for violence as well as conflict. Both were repeatedly hit by terrorist attacks in 2014, including a bombing at an anniversary commemoration of the Maidan revolution in Kharkiv. These regions thus remain susceptible to political subversion and instrumentalisation.

War and Its Consequences

The “Anti-Terror-Operation” conducted by the Ukrainian government since May 2014 meets with a heterogeneous response within the population. In summer 2014 a majority of 54 percent wanted to see the operation ended and the conflict resolved through dialogue and compromise, while 34 percent supported continuing it. But attitudes hardened over the course of the autumn after attempts to bring about a cease-fire failed while the Moscow-supported separatists made territorial gains. In October 53 percent still were calling for a cease-fire to be negotiated with the leaders of the self-appointed “people’s republics”, but in November the figure fell to 43 percent, while the proportion calling for the peace talks to be abandoned grew from 22 to 36 percent.

Where there have been public criticism and isolated protests, these have not been directed against the military operations as such. Instead the political leadership has been accused of failure, for example in protecting and equipping conscripts and volunteers. As far as attitudes towards the military operation are concerned, surveys also reveal regional differences: the closer to the warzone, the greater the rejection of military means and the stronger the support for dialogue. However, the population regards the self-appointed “people’s republics” of Donetsk and Luhansk as a product of Russian aggression rather than as genuine representatives of those living there. It is above all this perception that feeds Ukrainian society’s fundamental approval for the actions of its government.

In fact, even in the affected regions the armed separatists have to date received little in the way of active support from the population. Participation in so-called referendums on independence from Ukraine held in parts of the Donbas in May 2014 should be understood above all as a protest against what was felt to be inadequate heed for the interests of the regions in the Maidan movement. But no concrete demands were formulated. Instead, parts of the Donbas population articulated a general dissatis-

faction with a socio-economic situation that had arisen over the course of years. Moreover, propaganda and other types of Russian influence fanned massive fears about supposed right-wing extremists.

However, the continuing fighting, in which both sides have been willing to tolerate a significant number of civilian casualties, has inevitably consolidated the mistrust that already existed in the Donbas towards Kyiv and the existence of supposedly radical pro-Ukrainian attitudes. While most of the Ukrainian population understood the military operations to be directed against the resistance of Russian “terrorists”, the inhabitants of the directly affected regions may come to precisely the opposite conclusion. The perceptions of the population in the area controlled by the separatists are shaped above all by months of exposure to exclusively (pro-)Russian propaganda. Personal experience of violence, propagandistic instrumentalisation of civilian victims and the publicly flaunted use of torture against prisoners of war have caused grave harm to relations between different sections of Ukrainian society.

Certain measures introduced by Kyiv, such as stopping payment of pensions and other benefits and the introduction of a travel permit regime to prevent more separatist forces infiltrating into the non-occupied areas, must also be questioned in this context. While it was initially possible to pass the checkpoints without major difficulties, principally to collect cash and have pensions paid, in recent weeks it has become much more difficult for residents of separatist-controlled areas to leave. This also cements the existing front line as a de facto frontier. At the same time, increasing war-weariness is leading to growing calls within Ukraine to let the Donbas go.

Enormous movements of IDPs create a further strain on social cohesion, with numbers from the war-afflicted eastern regions increasing steadily as the fighting continues. Alongside about twenty thousand from Crimea, well over one million IDPs from the Donbas were registered by

the middle of March 2015. Most of them now reside in the directly adjoining areas under Ukrainian control, in the regions bordering the Donbas (Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhia), in the Odessa region or in the capital Kyiv. Especially during the cold part of the year, providing proper housing for these people represents an almost insurmountable challenge. Given that many do not register at all, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees believes that the true numbers are considerably larger.

The IDPs have to date mainly been seeking temporary protection from the dangers of war, and it can be assumed that most will wish to return home. This is particularly likely to be the case for pensioners, who represent the overwhelming majority of IDPs in the areas around the war zone. But fighting and ongoing instability in the region are likely to make a quick return impossible in most cases. In view of the deteriorating economic situation in the country there is therefore a risk of resource-related conflicts, for example over housing and public services. Those from the Donbas may also suffer stigmatisation on the basis of suspicion of lack of patriotism or (at least passive) support of separatism. Above all, political conflicts could occur in the regions that accept particularly large numbers of IDPs. The question of how to deal with active or passive support of military separatism on a legal and especially on a societal level is also likely to arise. This is a question that affects the social cohesion of the country as a whole and must therefore be clarified above and beyond the regions directly affected by the fighting.

