The ambiguities and social capital of global Ukrainians

Ukrainians abroad have generally done well in assimilating into their new cultures, and rarely have they demanded alternative public spaces in their new homes. Maidan 2.0, however, affected the Ukrainian émigré in a new, unique way. To start with, it was the virtual spaces – which had become a frontline for advocacy and "kitchen politics" among forum members of post-Soviet countries – that caused many Ukrainians to unsubscribe as followers and censor previous "friendships". Perhaps the most contested virtual spaces were many forums such as *Russians in* [...] or *Russian-speaking community in* [...] that have conveniently integrated Ukrainians abroad. In a rather short span of time, these lists had become a point of departure for the creation of borders between identities, between us and them, for those who for years had been aggregated under the common denominator *russkie*.

The demonstrations by the diaspora in European and North American cities in support of EuroMaidan in late 2013 and throughout 2014 confirmed this milestone in the awakening of many individuals of Ukrainian origin scattered around the European and the wider world economic landscape. The voices of many professional and educated Ukrainian expatriates the world over became stronger as they spoke of a homecoming. They seemed willing to give up their comfort zones outside Ukraine and become part of the change in the recovering country. Those who remained abroad placed high on their agenda the tasks of maintaining a link with conationals inside as well as outside the homeland, and of effectively using their skills and knowledge to advocate for Ukrainian interests throughout the world.

The website of InterNations ...

... and that of Global Ukraine.

So who is this social group, Ukrainian expats: altruistic lone wolves, or a rising social class? To try to find an answer I visited the Global Ukraine expat forum held in Kyiv on October 31, 2015. The forum drew attention to the increasing social capital of Ukrainian expatriates who engage in public diplomacy and lobbying on behalf of Ukrainian interests worldwide.

THE GLOBAL UKRAINE forum in Kyiv in 2015 was the second gathering of Ukrainian expats that year. It was aimed at synchronizing the activities of Ukrainians at home and abroad, in order to "promote the Ukrainian identity, protect and advance Ukraine's cultural and economic interests worldwide," according to the program description of the event. Conceived during Maidan 2.0 and officially registered in early 2015 as an international nongovernmental organization, the platform united small-scale communities of Ukrainian expats and members of the Ukrainian diaspora worldwide in the goal of acting in the realm of public, cultural, and business diplomacy.

The one-day forum was filled with patriotic sentiments, lively discussions on possible additional strategies of Global Ukraine, and alarming trends around the world that ran counter to Ukrainian interests. The words of organizers and guest speakers alternated with Skype calls from Ukrainian community leaders in Mexico, the US, Great Britain, Australia, the Netherlands, India, China, and Belgium. The agenda contained the general injunctions to try to think globally and act locally, to fill the gap between Ukrainian diasporas and the nation-state; to act to reduce the outflow of Ukrainians from the homeland, to display ad hoc leadership in diasporic communities, to lobby European and Ukrainian decision makers, and, last but not least, to adopt benchmarks to measure the success or failure of these efforts.

As the day grew dark, the debate became more vigorous, addressing questions of leadership and control, funding, group cohesion, and task-setting. These developments over the course of the day reflected the natural process of institutionalization of a growing organization; simultaneously, they signaled that the group's future remained mired in matters of power relations and identity politics.

A critically valuable type of human

capital – returning expats – could mean a recovery from a devastating outflow of workforce in Ukraine. Their duty-memory (to use Pierre Nora's term),[1] and a desire to secure their future with a place and a nation that expats themselves identify with, serve as the impetus for an eventual return to their place of origin – when the time is right. Like members of the diaspora, as well as sojourners, expats are a generation in cultural borderlands, in a state of in-betweenness, whose value systems spring from bilingualism and a deep understanding of different cultural settings.[2] In addition to generally higher educational and professional capital, they epitomize a rising *social capital*[3] and an informal think tank of sorts that the ruling political elite in Ukraine continuously invokes in its official rhetoric but fails to address in official state programs assisting returnees. More tellingly, the rallies for local election campaigns in October 2015 revealed that the participation of Ukrainian expats in vernacular politics remained opportunistic and stood in direct opposition to the corrupt system.

To be effective, expats form sodalities, such as Global Ukraine, of like-minded and action-driven individuals. Yet a bridge must be crossed from what Aihwa Ong has described as *flexible citizenship*,[4] which derives from living in multiple locations, to *effective* citizenship. In this way, any social group is likely to face inter and intragroup controversies that come about to a large extent as a result of cultural stereotypes, romantic sentiments, and the plural nature of the formulas that govern diasporic identity. For that matter, expat communities should be critically investigated as a separate research field, first, as a social group, and second, as a virtual social group.

