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'Soviet' in the Contemporary Ukrainian Intellectual Discourse

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Abstract

My research focuses on the ways Soviet past is represented in the contemporary Ukrainian intellectual discourse and how the notion 'Soviet' is used within it. Through study of these two issues I plan to arrive at more general conclusions about the formation of Ukrainian intellectuals as a social group after 1991.

Introduction

The break up of Socialistic Bloc and later USSR was considered to be a crucial turning point in the history of the world and of East Central European countries. The change was seen as such abrupt that new ruling elites spoke about new, very different stages in the statehood of their respective countries, which was stressed by changing the names of the states. Thus clear symbolic demarcation line between two states – past and contemporary, was drawn.

Strategies of coming to terms with recent past were and are different in the countries of the region (illustration in then still Czechoslovakia, Mazowiecki's 'gruba kreska' (thick line) in Poland). The developments in former Soviet Republics took different course. 'New elites' that came to power in Ukraine in the course of the first free Parliament and Presidential elections in the majority were people involved in running Ukrainian Soviet Socialistic Republic. This influenced the fact that no serious public discussion was ever held about the recent past, its legacy and implications in contemporary Ukraine. Ruling Ukrainian elites seemed to have chosen tactics of silencing Soviet past into normalization. This left their opponents with no other chance as to demonize Soviet experience to the extreme. As a result, the problem of evaluating what was Soviet Ukraine and what are its legacies/implications for contemporary Ukrainian state remains open.

Defining 'Soviet'

In my research I focus on how the notions 'Soviet' and its derivatives are used in the contemporary intellectual discourse in Ukraine when discussing its recent past and present-day situation.

The issue is complicated by the very vagueness of this term in the contemporary Ukrainian intellectual discourse. Even at a quick glance at the texts produced by the people presenting themselves and being acknowledged as intellectuals it becomes apparent that 'Soviet' is not only something that belongs to the past and realities of Soviet Union and / or Soviet Ukraine. Quite a few the Ukrainian intellectuals claim that 'Soviet' is also something still existing

nowadays. This situation notwithstanding, this notion is not being problematized in the contemporary Ukrainian intellectual discourse (Zayarnyuk).

Thus 'Soviet' became a floating signifier, to which any meaning could be attached. Therefore, one of the tasks of my research project is to show what different Ukrainian intellectuals mean when they say 'Soviet' and how (for what purposes) they use this notion.

Mere Choice of Words? How the Evaluation of the Soviet Past is Mirrored in the Lexicon

The other interesting development in the Ukrainian discourse since 1991 is that the two words for the term 'Soviet' coexist – 'soviets'kyi' (советський/советський) and 'radians'kyi' (радянський)¹. The latter one was used by Ukrainians from outside Soviet Ukraine (Galicians, émigrés and Diaspora) and with the changes of the late 1980s-beginning of 1990s started to appear in Ukrainian domestic discourse.

At present it could be claimed that 'radians'kyi' and 'soviets'kyi' have become two different words signifying two different notions and the usage of one or another immediately signifies speaker's/writer's attitude towards event/person/phenomenon designated by the word. For some intellectuals 'Soviet' became an ideologically loaded tool for othering those who hold different views on the way Ukraine should develop or simply a pejorative word.

By using the word 'soviets'kyi' (strange sounding word, which, however, is claimed to be 'inherently Ukrainian') non-Ukraininess of the phenomena is stressed. It often stands as shorthand for the conviction/belief, that Soviet system was something totally alien and Ukrainians had nothing to do with it – and thus should be designated by this estranged word. Thus the term 'soviets'kyi' often means an attempt to get rid of the responsibility – for things that happened in Soviet Union and things that were (and are) happening in independent Ukraine.

This usage however is extended in time well after the break-up of Soviet Union. In the pre-Orange revolution discourse of certain Ukrainian intellectuals (and media) it was clear, that 'real Ukrainians' are suffering in Ukrainian state because of some 'Soviet' people.

To sum up, 'soviets'kyi', though used by some as academic term, in fact is not, as term should, unbiased, descriptive – it carries evaluation in itself. And what is more – this is a powerful tool to brand one's rivals – intellectual, imaginary or real.

