

Keynote Speaker Message

The Need for ‘Ukrainess’ and Euromaidan Perspectives

Olga Poliukhovych, PhD (Cand.), Managing Editor
National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, Ukraine



One year has passed since the events known as Euromaidan took place at Maidan Nezhalzhnosti (Independence Square) in Kyiv. These events greatly influenced the way we approach the topic in our everyday lives as well as in scholarly discourse. The very first issue of the *Social, Health, and Communications Studies Journal* reflects on this phenomenon from different perspectives, and thus demonstrates its diversity and complexity.

Recent events in Ukraine have greatly changed the people. They altered the way we think about ourselves and how we present ourselves. Today, we are not those Ukrainians that we were a year ago. We feel our ‘Ukrainess’ in completely different ways. I’m not speaking for all Ukrainians but for the majority. There were also those people in Kyiv who enjoyed their cappuccino-latte-whatever some hundreds of meters from (Independence Square) when hundreds of people were being killed—an absolutely postmodern situation. Postmodernism has hardly come to our literature, but it has completely penetrated into our lives.

Before gaining independence, Ukrainians did not have the experience to be Ukrainians as such. In fact, Ukraine became independent due to the Soviet collapse. In the referendum of December 1991, 91 per cent of Ukrainians voted for independence. Before that, all of them were Soviet-Ukrainian citizens, after which they became Ukrainians. What does it mean to be Ukrainian? I guess we are approaching this notion more closely now. Independence was not our ultimate gift in 1991. Our ‘Ukrainess’ needs to be maintained and proven many times. And we had to prove it in November 2013. Thus, we gain the sense of our national belonging in extremely difficult times. Our contemporary ‘Ukrainess’ is born out of a profound crisis.

In the 1920s, Mykola Khvylovy, a prominent Ukrainian writer and political leader of his generation, had the courage to proclaim the slogan “Away from Moscow! Towards Europe!” These words were said when Ukraine was absent on the world map. Today, when Ukraine is represented in geographical terms, Khvylovy’s slogan is interpreted in the sense that nobody brings us Europe. We, Ukrainians, are Europe; we are Europeans mentally. And we are on our way to becoming a political state in European terms, not only in geographical ones.

Initially, the events of Euromaidan began with the people exercising their right to choose their political orientation—the majority of Ukrainians chose its European direction of development, of course. But after several weeks of protests in Kyiv as well as in other cities, towns, and villages of Ukraine, it was not about Europe, it was about ourselves. Taras Lyuty, Ukrainian philosopher, claims: “We initiated Euromaidan in a search for Europe, and then we found Ukraine.”

Due to Ukraine’s complex history, the Ukrainian identity is often overwhelmed and can be interpreted in different ways. After the latest events, we have a better sense of our ‘Ukrainess’. To identify our belonging is a crucial issue today. As victims of Russian aggression, we maintain our self-definition as Ukrainians providing our sense of belonging to the nation Russia attempts to undermine. Russia takes advantage of the situation in which we do not completely know who we are.

How we feel our ‘Ukrainess,’ or our belonging to Ukraine, is one of the most meaningful and crucial tests for Ukrainians, especially now when we are faced with an outer threat which undermines the sense of our national identity. The aggressive foreign policy of Russia aims to weaken the sense of our national belonging, trying to prove to us, Ukrainians, and to the world, that we are part of the so-called ‘Russian world’. These games are taking place due to the informational war against Ukraine as well as due to the real war in Eastern Ukraine. I do not speak about the whole of Russia—there are many reasonable people there—when speaking of Russia I have in mind the Kremlin’s policies and its adherents. They claim to tell us who we are. Playing identity games and taking advantage of uncertain identity as well as the political crisis, they try to maintain their version of who Ukrainians are and what they should do.

The joy of the Euromaidan Revolution was overshadowed by the death of hundreds of people as well as the consequences of the Maidan, i.e. the Russian annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine. In a deep crisis, we can see more clearly. Despite the tragic events, Euromaidan created an appropriate ground for self-definition. During the Maidan events, Ukrainians faced direct questions: Who are we and where are we headed? Paradoxically, Ukraine has emerged from the crisis and war with a stronger sense of national identity.

In order not to become a target of empires and powers exercising chauvinist/authoritarian/totalitarian ideologies, we must tell ourselves and the world who we are. The answer is clear: Ukraine itself should mobilize around the idea of a nation not to get swallowed up by another country. In her article “Nationalism is exactly what Ukraine needs now,” Anne

Applebaum claims: “Democracy fails when citizens don't believe their country is worth fighting for.” Euromaidan proved that Ukraine is worth struggling for.

We gain the sense of our national belonging in extremely difficult times. Nevertheless we feel a common mental link with past generations, whose deeds we are continuing. The realization of the need for ‘Ukrainess’ has come and there is no way back.

Glory to Ukraine! Glory to its Heroes!

Olga Poliukhovych, Managing Editor
PhD Cand., Department of Literature
National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy
Kyiv, Ukraine
olga.poliukhovych@gmail.com