

Regionalist Promises in State Social Identity Construction: The Rhetoric of a Single Economic Space

*Prepared for 6th Pan-European International Relations Conference, Torino, Italy
12-15 September 2007*

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Abstract

Constructivism and social identity theory provide a useful point of departure for the analysis of regionalist aspirations of the postcommunist countries of the former Soviet Union. In many cases, these aspirations remain in the realm of rhetorics. The coveted or presumed regional affiliation drives foreign policies and external branding of the state. It also importantly affects the state's identity. Identity construction in the region has emphasized the irreconcilably dualistic nature of such categories as "European" versus "Eurasian," thus driving European countries of the former Soviet Union to break their ties to Russia.

Seeking eventual affiliation with the European Union, Russia's closest ally, Ukraine, had spearheaded an openly anti-Russian GUAM (Georgia-Ukraine-Azerbaijan-Moldova) alliance. However, regional affiliation with other EU hopefuls proved unstable, in no small part because the GUAM's construction of identity in explicit opposition to that of Russia's was not positively rewarded with promises of the prospective EU membership. Meanwhile, the "Eurasian" Russia, acting in tandem with Kazakhstan, has launched institutionalization of a Single Economic Space (SES), which Belarus and Ukraine were also invited to join. The SES rhetorics emphasize its alleged similarity to the early phases in the evolution of the European Union. The idea of creation of a new trading bloc or free trade area in Eastern Europe and Eurasia serves as much an anchor of identity for the participating states as a basis for pragmatic foreign economic policy and institution building.

The paper examines regional dimensions of social identity construction in post-Soviet space, focusing on the competing images of "Europe" versus "Eurasia." By looking at the example of the SES, it seeks to clarify the role that regional identities and cultures play in the alliance politics in Europe and beyond. The symbolic meaning of the EU as an identity magnet is juxtaposed with Russia's rhetoric of common roots, complementarity and kinship with other Eastern Slavic states. The paper argues that development of regional dimension to a national identity is the necessary first step towards wider international integration.

Introduction

The end of the Soviet Union has changed political geography of the continent in more than one way. The super-state that occupied one-sixth of the land surface of the planet was gone, and fifteen independent states appeared in its stead. The distinction between the European and the Asian states of the former Soviet Union immediately came to the fore. Finally, the question of a

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regional “home” for these states was pushed on the agenda by the emergence of the new security dilemmas and economic challenges.

Out of this newly found “homelessness,” the desire to be adopted was born, and the quest for a regional affiliation with a family of kindred states started in earnest. However, few of the established regional families rushed with adoption offers. Thus, an idea to engage one’s former sister republics in a regional arrangement of some sort came rather naturally to the leaders of several ex-Soviet states, and was implemented in parallel to the organized dissolution of the former Soviet Union.

Over the last decade and a half, there have been several attempts to institutionalize new regional “families” on the Eurasian continent. The Commonwealth of Independent States (created in 1991) was followed by a tripartite customs agreement among Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia (1995), formation of the Eurasian Economic Community with the same three plus Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (2000), establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization with China in 2001, and announcement of the Single Economic Space (SES) agreement by Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia and Ukraine in 2003. The Baltic states moved to join the EU, while Ukraine created a GUAM (Georgia-Ukraine-Azerbaijan-Moldova) alliance that was specifically designed to oppose Russian influences in the CIS. Fresh out of the 2004 Orange Revolution, Ukraine co-founded the "Commonwealth of Democratic Choice" among “all democratic states in the Baltic, Black Sea and Caspian regions” (Frolov, 2005: 7). The Central Asian states toyed with the idea of resurrection of the Great Silk Road and produced the whole string of solidarity organizations, from the Central Asian Commonwealth in 1991 to the Organization of Central Asian Cooperation (OCAC) in 2002.

Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan all have significant Russian minorities. Their societies bore indelible impact of the historical and present influences of the Russian language, culture, and ethnicity. Belarusians and Ukrainians by and large perceive Russians as their next of kin. Historical memories of Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians converge on the same memorable events. These three nations stand out in the degree of ethno-cultural, historical, and political-economic closeness. Such closeness might have permitted institutionalization of a regional union with a potentially significant developmental potential and a good measure of internal cohesiveness based on the idea of cultural kinship and/or civilizational similarity. Yet, institutionalization of the SES proceeds against the backdrop of the continuing engagement of Ukraine and Kazakhstan with other international organizations that gravitate elsewhere. Russia itself does not seem to recognize the SES as its “pet project” and is keen to take part in various political and economic groupings that are not tied to its immediate geographic neighborhood.

