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# Identities dynamics and Foreign Policy Orientation in the Southern Ukraine and in Odessa City in the Context of Ukrainian Post-Revolutionary Shifts

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## Δυναμικές ταυτοτήτων και προσανατολισμός εξωτερικής πολιτικής στην Νότια Ουκρανία και στην πόλη της Οδησσού στο πλαίσιο των μετεπαναστατικών μεταλλάξεων

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### ABSTRACT

This article shows the features of the constituent identification practices of southern Ukraine and Odessa city, and states some changes that have occurred over the past 7 years since the Revolution of dignity in 2013-2014. The main characteristics of Odessa's Identity we have revealed consist of 2 trends. First one is a high self-organization potential of the population, the presence of a high level of business activity, as well as the desire and the ability to protect themselves, their loved ones, their rights. At the same time, distrust towards institutional structures is traditionally observed, and as well as, there are close networks of informal contacts that help to survive and "address problems". Secondly, the creation of new informal associations of civic activists who since 2014 have taken active part both in social networks and in the real social space of the city and become real germs of civil society in the Odessa region.

**KEY WORDS:** Identities, Foreign Policy, Southern Ukraine ,Odessa City, Ukrainian Post-Revolutionary Era.

### ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Η έρευνα αυτή δείχνει τα χαρακτηριστικά των πρακτικών ταύτισης στη Ν. Ουκρανία και στην πόλη της Οδησσού και αναφέρει μερικές αλλαγές που επήλθαν τα τελευταία 7 χρόνια μετά την λεγόμενη Επανάσταση της Αξιοπρέπειας το 2013-14. Τα βασικά χαρακτηριστικά της «ταυτότητας» της Οδησσού είναι όπως διαπιστώσαμε δύο: το πρώτο συνίσταται στην υψηλή δυνατότητα αυτό-οργάνωσης του πληθυσμού, στην παρουσία υψηλού επιπέδου επιχειρηματικής δραστηριότητας καθώς και στην επιθυμία και ικανότητα προστασίας των δικαιωμάτων τους, στάσεις που συνοδεύονται από δυσπιστία απέναντι στις θεσμικές δομές και που οδηγεί στο να απευθύνονται σε δίκτυα ανεπίσημων επαφών για επίλυση διαφόρων προβλημάτων. Το δεύτερο χαρακτηριστικό είναι η δημιουργία ενώσεων νέων πολιτικών ακτιβιστών που από το 2014 και μετά έχουν συμμετάσχει ενεργά τόσο σε κοινωνικά δίκτυα όσο και στον κοινωνικό χώρο της περιοχής και έχουν αποτελέσει τις βάσεις μιας νέας κοινωνίας των πολιτών.

**ΛΕΞΕΙΣ-ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ:** Εθνικές ταυτότητες, εξωτερικής πολιτική, Νότια Ουκρανία, πόλη της Οδησσού, μετανάστευση.

## 1. Introduction

The peculiarity of the social and cultural situation that has historically developed in Ukraine, according to various researchers, looks like a space where for many centuries various internal borders have emerged and mixed: between linguistic and ethnic groups, states, religions, political and cultural systems, areas of different economic ways, etc. This made it a pronounced contact zone with a very diverse range of socio-cultural phenomena. Due to its geographical location at the junction of the Eurasian Steppe and two massifs of European ("Byzantine" and "Latin") cultures, the territory of Ukraine has really become a kind of "crossroads" between Asia and "Orthodox" and "Latin" Europe.

And, it is quite obvious that the current stage of Ukraine's history, as never before, requires consolidating efforts. Changing worldviews, discrediting the values of the old ideology, the lack of integrating ideas have become the causes of the identification split and a kind of "crisis" of identity. Among the factors deepening this crisis we can state ideological confrontation; preservation of post-Soviet identity; the emergence of regional sub identities with different value dominants and integration vectors. The Russian-Ukrainian war further raised the issue of forming a common identity of Ukrainian citizens. According to historical studies and modern researches, Ukrainians often do not form a single civil society - one that has a single historical mythology, common values and symbols, one-way political aspirations.

