

**INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS  
AND THE HISTORIOGRAPHIC DISCOURSE  
– SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON THE UKRAINIAN CASE**

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**Abstract.** Building a common future on solid foundations first involves coming to terms with the past. The European future of Ukraine necessitates the creation and permanence of collective historical commissions to write and popularize the common history in an inclusive and equidistant manner. The interpretation of history is directly proportional to the older or newer historical experience and cannot be imposed. Multi-perspective interpretation is possible and where or if it is not possible, mentioning the points of view of others is possible and desirable. We can campaign for an interpretation of the past that emphasizes the common culture resulting from secular coexistence. At the same time, I realize that it is difficult to write an apolitical history acceptable and comprehensible to the public.

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The way people memorialize the past is important for contemporary international relations and often the key to understand current events. When the “special military operation” started on 24 February 2022, in his televised discourse the Russian president motivated this action among other reasons with the way Ukrainian politicians have chosen to write/rewrite the history. At the time I am writing these lines, I do not know how the conflict between Ukraine and the Russian Federation will end. What I know is that the majority of the Ukrainian people have chosen a European future and this future involves not only an economic but also a political-ideological path. Some of predominantly Russian-speaking regions (like Transnistria in the Republic of Moldova), will probably not accept the idea of distancing from Russia, constituting a potential source of instability that the EU does not need. Ukraine is geographically and demographically a large country with problems difficult for the EU to digest, especially after the 2004 mega-expansion with countries from Central and Eastern Europe. Preparing for a European future involves favouring a discourse of tolerance, acceptance of diversity, multiculturalism, a discourse of reconciliation that certain areas of Central and Eastern Europe are still far from. Westerners in general, as well as

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the non-Soviet neighbours of this country, know little about Ukraine, its culture and history. More or less, anything related to the Tsarist or Soviet past is assimilated to the concept of *Russian*. In documentary materials about WWII, the expression *Russia* instead of *USSR* is used, *Russian army* Soviet *army*, *Russian soldiers* instead of *Soviet soldiers*. As a graduate of a history faculty in Romania, I don't remember having done anything in the six years of study about the history of Ukraine as neighbouring country, except for some sporadic references to the state of Halici Vytinia and its influence on the area where the Moldavian Principality will later be formed, or some references to noble families of Ruthenian origin in the context of the religious union of a part of the Orthodox Church with the Church of Rome. For Romanian historiography as it is exposed to the public, for the extra-Carpathian area (between the Dniester and the Carpathians) the history between the Roman period and the creation of the state of Moldova in the 14<sup>th</sup> century is a "blank page" although the area was crisscrossed by trade routes, respectively it was more or less under the control of various non-Romanian political entities.

I can also notice a lack of a real organized framework that constantly deals with the problems of Romanian-Ukraine common history. In Satu-Mare, a symposium on *Romanian-Ukrainian relations, history and contemporaneity* is organized in quasi-anonymity, reaching its 10<sup>th</sup> edition under the auspices of the *Satu Mare County Museum* and the *Union of Ukrainians in Romania* in cooperation with *Babes-Bolyai University* and the *University of Uzhgorod*. Within the Romanian Academy there is a *Romanian-Ukrainian history commission* led by Dr. Alexander Rubel, but it was impossible for me to find out any additional information about the activity of this commission while writing this article. According to my knowledge the last notable event where Romanian and Ukrainian historians met publicly was an event organized by the Ukrainian embassy in Bucharest on the topic of *Romanian-Ukrainian relations 1918-1920*, in June 2018. The debates were tense, following same inflexible old clichés known since the Soviet time and emphasizing a lack of communication, collaboration or desire to listen the "other's" arguments. Instead there are active Ukrainian-Hungarian or Ukrainian-Polish or Ukrainian-German history commissions, which regularly debate the controversial aspects of the common history and communicate them to the public through mass media channels, being a factor not to be neglected in the process of creating a basis for mutual trust. For Romanian-Ukrainian relations too little has been done to institutionalize a constant dialogue between historians, intellectuals, students. It is hard to believe that anytime soon a common point of view can be reached regarding controversial historical aspects, historical memory being the result of one's own experiences, but at least the points of view and arguments of each side can communicate calmly in a non-passionate and non-political manner. Presenting the common historic cultural heritage in a way that shows we have more things in common than things dividing us is not that difficult neither scientific inaccurate. What may be difficult is to fight with deep rooted myths and clichés and in general to tell the audiences (that finances you) what they don't want to hear. In Ukraine as well as in Romania in the continuation of the national romantic ideological vein of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the public opinion is intoxicated by *esotericism* and

