Defending Identity at the Square: Ukraine's Euromaidan and Antimaidan Reconsidered

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Since 2008, mass protests have swept across the world, captivating global audiences. Driven by digital media and popular frustrations with economic crises, corrupt governments, and democratic institutions that have failed them, these movements of the square, as Paulo Gerbaudo has called them, represent a new form of popular resistance. From Tunis and Cairo to Madrid, Istanbul, and Wall Street, these protests involve occupying a square and uniting nations against tyrannical rule and unjust political and economic systems. They lead to new forms of social organization, new forms of activism, and new communal identities that speak for the nation.[1] Mark Beissinger, who refers to such movements as urban civic revolutions, argues that these protests have the potential to mobilize opposition to oppressive regimes in the name of the nation. Participants take over public squares near key centers of state power and put pressure on regimes to collapse or make considerable concessions. These revolutionary movements since the Cold War's end have become more frequent, as attested by the color revolutions in Eastern Europe and the Arab Spring. Yet even cases of successful regime change fail to transform political systems and resolve the issues that had sparked them in the first place.[2]

This article addresses the new identities forged in movements of the square in Ukraine. It draws examples from my new book, *Ukraine's Euromaidan: From Revolutionary Euphoria to the Madness of War.*[3] From November 2013 to May 2014, Ukraine's Euromaidan and its antithesis, the Antimaidan, represented movements of the square generated by digital media, popular grievances with economic injustice, and government corruption. Yet the forging of new identities at the square took place differently. The two protest movements engaged in a battle for Ukraine's national identity. This led to both movements in the end failing to transform political systems meaningfully or address the socioeconomic grievances of ordinary citizens.

This article argues that there were two different views of Ukraine's future that affected how citizens viewed themselves as members of a nation. For the Euromaidan, Ukraine was to be a European nation and a part of Western civilization, moving away from the Soviet past and Russian influence. At the Antimaidan, participants did not necessarily deny Ukraine's existence as a nation, though some insisted that it, Russia, and Belarus were one nation of brotherly peoples. They embraced the civic nationalism of Soviet Ukraine, where territory, not language or culture, united Ukrainians, and where economic, family, and cultural ties with Russia had to be preserved. For the Antimaidan, Ukraine was a culturally and ethnically diverse state whose differences needed to be respected by turning the state into a federal one. For the Euromaidan, Ukraine had to remain a unitary state, though with a decentralized government. Historical memory played a role in defining these two competing views of the nation's identity. For the Euromaidan, national heroes, including controversial ones revered by Ukraine's far right, became acceptable at protest events. For the Antimaidan, Soviet heroes and the Soviets' victory in World War II defined Ukrainians as a nation.

First, I must make some caveats about the Antimaidan. Admittedly, the Antimaidan was more in-

1 Paulo Gerbaudo, *The Mask and the Flag: Populism, Citizenism and Global Protest* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Paulo Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism* (London: Pluto Press, 2012).

2 Mark Beissinger, *The Revolutionary City: Urbanization and the Global Transformation of Rebellion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).

3 William Jay Risch, *Ukraine's Euromaidan: From Revolutionary Euphoria to the Madness of War* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2026). Interviews cited in this article will use the pseudonyms given in this book.

coherent and dependent on regional and central government officials for support and direction. With the collapse of the regime of Viktor Yanukovych on 22 February 2014, its participants joined counter-protests in the so-called Russian Spring. Russia's leaders, Russian intelligence services and military, and ordinary Russian citizens played a considerable role in turning this movement into one advocating regional separatism. The Russian Spring led to Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea and then military intervention in the Donbas. Yet at least in its early weeks, Russian Spring protests continued to articulate this different vision of Ukraine's future. The idea of Ukraine becoming a federal state continued to surface in protests in support of separatist movements in the Donbas. The new nation formed in the fire of revolution in Kyiv only reinforced Antimaidan participants' convictions that it was hostile to them.