A question of the state’s “true” identity significantly bears upon the choice of its regional affiliations. Thus, the “social construction of Europe” that emphasizes “transformation of identities, the role of ideas and the uses of language” (Christiansen, Jorgensen and Wiener 1999:528) is uncannily echoed in regionalist pursuits of the post-Soviet states.

The State’s Social Identity and International Relations Theory

The concept of social identity refers to a stable set of linkages between self-perceived

membership in a group and the agent's social behavior, attitudes, and perceptions. Social identity is defined as "that part of an individual's self concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to the membership" (Tajfel 1978, as cit. in Greene 2004: 137). Social identity is that part of individual identity that links an individual and her referent group together, transforming the individual into an indispensable member of the group, and the group – into the individual's social birthplace, the "land" of origin and the higher moral authority, at least according to that picture of the world that the individual accepts as true for both idealistic and practical reasons.

The concept of social identity is crucial to our understanding of states' behavior in the international arena. Identity of a state is a "subjective or unit-level quality, rooted in [its] self-understandings," but equally dependent on other actors representing the state in question in the same way, thus granting its identity "an intersubjective or systemic quality" (Wendt 1999:224). Formation and the resultant shape of any state's identity can not be fully explained by endogenous factors alone and would also require accounting for this state's interaction with others. Exchanges between states reflect both their idiosyncratic and systemic features, but it is the latter that make these interactions recurrent and, to some extent, predictable: "[j]ust as collectivities of individuals within states hold intersubjective understandings that affect their behavior, so too... do collectivities of states. In both cases these understandings appear to differ from the mere aggregation of the individual parts" (Ruggie 1998: 12).

The concept of the state's social identity has been developed by the constructivist school in international relations theory in conjunction with the studies of culture and human agency as central forces of international politics. Constructivism has shifted attention "away from objectives (actors, structures) to processes (constitution, construction, learning)" in which structure and agency are co-constitutive (Burch 2002: 62). Constructivists see the international system itself as a snapshot of continuous interplay between states, an interplay propelled by distinct and interactively defined national identities. Instead of taking the state's survival instincts and material interests as given, constructivists "regard the interests and identities of states as a highly malleable product of specific historical processes" (Walt 1998: 40). The states' identities are unique in no small part because they are established, changed, negotiated and redefined in the process of social interaction with other states.

The post-Cold War era in particular has opened new possibilities and put a new emphasis on the ability of states to *choose* their identities and interests and to market them internationally. National elites across the world bought into the "postmodern politics of image and reputation" and responded to globalization through international branding of their state, that is, by giving the state "an emotional dimension with which people can identify" (van Ham 2001: 2). The resulting rise of a "brand state" became one of the notorious features of contemporary international politics, while the states' social identities as such grew increasingly embedded in the transnational spaces that exist above and beyond national boundaries. Both global and regional anchors of identity gained in prominence, while identities centered on one's old domestic selves entered the period of decline, which even the world's strongest powers can not stall or avert.

As of recent, attention has been given to the potential of social constructivist approaches in the growing field of studies of European integration. Calling for a "more sociological and

constructivist understanding of [European] institutions as constitutive” for individual states’ behavior and preference formation, Checkel (1999: 555) emphasizes the need for a middle-level theory of European integration that would eschew normative teleology of the early neo-functional accounts, while simultaneously promoting a better understanding of the interest-and identity-shaping forces of social interaction at the regional level. An exploration of the European responses to globalization indicates that “the social construction of external or structural context is an important element in the European integration process” (Rosamond 1999:653). Studies of the EU eastern enlargement and Turkey’s membership prospects bring new attention to the question of “European identity” and rekindle interest in culture and community (Aybet and Muftuler-Bac 2000; Fuchs and Klingemann 2002).

