



Munich Personal RePEc Archive

The Historical Origins of Pro-Democratic Attitudes in Ukraine

Tamilina, Larysa

Kyiv School of Economics

15 January 2024

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/119916/>
MPRA Paper No. 119916, posted 26 Jan 2024 07:25 UTC

The Historical Origins of Pro-Democratic Attitudes in Ukraine

Laysa Tamilina

Kyiv School of Economics

Mykoly Spaka st. 3,

Kyiv 03113 Ukraine

Phone: +30 050 7897267

Email: ltamilina@kse.org.ua

Author Note

All correspondence concerning this article should be sent to ltamilina@kse.org.ua.

The Historical Origins of Pro-Democratic Attitudes in Ukraine

Abstract

This article examines how Ukraine's historical experiences of occupation and territorial fragmentation could lead to the emergence of a democratic political culture within its population. Utilizing individual-level psychological theories, I illustrate that extended periods of occupation cultivated pro-democratic values among Ukrainians, by nurturing sentiments of resistance and autonomy. Additionally, the historical presence of territorial fragmentation contributed to the promotion of diverse perspectives, stimulating social dialogue and encouraging citizens to pursue increased participation in the political sphere. This historical context influenced the shaping of democratic attitudes among Ukrainians.

Keywords: History of occupation, territorial fragmentation, the emergence of democracy, Ukraine.

The Historical Origins of Pro-Democratic Attitudes in Ukraine

Many studies showed that Ukraine and Russia have been heading in different political directions since early 2000. Ukraine was leaning towards a more democratic system, while Russia was gradually returning to authoritarian governance (White et al., 2010). This divergence was primarily attributed to Ukraine having a more democratic culture compared to Russia (Brudny and Finkel, 2011). Democratic values like political resistance and activism were present in Ukraine even during the Soviet era and gained momentum after the collapse of the communist bloc (Turchyn et al., 2020). Ukraine, with a strong civic component, managed to incorporate the voice of its citizens into the post-soviet oligarchic structure, moving towards more democratic elections and increased public influence. In contrast, Russia, lacking a similar civic component, developed more authoritarian and centralized forms of governance, while maintaining a free-market framework for its economic system (Evans, 2011).

Although research acknowledges that initial differences in political cultures influenced recent political developments, explaining why a more democratic culture emerged in Ukraine but not in Russia remains a puzzle. This article seeks to provide a response to this question by utilizing psychological theories to examine Ukraine's historical experiences. Similar to the individual-level psychological analysis, the historical encounters are viewed as early "childhood" experiences of the nation, contributing to the formation of collective memories that have influenced present-day political values among Ukrainians.

Literature review

Due to its strategic location at the crossroads of Eastern Europe and the Eurasian Steppe, Ukraine's history was characterized by two specific features: (1) frequent invasions from neighboring states and (2) territorial fragmentation. In particular, the territory was contested, divided, and ruled by a variety of external powers for more than 600 years, including the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Austrian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Tsardom of Russia, and the Soviet Union. Consequently, the country has faced persistent challenges in establishing and maintaining a unified state throughout its history. These historical encounters could influence the psychology of the nation by triggering specific psychological reactions among individuals in the population, ultimately shaping collective political values and behaviors.

Specifically, during periods of occupation by foreign states, Ukrainians faced deprivation of autonomy, coupled with restrictions on the use of the Ukrainian language and suppression of their cultural identity (Düben, 2020). Historical events, such as the 1932 - 33 genocide (Holodomor), illustrate that occupation of Ukrainian territories often led to the exploitation of the local population and their resources without integrating Ukrainians on equal terms (Yekelchik, 2015). These negative experiences of occupation could have a dual impact on the psychology of Ukrainians. On the one hand, the harsh governance and oppression could instill a profound distrust towards governing bodies, fostering a tradition of skepticism among Ukrainians about the authorities that remained till recently (Cudd, 2006). On the other hand, the dynamic nature of occupation, with changing political powers taking control and relinquishing Ukrainian lands, contributed to linking Ukrainians' attitudes towards the authorities to their experiences with them. Even presently, Ukrainians continue to associate their overall level of institutional trust with the success of government-led reforms (Sasse and Lackner, 2018).