The Euromaidan protests, which began in Kyiv on 21 November 2013, and spread to other cities, engaged in national identity politics from the very beginning. The Association Agreement with the European Union, over which the Yanukovych administration had suspended negotiations, embodied Ukraine's alleged return to Europe. "Europe" meant not just a free trade agreement, but the setting of European standards in Ukrainian life, such as rule of law, curbing corruption, providing greater opportunities for small and mid-sized businesses, travel and work in Europe, and supposedly a higher standard of living. Closer ties with Russia, including joining the Eurasian Customs Union, offered not much of a future at all. Protesters saw those ties as assuring Russian domination over Ukraine. Once the Yanukovych administration cracked down on the center of the protests in Kyiv on 30 November 2013, the Euromaidan represented a struggle against an authoritarian regime. It was a battle for the nation's future.

The protest camp on Kyiv's main square, and Euromaidan protests in other parts of Ukraine, mobilized support by appealing to Ukraine's national ideology. That ideology, espoused by what I will refer to as Ukraine's national democratic camp, emerged in the struggle against communism at the end of the 1980s. It resembled other trends in Eastern Europe, where the far right allied with others and overturned communism in the region.[4] That ideology brought together liberals, conservatives, and members of Ukraine's far right. It stressed that the nation came before all other issues, such as class and gender. It expressed opposition to Soviet and Russian domination. It championed Ukrainians' language and culture. Finally, Ukraine's national ideology championed as heroes controversial figures from Ukraine's past, such as Stepan Bandera, leader of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), and Roman Shukhevych, leader of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). Nationalists like Bandera and Shukhevych were killed by Soviet security forces after World War II. They became martyrs in the struggle against communism. Yet such nationalists from the World War II era were tainted by collaboration with the Third Reich and complicity in the mass murder of Jews and Poles. Their partisan struggle against Soviet power after the war terrorized Soviet citizens, including Ukrainians themselves. Soviet propaganda had equated such movements with Nazism, and national forms of expression, even including Ukrainian language use, became branded as "Banderite" in the late Soviet period.

The Euromaidan protests incorporated symbols from such wartime nationalist organizations as OUN. "Glory to Ukraine! Glory to the heroes!" had become a greeting among OUN nationalists before and during World War II, with nationalists saluting one another in the style of Mussolini's fascists in Italy.[5] The "heroes" were fallen members of OUN. The chant had circulated among young

4 Tom Junes, "Illiberalism in Eastern Europe Is a Legacy of 1989," *openDemocracy, 20* November 2019, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/illiberalism-eastern-europe-legacy-1989; Emily Channell-Justice, *Without the State: Self-Organization and Political Activism in Ukraine* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022), 85 – 86; Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceauşescu's Romania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

5 Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe, *Stepan Bandera: The Life and Afterlife of a Ukrainian Nationalist. Fascism, Genocide, and Cult* (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2014), 179 – 80.

Ukrainian soccer fans influenced by right-wing groups. By the time of the Euromaidan, it is unlikely that protesters, especially younger ones, knew what the chant originally meant. The chant was generic enough to escape its fascist-era origins, yet it was an example of Ukraine's far right influencing the protests' rhetoric about the nation. OUN flags from the World War II era, featuring the colors of black and red, showed up at rallies, protests, and marches for the Euromaidan. The Euromaidan protests took on other chants from the far right, ones that originated in independent Ukraine. "Glory to the nation! Death to the enemies!" came from the far-right organization Ukrainian National Alliance – Ukrainian National Self-Defense (UNA-UNSO). An openly fascist chant, derived from wartime Germany's national anthem, resounded at Euromaidan events. "Ukraine über Alles!," my translation of "Ukraina – ponad use!" was that slogan. Occasionally, Euromaidan rallies featured derogatory references to ethnic Russians, in the chant, "Who doesn't jump is a moskal!" "Moskal" was an ethnic slur directed at Russians. As the protests became violent in late January, the far-right chants and symbols took on new meaning. They were essential elements in an uncompromising war against the state. As early as 8 December 2013, Euromaidan activists, many of them from the far right, demolished Lenin monuments as hated symbols of the Soviet past. As the protests radicalized, Lenin statues fell in cities and towns in central Ukraine. Once Yanukovych fled Ukraine, protesters took down Lenin in southern cities like Mykolaiv and Kherson. They discussed doing the same in Zaporizhzhia and Kharkiv and even in Simferopol in Crimea.

