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On Independence Day, Ukraine's Existence Questioned

By Alexey Eremenko

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Members of the National Guard march during Ukraine's Independence Day military parade, in the centre of Kiev August 24.

On Sunday, Independence Day was celebrated for the 24th time in Ukraine — a nation that, in the eyes of many Russians, does not exist at all.

The decades-old question of Ukrainian national identity has reached a fever pitch in recent months thanks to the pro-Russian insurgency's capacity to exacerbate patriotic sentiments in both Ukraine and Russia.

Russian nationalists see Ukraine as a renegade province misled by a handful of Russophobes into viewing itself as an independent nation, distinct from Russia.

"There never was ... a Ukrainian ethnicity, a Ukrainian nation, a Ukrainian civilization. Just western Russian lands," Alexander Dugin, an ultraconservative Russian philosopher, wrote

on his website Evrazia.org in February.

Having long been relegated to the fringes of society, Dugin's ideas were recently co-opted by Kremlin ideologues, and now enjoy mainstream popularity in Russia.

But historians, even those in Russia, argue that Ukraine is a nation — albeit one that is very young, and very closely intertwined with its former mainland.

"The Ukrainian nation doubtless exists," said Maria Falina, an expert on Eastern European history with University College Dublin. "They're just still working out their own historical narrative."

The Long Road to Independence

In medieval times, the Eastern European Plain housed a tumble of ever-morphing feudal principalities kept in constant upheaval by internal strife and foreign invasion, most notably the German crusaders and the cataclysmic Mongol forces.

"Ukraine" as a distinct region emerged in the 16th century, when the term was used to define the mostly Orthodox Christian territories controlled at the time by the Catholic Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth.

Religious tensions prompted Ukrainian elites to forge an alliance with the rising Russian Empire in 1654. The move was largely opportunistic, but Cossack hetmans (warlords) soon found that the Russian Empire was like Hotel California: easy to check in, but impossible to leave.

Between the 18th and the early 20th centuries, Russia controlled most of modern Ukraine's territory — except Galicia, the western heartland of modern Ukrainian nationalism, which belonged to Austro-Hungary.

Ukraine enjoyed a brief spell of independence between 1917 and 1921, but was then absorbed into the Russian Bolshevik state, becoming one of four formal co-founders of the Soviet Union in 1922.

Galicia only became a part of Ukraine after World War II, and Crimea was "reassigned" from Russia to Ukraine within the Soviet Union in 1954.

Ukrainian leader Leonid Kravchuk was one of the three leaders of the Soviet republics — along with his Russian and Belarussian counterparts — to sign a declaration disbanding the Soviet Union in 1991.

The Unstoppable Nation-Building

The majority of the nations that comprise modern Europe emerged between the 17th and the 19th centuries, most academics agree.

This process only spread to Eastern Europe in the 19th century, however, as most of the region's nations had previously fallen within one of four empires — Russian, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman and Prussian.

Initially championed by the intelligentsia, the national sentiment gradually seeped down to the general public, spawning national renaissances that brought about independent states such as Poland, Czechoslovakia and the three Baltic states after World War I.

While Ukraine did not gain independence until 1991, the Bolsheviks supported Ukrainian national identity through a process known as "Ukrainization" between the 1920s and 1930s, in order to pacify the region following the tumultuous Civil War era.

As part of the process, Ukrainian schoolchildren were instructed in their native language and books were published in Ukrainian, among other expressions of cultural pride. Though this process ended in the mid-1930s, it succeeded in bolstering cultural sentiment.

"This is when they really began to think of themselves as Ukrainians," said Mikhail Dmitriyev, a Slavic history expert at Moscow State University.

The rise of nationalist sentiment was apparent during World War II, when many Ukrainian nationalists, such as the controversial Stepan Bandera (1909-1959), advocated an alliance with Nazi Germany as a means to ending Soviet rule.

Ukraine remained a Soviet republic after the war, though Russia exerted a strong cultural influence. More than half of the population of eastern Ukraine views Russian as its primary language, though some nevertheless identify as Ukrainians.

But all Ukrainian post-independence governments have been working hard to promote Ukrainian national identity in schools and the media, said Valery Tishkov, who heads the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology at the Russian Academy of Sciences.

The process is not without exaggerations: Some historians have gone so far as to claim the Ukrainian nation — "the Ancient Ukrs" — is 40,000 years old.

But this is still the continuation of the same region-wide nation-building trend that began in the early 19th century, all experts interviewed for this article said.

Where Does a Nation End?

The question to debate is not whether a Ukrainian nation exists, but rather where it ends and Russia begins, pundits said.

Despite tensions between the Ukrainian-speaking west and the Russian-speaking east, the two sides have largely worked out a compromised view on their history and identity acceptable to everyone, said Falina of University College Dublin.

"A national identity is a complex thing. You can identify as both a Russian and a Ukrainian. It's not about an 'either-or' choice, it's an 'and-and' proposition," said Tishkov.

But Russia's influence on Ukrainian identity is likely to be waning, as the majority of Ukrainians blame Moscow for the ongoing strife in the country's east, he said.

"War leaves very long-lasting scars," Tishkov said.

See also:

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