The oppression experienced by Ukrainians during occupation could also shape attitudes towards freedom, political resistance, and civic engagement. In accordance with the self-determination theory, autonomy represents a fundamental psychological need: individuals possess an innate desire for freedom, choice, and control over their actions and decisions (Deci and Ryan, 1995). When autonomy is denied, individuals may experience frustration and dissatisfaction, prompting them to actively seek opportunities to regain their sense of independence and self-direction. Applied to Ukraine, the prolonged historical experience of occupation may have cultivated a deep-seated desire for self-determination among Ukrainians, elevating freedom to a foundational value of the nation. On a collective scale, this elucidates the aspirations of Ukrainians for an independent and autonomous state (Musliu and Burlyuk, 2019).

The pursuit of freedom is directly correlated with political resistance. According to the reactance theory, individuals experiencing constraints on their autonomy may undergo a psychological state known as "reactance." Specifically, when people perceive limitations on their autonomy, they are motivated to restore their freedom by resisting the controlling influence and reclaiming a sense of control over their lives (Mühlberger and Jonas, 2019). Examined collectively, this process is expected to foster the practice of political resistance to the occupiers. Applied to Ukraine, the numerous upheavals during the country's history of occupation and unwanted political influences substantiate this line of reasoning and underscore the significance attributed by Ukrainians to the value of resistance as a means of opposing oppression (Reznik, 2016).

Similarly, occupation has the potential to instigate civil activism among individuals. The empower and agency approach (Bandura, 2006) posits that oppression can diminish an individual's sense of agency, which is the belief in their ability to influence their environment and make

decisions that affect their lives. The desire to regain a sense of empowerment and control can motivate individuals to become agents of change, striving not only for their personal freedom but also for the liberation of others facing similar challenges. Psychological empowerment, or the belief in one's capacity to effect change, can drive people to engage in efforts to advocate change for themselves and others. This mechanism could contribute to the formation of civic values in Ukraine, which manifests in a vibrant civil society with active non-governmental organizations, grassroots movements, and a history of civil activism in the country (Onuch and Hale, 2022).

Simultaneously, the fragmentation resulting from the partitioning of Ukrainian territories among various, often shifting, political powers could result in a divergence of values and attitudes among Ukrainians, instilling a preference for plurality. Drawing from social identity and intergroup relations theories, the process of fragmentation tends to give rise to numerous subgroups within the population (Hogg et al., 2004). As these subgroups converge, individuals are compelled to negotiate and integrate diverse perspectives and values to forge a cohesive national identity. In accordance with this perspective, when unified, Ukrainians had to assimilate different views and opinions into a single system of values, fostering a culture of plurality.

Additionally, unifying subgroups into a singular identity demands communication among various population groups and branches of power. Positive interactions between members of different subgroups can mitigate prejudice and cultivate understanding, thereby enhancing social dialogue. When diverse subgroups converge, positive intergroup contact becomes an opportunity, fostering the development of social bonds within society. Consequently, Ukraine's history of territorial fragmentation might have contributed to the promotion of social dialogue, laying the further groundwork for the emergence of the value of participation among the Ukrainian population.

In summary, Ukrainians, owing to factors such as prolonged occupation by foreign powers and territorial fragmentation prioritized societal ties and activism over their connections with authorities. Occupation stimulated skepticism about the authorities and an intrinsic yearning for independence, fostering political and civic resistance, and active civil engagement. Parallely, territorial fragmentation during occupations introduced diversity in opinions and values, promoting pluralistic ideals and fostering participation. Collectively, these factors contributed to the formation of a more democratic political culture in which individuals are active participants in the formation of the state and nation.

Data and methods description

To verify the claims mentioned earlier, I conduct a comparative analysis of political values between Ukraine and Russia. The main assumption is that if historical experiences have shaped Ukrainians' pro-democratic values, then the chosen indexes for Ukraine should indicate stronger support for democracy compared to Russia in spite of their shared Soviet Union history. I rely on the World Values Survey as the primary data source, using all available waves for both countries (from 1996 to 2020) in order to reduce the influence of the post-communist experience with democracy. The analysis includes calculating mean values for selected criteria and conducting pairwise comparisons.