Manicheism when the question of *the origins* and *national specificity* arises. Same can be said about anything related with *the national specificity, the glorious past, the noble origin (as unaltered as possible), the special character and historic mission, the leading role in the region* etc. The combination with fiction, speculation, conspiracy theories, the “exceptionalism” is “the bread” of a whole constellation of influencers and TV shows (with for sure more audience than an academic conference). In such a context is not easy to plead for a non-ideological history that discovers the complexities of hybrid post-imperial Habsburg/Tsarist and post-Soviet identity articulations. The differentiation that the officials from Kyiv make between “Romanians” and “Moldovans” may well be a strategy to diminish by fragmentation a minority with a massive presence, however, in some cases it mirrors the reality of assuming a certain identity by individuals. A quarter of a century ago I was told by a well-established Romanian intellectual from Cernăuți (Northern Bukovina) that among Romanian families from North Bukovina there are cases in which in the same family one of the brothers considers/declares himself *Romanian* and the other *Moldovan*. We are talking here about transitional identities, often unstable, depending on the access to information, exposure to ideologies and, last but not least, personal experiences with neighbouring Romanian, Ukrainian, Russian, Polish, Hungarian, cultures, individuals, authorities. The ability to integrate these considerations into a coherent speech, acceptable to everyone that remains intelligible to the public, remains a challenge. In this part of Europe, we still live in what Fernand Braudel called *longue durée* far from a post-national reality (also debatable and questionable) of the Western countries. The *multiperspectival* approach recommended by the *Council of Europe* as well as scientific objectivity rarely makes a *good house* with coherence. Aspects such as WWII, the Soviet occupation, the German occupation, the collaboration of the Ukrainian People’s Army with the German army, the involvement in the Holocaust, the ethnic cleansing practices, the dichotomy “invaders”/“liberators” of the Soviet army are difficult to transpose anyway in school textbooks or in public discourse, but even harder in a multi-perspective manner. Equally difficult remains the possibility of transposing into a multi-perspective discourse the relationship of the three Ukrainian Republics existing in the period 1917-1920 with both the neighbouring countries and the cohabiting nationalities, respectively with a part of their own compatriots of a different political orientation (“reds” vs. “whites” with the multiple variants and orientations within each major current, pro-Russian versus pro-Polish, Orthodox versus Greek-Catholic). The cultural/identity impact of the post-WWII unification of Western Ukraine with Eastern Ukraine after centuries of separate evolution within Poland and the Habsburg Empire is visible. For most analysts the so called “Ukrainian nationalism” comes from the west of the country in the area of the former Galicia.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, historical writing in a multi-perspective manner in particular regarding issues tangible for the international relations today imply a self-confidence that only mature nations with solid states can afford. Not only Ukraine, but also the Central and Eastern and South Eastern European countries in general cannot

<sup>1</sup> Steven Bottlik, Zsolt Berki, Marton Jobbitt, *Power and Identity in the Post-Soviet Realm*, BoD – Books on Demand, 2021, p. 76.