In contrast to the Euromaidan, the Antimaidan expressed an identity politics asserting that Ukraine was a brother nation to Russia and Belarus and that Ukraine's alleged return to Europe was an act of Western interference in Ukraine's affairs. Instead of demonizing the Soviet past, Antimaidan participants embraced it. The St. George ribbon, consisting of orange and black stripes, had been worn by citizens in both Russia and Ukraine to commemorate the Soviet victory in World War II. It was an element of President Vladimir Putin's politics of memory that appealed to both nations in the early 2000s. Antimaidan protesters and supporters identified themselves as such by wearing the ribbon at rallies. They unfurled and displayed banners in the colors of the St. George ribbon. Soviet symbols and references to the Soviet people's victory over fascism appeared on the Antimaidan side after violence broke out between Euromaidan participants and law enforcement. This display could be seen at the police barricades on Hrushevsky Street in Kyiv, not far from parliament. Video taken during a truce between Euromaidan forces and law enforcement on 10 February 2014 featured pieces of wood riot police and Berkut security forces had turned into signs on their side of the barricades. One of the signs said, in Russian, "Thanks Grandpa for the victory!" referring to the Soviet victory in World War II. Other signs pointed in the direction of the Euromaidan side of the barricades, referring to the protesters as "apes" and those "born in pain," suggesting the Euromaidan's participants were mentally ill or had learning disabilities. The Euromaidan side of the barricades that day had become the scene of a musical concert that tried to project a positive influence on the police not far away. Yet the stage at the barricades featured the OUN flag. It was a scene suggesting a clash of two visions of the nation.[6] Just a few days later, on 18 February, a riot broke out in a park near parliament between Euromaidan protesters trying to put pressure on parliament to curtail Yanukovych's powers and riot police, Berkut forces, and paid protesters blocking their way. Yanukovych's forces went on the offensive and brutally beat anyone in their path. One of the Euromaidan protesters recalled the Antimaidan supporters assailing them, calling them Banderites, fascists, and homosexuals, threatening to deal with them as their grandfathers had with the Nazis and their underlings during World War II. They seemed ready not just to beat up, but kill, Euromaidan protesters in the park.[7] That day, which marked the beginning of what I call the February uprising, looked very much like a civil war, as one Maidan Self-Defense volunteer

6 Sergei Rulev, "10 02 14 Na fronte zatish'e pered burei," *YouTube*, 10 February 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9qXzDXgW9kA (no longer available).

7 Bohdan, interview with Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, Kyiv, 23 July 2014.

told me in English.[8] Given the role of identity politics in the February uprising, one could conclude it resembled a civil war not based on ethnic or linguistic differences, but over whether Ukraine should adhere to its Soviet past or become a European state free of Russian influence.

With the collapse of the Yanukovych regime in late February 2014, Antimaidan supporters sought to protect the Soviet past. The wave of Lenin demolitions convinced them that "Banderites" were coming to their towns and cities to tear down Lenin and then even murder ordinary citizens they did not consider to be true Ukrainians. The defense of Lenin monuments in cities like Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, and Donetsk became protests of the square that symbolized the beginnings of the so-called Russian Spring. Defending Soviet monuments, the Russian language, and local histories and identities, as well as federalizing the Ukrainian state, became rallying cries of such Antimaidan gatherings. Ukrainian media very quickly labeled these rallies as "pro-Russian" or even "separatist," though the term "Antimaidan" lingered on as a reference to this rejuvenated protest movement. During the Russian Spring, elements of the far left and the far right converged and sought to defend their communities from the new government in Kyiv. Decades of efforts by local political elites, especially in Crimea and the Donbas, instilled in local residents a sense that they were under siege from Ukraine's national democrats, who coddled the far right and Russophobic movements and who planned to eliminate jobs, close industries, and arrest and even kill those who spoke the wrong language or went to the wrong church. Lenin squares became protest communities where participants could express themselves incoherently, aggressively, and promote illiberal, anti-Western views and conspiracy theories. In cities like Mykolaiv where Lenin had already been removed, forces opposed to the Euromaidan occupied a war memorial to paratroopers killed while trying to liberate the city from the Nazis during World War II. In Odesa, Antimaidan protesters took over Kulykiv Field, where the city traditionally held World War II commemorations.