Euromaidan 2014 demonstrated the strength of the lines of demarcation in the value-symbolic space of society. But Ukrainian society is largely deprived of such unifying incentives as ideology, common values, outlined state interests, so their consolidating role is often not fulfilled. Although the concept of "civil society" is present in political rhetoric, its content is often quite vague, as is the perception of "political nation". The deficit of civic identity is too poorly compensated by local varieties of cultural identities. Different ethnic, religious and linguistic identities often act as factors that shake the foundation of civic identity.

It should be noted that the risk context of civic identification policy is caused by the following factors: differentiation of language practices and attitudes to the status of the Russian language; assessment of historical (and times of independence) heritage; features of the limited (on the border between civilizations) position of Ukraine. Therefore, today it is extremely important to study all those changes, in particular, in identity practices, which would not only see the new, but also would create practices to overcome negative identity, political and social divisions, would create unique practices of transcultural orientation to cultural transcendence, would focus on dynamics not only and not so much as dynamics of regional demarcations, but, first of all, of regional interactions.

Odessa, a Black Sea transport and cultural hub, is traditionally a place that attracts representatives of multiple nationalities, religions, and social classes. This is the basis of public sympathies/conflicts, political confrontation, economic activity, and cultural industries, which make the image of Odessa as an "exceptional" city defined by a "bizarre uprising against homogeneity, hostile to any efforts to national construction". Opportunities, in this sense, in line with some opportunism, invention, trenching, resistance, and adaptability are its unique that defines the spaces of Odessa identity.

This article shows the features of the constituent identification practices of southern Ukraine and Odessa city, and states some changes that have occurred over the past 7 years since the Revolution of dignity in 2013-2014, as well as we analyze the dynamics of geopolitical orientations

of southern Ukraine and Odessa, based on specific features of such identities. In our study, we focused on the socio-cultural and geopolitical dimensions of identity, which we believe have the most significant regional differences.

## 2. Identities as values shifts in Odessa after the Euromaidan

Sociological studies carried out in late 2013 - early 2014 and in 2018 by the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine helped identify the value preferences of active participants in Euromaidan in comparison with the value profile of the "average" Ukrainian. Thus, safety ranks first in the hierarchy of value preferences in Ukraine in general. Then follow benevolence and universalism (the values of social equality, the well-being of all people and the environmental protection). Speaking about regional identity profiles, it stands to mention that the greatest differentiation between the regions of Ukraine presents the value of participation in religious life, the value of state independence of Ukraine, the value of participation in political life. Both in 2014 and in 2018, the first two values became the leading priorities that determined the noticeable differences between the Western and Central regions from the Southern, Eastern regions and Donbas. Value indices of religious life and independence of Ukraine (calculated on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is completely insignificant, and 5 is of great importance) indicate that these values are more represented in the West and the Center of Ukraine and the least significant in the East and South. In the Southern region and Odessa, the most significant were the values of interesting work (4.27) and independence in affairs and judgments (4.12), and the least significant was participation in political life (2.82).

The data of sociological studies conducted in Odessa in 2014, 2017, 2018 confirm All-Ukrainian studies of identities and value profiles.<sup>1</sup> In 2014, 45% of residents of Odessa are ready to personally participate in solving the most important problems for the city as follows: poor road conditions (54%), urban pollution (52%), substandard health services (47 %), lack of jobs (37%), and a challenging criminal situation (34%), and another 5% are ready to invest their money in addressing these problems. In the case of conflict situations that may arise while solving these problems, the population of Odessa is inclined to trust only themselves and their closest friends and relatives - 54%, only they themselves can improve their material situation and economic security - 74% of Odessa citizens think this way, and 17% and 14%, respectively, count in this case on the government and the president of the country. About 44% of Odessa residents trust various local commercial organizations in resolving local problems. A high level of self-organization can also be confirmed by the focus of Odessa residents on personal communication (50%) in the search for information, and 29% who use different social networks, which today are active agents of social activity and social participation, could also be added here.

This trend continued in the subsequent period. Answers to the question "What in your opinion can unite the Odessa residents today?" in the 2017 studies, the subjects noted that the most significant for them is still "creating and maintaining a high standard of living" (49.3%); respondents also express the desire to unite "for the sake of joint actions aimed at urban improvement" - 34%. At the same time, the importance of work continues to be one of the value priorities of Odessa residents ("creating enough jobs with decent pay" - 30.6%). In addition, a quarter of respondents are ready to jointly support the idea of "the city revival" - 24.3%.