'Soviet' in Mykola Riabchuk and Iaroslav Hrytsak Essays

At the present stage of my research I have analyzed the essays written for the wider public (not academic texts) by the two well-known Ukrainian intellectuals, acknowledged also outside Ukraine, Iaroslav Hrytsak and Mykola Riabchuk. They are quite different in their relation to the notion 'Soviet'. For Hrytsak this is foremost historical category describing a definite period in the history of Ukraine. For Riabchuk 'Soviet' is much more than that. For him it is rather a metaphor than something definite, an antinomy of everything good, progressive, which is for him Western/European. Because of these differences, it is relatively easy to locate the 'Soviet' theme in Hrytsak essays, while in Riabchuk's essays it seems to be almost omnipresent, however never clearly defined.

¹ This situation is not unique for Ukraine; similar developments could be observed happened in Poland and Lithuania at least; however, of course, situation in all three countries differs

Writings of Mykola Riabchuk may be interpreted as a continuous process of finding and inscribing new self in the changing circumstances. When changes in USSR and Ukraine only began, Riabchuk's concepts seemed to be more sympathetic to 'simple people', going more in the vein of populist thinking (though criticizing the veterans of this thinking, then still active Ukrainian writers of the older generation). In the end of 1980s - beginning of 1990s critical to the moods of society he were, still he was trying to find justifications for such behavior, discover its roots. In his later texts he seemed to find these reasons and started accusing society itself and its leader (elites) in the deplorable in his view situation Ukraine found itself in (Riabchuk, 2004). These views contrast greatly with Hrytsak's thesis about the 'normalcy' of Ukrainian situation.

Riabchuk's bitter and critical evaluation of everything in Ukraine gives him and the whole group of liberal intellectuals a comfortable place within Ukrainian society. This place is created by writings of this loosely defined group centered around a couple of magazines and maintained by the reception of their writings in Western Europe / European Union. By othering 'Sovietized' Ukrainian society and 'criminal and corrupted' political elites they create a very favorable niche for 'true intellectuals' – independent, analytical, liberal and 'European'. In Riabchuk's essays this contrast is very distinct – a few truly European intellectuals hold versus Soviet mass of schizophrenic and criminal rest. These accounts are eagerly accepted in certain circles in Europe and these intellectuals are seen as giving true and unbiased accounts of what is happening in Ukraine (for instance, Iurii Andrukhovych was the one who got to speak in European Parliament in December 2004, during the Orange Revolution, becoming a voice for the whole Ukraine, despite his involvement with quite controversial 'Letter of 12 Writers' a couple of months earlier which disturbed Russophone Ukrainians a lot). This happens in part because in the texts of these Ukrainian intellectuals Western European public can read what it already knows – that Ukraine in the East is Soviet and backward (but Russia is even worse), and that they (Europe) is still very desired (thus – still successful) project. This strategy of Ukrainian liberal intellectuals can be seen as self-orientalization (in the meaning of using preexisting set of ideas about one's own country / culture for one's own benefit (Ong, 1997)).

This mode of behavior has its drawbacks for people belonging to this privileged (as perceived by some other Ukrainian intellectuals – because of liberal intellectuals travels and financial support from the institutions outside Ukraine) group. Riabchuk's texts offer us a description of 'real Ukrainians' as people confined to the ghetto (thus regular comparisons with black or Indian population of North and South America) and in need of 'affirmative action'. The possible dangers of such self-perception are described by Ola Hnatiuk in the article published in the collection *From Sovietology to Postcoloniality: Poland and Ukraine from a Postcolonial Perspective* (2007). Interestingly enough, this text never mentions Riabchuk as one of the contributors to existing 'ghetto discourse' in Ukraine.