The key indicators chosen for this investigation cover three categories of measures. The first pertains to the consequences of occupation and includes the percentage of individuals favoring freedom over equality or security, the percentage of those trusting the government, the percentage of people participating in lawful demonstrations, and the proportion of respondents claiming membership in at least one civil organization. The second category captures the consequences of

territorial fragmentation and involves the percentage of respondents trusting those of other nationalities or religions, the share of population always voting in national elections, and the share of respondents expressing a sense of belonging to the community.

Finally, I measure the prevailing attitudes towards democracy by calculating the percentage of respondents who agreed with arguments that in a democracy: (1) the economic system functions poorly, (2) democracies are indecisive, (3) they are not effective at maintaining order, or (4) they have flaws but are still preferable. Figure 1 depicts the mean values for the selected measures calculated for each country separately. Table 1 provides a t-test for the statistical significance of differences in these mean values between Ukraine and Russia.

Empirical analysis and results

The data reveals that Ukrainians, despite enduring Russian occupation during the Soviet era, exhibit a more democratic culture than their Russian authoritarian counterparts. Specifically, Ukrainians place significant importance on autonomy and freedom. Notably, 70 percent of Ukrainians prioritize freedom over equality, and nearly 31 percent prioritize freedom over security, as opposed to 54 percent and 24 percent, respectively, in Russia. Furthermore, Ukrainian respondents tend to express more skepticism towards their authorities: Only 33 percent of respondents in Ukraine express confidence in their government, whereas almost 44 percent of Russians declare such confidence. Overall, these findings support the occupation argument, suggesting that prolonged exposure to occupation has instilled values of freedom, autonomy, and skepticism about authorities in Ukraine.

Moreover, Ukrainians exhibit some disparity in political activism, as measured by participation in lawful demonstrations, when compared to Russians (29 versus 17). Additionally,

a notably higher proportion of the Ukrainian population declares participation in non-governmental organizations compared to Russia (42 versus 32). While the differences are not substantial, they are still statistically significant (see Table 1). These findings support the proposition that prolonged occupation tends to foster sentiments of political resistance and increased civic participation.

Furthermore, Ukrainians demonstrate a higher level of tolerance towards differences in nationalities and religions, as measured by the level of trust expressed toward these respective groups. Specifically, approximately 50 percent of respondents in Ukraine declared trust in people of other nationalities, and 45 percent expressed trust in individuals of other religions. In contrast, these percentages are lower in Russia, averaging 41 and 40, respectively. Ukrainians are also more inclined to consistently participate in national elections compared to Russians, with a rate of 60% versus 44%. These findings align with the notion that territorial fragmentation can instill values of pluralism and tolerance for differences, along with participation. Lastly, the World Values Survey data indicates that Ukrainians feel a greater sense of belonging to their community compared to Russians (58 versus 27 percent), pointing to the presence of a robust civic component in Ukraine.

In summary, Ukrainians exhibit a greater presence of democratic values than Russians, which contributes to the stronger support for democracy in Ukraine compared to Russia. Specifically, Russians tend to be more skeptical about democracy. Approximately 60 percent of Russians believe that economic systems run poorly under democracy, compared to 43 percent in Ukraine. 78 percent of Russians also consider democracies to be indecisive, while the corresponding figure in Ukraine is only 61 percent. Finally, around 71 percent of Russians doubt that democracies can effectively maintain order, as opposed to 55 percent in Ukraine. This skepticism in Russia explains why only 59 percent agree that, despite these shortcomings,

democracies are a superior form of governance, whereas in Ukraine, this figure reaches 77 percent. Even though Ukraine may still need effort to align with EU countries in terms of enhancing democratic values, it is undeniable that Ukrainians demonstrate more pro-democratic attitudes than Russians. It is worth noting that these disparities are not recent phenomena but have persisted well before the first Russian invasion since the indexes were calculated based on the data from 1996 to 2020.

Conclusions

Therefore, it is possible to conclude that pro-democratic attitudes among Ukrainians are deeply rooted in the psychological makeup of individuals, shaped by their respective historical experiences. This means that the ongoing war is an effort of Ukrainians to save the democratic political culture in the country. This conflict is not just between two countries but represents a clash between a more democratic and a more authoritarian political system. Hence, it is imperative for the global community to recognize the connection between the war in Ukraine and the value of democracy. If Ukraine wins, it's a win for democracy. On the flip side, if Ukraine loses, it's a loss for democracy, allowing authoritarian tendencies to grow and threaten other democratic nations.