As a subject of study, expatriates fall into a theoretical grid cutting across identity, citizenship, and geographic location. Like other migrants of identity, expats regularly deploy socially-based questions about who they are, and where they belong. Creating sodalities helps expatriates look for a shared answer and form unions among similar, self-reflective individuals. Facing "increasing inter-linkage between globalizing influences and personal dispositions",[5] expats dictate new models of global citizenship in a world that is hardly post-national in the way Arjun Appadurai would have us believe.[6] Rather, citizenship is now actualized through a mental frame of reference with a home (or diasporic *ontological moorings*, as suggested by Christopher Tilley),[7] and by the reiteration of bonds through return trips. Furthermore, creating sodalities leads to what Tilley calls cultural ecology,[8] referring to a space of intellectual transaction between multiple sites of and small-scale bonding and a large-scale confrontation. Similarly, David Harvey emphasized the importance of translating the particularities of grassroots struggles into struggles for a national or communal justice.[9]

Geographical and sociological imagination is constantly at work as expats *imagine* themselves belonging to one group, a phenomenon depicted quite accurately at the national level by Benedict Anderson.[10] Arjun Appadurai likewise assigns a significant role to the social practice of imagination as "a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility".[11] At the same time, the imagining component of virtual (in contrast to face-to-face) groups can jeopardize a group's lifespan. The fact that most global Ukrainians remain *invisible* to one another in the network (Diane Crane has observed this in scientific circles)[12] can lead to unforeseen intragroup controversies despite shared values, visions, and missions. Hirsch and Spitzer, in this vein, described the not-so-smooth transformation of a Jewish diaspora community from a web list into a real-life reunion in Czernowitz.[13]

FOR THE LAST couple of years, there has been a publicized and mediatized injunction using the locution a "united country" (*jedyna kraina*) in order to emphasize how we, Ukrainians, are alike. But with regard to the diaspora, there is a moment of estrangement of those who *remained* in a stagnant country towards those who *left* to find their fortune (or "look for pears on willows" as the popular song "Tylku wy Lwowi" goes). It is only recently that we have realized the extent of our ignorance about Ukrainians living abroad and have started – mainly due to significant support from the diasporic community during Maidan – to overcome this ignorance with documentaries on Ukrainian émigrés in the US and Canada, to listen to outspoken female workers in Italy and Poland who never spoke out before, and to laugh at our realities with the quasi-returnee journalist Michael Tschur. These moments confirm that we are still awkward in the subject–subject relation which is our relation with the Other of the Ukrainian self.

Ukrainians should, to cite one of the forum speakers, hold on to their *distrust* as an instrument to pressure authorities and demand transformations – like watchdogs of change. As a concluding comment, I wish to extend that and suggest that both distrust and trust should be among the many balls in the air for those Ukrainians who count on transformations at home. The investments in trust should also be directed toward conationals outside the national borders.

The proliferation of new social layers in Ukraine as another effect of the Maidan – civic journalists, bloggers, intellectuals, volunteers and NGO activists, the diaspora, and last but not least returning expats – finally signaled the arrival of a horizontal political culture. Trust is an important token of this civic formation in the process of replacing "the hierarchical politics and distrust with horizontal ties of mutual involvement and civic engagement".[14] Yet a great deal of primordial affect,[15] national sentiments, illusions, and the phantasmagorias of virtual circles add to the exoticized idea of homecoming that upon realization may clash with inter and intra-group politics of identity, like a ground that chokes the good seeds and yields no harvest.

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On the frontlines of disinformation.
Academic packaging of old stereotypes

Richard Sakwa, Frontlinje Ukraina: Krisen i gränslandet mellan Ryssland och Europeiska unionen; Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands

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On November 30, 2015, two years had passed since a peaceful student demonstration at the Maidan in Kyiv was dispersed by the police, and the process referred to in Ukraine as "the revolution of dignity" began. Ukraine once again became a hot topic after an extended period of "Ukraine fatigue" among Western politicians and media. As the events escalated into street fighting in Kyiv and other cities, and with the Russian occupation of Crimea and armed intervention in Donbas, a host of writers offered their interpretations of the events.

Richard Sakwa, a professor of Russian and European history at Kent University in the UK, has been writing about the Soviet Union and Russia since the 1980s. His fifth book in as many years, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands*, was first published in the UK in the winter of 2014–2015. In September, it was released in Sweden in translation.

Sakwa takes great pains to present an alternative view to the established image of Russia as a belligerent and revisionist power that encroaches on the sovereignty of nonaligned neighbors, and that routinely threatens all neighboring countries, with the possible exception of the rather compliant Belarus. Ukraine is depicted as a failed state from the perspective of nation- and state-building. Although it is a conglomerate of cultures and traditions, the country has, Sakwa maintains, been run as an ethno-culturally homogeneous state since gaining independence in 1991. This supposed process has resulted in much damage and bitterness. The "February Revolution", which is what Sakwa calls the take-over of power by the opposition, was hijacked by the extreme right. Groups on the extreme right constituted an important element of the motley street opposition in Kyiv to President Yanukovych from the very first days of the protests.

This radicalized the people in Crimea and Donbas. It also compelled Russia to take steps – in accordance with its defense doctrine – to rescue the Russian and Russian-speaking population in Ukraine from the ill-treatment by the Ukrainian government set in motion by these dark forces. In Sakwa's interpretation, the Russian occupation and annexation of Crimea, as well as its aid to the separatists in Donbas, were improvised as the events unfolded, and were