Society as a Crucial Actor

It was activists from Ukrainian society who sparked the Maidan movement in November 2013, and organised parts of society today make a decisive contribution to supplying the Ukrainian army with the equipment it needs and caring for steadily growing numbers of IDPs. Through its future

behaviour society will also help to determine whether Ukraine engages in successful reforms.

Yet the role of Ukrainian society is often neglected, by external actors as well as by the country's elites. In fact, a stronger awareness of societal attitudes could be helpful in generating realistic demands and expectations with which to approach Kyiv. Such deeper insights would also assist Germany and the European Union to locate allies within Ukrainian (civil) society who could help to advance the reform process. This would make it easier to identify the risks and opportunities that will influence developments in Ukraine in the coming months. A more profound understanding of societal trends and potential lines of conflict could also be useful for OSCE observers on the ground in Ukraine in their interactions with local actors, as well as on the level of strategic planning.

Recognition of the potential of Ukrainian civil society and the wish to do more to promote it are certainly present in the German context. The best proof of this is the special funding approved by the Bundestag for German organisations to carry out projects at (civil) society level with partners from Ukraine or other countries of the Eastern Partnership (EaP). These funds, administered by the German Foreign Ministry, have been increased from €5 million in 2014 to €14 million in 2015. The special funds are suitable for financing projects in the fields of conflict transformation and societal reconciliation. But the funding is too short-term in nature to generate credible sustainability. It would therefore make sense to consider how these monies could be linked to other longer-term funding sources, since projects working towards reconciliation must be medium- to long-term if they are to have any prospect of success.

On the EU level there has been a significant amount of rhetorical as well as substantive support for Ukrainian civil society in past years. The Eastern Partnership's Civil Society Forum has provided opportunities for Ukraine and other EaP countries

to provide input from civil society actors into Brussels policy processes, as well as to network with their counterparts from other states in the region and some EU member states as well. However, while the EU has increasingly acknowledged the need to assist civil society development in Ukraine and has acted accordingly, the potential of forming a tandem between the EU and civil society actors in Ukraine to induce the Ukrainian political and economic elite to carry out genuine reforms has not yet been realised. A much more systematic network of contacts would be necessary to ensure that Brussels institutions and Ukrainian NGOs are effectively pooling their efforts to push for reform.

This can also apply in part to the field of societal reconciliation, in which greater awareness in Brussels of efforts by Ukrainian organisations can enable the EU to alert members of the Ukrainian elite to the problems generated by societal tensions and the potential solutions offered by its own (civil) society. Furthermore, a heightened understanding of societal trends and concerns in Brussels can help EU officials tailor their approach to Ukraine in a more realistic and appropriate manner. This fits in well with the emerging consensus around stronger differentiation according to country within the Eastern Partnership, as reflected for example in the Joint Consultation Paper “Towards a new European Neighbourhood Policy” issued by the European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on 4 March 2015.

As in the fields of politics and economy, Ukraine has missed many opportunities to promote social cohesion in the past two decades. The Maidan and the events in Crimea and the Donbas have now initiated and accelerated diverse processes of change in society. While these have contributed to consolidating a Ukrainian identity, they have also deepened existing fault lines between the Donbas and other parts of the country. Moreover, violence has also become at least more commonplace as a means for

dealing with conflict, and perhaps more accepted as well.

The handling of these problems in the coming months and years will help determine the strength or weakness of the Ukrainian state. It will be important to sensitise political actors in the country to these questions. Here their contacts in Germany and the European Union have a contribution to make. It is equally important to encourage and concretely support the small but growing number of (civil) society actors working on processes of conflict transformation and reconciliation. The actual form of assistance will differ from case to case, and will need to be continuously re-negotiated between those involved to reflect the rapidly changing situation. This makes tackling these questions a significant but worthwhile challenge, and one where the interaction between political and societal actors will be decisive.

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ISSN 1861-1761

Translation by Meredith Dale

(English version of
SWP-Aktuell 23/2015)