Regardless of Russia's initial motivations for attacking Ukraine, the potential outcome of Ukrainians losing this war should raise concerns about the proliferation of autocracies. Russia's taking over Ukraine should be interpreted as democracies succumbing to autocracies and, hence, as a sign that democracies is less capable of maintaining their governance and territorial unity compared to autocracies. Paradoxically, the present circumstances demonstrate that authoritarian regimes are more formidable and cohesive than their democratic counterparts on the global stage.

The continued support and provision of weapons to Russia by autocratic states such as China, North Korea, and Iran, coupled with Ukraine receiving minimal assistance from its democratic allies, suggest that autocracies exhibit greater unity in international conflicts than democracies. The message from the current situation with Ukraine is that invasions of democratic states by authoritarian ones are not only possible but might go unchecked.

Hence, if Ukraine loses, it will essentially provide a green light for authoritarian regimes because behind every act of violence, powerful international authoritarian giants will stand ready to endorse the action to support the spread of their regime. Therefore, by withholding support from Ukraine now, the international community inadvertently promotes the proliferation of authoritarian regimes, posing a direct threat to their own states. To safeguard their countries, the democratic world must take immediate action, starting with the rescue of Ukraine from Russian aggression.

References

- Bandura, Albert. 2006. "Toward a Psychology of Human Agency." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 1 (2) : 164-180. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-6916.2006.00011.x>.
- Brudny, Yitzhak M., and Evgeny Finkel. 2011. "Why Ukraine is not Russia: Hegemonic national identity and democracy in Russia and Ukraine." *East European Politics and Societies* 25 (4): 813–833. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325411401379>.
- Cudd, Ann E. 2006. "Psychological Harms of Oppression: *Analyzing Oppression*." *Studies in Feminist Philosophy*. December 13, 2026. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195187431.003.0006>.
- Deci, Edward L., and Richard M. Ryan. 1995. 'Human Autonomy: The Basis for True Self-Esteem.' In *Efficacy, Agency, and Self-Esteem*, edited by Michael H. Kernis, 31-49. New York: Plenum.
- Düben, Björn Alexander. 2020. "There is no Ukraine": Fact-checking the Kremlin's Version of Ukrainian History." December 15, 2023. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseih/2020/07/01/there-is-no-ukraine-fact-checking-the-kremlins-version-of-ukrainian-history/?from_serp=1.
- Evans, Alfred B. 2011. "The Failure of Democratization in Russia: A Comparative Perspective." *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 2 (1): 40–51. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2010.10.00>.
- Hogg, Michael A., Dominic Abrams, Sabine Otten, and Steve Hinkle. 2004. "The Social Identity Perspective: Intergroup Relations, Self-Conception, and Small Groups." *Small Group Research* 35 (3): 246-276. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1046496404263424>.