These questions of identity and belonging are of utmost importance to the postcommunist states of East Central Europe (ECE) and Eurasia. Multiple transitions that the postcommunist Europe has experienced in the last decade and a half have all been centered on the questions of identity: economic, political, and cultural. East Central Europeans now define themselves as capitalist, not socialist (economic identity); democratic, not party-led (political identity); and European, not “East European” (cultural identity) nations. This multifaceted imagery has not been created from scratch, but rather modeled on pre-existing identities of the West European states. As an offprint of someone else’s identity, it cannot but be weak and require some extra grounding in intersubjective reality of reciprocal recognition and exchanges with the group of model nations. A promise of membership in the European Union extended to the ECE nations presented them with a unique opportunity for such positive reinforcement. At the same time, post-Soviet states of the CIS had found themselves in a limbo of transitions to nowhere and were denied all chances to redevelop their national identities from a new regional or indeed global foundation. It is small wonder, then, that in a hope to find new beginnings they had to anchor themselves in a region they all came from in the first place, thus launching reintegration processes with their former sister republics within the space once occupied by the Soviet Union.

Reintegration Efforts in the Post-Soviet Space: A Constructivist Reading

In what follows, I will attempt to offer a constructivist interpretation of the interstate integration efforts in the post-Soviet space. I suggest these efforts deserve a constructivist reading not just because there is an attempt to build, modify, or rebuild an objectively understood international structure. A rationally understood, politically and socially pragmatic effort of “building” gets, in fact, supplemented, if not subverted, by the purely rhetorical efforts to engage what constructivists call “ontology of becoming” (Green, 2002:11). In other words, political elites of the newly independent states not infrequently pursue the task of “regional embedding” by essentially narrative means. A path toward regional integration, be it with the EU or with regional organizations driven by Russia and other post-Soviet states, gets “socially constructed by actors creating intersubjective meanings (culture, norms, common understandings) through interaction in a community” (Green, 2002:11).

It has been noted that the term identity expresses a “recursive doubling,” denoting “simultaneous intimacy and distance” (Mazzarella, 2004: 357). A part of the story that is less commonly told is that of a desire of acceptance and belonging, desire to become something that you are not yet at the moment, but ought to become in order to reveal your “true” identity. Identity as a project, as

what one “should, ought and wants to be” (Yngvesson and Mahoney, 2000), is by definition incomplete. A state’s identity that has to be completed or rebuilt anew drives frantic searches for an anchor of belonging. In the world defined by globalization and regionalism, this anchor of belonging must be found in a wider international/regional community.

Only few of the ex-Soviet states could realistically dream of the eventual membership in the European Union. When the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was created, its main declared purpose was to preserve economic ties within post-Soviet space. An undeclared purpose was to serve as a regional anchor of identity and belonging, emulating, in a way, an early phase in the evolution of the European Union. Although the crisis that most post-Soviet republics experienced in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union was multifaceted in nature, most of its facets converted on the problem of lost or never developed traditions of independent statehood. To compensate for that, nation states had to be resurrected or constructed anew, national sovereignties had to be established and protected; separate national identities established and “sold” to the world (cf. Hopf, 2002). That was not enough, however. Newly independent states of the former Soviet Union had to find their unique niches in the international system, establish political and economic affiliations with other states, build regional and international alliances, informal and formal networks of support and association. Embedding of a newly independent state in a regional community of states became an important task for all new governments. Political rhetoric of the alleged socio-cultural and regional identity of a newly independent state became an important diplomatic tool that was used to pave the way to eventual integration with the desired “community of belonging.”

The proclaimed rhetorical “Europeanness” of the Balts, just as the earlier rhetorical exercises of a similar nature by East Central Europeans, brought the expected fruit. Ukraine tried to emulate this example of success, but to no avail. Meanwhile, the Russian leaders vacillated between their own historical anchors of identity – westernism, on the one hand, Slavophilism, on the other, and, finally, Eurasianism as the way out of the intractable predicaments posed by the first two.

In October 2000, the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEc) had come into being. By 2005, it included Kazakhstan, Belarus, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Armenia and Moldova. Ukraine had an observer status. However, Eurasianism had little appeal to the East European countries that found themselves fully in Europe. Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, each irked with Russia’s imposing presence in the CIS framework and irritated at Moscow high-handed approach to various issues of bilateral interest, decided to create a regional grouping of their own. Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan had also joined the grouping, which became known as the GUUAM. Nonetheless, the movement toward economic reintegration with Russia did not die. It continued, even inside the GUUAM countries, out of sheer utilitarian necessity of cooperation, as well as the more sublime desire to find an interstate community of belonging that could not be obtained elsewhere.