The symbols of World War II became ubiquitous during the Russian Spring. On the evening of 6 April 2014, the classic Soviet wartime song, "Arise, enormous country!" (*Vstavai, strana ogromnaia!*), boomed from a stereo system in Kharkiv as a signal for the Antimaidan protesters there to storm and occupy the Kharkiv Regional State Administration building they had converged on. Their leaders proclaimed a people's republic that lasted only briefly.[9] The occupied Luhansk regional SBU headquarters, which became the kernel of the so-called Luhansk People's Republic, featured such Soviet World War II era symbolism in a banner displayed above its entrance on 21 April 2014. The banner equated their protest with Pavlov's House in Stalingrad, where the Red Army held onto this legendary apartment building for sixty days before fellow troops arrived and broke the siege, defeated the German forces there, and turned the war's tide; the Red Army then advanced all the way to victory in Berlin. For one local blogger, the Luhansk SBU was on the front line of the Russian World's counteroffensive westward, against new Nazis. Before entering the occupied SBU building, the blogger recalled standing in front of this banner in wonder. He declared, "History is being made before our eyes."[10] The blogger's remarks seemed to echo sentiments on the other side of the barricades, the Euromaidan protest camp in Kyiv, where a Euromaidan activist and historian, and future director of Ukraine's historical memory policies, urged YouTube audiences to come to the square on 8 December 2013. He asserted that they were "making history together."[11] In Luhansk too, forces from the far right and far left formed coalitions that, with Russian help, championed Russian nationalism and

8 Danylo, interview with the author, Kyiv, 22 March 2014.

9 Slava Mavrichev, Facebook,6 April 2014, https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=615244795233170&set=a.483005518457099&type=3&theater.

10 yadocent, "Ekskliusiv iz doma Luganskogo SBU," 21 April 2014, https://yadocent.livejournal.com/563627.html.

11 Hromads'kyi sektor Ievromaidanu, "Volodymyr V'iatrovych: Prykhod' 8 hrudnia na Maidan!" YouTube, 7 December 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=xCzgXBaWqZM.

imperialism.[12]

The armed uprisings in the Donbas, and Russia's role in them, alarmed Euromaidan activists who, instead of building a new European future for Ukraine, had to stop separatism from tearing the country apart. Violence against pro-Ukrainian unity rallies in cities like Donetsk, and the terror armed men inflicted on pro-Ukrainian unity activists, compelled Euromaidan participants and their allies to fight back. Pro-Ukrainian unity movements in Mykolaiv, Kharkiv, and Zaporizhzhia fought alleged separatists. Just as Antimaidan supporters demonized them, referring to them as mentally retarded, homosexuals, and fascists, Euromaidan participants began referring to their foes as Colorado Beetles. The Colorado Beetle, a pest that destroys potato crops, has the same colors as the St. George ribbon -- black and orange stripes. The rhetoric did not necessarily lead to people willing to kill one another, yet it delineated two communities – one the Antimaidan, the other the Euromaidan or pro-Ukrainian unity forces – whose members perceived themselves to be under threat.[13] While after 2008 movements of the square in other parts of the world used crude rhetoric to channel participants' anger and taunt their foes, such speech acts in Ukraine undermined the civic nationalism that the Euromaidan's participants claimed to represent.[14] This could be seen in Odesa on 10 April 2014, when Euromaidan protesters surrounded a hotel where a Yanukovych ally and known supporter of the Russian Spring was staying. They planned to throw rocks and eggs and green dye at him. Antimaidan forces tried to get them to leave. The Odesa Guard, a paramilitary organization that was openly Russian imperialist, faced off against the protesters. One of them got their side to chant, in Russian, "Maidaners on a pike! Make Bandera cry!" The Euromaidan side chanted an equally derisive call to their enemies, in the Russian language: "We are Odesa, you are shit!" They chanted, "Suitcase, train station, Russia!" thus demanding that they leave the country.[15] On 2 May 2014, clashes between participants of a Ukrainian unity march and Antimaidan forces resulted in a fire that killed dozens of Antimaidan participants in the Trade Unions Building that overlooked their protest camp. Many of them died from smoke inhalation. Some were burned beyond recognition. The Euromaidan's supporters celebrated the would-be separatists' defeat. One politician referred to the Antimaidan protesters as "hoards of Colorado Beetles" that had attacked first and deserved to be liquidated.[16] The day of the fatal clashes, a political scientist from Ukraine wrote on Facebook, "When I was little, my grandfather in the garden taught me to gather Colorado Beetles in a jar and then set [them] on fire."[17]