The problem with Mykola Riabchuk views on Ukrainian society is that they are very normative. He clearly has developed some ideal Ukraine and ideal way to achieve it, which he considers to be a norm. Riabchuk is very Eurocentric in his worldview and 'norm' for him is 'Europe', or, more precisely (especially in his latest writings, where he becomes more critical of Poland and Central Europe) 'Western Europe'. Everything in Ukraine that goes differently from this 'norm' is automatically branded as not normal, aberrant or pathological. As a result, 'Soviet' became the term which signifies aberration from the norm (as perceived by Riabchuk). As contemporary situation in Ukrainian state is not satisfactory by his standards, he denies the fact of it being 'Ukrainian', preferring instead to call it 'Soviet'.

The correlation between the two notions: 'Soviet' and 'Russian', in Riabchuk's essays is not stable. There is a long tradition of equating two of them in the writings outside Socialist bloc and texts of some former dissidents. Mykola Riabchuk does not follow it fully. In several of his essays he made a point of 'Russia / russification' being different from 'Soviet Union / Sovietization'. And though in the beginning russification did seem to bother him a lot and was very much equated with Sovietization, in the mid 2000s he started to write about urgent need to de-Sovietize Ukrainian society and to leave derussification aside for a while. Nevertheless, his texts are full of hints at his negative attitude to Russia (for instance, he claims that he does not use Russian sources in his studies the complete denial of Russian modernization project (however imperfect it was) in his 'civilization theories' and similar). The clearest manifestation of his attitude towards Russia can be found in his late 2000s changes to description of two civilizations clashing on the territory of Ukraine. Riabchuk builds the following historical succession when writing about the other – Eastern and 'uncivilized' civilization: Golden Horde – Russian Empire – Soviet Union – contemporary Russia. He tries to persuade his reader that certain features, such as despotism, anti-Western 'gut feeling', were and are immanent to all of these. Through the use of historical analogies, metaphors and substituting certain notions for the others he reinforces negative image of contemporary Russia. In fact his depiction of Russia makes it into Ukraine's 'Orient', which goes along Sorin Antohi observation that since 1989 the whole region of former Socialist states involved in the practices of orientalizing their neighbours (Antohi, 2000).

It is difficult to present Iaroslav Hrytsak views in a nutshell, as they are often non-coherent and sometimes contradictory. Iaroslav Hrytsak, according to his own often-repeated statements, writes and speaks about things from the point of view of a historian (at this point the first contradiction appears immediately: in many texts he also speaks as a sociologist or at least uses sociological data to illustrate and prove his points). As a historian he explains the development in the contemporary Ukraine by events from its past. Hrytsak sees the roots of the situation Ukraine is now in the fact that more than thousand years ago on the territory which is now Ukraine Christianity of the Eastern rite was adopted. In time this caused civilizational differences between this part of Europe and what later became 'Western Europe'. Eastern Europe failed to join in the modernization processes that started several centuries ago in the other (Anglo-Saxon) Europe, so at certain point it had to embark on the huge overhauling modernization project to stop lagging behind. At that time it meant copying its Western neighbour, thus - 'Westernization'.

Hrytsak is opposed to the idea, which he calls 'Huntingtonian' that the civilizations necessarily fight – he insists that they do cooperate and something new could be born out of such synthesis. He describes Ukraine as a result of such process: the territories which now are Ukraine has been subjected to the 'Western' influences, which was something that created Ukraine, made it possible (though 'Eastern' legacy has played crucial role in its shaping as well). In such a grand scheme Soviet past is just a short-termed experience, which is rather caused by the previous developments than a deviation from them.

However Hrytsak pays more attention to Soviet past than it deserves according to his scheme. This is caused by Hrytsak's efforts to be actively involved in the contemporary intellectual discussions in Ukraine, which often touch issues related to the Soviet past directly or indirectly. This involvement is dictated to Hrytsak by his perception of the role of the intellectual in this part of the Europe, which he developed both through reading scholarly studies on the topic and from the experience of his generation's involvement in certain societal and political activities.

Hrytsak has lived through the ruination of socialistic meta-narrative and remained skeptical towards national meta-narrative that in the times of his socialization had non-appealing folkish and introverted/autarkic form. This also coincided with the triumph of deconstructivism in social sciences in general and history in particular, which he was able to witness during his stays abroad. This all combined must have caused his disenchantment with the grand narratives in general. Thus his essays are directed against existing misperceptions about Ukrainian past or present, but rarely (or almost never) move further trying to establish Hrytsak's own theory, describe his view on certain issues, and propose ways out of the situation. Quite often he stops short before making the conclusion, which would have seemed to be a natural consequence of his flow of the arguments, leaving this step for a reader to perform.