A current attempt by Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan (the “big four” of the CIS) to form a single economic space (SES) was launched in September 2003. As noted in the agreement on the creation of the SES, the member states will seek to provide for free movement of goods, services, capital and labor. They agree to obey by the uniform trade regulations and tax policies, and work toward the creation of a common financial system. They plan to introduce uniform

technical standards, including public health and environmental norms. They will also seek harmonization of their macroeconomic policies and national legislation in the areas of international trade, competition and regulation of natural monopolies. While it has been emphasized that the current agreement is open to other states in the region, non-participation of other post-Soviet states seem to be of little concern to Moscow.

The Agreement was almost simultaneously ratified by all four countries in the spring of 2004. At the Yalta (Ukraine) summit in May 2004, presidents of the member states selected areas for prospective cooperation and prepared documents to discuss at the next meeting. The September 2004 summit in Astana (Kazakhstan) saw them signing an agreement to levy the value-added tax (VAT) on a destination-country principle. A High-Level Group was vested with the task to ease border crossings for citizens of the member states. More than two dozen documents that would lay the foundation of the SES legal structure have been prepared for signing by July 1, 2005.

However, the integration process ran aground because of Ukraine's unwillingness to fully cooperate with its partners. By May 2005, Ukraine insisted on reducing the agreed-upon package of 29 documents to 16, and later, 14 (the so-called "14+1" format). A year later, the HLG experts had 95 documents developed and ready for discussion as a proposed foundation of the SES legal base. Upon Ukraine's insistence, this package was trimmed down to 38 documents, yet Kiev was still hesitant to extend its approval. Apart from fears that Russia might use regionalization initiatives to reassert its influence in the area, especially worrisome for Ukraine are implications of the SES agreements for the country's European integration bid. Two anchors of identity appear to be in conflict here: the European and the Russian/Eurasian poles. Reciprocally, Russia itself is torn between its own two poles of identity: Eurasianism and pan-Eastern Slavism.

A Eurasian or an Eastern Slavic Union?

Eurasianism appeared as a reaction to liberal internationalism and anarcho-capitalism of the first Yeltsin administration. It started growing in popularity as soon as expectations of a new Marshall plan for Russia proved stillborn. Denied all prospects of the European Union or NATO membership, Russia had no way to go but to turn east. Thus, a brief "Atlanticist" interlude pioneered by Yeltsin's first Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrei Kozyrev gave way to nationalistic soul-searching under his successors Evgenii Primakov and Igor Ivanov. Eurasianism offered an identity broad enough to cover not only Russia, but also other ex-Soviet states that would not shy away from cooperation. Because of this, it supplied Russia with a non-exclusive regional personality that, by virtue of its being open to other claimants, allowed re-establishment of Russia-centered Commonwealth on a postcommunist, post-imperial basis.

Adepts of the "Euro-Asian project" rejected "primitive Westernism" of the first post-perestroika years (Kortunov 1998: 21). By the mid-nineties, the time of "romantic relations with the West" was over, and the Russian elite had finally realized that no one would take care of Russia's national interests save Russians themselves (Seleznev 1997). The shock waves of disintegration of a unified Soviet market had driven home the idea of restoration of the disrupted economic ties. The neoliberal talk of shedding the so-called "clients" to free the country from its alleged "imperial burden" slowly subsided, to be replaced by the idea of reintegration.

The Eurasian identity has been persistently championed by the President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev. Nazarbayev often refers to an identity that is presumably shared by the Kazakhs and the Russians alike. Kazakh diplomacy was instrumental for the establishment and successful functioning of not only the EurAsEc, but also the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), where both Russia and China participate, and the Conference on Security and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia with 15 other countries. Seeing the 21st century as “the century of Eurasia’s blooming development,” Nazarbayev (2002) has based his hopes for peaceful coexistence of Islam and Christianity on what he reads as “centuries of mutual enrichment of Slav and Turkic peoples.” In this vision, Eurasianism is recognized as a way to “construct new bridges of mutual understanding and cooperation between states and nations” (ibid.) Yet, anti-western undercurrents of Eurasianism are also clearly visible. Recently, Nazarbayev (2004) drew attention to the “contradiction between globalization and national statehood,” decried “structural imbalance of the world,” and insisted that the “ratio between liberalization and security” must be regionally determined.