At the same time, the 2018 sociological studies demonstrated the intensification of contradictory trends and some disappointment in the post-revolutionary development of the country. On the one hand, when answering the question "Do you think life in Odessa has changed in general over the last year?" The majority of Odessa residents answered that life "rather improved" - 37%, and 10% said that it "significantly improved". At the same time, only a quarter of respondents (23%) considered that life "worsened" or even found it difficult to answer this question. However, the answers to the question "Subjectively, have the events of Euromaidan changed Ukraine?" indicate some disappointment and ambiguous trends in the mass consciousness of the Odessa residents: "definitely changed for the worse" - almost half of the respondents chose this answer option - 44% and a quarter indicated that Euromaidan "rather changed for the worse" - 25%. Only 10% indicated that "changes for the better" had occurred and 13% did not see any changes for themselves.

In fact, the 2015 focus group studies of Odessa Maidan and Antimaidan revealed that both parties have much more in common than differences. The main "dividers" are the events of May 2, 2014, and the attitude to the ways of achieving goals (identical in both groups - personal well-being, Ukraine's economic recovery, peace in the country, security, a decent life for every citizen, and social security for most vulnerable groups). Here we should note that most of the respondents were ready for dialogue but at the same time they realized that positive changes would not occur soon.

The same should be said about the importance of local identity - precisely for the sake of Odessa, for the sake of its peaceful and stable life, people were ready to organize a kind of "third force", considered as promising by both parties. The unanimous opinion about the future of the city at the time of focus groups was as follows: provided that they focus on the internal problems of the city, provided that the events of May 2 in Odessa will not be used as a kind of brand for rousing hatred, provided that all people - from the ordinary citizen to the highest-ranking officials - will unite their efforts, the dialogue is possible and will serve as an instrument for the survival of Odessa as a peaceful and Ukrainian city.<sup>2</sup>

Importantly, representatives of the Maidan in Odessa not always overvalue the Ukrainian language (contrary to the prevailing stereotype), just as their opponents do with the Russian language. Thus, studies have shown that not only representatives of the Odessa "Maidan" are quite tolerant of the language problem but, in contrast to the prevailing stereotype, representatives of the Odesa "Anti-Maidan" unanimously believed that the state language should be the same - Ukrainian. In this case, of course, according to informants, the rights of other language-speaking citizens should not be infringed. In general, the language issue is considered in many ways as a pragmatic factor. Informant N. says during a focus-group study, that "If my state develops economically, there will be no language problem at all, and if I have to learn English for this, for example, it makes no difference to me".

Despite some inconsistencies in judgments, when it comes to direct assessments, Odesa residents, however, as well as Ukrainians in general, have largely become more proactive and more prone for changes. Moreover, they are ready to make these changes by themselves. Here we clearly see the refusal of the "old" for the "new". The same trend arises in the opinion of Ukrainians in the presidential election in 2019: 73% did not vote for V.A. Zelensky but tried to cut off the recent past, having positive expectations from the future.

### 3. South regional identities and geopolitical orientations

Sociocultural identity and value orientation largely determine the geopolitical orientations of citizens. Accordingly, the changes that have occurred in various aspects of the socio-cultural sphere over the past 10 years, and especially under the influence of the Maidan and Russian aggression against Ukraine, have affected the geopolitical trends of Ukrainians.

After Euromaidan, the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of Russian aggression in the Donbas, a significant reorientation of citizens to the EU and a huge drop in support for Russia as a main partner occurred. According to the All-Ukrainian study conducted by the sociological service of the Razumkov Center, 11% of respondents considered relations with Russia as priority in 2014.

The development of relations with the EU has an obvious advantage in the South (36%). However, at the same time, relations with Russia continue to remain priority for 13% in the South. It is worth noting that a rather significant share of respondents (24-28%) in the South-East regions found it difficult to answer this question. At the same time, supporters of European integration have only a relative advantage in the South (41%); here are also most of those who have not yet picked their side (20%). At the same time, the relative majority (54%) in the South in 2014 did not consider European integration an idea that could unite all regions of Ukraine.