Hrytsak is very much opposed to the positivism in any of its forms – be it the old Soviet Marxist way, the national revivalist version or the view of the proponents of modernization theory. He claims that there is no ultimate truth valid for everyone and calls for the existence of different views and angles on the same events in history. He also denies the possibility of objectivity and claims that good scholar has to explain their standing point first of all and not to pretend to be unbiased at all.

Another point that Hrytsak makes in many of his essays is that Ukraine is not in any way an extraordinary country, its history being a normal history. He does it in the response to widespread discourse of victimhood and exceptionality in Ukraine (which is also widespread in other Eastern European countries).

And the last point to be made about Hrytsak's views: he declares his belief that Eastern Europe exist as a region and often uses it as a contrast (or, as he puts it himself, as a mirror) to the developments on Western Europe. However he never gives his definition of the region – there is no list as to which countries in his mind belong to Eastern Europe besides Ukraine.

Iaroslav Hrytsak stated in one of his essays that 'Ukraine needs to change the paradigm of thinking' (Hrytsak, 2008, p. 35). However he is not offering it in his texts. He works a lot on dismantling existing myths and misconceptions, but be it from his disbelief in grand narratives or some other reason, he is not offering a coherent story of what was Ukrainian history, what is its present and what should be its future.

Defining 'Intellectual'

As you have noticed, I did not give definition of the intellectual in the beginning of my short paper. The reason for this is that in the course of my preliminary research I understood that this definition is also a very problematic one and it does mirror the complexities of post-Soviet societal transformation in Ukraine. Thus I singled out additional research problems for my project, which is the ways in which a group of 'intellectuals' is being formed in the contemporary Ukraine. This process cannot be reduced to simple adoption of the new name by the former Soviet intelligentsia.

My hypothesis at the moment is that the notion of 'intelligentsia' has discredited itself in Ukraine (unlike in Russia and Poland though – but there this notion is perceived as domestic (see also the debates on which nation gave the world this notion (Gella, 1987))). This notion has undergone a series of changes – from emergence in the 19th century till the late Soviet usage. Both Mykola Riabchuk and Iaroslav Hrytsak belonged to this wide strata of 'intelligentsia' before 1991. They both, as many other active participants of intellectual life in

the contemporary Ukraine started their careers in Soviet Union. They present themselves as being different/non-compliant with the existent system back then, nevertheless they had their place in it, which disappeared with Soviet Union break-up. This demanded reorientation and creating a new place for oneself in the new circumstances.

In the both cases analyzed here, 'Western' experience played very important role in the formation of their stance. With the help and under the influence of Ukrainian Diaspora first and other Western agencies later, a group of Ukrainian scholars and cultural activists started to form Ukrainian alternative academic life. After 1991 in Ukraine there was no attempts either to dismantle the existing institutions or to purge them from the 'old cadres'. Instead the alternative parallel academic sphere has been created (different Institutes, University 'Kyiv-Mohyla Academy' and later Ukrainian Catholic Universities and others). New academic journals were founded, new book series started etc. These people, who started these endeavours, are the most active and most present in Ukrainian public discourse today – precisely for the reason that they created it and dictate their rules there. In majority they seem to share belief that the best solution for Ukraine is Westernization and regard 'West / Europe' as a norm. For them adopting the title of 'intellectual' was another step on the way of 'normalizing' Ukraine (i.e., bringing it to the 'European / Western' standard). This however led to silencing many other voices – non-Western oriented, non-Ukrainophone, not supporting liberalism / neoliberalism as the only right ideology. In my research I would like to try to find these other voices and to speak about them as well. From my very preliminary search it seems that the next generation of young people who also think about Ukraine, society and the way it should be developing is not concerned with the title 'intellectual' – they conceptualize themselves rather as 'activists'.

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