Speaking at a recent international conference at Lev Gumilev University in Kazakhstan, Putin has confirmed Russia’s Eurasian inheritance, noting that “Russia is the very center of Eurasia” (RFE/RL Newline, 18 June 2004). Parallel to this, a growing group of Russian intellectuals sees Russia as a unique “metanational corporation,” an “intercivilizational melting pot” that must appeal to the Eastern Slavic trio of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus first and foremost (Kortunov 1998: 90, 85). Neo-Slavophiles believe that Ukraine “objectively” does not belong with the West and that both Russia and Ukraine will lose if the latter will find its way into the European Union.

The idea of a “common to all Russians” (i.e., East Slavs) “transnational” identity underscores cultural uniqueness of the traditional Eastern Slavic civilization, which allegedly still ties its heir nations together. This imagery overrates cultural proximity of the three nations. Nonetheless, rhetorical building of a common regional home creates a momentum of its own. When rooted in cultural proximity of the three nations and helped by mutually beneficial economic exchange, it may well be sufficient to secure regional cohesion (Molchanov 2002a).

Moreover, if regional integration strengthens democracy, facilitates free trade and upholds national sovereignty, it might be seen and “sold” as a part of the pan-European process. Even though Putin’s Russia appear to be sidetracking from this path, it might still get a chance to lead post-Soviet developmental efforts on behalf of the “big four,” thus helping to overcome the region’s isolation from the rest of the world. In order to succeed, a Russia-led union must take the interests of all of its member states into the account. Development of an all-inclusive and Europe-friendly identity can be a key to such wider pan-European integration. Until then, the western-oriented Ukraine will remain wary of Russia’s efforts.

Moving Away from Russia: Ukraine and the GUUAM

The CIS proved stillborn in no small part because of its over-reliance on the “Eurasian” ideology, which some countries saw as an “imperial version of Russian nationalism” (Laruelle 2004). In the mid-to-late nineties, the Ukraine-led GUUAM (Georgia-Ukraine-Uzbekistan-Azerbaijan-Moldova) gained momentum as a chief opponent of the so-called “Russian Four”

(Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan-Kyrgyzstan), the countries that formed the core of the CIS customs union and its various collective defense agreements.

Ukraine's decision to break up the CIS came in the wake of the apparent failure of its 1997 Chisinau summit. With the blessing of the West, Kiev moved on to conclude bilateral agreements with the countries of the southwestern post-Soviet periphery, each with its own grudges against Moscow. Georgia and Moldova were less than happy with the CIS peacekeeping operations, Azerbaijan saw Russia favoring the Armenian side in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, while Ukraine sought to break its energy dependence on the Russian monopolists with Azerbaijan's assistance.

To a varying degree, all four laid claims to a "European" identity, in contradistinction to its alleged opposite, the Eurasian identity championed by Nazarbayev and such Russian politicians as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy or Evgenii Primakov. These states regarded themselves well positioned to eventually enter the European structures of economic cooperation and security by moving as far away from Russia as possible. All four saw Russia's reintegration efforts as a threat, thus seeking to counterbalance with regime building premised on the "European" idea.

The GUUAM's coming into being was symbolically announced in Washington during the NATO summit that has historically redefined the mandate of North Atlantic Alliance. Responding to these developments, Vladimir Putin, then acting as a Secretary of the Russian National Security Council, urged Russian-Belarusian unification as "a strategic task" that must be pursued further. However, the GUAM's planned escape to the West remained an exercise in futile rhetoric. During the January 2000 CIS meeting all of the GUUAM members endorsed Putin as the Chairman of the CIS Heads of State Council. The meeting adopted a Russia-sought resolution, following which the GUUAM defense ministers' meeting was cancelled. All events at the summit indicated that would-be defectors continued placing "bilateral concerns with Russia above all else" (Miller 2000). Ukraine's behavior at the summit was in line with more conciliatory toward Moscow attitude.

Most GUUAM decisions remained on paper. In June 2002 Uzbekistan announced that it was "suspending" its participation in the organization "because of the lack of progress in its activity" (Pravda.RU 2002). GUUAM reverted to GUAM, and no one else but the U.S. Office of Secretary of Defense tried to revive the moribund organization by various measures designed to assist its member states "in designing and implementing new cooperative agreements" (GUAM 2002). Finally, the 2004 revision of Ukraine's military doctrine "lost" its previous reference to the country's aspiration to join NATO and the EU, which some analysts saw as "a further nail in the coffin of the GUUAM alignment" (RFE/RL Newswire, 29 July 2004). With Moldova equally adrift, GU(U)AM's summit, planned for June 2004, was postponed until further notice.