The identity politics of Ukraine's Euromaidan and Antimaidan helped choreograph protests and rallies at public squares. Identity politics helped draw to these squares ordinary citizens who perceived that no politicians spoke for them. In the early weeks of the Euromaidan, the sight of hundreds of thousands of people converging on the center of Kyiv to proclaim a revolution in the making inspired outsiders. This included Western observers of the Maidan, not just invited speakers on the Maidan stage, like U.S. Senators John McCain and Chris Murphy, but ordinary foreigners visiting the Maidan like myself. Yet performing revolution in this manner had its drawbacks. In focusing on the nation's identity, the Euromaidan failed to win over ordinary workers and the working poor who de-

12 For more on such splits within the Ukrainian left in 2013 – 14, see Volodymyr Ishchenko, "Left Divergence, Right Convergence: Anarchists, Marxists, and Nationalist Polarization in the Ukrainian Conflict, 2013 – 2014." *Globalizations* 17, no. 5 (2020): 820 – 39.

13 Deborah A. Jones, "The Fascist and the Potato Beetle: Patriotic Chronotopes and Dehumanizing Language in the Ukraine Conflict," *American Ethnologist,* 50, no. 1 (February 2023): 30 – 42.

14 Gerbaudo, *The Mask and the Flag,* 82 – 83.

15 Anna Dombrovskaia, "Boinia v Odesse i pobeg Tsareva 10 aprelia. 18+," *YouTube*, 20 April 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iMD-tp1ssWY. For videos of these events collected from various sources, see the YouTube channel for Denis Artem'ev, a pro-Russian activist, at https://www.youtube.com/@user-mj1oq3di5y.

16 Lesia Orobets', *Facebook*, 2 May 2014, https://www.facebook.com/lesyaorobets/posts/pfbid02U2dYT45RV3waR4EFXnSz4L3yD6wKXs2AJajUDxr4Nfb3E5ZgyhJs5R5Z88LpwKt1l.

17 The name of the post's author is withheld here. The post caused a stir among Ukraine specialists at the time, and the author soon removed it.

manded solutions to their socioeconomic woes.[18] The nation seemed to include everyone who came to the square, but in fact, Euromaidan protesters and activists, often from the far right, drove leftists off the square, silencing these concerns. The Antimaidan, after the Yanukovych regime's fall, seemed to promise a revolution for the down-and-out in depressed centers of coal mining, metallurgy, and other industries. Yet national identity politics, namely Russian nationalism and Russian imperialism, ultimately highjacked that movement. Ukrainians became more divided, not less divided, as a result of the Euromaidan Revolution that brought regime change to Ukraine. It was only Russia's invasions of Ukraine, first in 2014, then in 2022, that brought them together. Taking to the square to rescue the nation was a noble and admirable feat. Participants felt as though they were making history together. Yet that history brought unforeseen tragedy and bloodshed, as seen in today's war against Russian military aggression.

18 Volodymyr Ishchenko, "Insufficiently Diverse: The Problem of Nonviolent Leverage and Radicalization of Ukraine's Maidan Uprising." *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 11, no. 2 (2020): 201 – 15.