afford this “luxury”. When it came to the issue of dominant language and culture something elementary like the definition of “normality” with its landmarks are different in the situation of Ukraine or the Republic of Moldova. During the Soviet period, the Russian language and culture were privileged in the USSR. Especially after 1990, the governments with electorate in the west of Ukraine put a special emphasis on the idea of cultural and linguistic unity, respectively revitalization of Ukrainian culture and language. In this context, Ukrainian becomes the main language in schools, a fact viewed as abnormal and oppressive by the Russian and Russian-speaking population in some areas, (especially the eastern part of the country) for which normality is equivalent to the predominance of the urban and modern Russian language and culture, unlike Ukrainian language and culture considered rural and archaic. Kyiv’s glorification of anti-Soviet fighters (in particular after 2014), some of whom are accused of collaboration with the Nazi occupier, pogroms and ethnic cleansing actions (against the Polish population) have further antagonized the Ukrainian society. I also note that language and geography as instruments of ethnicity are limited in the case of contemporary Ukraine, a country where the majority of the population is bilingual and in the large urban centres in the eastern part Russian is predominantly spoken. The cultural permeability of Ukraine’s borders today gives it an advantage in the sense of approaching a culture historiographic discourse in which the multiculturalism and the multiperspective, beyond the strengths of modern historiography such as *purism* or *exclusion*, will be welcomed. But is the Ukrainian intellectual and political environment mature enough and its internal or external audience sufficiently prepared for this kind of discourse? The repeated attempts after 1991 to outline a *History of Ukraine* within the parameters of Western national states were received with hostility in Russia where Ukraine is portrayed traditionally as the “Little Russia” and a component of the tripartite *Great Russia* and with ignorance in the West where Ukraine is traditionally portrayed as part of Russia’s history.<sup>2</sup> Same histories would unavoidable collided with histories of the neighbouring Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Romania as it reopened older or newer disputed files from the end of WWI and the end of WWII.

The establishment in 2006 in Ukraine of the Institute of National Memory did not help the issue of multiperspectivity, de-politisation of history writing or reconciliation with his neighbours.<sup>3</sup> Its declared purposed was not the promotion of multiperspectivity and exchange of ideas and information but “the promotion of patriotism among Ukrainian population”. The so called “De-communization laws” adopted in 2015 in Ukraine are a double sword instrument as they prohibit and punish by law the so called “propaganda of totalitarian regimes” so vague defined that it may further affect the freedom of expression, debate and the mutual dialogue.<sup>4</sup> Russian President’s “Memory law” (Article 354.1 of the Russian Penal Code) from 2014 which criminalize and punish to up to 5 years of detention not only “denying the Nazi crimes” but also “dissemination of knowingly false information about the activities of the USSR during the Second World War,

<sup>2</sup> Taras Kuzio, “Western Histories of ‘Russia’ and Ukraine”, *E-International Relations*, 2020, pp. 9-16, <https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/88286>, accessed on 15 Oct. 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Raluca Besliu, “Russia and Ukraine’s Tug of War over Memory”, *Green European Journal*, 14 June 2022, <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/russia-and-ukraines-tug-of-war-over-memory/>, accessed on 13 Oct. 2022.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

made publicly”<sup>5</sup> excludes by definition any kind of multiperspectivity, debate or dialogue on the many issues related with WWII and the way it is memorialized. Easy to notice in the above-mentioned Russian Law the intentional correlation between anything perceived as anti-Russian or anti USSR and the *Nazi propaganda*.

The Canadian historian of Ukrainian origin Taras Kuzio from the University of Alberta in an article from *Nationalities Paper* observes in the approach to the history of Ukraine a structure like this: Ukrainians are part of the group of Eastern Slavs, the family of which Belarusians and Russians are part<sup>6</sup>. The main historical controversy with major implications for the identity foundations of contemporary Ukraine refers to the historical legacy of Kievan Rus’, according to which today the Canadian-Ukrainian historian distinguishes four “schools” of thought, all continuations of currents previously existing in the Tsarist and Soviet period.<sup>7</sup> Thus he distinguishes: a *Russophile school* of Tsarist origins whose ideas were taken over by current Russian historiography, a *Sovietophile school*, an *East-Slavic school*, respectively a *Ukrainophile school* that appeared in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was active in the post-1918 period, respectively in Western Ukraine during the interwar period and WWII, to be revalued in post-Soviet Ukraine.<sup>8</sup> The same author notes the quasi-dominant position of the *Russophile* opinion in Western historiography.<sup>9</sup> The historiography of the neighbouring countries, including Romania, is no exception. In the post-1991 period in Kyiv, the ideas of one or another of the four currents prevailed depending on the existing political orientation of those in power.<sup>10</sup>