The Orange Revolution in Ukraine had galvanized the grouping. With the U.S. nudging, GUAM cloned into the Community of Democratic Choice, which open a consultative forum between the four GUAM members and the three Baltic states, Slovenia, Romania, Macedonia. A year later, during the May 2006 summit in Kiev, the four presidents signed a Charter for the freshly minted Organization for Democracy and Economic Development (ODED). The so-called ODED-GUAM promised to establish itself as a beacon of democracy and good governance in the realm

allegedly threatened by Putin's authoritarianism. The leaders were not deterred by the scandalous revelations of intensifying political corruption in Ukraine. The hereditary nature of the authoritarian regime in Azerbaijan was not discussed either. Instead, the West got assurances that the ODED-GUAM will fight against organized crime and create free trade zone modelled after the European patterns. The GUAM-USA framework cooperation program became the crown achievement of the summit.

GUAM's degeneration into a mostly rhetorical formation serving the US geopolitical interests can in no small part be attributed to its construction of identity in explicit opposition to Russia. This effort has not brought about dividends that were hoped for, as none of the participants got any promise of the eventual affiliation with the EU. The GUAM four have found themselves symbolically excluded from Europe, precipitating serious reflections on the achievements of their respective foreign policy establishments.

Identity politics in the post-Soviet space

Post-soviet regionalism grew out of fear be left alone in the increasingly globalized world. This was accompanied by the politics of envy toward the European Union. Other key movers were the Eu expansion to the east, China's rise and economic penetration of Central Asia, and Russia's attempts to reasserts itself both geopolitically and economically. The end of the bipolar world brought back bandwagoning and politics of alliances. Regionalization was called forth to address political and economic insecurity. Equally important, it opened a new promising conduit to procure resources that nation building required. Rhetorical politics of identity appeared well suited to deliver those resources even when regional institutionalization efforts stalled.

Post-Soviet states' politics of identity could not but be influenced by Russia's moves from Atlanticism to Eurasianism to strategic partnership with the USA to a new round of "cold peace" over Ukraine's elections 2004. Ukraine in particular was faced with a stark choice: to side with either Moscow or the West. For all countries of the region, Russia remains the main energy supplier, military superpower, and most reliable export market. On the other hand, association with NATO and the EU promises stability, prosperity, and prestige that are due to the elite club of developed nations. Adopting a European, a Eurasian, or an Eastern Slavic identity carries respective rewards and penalties. For Ukraine, a typical "torn" country in Samuel Huntington's sense, the choice of foreign policy orientations is further complicated by the identity preferences of the people, half of which speak Russian language at home and a quarter of which define their ethnicity as, to a varying degree, both Ukrainian and Russian (Arel and Khmelko 1996; Khmelko et al. 1997).

In the ongoing debate over identity definitions, it is easy to forget that both Russia and Ukraine "have chosen a European identity, but in neither country is that identity finally fixed" (Light, White and Löwenhardt 2000: 87). In Russia, the unstable identity is fed by feelings of injured national pride – the result of a symbolic exclusion from Europe. In Ukraine, identity is all too often used and abused as a tool of international politics (Molchanov 2002b). For the better part of the last fourteen years Ukraine's foreign policy has been "multivectoral," as the government attempted to steer a shaky course between Russia and Europe.

Ukraine's determination to apply for the EU membership dates back to 1993. Then, Ukraine attempted to emulate the strategy pioneered by the East Central Europeans and to secure a ticket to the affluent western club by merely distancing itself from Russia, the Europe's perennial "Other" (Neumann 1999). Seeking to capitalize on the country's well-advertised geostrategic location, the government in Kiev has been keen to represent Ukraine as the newest version of the "*antemurale Christianitatis*" – a mantle long claimed by the Poles for their allegedly civilizational fight against the "barbaric" Russian and Eurasian "east" (Zarycki, 2004).

