

Identifying Ukrainian Identity

February 14-15, 2004



At the conference

This Fulbright conference posed the question to a wide audience.

First-time travelers to Ukraine, or those who only speak of it at a distance on the basis of anecdotal information, believe that Ukraine is a simple place. They often believe that it is a territory with clearly delineated political affiliations, historical experiences, ethnic divides and loyalties, and language. The Fulbright Conference on Intercultural Identity Abroad concluded by disclaiming this simplicity. Almost all American Fulbrighters claimed that after months of research and teaching in Ukrainian universities, they realized how impossible it is to generalize about Ukraine and Ukrainians. They also realized how little they and the world know about Ukraine, and voiced a frustration about stereotypes they have grown used to hearing. Ukrainian Fulbright Alumni seemed just as unable (or unwilling) to categorize the Ukrainian citizen by “type” or



Fields near Cherkasy

“group.” This suggests that Ukrainians and Americans have begun thinking about who Ukrainians are and what is national identity. Is there a simple answer, a list of characteristics for Ukrainian identity? Americans and Ukrainians discovered that the answer to this question is “no.”

So what is Ukrainian identity?

According to conference participants, this is a set of paradoxes, contradictions, physical and historical components, emotions and beliefs. Identity in itself is multidimensional, but many agreed that when talking about “Ukrainian” identity we actually mean state identity. Ukrainian identity is first associated with territorial belonging and citizenship, and only afterwards with traditional questions of language and culture. Members differed on the validity of being Ukrainian by virtue of birth in Ukraine. Different terms like land, soil and territory added nuance to the relation of person and place. To no one’s surprise, language appeared to be an important aspect national identity, not necessarily a prerequisite for Ukrainian identity, but a means for formulating it. History, culture, and “memory” were often suggested by participants with different backgrounds and professions as equally valid determinants of identity.

Fulbrighters from the US were represented by two groups. Americans of Ukrainian heritage raised an issue which typically describes the Ukrainian Diaspora: lack of unanimity and consensus. This characteristic of the Diaspora represents the diversity of views and upbringing in a community that has generally been seen as a single unit with uniform qualities. In reality, this small group of people was even more divided on the question of Ukrainian identity than other groups. Non-Ukrainian Americans also saw Ukrainian identity as a complex set of contradictions, splits and dualities based on religion, language, geography, history and urban-rural differences.

Ukrainians from Kyiv with political science backgrounds suggested some humorous and insightful paradoxes as components of Ukrainian identity: We are a nation with incomes below poverty standards, but with cell phones and full refrigerators. We cherish Shevchenko on our bookshelves but we never read him. We are proud of our domestic matriarchy but our society is predominantly a patriarchy. We show off with credit cards but feel safer with our money under our mattress. And, in the words of our national guarantor, “Ukraine is not Russia,” but Russia is also not that far away.

These and other comments suggested that Ukrainian identity can be characterized by strong survival skills, complacency with the status quo, and an ironic optimism about the future, “We have what we have.” Ukrainians are who they are because of experiences and territorial affiliation. These open discussions occurred between people who have been abroad, and in some sense gained a better understanding of self and others. Perhaps to truly understand identity — especially Ukrainian identity — it would be best to go abroad and take advantage of international education opportunities. As it was, the lively discussions welded the participants into a cohesive group that was ready to brave the Ukrainian winter.

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Carpathian Mounteneers