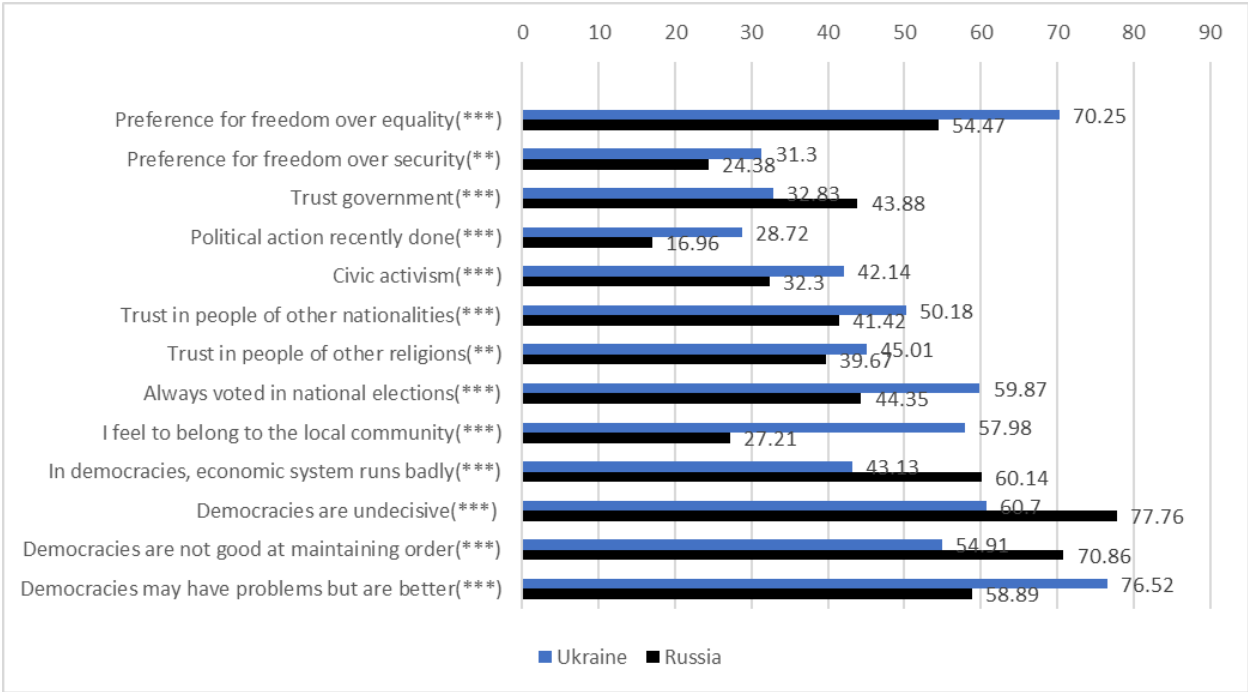
- Mühlberger, Christin, and Eva Jonas. 2019. "Reactance Theory." In *Social Psychology in Action*, edited by Kai Sassenberg, and Michael L.W. Vliek, 79 – 94. Springer International Publishing.
- Musliu, Vjosa, and Olga Burlyuk. 2019. "Imagining Ukraine: From History and Myths to Maidan Protests." *East European Politics and Societies* 33 (3): 631–655.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325418821410>.
- Onuch, Olga, and Henry E. Hale. 2022. *The Zelensky Effect*. London: Hurst Publishers.
- Reznik, Oleksandr. 2016. "From the Orange Revolution to the Revolution of Dignity: Dynamics of the Protest Actions in Ukraine." *East European Politics and Societies* 30 (4): 750–765. <https://doi.org/10.117/0888325416650255>.
- Sasse, Gwendolyn, and Alice Lackner. 2018. "War and Identity: The Case of the Donbas in Ukraine." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 34(2-3): 139-157.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2018.1452209>.
- Turchyn, Yaryna, Petro Sukhorolskyi, and Iryna Sukhorolska. 2020. "Marking Time on the Way to Democracy in Ukraine: A Causal Layered Analysis." *New Perspectives* 28 (2): 150–178. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2336825X20911287>.
- White, Stephen, Ian McAllister, and Valentina Feklyunina. 2010. "Belarus, Ukraine and Russia: East or West?" *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 12(3): 344–367. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-856X.2010.00410.x>.
- Yekelchik, Serhy. 2015. *The conflict in Ukraine: What everyone needs to know*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Table 1: A t-test of differences in mean values for the selected measures between Ukraine and Russia.

	Ukraine	Russia	The t-test for differences in means	
			Diff.	p-values
<i>Consequences of occupation</i>				
Preference for freedom over equality	70.25	54.47	15.78***	0.000
Preference for freedom over security	31.30	24.38	6.92**	0.018
Trust government	32.83	43.88	-11.05***	0.000
Political action recently done (demonstrations)	28.72	16.96	11.76***	0.000
Civil activism	42.14	32.30	9.84***	0.000
<i>Consequences of territorial fragmentation</i>				
Trust people of other nationalities	50.18	41.42	8.76***	0.007
Trust people of other religions	45.01	39.67	5.34**	0.025
Always voted in national elections	59.87	44.35	15.52***	0.000
I feel to belong to the local community	57.98	27.21	30.77***	0.000
<i>Value for democracy</i>				
In democracies, economic system runs badly	43.13	60.14	-17.01***	0.000
Democracies are undecisive	60.70	77.76	-17.06***	0.000
Democracies are not good at maintaining order	54.91	70.86	-15.95***	0.000
Democracies may have problems but are better	76.52	58.89	17.63***	0.000

Notes: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Figure 1: Mean values of political indexes in Ukraine and Russia.



Notes: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.