Meanwhile, Europe looked at Ukraine with suspicion, and rightly so. Bilateral relations were dominated by the EU concerns over Ukraine's inability to clean up the mess left by the Chernobyl disaster. Economy was slow to reform. The political system remained riddled with corruption. Free press was under attack. The idea of Ukraine's "natural place in the European family among other European nations" (Zlenko 2001), which did not evoke strong criticisms at the beginning of the nineties, sounded more dubious as the turn of the century approached. In addition, Ukraine was accused of unscrupulous dumping of textiles, coal and steel products on the European market. Antidumping measures were in full swing until October 2000, and had cost Ukraine millions of dollars. Even after the Orange Revolution, the EU took another year to grant Ukraine a market economy status.¹

Ukraine's marginalization was a hard blow for those who, together with Tarasyuk (2000), believed that they were no different from "Eastern Germans and other former Warsaw Pact countries...separated from the European mainstream for decades." To catch up with East Central Europeans, Ukrainians decided to bandwagon by joining the Central European Initiative and launching, together with other countries of the region, the Organization of Black Sea Economic Cooperation. Ten years later, inaugurating the ODED-GUAM clone, Ukraine's Victor Yushchenko has once again linked the country's futures to the European Union: "We are now laying the foundation for our future to create a zone of stability, security and prosperity, which is homogenous with the constantly enlarging European Union and consistent with European norms and standards" (ForUm, 2006).

Political rhetoric was supplemented with foreign policy activism. The end of the Orange Revolution saw the president calling upon the imagery of Ukraine's western vocation to divert attention from the opportunistic infighting and corruption scandals that plagued the orange coalition's rise to power. However, foreign policy is a poor substitute for the lack of good governance at home. At best, it forms a "precarious basis for the political legitimacy of the state" (Prizel 1998: 27). Legitimacy rests on concrete actions of the government that are repeated long enough to institutionalize norms and patterns of behavior. But institutional development takes time and resources, which Ukraine's power holders were not willing to spend. Hence, the choice was made to rely on social construction of identity, geostrategic positioning of the state, and the discourse of cultural closeness to either Europe or Russia, depending on circumstances at hand. Identity was put to use as a political resource (Molchanov, 2000).

European integration is now assertively articulated as a mainstream strategy for the country's

¹ The EU has announced granting a market economy status to Ukraine on December 1, 2005. The USA followed by making a similar announcement on February 17, 2006.

political, social, and economic development. “Our place is in the European Union,” proclaims Viktor Yushchenko (2005). “My goal is, Ukraine in a United Europe.” However, Orange Revolution notwithstanding, the EU dismissed Kiev’s requests for an associate membership, offering a wider “neighborhood policy” instead (Kyiv Post, 21 January 2005).

Ukraine’s regional embedding in Europe was up to a slow start. It failed under Leonid Kravchuk, who had missed his chance of fast rapprochement with Europe. It failed under Kuchma, who did not bother to support “European” rhetoric with democratic reforms at home. It remains to be seen if it may succeed under Yushchenko. Ukraine’s road to Europe looks definitely longer now than that of Turkey, which applied 18 years ago. These facts perpetuate the feeling of exclusion. Ukraine’s periodic comebacks to Russia are often seen as being deliberately orchestrated from Moscow. However, they can be also read as the nation’s attempts to find a community of belonging. Be it by means of association or excommunication, the EU does shape the ongoing process of construction of Ukraine’s national identity.

Back to Russia?

Ukraine was a founding member of the CIS, yet never signed the CIS Charter or the Treaty on collective security and restrained itself to the mostly formal associate membership in the CIS Economic Union. In 1991-94, Kravchuk’s government worked to distance the country from the CIS, revising the Agreement on Creation of the CIS *de-facto*. Meanwhile, Russia supported up to 22 percent of the Ukrainian GDP with subsidized energy sales and other forms of credit (Åslund 1995). One half of Ukraine’s industries depended on trade with Russia in order to survive. Faced with this reality, Kiev signed a comprehensive friendship treaty with Russia in May 1997 and the bilateral Program of Economic Cooperation till 2007 the year after. A poll after a poll put Russia on the top of the list of countries with which bilateral relations were considered a priority.

Ukraine’s decision to join the SES reflected both structural embeddedness in the region and the desires of a good part of its population. Dismissing this decision as a result of Russia’s “energy blackmail” does not improve our understanding of complex realities behind the process. Ukraine’s elites had 10 years of industrial collapse behind them to realize the value of collaboration with Russia. In spite of all the reservations that the “orange” government has expressed about the creation of supranational institutions within the SES framework, Ukraine’s westernizers have nonetheless remained firmly interested “in the economic component of this project” (Center for International Studies, 2007). On the political side, Ukraine’s vision of participation in the SES has been influenced by its infatuation with the EU. The very concept of the SES draws on the EU-tested idea of multilevel and multispeed integration. Ukrainian authorities are of an opinion that the speed and level of participation are to be determined by each of the SES participants independently.