Since 2014, the orientation toward joining NATO has been prevailing in Ukrainian society as the best way to guarantee the national security of Ukraine. In 2014, there has been an increase in NATO commitment in all macro-regions of Ukraine.<sup>3</sup> As of June 2017, in the south of Ukraine already 20% (in April 2012 - 7%) were adherent to the Alliance. It should also be mentioned that the growth of support for membership in the Alliance occurred against the backdrop of disappointment in the idea of non-alignment and a military alliance with Russia and other CIS countries. From 2012 to 2014, non-alignment was the most supported security option for Ukraine - 42%, but after the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in the Donbas, the share of non-aligned status-oriented individuals decreased to 31% in June 2017. However, there are significant regional differences regarding non-aloneness. It still continues to be considered as a way to ensure the security of Ukraine in the South (37%).

Between April 2012 and June 2017, support for the aim is to analyze the features of the constituent identification practices of southern Ukraine and Odessa and to record some changes that have occurred over the past 7 years, as well as to show the dynamics of geopolitical orientations of southern Ukraine and Odessa, based on specific features of such identities.

In our study, we focused on the socio-cultural and geopolitical dimensions of identity, which we believe have the most significant regional differences. Armed union with Russia and other CIS countries dropped in all macro regions of Ukraine, more significantly in the East (from 38% to 13%) and the South (from 31% to 11%).

The Southern Region has no common understanding of what NATO is for Ukraine: 19% of the population consider NATO as a defense, almost as much - 18% - as a threat, 25% think NATO is neither a defense nor a threat, and 37% could not express a certain position. Only 12% of those polled thinks that they are well aware of what NATO is, 55% know something but they think it is not enough, and 22% know almost nothing, and self-assessment of NATO awareness is the same in all regions of the country.

There is no ambiguity in the estimates of Odesa residents who is the main culprit of maintaining the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine. The 2018 survey<sup>4</sup> resulted in the following answers: "the current power of Russia" - 24.4%, "the current power of Ukraine" - 34.8%, "the former power of Ukraine" - 14.8%, "USA" - 9.1%, "DPR/LPR" - 4.7%, "European Union" - 2.5%, difficult to answer - 9.8%.

Thus, we can say that the South adheres to a relatively moderate position: about half of the respondents here prefer non-bloc status, and a relative majority advocates finding ways to reconcile with Russia. Almost half of the residents of the East want peace at any cost, while in the West and in the Center the vast majority of respondents are ready for peace only on terms acceptable to Ukrainian society. A considerable part of the inhabitants of the South support both the first and the second variant.

The 2018-2019 sociological surveys confirmed the ambiguity of the geopolitical focuses of Odessa residents. For example, if a referendum on Ukraine's accession to the European Union were held in May 2018, the Odesa residents would respond in the following way: 44.6% against joining the EU, 40.3% for joining the EU, and 15.1% would not vote.

If a referendum on Ukraine's accession to NATO were held in May 2018, the results would be as follows: 53.7% would vote against joining NATO, 26.6% would join. 19.8% would not take part in the referendum. The results of the spring 2019 poll in Odessa and the region are as follows: 32% would vote against joining NATO, 36% would join, 32% would not come / find it difficult to answer.

## 4. Odessa's regional identities and geopolitical orientations in focus

The regional peculiarities of Odessa as a whole confirm the general trend but it is still important to emphasize some features and differences we have been able to identify with the help of a focus-group study.<sup>5</sup> The respondents mostly see the European identity the European way of development of Ukraine. In terms of the Customs Union, Russia is a "symbol of the past". Citizens who, conditionally, choose Russia, in fact, choose the illusion of stability, the return to the Soviet Union "leaving everything as it was before and not worse". The future of Ukraine in the EU is, above all, associated with freedom of movement, educational opportunities, and human development. Also, the focus-group participants think it possible to re-establish relations with Russia. "It is necessary to simply make a leap, to enter a new space of the EU and then we can build full-fledged relations with the Russian Federation, this is our neighbor, ours link a lot in history and culture, mentality". In general, the respondents agreed that the issue of joining NATO should be resolved only through a referendum. Respondents see the main concerns in violation of positive expectations, for example: "Ukraine will suffer financial losses", "we are used as a territory and we will become a zone of contradictions, because we have an unreformed army", "we will not enter as long as there are unresolved issues - for example borders. And Crimea is not an unresolved issue as well as Donbas. Joining NATO in such a situation means a new war. Therefore, the only way is a referendum, but not now". Answering the question of what Ukraine's foreign policy should be like, most of the respondents / focus-group participants concluded that Ukraine should maintain a neutral position with all countries and remain a non-aligned state, while all

other strategies lead to a loss. At the same time, we can state that despite ambiguity and often contradiction of the foreign policy views of the Odessa citizens, there is a steady tendency of shift of positions towards European integration and joining NATO.