The most prominent representative of the *Ukrainophile school* is the historian Mykhailo Hrushevsky, president of the Ukrainian People’s Republic in its short existence since 1918 and the author of a History of Ukraine in 10 volumes.<sup>11</sup> He was a contemporary of Nicolae Iorga with whom he debated the disputed themes of Romanian-Ukrainian history. His work incorporates to a small extent, cultures and state formations prior to the Slavic migration and Kievan Rus. The relationship of the Ukrainophile historians (who, as in the case of Romania, were leaders of

<sup>5</sup> Gleb Bogush and Ilya Nuzov, “Russia’s Supreme Court Rewrites History of the Second World War”, *EJIL: Talk!*, *Blog of the European Journal of International Law*, October 28, 2016, <https://www.ejiltalk.org/russias-supreme-court-rewrites-history-of-the-second-world-war/>, accessed on 13 Oct. 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Taras Kuzio, “Nation Building, History Writing and Competition over the Legacy of Kyiv Rus in Ukraine”, *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 33, No. 1, Routledge, March 2005.

Same ideas are approached on year latter in Taras Kuzio, “National Identity and History Writing in Ukraine”, *Nationalities Papers*, 34(4): 407-427, DOI:10.1080/00905990600842080.

<sup>7</sup> Taras Kuzio, “Nation Building, History Writing and Competition over the Legacy of Kyiv Rus in Ukraine”, *art. cit.*, pp. 30, 34, 36.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> According with Taras Kuzio (2005, pp. 1-30) the *Sovietophile school* prioritizes Russia as the dominant cultural status and the role of leader of the continuing East-Slavism of Kievan Rus with the emphasis on the popular movements that over the centuries that, in addition to the “class struggle”, also wanted liberation from the Polish-Lithuanian or Habsburg domination to join mother Russia. The *Ukrainophile school* banned in the USSR after 1930 was the trend favored after the declaration of Ukraine’s independence. It is described by the other three schools as being nationalist, and the followers of the Russophile/Soviet trend associate it with the Ukrainian extreme right. The *East-Slavic school* accepts Ukrainian culture as part of East-Slavism and claims to avoid the *politicianism* of the three schools and the nationalism of the *Ukrainophile school*.

<sup>11</sup> Eduard Baidaus, “Relațiile Româno-Ucrainene în Istoria Ucrainei-Rusi. Considerente istoriografice”, *Revista istorică*, tom XXI, 2010, no. 1-2, pp. 167-182, available online at [https://www.academia.edu/37896876/RELA%C5%A2IILE\\_ROM%C3%82NO\\_UCRAINENE\\_%C3%8EN\\_ISTORIA\\_UCRAINEI\\_RUSI\\_CONSIDERENTE\\_ISTORIOGRAFICE\\_I\\_](https://www.academia.edu/37896876/RELA%C5%A2IILE_ROM%C3%82NO_UCRAINENE_%C3%8EN_ISTORIA_UCRAINEI_RUSI_CONSIDERENTE_ISTORIOGRAFICE_I_), accessed on 12 Oct. 2022.