The agreement on the creation of the SES envisions establishment of a free trade zone with agreed customs tariffs on imports from the partner states. Next, the agreement anticipates creation of a full customs union, which will include agricultural imports, and withdrawal of all protective measures. Finally, the complete freedom of movement will be ensured for goods, service, capital, and labor. A special provision of the agreement deals with the intended harmonization of the SES norms and regulations with those of the World Trade Organization,

where all of the SES participants wish to belong. The agreement also stipulates that, should any of the participants be admitted to the WTO before others, the firstcomer would be expected to help its SES partners secure the WTO membership for themselves (The Russia Journal, 19 September 2003).

Ukraine has ratified the agreement on creation of the SES with certain reservations, namely that its participation in the SES must not contradict provisions of the Ukrainian constitution or Kiev's strategic goal of European integration. Ukraine's vision of a SES-wide free trade area with no overarching institutions of a political nature diverges from Russia's preferred vision (Sushko 2004). Kiev sees SES as a tool of pragmatic foreign policy, rather than a symbol of transnational identity. "This step in no single way means the change of Ukrainian course towards the European integration," says Roman Shpek, Ukraine's representative to the EU. "The European choice proclaimed by Ukraine... remains... a paramount strategic goal..." (Ukraine—European Union 2004). To reconcile its eastern drive and western orientations, Ukraine has proclaimed its intent to apply the EU norms and principles within the SES.

Redefinition of identity in Ukraine has passed full circle from Russia to Europe to Russia and to the European Union once again. As Paul D'Anieri (2002: 42) observed, "the notion of contingent state identity... is a matter of practical politics in Ukraine." Looking at Ukraine's previous experience with both Russia and the EU, it is safe to argue that the circle is far from being over. Ukraine's elections 2006 have once again revealed a long-standing east-west divide among the country's population. The state-sponsored construction of unambiguously "European" identity has been unable to close this rift. To a democratic state that Ukraine wants to be, this discrepancy between the elite and mass views may suggest the need to bring the two conflicting identity orientations in harmony. A more thorough plan for Ukraine's regional affiliations will have to rely less on rhetoric and more – on practical actions aimed to reconcile the country's eastern and western drives.

Conclusion

Identity and culture play an increasingly vital role in global politics. Symbolic statements of identity are now as important as the state's material capabilities. Identity declarations that seek to anchor the state in a wider cultural and/or regional context, just as other forms of bandwagoning, "may... seem a less demanding and a more rewarding strategy than balancing, requiring less effort and extracting lower costs while promising concrete rewards" (Waltz 2000: 38). The promises of a prestigious international affiliation that feed into symbolic politics of identity are often used to cover political ineptitude and the lack of progress in domestic affairs. Moreover, political rhetoric offers an easy, although illusory, fix for institutional underdevelopment. Neither material capabilities nor institutions can change overnight. Identity statements are much more flexible in this regard.

These considerations may guide the analysis of the post-Soviet politics of regional affiliation. Ukraine's European choice was wholly about identity, which was constructed in a symbolic opposition to the "Eurasian" Russia. The external "branding" of the state was put to an instrumental use by the country's postcommunist elite as a complementary political resource to the nationalist mobilization at home (Molchanov 2000).

International affiliations are key to the symbolic construction of identity. The country's search for an "appropriate" identity often overlaps with the search for an "appropriate" regional or international community. The latter tends to have identifiable civilizational aspects that the applicant tries to emulate. Thus, the symbolic meaning of the EU is exemplified in the rhetoric of "Europeanness," which is frequently juxtaposed to the "Eurasianess" of such countries as Russia or Turkey (Oku, 2005). On the other hand, regional embedding in the post-Soviet space makes a virtue out of necessity and elevates "Eurasianism" as a model identity of peaceful coexistence and mutually enriching exchanges between eastern and western nations (Nazarbayev 2002). In dealing with Ukraine and Belarus, Russia relies on the rhetoric of common roots, complementarity and kinship. As for Ukraine, it remains torn between the two anchors of identity.

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