## 5. Conclusion

Speaking about micro social factors of Identity profile that has developed in the Odessa region, it seems necessary to identify those vectors, those "lines of watershed" that became the center of the socio-political expectations and attitudes of the Odessa residents, which, however, are generally comparable to that of the "average" Ukrainian: the main rift, in our opinion, runs along the line of "old-new". If we talk about the social characteristics of the electorate the "old-new" vector correlates with, then this is not only the age of voters, but also their social resource, that is, level of education, income, profession, attitude to property, and attitude to the world of work, that is, a hired employee or having his own business, as well as such integral indicators as the degree of social activity in general and the level of social embeddedness / marginality, that is, the younger the age is, the higher the social resource, the greater the social activity, and with responsible, less social marginality, the stronger the attraction to new are and vice versa. Another interesting fact is that such social characteristics as the language of communication and regional affiliation in this case are secondary, or, in other words, mediated by what we called earlier. The 2014 in-depth focus-group studies with representatives of the Odessa Maidan and Anti-Maidan show that linguistic affiliation is nothing more than an "ideology", "the top of the iceberg" that hides other social problems.

Summing up the main characteristics of Odessa's Identity or Odessa's subcultural profile, we should note, firstly, the trend that was characteristic of the mass consciousness of the Odessa region: a high self-organization potential of the population, the presence of a high level of business activity, as well as the desire and ability to protect themselves, their loved ones, their rights. At the same time, distrust towards institutional structures is traditionally observed, and at the same time, there are close networks of informal contacts that help to survive and "address problems". This trend, of course, does not testify to the development of civil society but allows us to talk about the availability of sufficient resources and high readiness to create informal and non-governmental organizations and associations, and to create them as part of an individual initiative and without any institutionalization. Secondly, it, first of all, considers the creation of new informal associations of civic activists who since 2014 have taken active part both in social networks and in the real social space of the city and become real germs of civil society in the Odessa region.

## Notes

1. 2013 - 2018 Researches of social and political attitudes of Odessa residents, under the guidance of Kryvosheia T.I., Lychkovska O.R., and Yatvetska A.V., associate professors, Department of Sociology Odesa I.I. Mechnikov National University, using questionnaire interview, face-to-face technique, sample size - 1000 respondents, limiting error - 3.6%.
2. The focus-group research was conducted in September-December 2015 by associate professors of the Department of Sociology Kryvosheia T.I. and Yatvetska A.V. as part of a



dialogue project implemented by the Odessa Regional Mediation Group, as well as in the framework of the project of the Ukrainian Peace building School <https://peace.in.ua/zvit-schodo-osobyvostej-konfliktiv-po-liniji-majdan-antymajdan-u-odesi/>

3. 10,956 respondents aged 18 and over were personally interviewed. The theoretical sampling error does not exceed 1%. [http://razumkov.org.ua/uploads/article/2014\\_ukr\\_2013-2014\\_ocinky\\_proгноzy.pdf](http://razumkov.org.ua/uploads/article/2014_ukr_2013-2014_ocinky_proгноzy.pdf)
4. 2013 - 2018 Researches of social and political attitudes of Odessa residents, under the guidance of Kryvosheia T.I., Lychkovska O.R., and Yatvetska A.V., associate professors, Department of Sociology, Odesa I.I. Mechnikov National University, using questionnaire interview, face-to-face technique, sample size - 1000 respondents, limiting error - 3.6%
5. The focus-group research was conducted in September-December 2015 by associate professors of the Department of Sociology Kryvosheia T.I. and Yatvetska A.V. as part of a dialogue project implemented by the Odessa Regional Mediation Group, as well as in the framework of the project of the Ukrainian Peace building School <https://peace.in.ua/zvit-schodo-osobyvostej-konfliktiv-po-liniji-majdan-antymajdan-u-odesi/>

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## Biographical notes

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