

# AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF ARMENIA



## **A Constructivist Approach to Ukraine Conflict**

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## **Abstract**

The conflict in Eastern Ukraine has resulted in the actual partition of the country. Its consequences were serious for the rest of the world, as well. The purpose of the thesis is to find out the role of identity in this conflict. The internal dimension of identity problem implies the divide between the Russian-speakers and the Ukrainian-speakers, which has deep historical roots. The western regions of the country are mainly inhabited by Ukrainian-speakers, whereas the population of the eastern parts is predominantly Russian-speaker. The division between these regions has historical context, which has been analyzed in the thesis. The identity problem has been reflected in the political sphere as well. The two groups have had opposite perceptions about the past of the country and about its future. The identity problem can be considered one of the major causes of the conflict.

## Table of Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| <b>Abstract</b> .....  | 3  |
| <b>Introduction</b> .....                                    | 5  |
| <b>The Conflict in Eastern Ukraine: What Happened?</b> ..... | 7  |
| <b>The Identity Problem in Ukraine</b> .....                 | 8  |
| <b>The Theory of Constructivism</b> .....                    | 16 |
| <b>The Role of Identity in Ukraine Conflict</b> .....        | 19 |
| <b>Conclusion</b> .....                                      | 23 |
| <b>References</b> .....                                      | 24 |

## **Introduction**

Since 2013, Ukraine and the events taking place there have been of great concern to the world. In fact, the result of these events was the actual partition of the country. With the mainly Russian-inhabited eastern regions demanding autonomy, the conflict in the country turned into a war between the Ukrainian army and the separatist forces.

In reality, the consequences were serious not only for Ukraine. These events, along with the earlier developments in Crimea are considered one of the most dangerous crises the world had faced since the end of the Cold War. This is because the conflict in Ukraine resulted in serious deterioration of relations between Russia and the West. The United States and the EU have imposed sanctions on Russia, which are still present. Thus, the conflict in Ukraine has altered the image of international politics in a significant way. Since the conflict is still going on, there is a danger of further escalation.

There have been various interpretations of the conflict and its causes. Many researchers see the conflict exclusively as a war between Russia and Ukraine, considering the developments in Eastern Ukraine a result of Russian invasion. However, few of them deny that Ukraine is a country divided politically, culturally and historically. Its regions vary in language, culture, with the western parts historically more oriented towards Europe, and the eastern parts oriented towards Russia. At the same time, however, the importance of this fact is not always acknowledged. Eventually, even with backing from Russia, part of the population of eastern Ukraine has rebelled. The thesis concentrates on these internal divisions to examine their impact on the current crisis. More precisely, the purpose of the thesis is to find out how the subsequent identity problem has influenced the conflict in Eastern Ukraine.

The research is guided by the following research question: what is the role of identity in Ukraine conflict? The hypothesis is the following: the identity problem has been one of the major causes of the conflict. The focus of the research is the continuing conflict in Eastern Ukraine; the events in Crimea have not been discussed.

The method of the research is qualitative. The theory of constructivism is chosen in accordance with the purpose of the research. It is a theory of international relations that can explain the impact of identity on the respective actor's behaviour and thereby contribute to a better understanding of that aspect of the conflict. Different studies are used while analysing the identity problem in independent Ukraine. Many studies suggest that the country lacks common national identity. These studies also identify the nature of differences among various regions and groups of Ukrainian population. The key historical events regarding Ukraine have been represented briefly. This is necessary, as the concept of identity is defined in constructivist terms, and the constructivist theory suggests the importance of history in shaping identities.

Language-related data have been used while referring to the ethnic diversity in the country. This is important, because language can also be considered a feature of identity.

## The Conflict in Eastern Ukraine: What Happened?

The fighting in Ukraine started in April 2014, when activists took control over government buildings in Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Earlier pro-Russian demonstrations took place in these regions as a reaction to the so-called ‘Euro-Maidan’ revolution, the massive pro-European protests, which brought to power nationalists. Earlier president Viktor Yanukovich had rejected the association agreement with the EU in favor of a closer cooperation with Russia and this had triggered the massive protests and the subsequent crisis in the country.<sup>1</sup> Following the ouster of Yanukovich, the parliament passed a law on language, which made Ukrainian the only official language in Ukraine.<sup>2</sup> This move along with the rise of nationalist moods in Kiev caused concerns among Russian-speakers in the eastern regions who felt their identity endangered. Russia in its turn accused the new leaders of Ukraine of violation of minority rights.<sup>3</sup> As the armed activists seized major state buildings, the government in Kiev launched a military campaign against them.

In February 2015 Ukraine and Russia, along with France and Germany signed an agreement on ceasefire in Minsk. The agreement envisaged establishment of a buffer zone, release of hostages and organizing elections in Donetsk and Luhansk under the Ukrainian law. Thus, Ukraine was supposed to regain its control over these territories in case of adopting constitutional amendments aimed at decentralization of power.<sup>4</sup> However, this seems to be a hard task. Despite the fact that the agreement was an achievement, there are many challenges to its implementation. In fact, there were no provisions for the implementation of the agreement when it was signed. Its enforcement totally depends on both

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<sup>1</sup> “The Ukraine Crisis Timeline,” <http://ukraine.csis.org>.

<sup>2</sup> “The Ukraine Crisis Timeline,” <http://ukraine.csis.org>.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Kirby BBC News, “Ukraine Conflict: Why Is East Hit by Conflict?” *BBC News*, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28969784>.

<sup>4</sup> “Details of the Ukraine Cease-Fire Negotiated in Minsk - The New York Times,” <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/13/world/europe/ukraine-cease-fire-negotiated-in-minsk.html>.

sides.<sup>5</sup> So far, the sides have not shown enough commitment to the agreement, and the conflict is yet to be resolved.

### **The Identity Problem in Ukraine**

As mentioned above, many researchers depict Ukraine conflict as a war between Russia and Ukraine, and consider the breakaway of eastern regions solely a result of Russian military invasion.<sup>6</sup> Thereby, they do not bring up any other problems that could have led to the conflict as well. The situation in Ukraine is usually seen only in the context of a broader struggle for influence between Russia and the West. This is similar to the realist interpretation of the conflict. The proponents of the theory of realism consider states the only actors in international politics, and the main goal of each state, according to them, is to maximize its power.<sup>7</sup> This theory, however, as will be argued later, cannot provide a comprehensive explanation of this complex conflict, as it largely disregards many other factors that influence state behavior, including identity.

Some researchers also consider the fact of ethnic and cultural diversity of Ukraine as one of the factors causing the conflict. Besides, Ukraine is often seen as not merely a diverse, but a divided nation. These divisions mainly refer to the eastern and western regions. Moreover, the linguistic, religious and cultural differences are so deep, that it is hard to speak about Ukraine as a single, united nation. This stance is sometimes criticized as exaggeration.<sup>8</sup> However, regardless of the disagreements about the scale of the problem and its importance, it is hard to deny Ukraine has an identity problem.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> David J. Kramer, "The Ukraine Invasion: One Year Later," *World Affairs* 177, no. 6 (2015).

<sup>7</sup> Stephen M. Walt, "The Progressive Power of Realism," *The American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (December 1997)

<sup>8</sup> J. Alexander Motyl, "The Surrealism of Realism: Misreading the War in Ukraine," *World Affairs*, February 2015.



In fact, there are studies conducted on this issue before the conflict that suggest the same: Ukraine lacks a common national identity. One such study was conducted based on 58 interviews of Ukrainian and foreign experts.<sup>9</sup> They all have stated that Ukraine lacks common identity and that the country has been in the process of creating it since the independence from the Soviet Union. This process, however, was not succeeding because of absence of institutions and proper policies.<sup>10</sup>

The failure to develop a united identity is also considered a major drawback of the country's leadership. The role of leadership is considered largely negative. The leaders paid little attention to build a solid national identity, so that the country would not remain in the state of uncertainty and prone to internal tensions.<sup>11</sup>

Thereby, it can be claimed that there are cultural, religious, linguistic divisions inside the country, which create identity problem. Views, however, vary on the role this problem plays in the conflict, and the ways it could affect the developments in Ukraine.

As Peterson and Kuck emphasize, diversity does not necessarily lead to ethnic conflict: there should be other factors, such as internal leadership and foreign instigation.<sup>12</sup> Leadership in Ukraine's case has played a significant role according to them: when Yanukovich decided to move the country closer to Russia at the expense of its relations with the EU, he intensified already existent tensions between Ukrainian majority and Russian minority.<sup>13</sup> Thereby, they consider ethnic struggle, in this case struggle between ethnic Russians and Ukrainians one of the origins of the conflict.

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<sup>9</sup> Karina V. Korostelina, "Ukraine Twenty Years after Independence: Concept Models of the Society," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 46, no. 1 (March 2013)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Lauren Van Metre et al., *The Ukraine-Russia Conflict: Signals and Scenarios for the Broader Region*, 2015, <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR366-The-Ukraine-Russia-Conflict.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> James W. Peterson and Sarah Kuck, "Civil War in Ukraine: Ethnic Conflict, Authoritarian Leadership, and Outside Involvement," [http://www.ces.upol.cz/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/CES\\_1\\_14\\_Peterson-Kuck.pdf](http://www.ces.upol.cz/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/CES_1_14_Peterson-Kuck.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

In fact, the process of identity construction in Ukraine historically has been very much connected with its relations with Russia. The history of the two countries is linked in many ways, although this linkage and its significance is not always acknowledged, at least not by all the groups of the Ukrainian population. The beginning of the history of Ukraine is considered the medieval state of Kievan Rus, which collapsed already in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Both Russians and Ukrainians consider it as the origin of their countries and nations. There is a contest between them over the right to claim the legacy of Kievan Rus.<sup>14</sup>

For centuries following the dissolution of Kievan Rus, the territories of current Ukraine have been under domination of different countries, such as Poland, Lithuania, Crimean khanate. The Cossack Hetmanate, a state established in the 17<sup>th</sup> century on the left bank of the Dnieper is considered the predecessor state of Ukraine and it is believed to set the base of development of modern Ukrainian identity.<sup>15</sup> The entity was under suzerainty of the Russian state. Russia in its turn called the hetmanate “Little Russia”, and here is when the tradition of considering Ukraine as a part of larger Russia is believed to originate.<sup>16</sup> The Cossacks repeatedly revolted against Russia trying to establish the hetmanate as a state separate from Russia. In the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the last rebellion headed by Ivan Mazepa against Peter I of Russia failed. The Russians defeated the Swedish army, which entered Ukrainian territory at the famous battle of Poltava. The Cossacks had sided with the Swedes, hoping to get rid of the Russian domination. By this defeat, the efforts to create a distinct nation and state of Ukraine failed and the idea itself disappeared from the Ukrainian discourse.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Serhii Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

It reemerged several decades later, when again the territories of current Ukraine were divided this time between Austrians and the Russian Empire. Western parts were under the Austrian rule; the rest was part of Russia. In modern times, Ukraine's history textbooks usually present the bad effects of the domination of the Russian Empire over the Ukrainians and depict it as cruel.<sup>18</sup>

During the period between the two World Wars, Ukraine did not have its own state, with the respective territories divided among Bolshevik Russia, Romania, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. The two dominant ideologies among Ukrainians in that period were communism and nationalism; the former developed in Soviet Ukraine, the latter in Polish-ruled western Ukraine, Galicia and Volhynia.<sup>19</sup> In the first years of the Soviet Union, the Soviet leaders adopted and quite successfully implemented the indigenization policy, which suggested promotion of local cultures. The so-called 'Ukrainization' of the people living in the country included the promotion of the Ukrainian language and culture at all the levels of the local population, including the Communist party.<sup>20</sup> In late 1920s, the approach of the Soviets towards local cultures changed and indigenization policy ended, thereby, the attempt to create a distinct Ukrainian culture failed once again.<sup>21</sup>

A key historical event that has influenced the Ukrainian perceptions about the Soviet period is the Great famine of 1932-1933, Holodomor, which took millions of lives in Ukraine. There are different views among academics about this event. Some consider it ethnic genocide against Ukraine; others think there is not enough evidence to claim that the

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<sup>18</sup> Karina Korostelina, "Shaping Unpredictable Past: National Identity and History Education in Ukraine," *National Identities* 13, no. 1 (March 2011)

<sup>19</sup> Plokhy, "The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine".

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

aim of the famine was to annihilate Ukrainians.<sup>22</sup> The different approaches towards this event have an impact on the process of identity construction in Ukraine.

In 1939, the Soviet forces invaded Poland and seized Galicia, which afterwards was incorporated into the territory of Soviet Ukraine. Thus, the western part of Ukraine joined the Soviet Union and the Soviet Ukraine later, continuously being dominated by various European countries before that. This fact is important to consider in order to understand both nationalist and pro-Western attitudes of people in these regions.

While considering the 20<sup>th</sup>-century nationalist movements of Ukraine, it is necessary to mention the respective organizations, the Ukrainian military organization, the Organization of Ukrainian nationalists and the Ukrainian insurgent army. The first was created in 1920 in Poland and it is responsible for killings of many Polish officials.<sup>23</sup> The second was formed in Vienna in 1929 and did not differ much from the first one in terms of radicalism, and finally, the Insurgent army was formed in 1942 and its activities are considered very controversial. Both the Organization of Ukrainian nationalists and the Ukrainian insurgent army fought against the Soviet Union up to 1950s.<sup>24</sup> Today there are opposite approaches towards the activities of these organizations inside and outside Ukraine. The Communists view these organizations as enemies who aimed to divide Ukraine, while nationalist view them as fighters for liberation of Ukraine, that is to say liberation from the Communist rule, as well.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, many Russians and Poles consider these organizations as terrorists groups, because of the atrocities the nationalists committed aligning with Germany during the Second World War.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Karina Korostelina, "Constructing Nation: National Narratives of History Teachers in Ukraine," *National Identities* 15, no. 4 (December 2013)

<sup>23</sup> Alexander J. Motyl, "Facing the Past in Defense of Ukraine's New Laws," *World Affairs* 178, no. 3 (2015)

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Korostelina, "Constructing Nation."

<sup>26</sup> Motyl, "Facing the Past in Defense of Ukraine's New Laws."

Thus, the division between different parts of Ukraine population has historical roots, and many historical events have had significant impact on the respective perceptions of contemporary Ukrainian citizens.

It is important to observe the modern process of construction of Ukrainian identity to understand its impact on the current situation. As it was already mentioned, the country has been in the continuous process of creating identity since its independence. This is a natural phenomenon of newly independent states, to be engaged in nation building and state building. In case of Ukraine, this process has been hindered by opposite attitudes and beliefs about the past held by the different ethnic and/or linguistic groups.<sup>27</sup>

The distance between the two main ethnic groups of Ukraine, Russians and Ukrainians differs across regions.<sup>28</sup> The Russian population comprises not more than 17 percent of the overall population of the country; however, the number of ethnic Russians does not coincide with the number of Russian-speakers, because there are ethnic Ukrainians who consider Russian as their first language.<sup>29</sup> The Russian-speakers prevail in the East and South. In fact, there are Russian-speakers in almost every part of Ukraine, except for some western regions.<sup>30</sup>

After the independence, the existing identity problem between Russia and Ukraine revealed itself in the history education of the country.<sup>31</sup> The textbooks emphasize that the Kievan Rus was actually a Ukrainian state, which later enlarged incorporating Russians and Belarusians.<sup>32</sup> As it was already mentioned this is the opposite version of the Russian

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<sup>27</sup> Karina Korostelina, "Constructing Nation: National Narratives of History Teachers in Ukraine," *National Identities* 15, no. 4 (December 2013)

<sup>28</sup> Korostelina, "Constructing Nation."

<sup>29</sup> Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Richard Sakwa, *Ukraine and Russia: People, Politics, Propaganda and Perspectives*, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Korostelina, "Shaping Unpredictable Past."

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

approach. In the textbooks, Ukraine is often represented as a European country in contrast to ‘Asian’ Russia, and based on that the superiority of the Ukrainian culture over Russian is claimed.<sup>33</sup> The harsh policies of both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union towards Ukrainians are presented as the main threat and obstacle to the preservation of Ukrainian culture. In general, the image of Russia portrayed in these books is negative.<sup>34</sup>

It can be argued that this representation has influenced the perceptions of Ukrainians and their views about the relations of their country with Russia. Surely, this firstly refers to the western regions of the country. The regions primarily inhabited by Russian-speakers, of course have another view. Donbass, that is Donetsk and Luhansk, is actually one of these regions. It is considered to have its own regional identity, which can be seen as a combination of Russian and Ukrainian features.<sup>35</sup> Here, the predominant has been the pro-Russian narrative, which also tends to praise the Soviet past and its contributions to the development of Ukraine, blaming Western Ukraine for the crisis the country has been facing since its independence.<sup>36</sup>

At the same time, the nationalists tend to view Donbass as an alien region, because of the predominance of Russian language and often pro-Russian approach, and the often-suggested solution by nationalists has been to educate these people in order to revive their ‘repressed’ Ukrainian identity.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, the division between Western Ukraine and mainly Russian-speaking eastern parts becomes clear. Surely, there are other nuances regarding the perceptions of the

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Sakwa, *Ukraine and Russia*.

<sup>36</sup> Korostelina, “Constructing Nation.”

<sup>37</sup> Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Sakwa, *Ukraine and Russia*.

respective groups, and exact boundaries between them cannot be set. However, these were the main features of the divide before actually the crisis began.

In fact, this divide has had its impact on political processes since the independence of the country. More precisely, the question where Ukraine belongs in the context of geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the West has been very much connected with the divide between the regions and the subsequent identity problem inside the country. The western regions have constantly supported more or less pro-Western candidates during presidential elections, such as Kravchuk in 1994, Kuchma against his Communist opponent in 1999, Yushchenko, following the so-called “Orange revolution” and Tymoshenko.<sup>38</sup> The divide became more evident under Yushchenko, who clearly had a pro-European stance and whose attempts to build a new nation depicting the radical Ukrainian nationalists as heroes alienated the eastern regions.<sup>39</sup>

In Eastern Ukraine, Donetsk and Luhansk in particular, the position of the Communist party was very strong in 1990s. However, its popularity declined by emergence of new forces. The Regions party rose in Donetsk, with Yanukovich as the main figure of the party. Being a representative of Russian minority, he was able to win the elections, and thereby shift the pro-Western direction Yushchenko had been advocating for the country.<sup>40</sup>

As noted earlier, the economic development and the nature of political regime are factors believed to have the potential of turning an ethnic dispute into a conflict.<sup>41</sup> In case of Ukraine, the economic difficulties and widespread corruption, along with largely authoritarian style of leadership have caused a lot of tension in the country since the independence. The hopes of change largely faded after 2004 revolution. This caused also

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Peterson and Kuck, “Civil War in Ukraine.”

ethnic tension, because, as mentioned earlier, many citizens, primarily in the western regions believed that the reason for the inability to achieve development was the influence of Soviet Union and later Russia on the path of the development of Ukraine. They saw the solution of Ukraine's problems and its future in closer association with Europe. When the opportunity was lost, the tension turned into a conflict.

### **The Theory of Constructivism**

The constructivist approach helps to gain insight into various aspects of the conflict. In fact, constructivism is the only international relations theory that can help to explain such broad concept as identity. It is one of the central concepts of the theory: constructivist theorists emphasize the importance of identity in understanding international politics.<sup>42</sup>

Constructivism appeared in the 1990s as it became clear that the dominant neoliberal and neorealist approaches were unable to explain the transformative processes the world was undergoing after the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>43</sup> Constructivists believe that norms, beliefs and identities create world politics. They claim that identities are the basis of interests: an actor's interest is defined by his or her identity.<sup>44</sup> If, for example, a state has an identity of a 'great power', it suggests a particular set of interests, which would be different if the state had the identity of 'European Union member'.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, constructivism assumes that such kinds of identities are multiple. Identities have important functions in the theory, they tell the actors and others who they are and who others are.<sup>46</sup> Constructivists have especially

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<sup>42</sup> C. G. Thies, "Progress, History and Identity in International Relations Theory: The Case of the Idealist-Realist Debate," *European Journal of International Relations* 8, no. 2 (June 1, 2002)

<sup>43</sup> Brian Frederking, "Constructing Post-Cold War Collective Security," *The American Political Science Association* 97, no. 3 (2003)

<sup>44</sup> Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992)

<sup>45</sup> Ted Hopf, "The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory," *International Security* 23, no. 1 (1998): 171

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.



emphasized the role of ‘other’ in constructing identities. The identity relationship is considered two-sided: the ‘other’ can contribute significantly to the creation of self.<sup>47</sup>

In fact, constructivism does not suggest that identity is something given. On the contrary, such as norms and beliefs, identities are ‘socially constructed’.<sup>48</sup> They are social facts; they exist, as long as all the respective parties agree that they exist. Such concepts as human rights, property and sovereignty are also social facts constructed by human agency.<sup>49</sup> Thus, identity is constructed. According to constructivism, identities of states depend on historical, political, social, cultural contexts.<sup>50</sup> Thereby, it is possible to understand the identity of a nation or a group by looking at these factors. However, this process of constructing identities is continuous: the existing identity can be changed under new circumstances. Therefore, it is important to understand that an agent’s reality at any period is historically constructed and conditional.<sup>51</sup>

In constructivism, not only states are considered actors but everyone. Thus, individuals, organizations, different groups can affect the international politics and respective political outcomes as much as the states. This allows seeing a more comprehensive picture of a particular case. The power of ideas, norms and values and their impact on politics also need to be considered to gain insight into complex conflicts and their roots. Constructivists emphasize the influence the beliefs of an individual can have on policy choices and the respective outcomes.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Aliaksei Kazharski and Andrey Makarychev, “Suturing the Neighborhood? Russia and the EU in Conflictual Intersubjectivity,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 62, no. 6 (November 2, 2015)

<sup>48</sup> Frederking, “Constructing Post-Cold War Collective Security.”

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Hopf, “The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory.”

<sup>51</sup> C. Dale Copeland, “The Constructivist Challenge to Structural Realism: A Review Essay,” *International Security* 25, no. 2 (2000)

<sup>52</sup> Emanuel Adler, “Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics,” *European Journal of International Relations* 3, no. 3 (1997).

Moreover, the connection between structure and agency is one of the strong points of the theory. Constructivists do not argue which of the two creates the other. Instead, the theory suggests that structure and agency constitute each other.<sup>53</sup>

Constructivist approach is often used while examining various ethnic conflicts and civil wars. This is because it is hard to understand these conflicts disregarding the idea of identity. The constructivists see language, culture, history, symbols capable of activating ethnic rivalry.<sup>54</sup> Thus, as noted earlier, ethnic conflict is a result of concrete historical processes, which influence the relations between different ethnic groups and create hostilities.<sup>55</sup>

In case of civil wars, constructivism helps to understand not only the environment in which the respective actors exist, but also the relationship between them, and the meanings these actors give to their actions and the actions of others.<sup>56</sup>

In fact, constructivism can also be useful to understand Russia's motives for intervening in Ukraine, as a move driven by its identity, which many constructivists actually do. The thesis, however, is concentrated on the identity problem inside Ukraine, not ignoring, of course, its relations with Russia, which apparently are an essential part of that problem.

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<sup>53</sup> Hopf, "The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory."

<sup>54</sup> Dodeye Uduak Williams, "How Useful Are the Main Existing Theories of Ethnic Conflict?," *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 4, no. 1 (2015)

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Bill Kissane and Nick Sitter, "The Comparative Study of Civil War: Towards a Dynamic Model" (The Centre for European and Asian Studies, 2006).

## **The Role of Identity in Ukraine Conflict**

The conflict in Eastern Ukraine has been interpreted in different ways. The predominant approach has been the realist perspective of interstate conflict. From the realist perspective, the situation in Ukraine is largely a result of geopolitical struggle between Russia and the West. The involvement of Russia in the eastern regions and its alleged instigation of local protests is often seen as the only reason for the subsequent conflict and partition of the country. The interpretation of the motives beyond the involvement may differ depending on whether it is considered an action aimed at maximizing power, or a response to a threat aimed at maximizing security.

In any case, this approach seems to overlook Ukraine itself, the specifics of the conflict in internal dimension, as well as such important aspect of the relations between the two countries as identity. The realist theory considers the interests of states as given; suggesting that power is what defines the interest. Thereby it explains the actions of the states as strife to maximize it, or in case of neorealism, to ensure maximum security. The states are the only actors, and the impact of internal politics on the state behavior is not considered.<sup>57</sup>

The constructivist approach is more complex. It does not see the interests as given. For constructivists, the world in general and politics in particular does not consist of objective facts: the reality we have is constructed. Hence, the politics including state behavior cannot be explained with structural facts as such, as the facts do not exist independently from the respective actors, they exist to the extent to which actors give them meaning. Therefore, the identity of actors is very important.

When observing the situation in Ukraine before the conflict, the identity problem seems to have played a major role both internally and in the foreign policy of the country.

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<sup>57</sup> Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics."

Actually, in Ukraine's case these two are interconnected. The historically rooted internal divide has affected the behavior of the state. The division between the eastern and western regions and the subsequent boundary between the two groups is imbedded in the historical context in which their relations developed. The western parts, constantly being under domination of various European countries are very different from the East where the presence of Russian language and culture is significant.

As noted earlier, the clear boundaries between the two groups are hard to identify. The picture becomes more or less precise if we consider language-related facts, because, as it was already mentioned, ethnic Russians are minority; however, the percentage of Russian-speakers is much higher than those of ethnic Russians. Many Ukrainians consider themselves Russian-speakers. The nationalists in the country have tended to treat the eastern parts, namely Donbass, as alien to what they believe to be the Ukrainian culture.

As mentioned above, the process of identity construction in Ukraine has historically been connected to its relations with Russia. The constructivists emphasize the role of other in creating the self. This case can be interpreted similarly. Throughout the history, the attempts to create a distinct identity separate from Russia have failed. Russia has not treated the Ukrainians as a nation distinct from itself, and considered them as part of the larger Russian world. Thus, for Ukrainians, at least part of them, one of the definitive features of identity has become the distinctness from Russia. They have come to see the Russian, later the Soviet domination over the country the major threat to their development as a separate nation.

In modern times, this trend continued, as many, because of its dependence on Russia, have questioned the sovereignty of Ukraine. As noted earlier, the history interpretation in the country tends to depict a largely negative image of Russia. Thus, in this case the image of the other is negative.

The divide over the perceptions about the nationalist groups is also important. Some people consider the members of nationalist organizations, such as Ukrainian insurgent army, fighters for freedom, as it is also represented in the history education. Meanwhile Russians consider them terrorists. This is a part of general perceptions about the Soviet period, because the nationalists in Ukraine tend to consider Communism as evil as Nazism.<sup>58</sup> Surely, the population of eastern regions would not welcome such approach, as they tend to praise the Soviet past and its contributions to prosperity of Ukraine. Thus, it can be stated that the two groups have opposite beliefs about the past, which have formed as a result of the respective historical processes.

While examining the identity problem, it is also important to note the social and political contexts on which the actors' identities also depend, according to constructivism. In this respect, the situation in Ukraine since its independence needs to be considered. The social boundary between the regions has been significant. The political environment has been influenced by the existent attitudes at the same time shaping them. The social and political instability has increased the divide between the Ukrainians and Russians. This is because the elites have been prone to either Russia or Europe, and each time the respective group has been unsatisfied with the dominant ideas of the ruling elite.

Following the revolution of 2004, as it was already mentioned, Yushchenko was trying to advance the idea of moving closer to Europe. However, the revolution was unable to fulfill the proclaimed goals, and the country remained prone to tensions. The victory of Yanukovych in its turn caused concern in the western parts, as he was a pro-Russian leader.

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<sup>58</sup> Motyl, "Facing the Past in Defense of Ukraine's New Laws."

In fact, the divide between East and West has been reflected in the voting patterns of these regions, with Donbass, along with Crimea being the opposite of those in Galicia.<sup>59</sup> The latter has tended to support more or less pro-Western politicians.

Thus, it can also be claimed that these two groups have had opposite visions about the place of their country in the world and its future. In 2004 revolution movement, the participants were mostly from Western Ukraine, mainly Ukrainian-speakers, while their opponents were from the East, primarily Russian- speakers.<sup>60</sup> The same picture was in 2014. The protesters are believed to be mostly Ukrainian- speakers, from western regions.<sup>61</sup>

Thereby, the identity problem has emerged as a result of the respective historical processes of interaction between the two countries and ethnic groups. According to constructivism, identity of a state depends on historical, political, social contexts. In all these aspects, there had been a deep divide between the two groups, which eventually turned into a large- scale conflict.

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<sup>59</sup> Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Sakwa, *Ukraine and Russia*.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

The conflict in Eastern Ukraine has resulted in the actual partition of the state. Its consequences were serious for the rest of the world, as well. The relations between Russia and the West worsened significantly, and the United States and the EU imposed sanctions on Russia. There have been various approaches regarding the causes of the conflict. These approaches have been focused mainly on the geopolitical struggle between Russia and the West, with Ukraine obviously being very important to both of them.

The internal dimension of the conflict has received relatively little attention. More precisely the identity problem inside Ukraine and the role of identity in the conflict in general needs to be considered as well. The identity problem in this respect means the divide between Russians and Ukrainians, or to be more accurate, between the Russian-speakers and Ukrainian-speakers, which has deep historical roots. The western regions of the country are mainly inhabited with Ukrainian-speakers, whereas the population of the eastern parts is predominantly Russian- speaker. The division between these two groups has historical context, which has been analyzed in the thesis. The process of constructing identity in Ukraine has been strongly influenced by its interactions with Russia. Similar to the past, in modern times the emphasis has been on the distinctness of Ukrainians from Russians. This is similar to the constructivist idea of creating self with the help of other. The other in this case is Russia, the image of which is largely depicted as negative.

The identity problem has been reflected in the political sphere as well. The two groups have had opposite perceptions about the past of the country and about its future. Surely, the political crisis in its turn has influenced the identities of these groups intensifying the hostilities. However, the impact of identity on the conflict is clear, and it can be considered one of the major causes of the conflict.

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