the Ukrainian national movement), with the Kingdom of Romania was tense. The Ukrainian national movement considers Bessarabia, Bucovina and Maramureş as historical Ukrainian territories<sup>12</sup>, invoking here both a so called “historical right” of primacy respectively the “majority principle” in North Bucovina and Southern Bessarabia. For the “historical right”, Mihail Hrushevsky, invokes (from Hungarian sources) the *immigration theory* regarding Romanians who may have emigrated from the Balkan Peninsula and settled in the areas east of the Carpathians in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, taking advantage of the political power vacuum after the fall of Ukrainean Halici Volânia state who ruled the area from the Dniester to the Carpathians.<sup>13</sup> His reports about Romanian-Ukrainian relations over the centuries are few. Apart from the mentions about the Balkan origin of the Romanians, Hrushevsky has some references to the Romanians in the context of the participation of the Zaporizhzhya Cossacks in the campaigns of Mihai Viteazul<sup>14</sup> and Ieremia Movilă respectively, the interventions of the Cossacks in favour of one or another of the pretenders to the Moldavian throne<sup>15</sup>, the support given Orthodoxy after the union in Brest by the Orthodox theologian Petru Movila, son of the Moldavian ruler Simion Movila, who became the Metropolitan of Kyiv.<sup>16</sup>

Today usually the Ukrainian historians criticized the Romanian Kingdom for what they call “the annexation” of parts of Bucovina or Bessarabia in 1918 which (according to them) was done without consulting the population, and in the presence of the Romanian Army. Romanian historians invoke the policies of denationalization carried out by the Hapsburg and Tsarist empires, respectively the situation of anarchy in these provinces in 1918 which determined the intervention of the Romanian army at the express request of the *Council of the Country* in Bessarabia or the *National Council of Romanians* in Bukovina. Also, to note that at the time all the parts involved in the dispute had their own armed forces or paramilitary groups (Ukrainian, Poles, Jews, Hungarians, Romanians, plus the political driven armed forces like “reds” vs “whites”). Romanian historians also invoke the policies of the Austrian crown to colonize the province, visible in the Austrian population censuses. The double standard is used by both parts. Basic arguments like “demographic majority” are used selectively when it serves just to be replaced by “historic rights” (who is more autochthonous). I noticed the same “double standard” when the Ukrainian historians criticize the colonization policies practiced by Poles, Austrians or Russians.

The Romanian-Ukrainian dissensions on this topic also led post-1990 Romania to sign the *Base Treaty* with Ukraine late and only obliged by the circumstances of integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures<sup>17</sup>. Then, Romania declared through its representatives that it has no territorial claims against Ukraine but repeatedly requested a statement condemning the *Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact*<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 171.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 178.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 176.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 180.

<sup>17</sup> V. G. Baileanu, “In the Shadow of Russia: Romania’s Relation with Moldova and Ukraine”, G85, Conflict Studies Research CentRE, August 2000, p. 20, [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/97702/00\\_Aug.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/97702/00_Aug.pdf), accessed on 15 Oct. 2022.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

The Ukrainian side refused to draft a statement condemning the *Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact*, considering the taking over of the USSR's legacy over Northern Bukovina and Southern Bessarabia as Ukraine's historical rights.<sup>19</sup> Bilateral relations were affected by this attitude, but also by the constant practices of the governments in Kyiv of *autochthonization* of education aimed primarily at favouring the Ukrainian language and culture in to the detriment of the Russian but which also indirectly affected education in the language of other nationalities such as Romanians or Hungarians<sup>20</sup>.

In conclusion, building a common future on solid foundations first involves coming to terms with the past. The European future of Ukraine requires the creation and permanence of collective historical commissions to write and popularize the common history in an inclusive and equidistant manner. The interpretation of history is directly proportional to the older or newer historical experience of each people and cannot be imposed, but multi-perspective interpretation is possible and where it is not possible, mentioning the points of view of others is possible and desirable. I have come across opinions according to which equidistant implies reporting facts that "speak for themselves". But the facts that "speak for themselves" are also the result of a selection, so that they "speak for themselves" in a certain manner and justify a certain predetermined point of view. I can campaign for a cultural history that emphasizes the common culture resulting from secular coexistence, but also acknowledge the challenges to write an apolitical history that excludes chronology and still remains comprehensible to the public. If I have to plead for an old fashioned chronological, politic-events based history the things are not easy either considering the needs for *de-politisation*, *de-mythization* and *de-sacralization* of national histories as basic preconditions for any progress as far as the mutual dialogue is concerned.

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> Hungary especially reacted harshly to the repeated changes in education legislation considered to be detrimental to the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia.