

Instrumentalisation of History or Inclusive Narrative? Regional Policies and Ethnic Memories in Ukraine.

by Iryna Brunova-Kalisetska

The paper examines the concept of instrumentalisation of history in today's Ukraine from the perspective of experts in history from Kiev, Southern and Eastern Ukraine. Based on interviews with historians, this instrumentalisation is described as a resource that is used by different actors and entities and cannot exclusively be attributed to the ultra-nationalist camp. Instrumentalisation is interpreted as a rather natural process. The following actors applying instrumentalisation were mentioned: individuals, families, NGOs/civil society, teachers, media, cinema/literature/art producers, academic historians, social movements, all political forces/parties, the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, presidents, any group that has its own identity. The goals of instrumentalisation can vary from identity processes to trauma healing and prevention of violence and war. Inclusiveness of the regional and ethnic memories in the experience of history teachers is analysed as an example of non-nationalistic construction of a national narrative. Three indicators for the inclusiveness of a narrative in formal history education are proposed: the search for a common narrative and for including the memory of the ethnic "Other" into "our" memory," the recognition of regional history in the national narrative, the practical realisation of inclusiveness in the form of interregional exchange of memory. It was revealed that there is space for an inclusive narrative of ethnic memories, but the usage of it depends on several factors: the teacher's character, the access to historical sources, the possibility of cooperation with other institutions, such as NGOs, academia, museums, ethnic communities, etc.

Keywords: Instrumentalisation of History, Ukraine, Identity, Memory Narratives, Trauma, Inclusivity.

1. Introductory remarks

The current armed conflict in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine (that is called either "Russian-Ukrainian war" on the Ukrainian side, or "civil war in Ukraine" by the Russian side, and the "conflict in and around Ukraine" by international organisations has raised the question of whether an instrumentalisation of the past in Ukraine was one of the causes of this war. But this question seems insufficient without answering two others: 1) is history instrumentalised in Ukraine? 2) and if yes, should this instrumentalisation be considered ultra-nationalistic?

Common sense suggests that instrumentalisation is something that should be avoided, because it is misused by politicians for the mobilisation of their electorate, or for other political goals. However, it seems that some questions on this topic are still left open: what is the essence of instrumentalisation in a concrete national

context? How does it function in different practices in the country with territories and ethnic groups that have divergent memories of the same historical events? For a deeper understanding of the instrumentalisation of history in Ukraine, I have conducted a small research project in order to grasp these specifics in the Ukrainian context. I do not pretend that the current paper covers all the issues related to the topic of instrumentalisation of history/memory, nor that it is profound and pure scholarly research. Rather, it is a first reflection on instrumentalisation and inclusiveness from the perspective of mainly non-academia historians in selected regions of Ukraine.

By inclusiveness, I mean the process when a dominant narrative includes events, personalities or monuments of the Other. This process can be observed on at least two levels: at a regional level, with narratives that also include memories of ethnic minorities represented in the region, or at a national level, with a state narrative that includes regional and ethnic memories along with the mainstream ethnic narrative. I also address inclusiveness of regional and ethnic memories as an example for a non-ultranationalistic construction of the national narrative.

Research design

The research presented here has been conducted at two interrelated stages. In a first phase, I interviewed experts in history with a wide range of questions about collective memory and memory policy in Ukraine. The results of this survey have then motivated me to conduct a second round of interviews dedicated to the problem of lacking inclusivity in the official memory policy practiced by the Ukrainian state (stage 2).

First stage of research, spring 2017

During the first stage of research, a total of nine expert interviews were conducted. They tackled the following questions:

What does instrumentalisation of history mean? Who are the actors involved? What are the mechanisms? What is the relationship between instrumentalisation of history and collective memory? What is the relationship between instrumentalisation of history and nationalism? What effect does this relationship have? What are the specifics of history instrumentalisation in the regional or ethnic sphere of your expertise/research?

Five interviews had a regional focus:

- 2 – Odesa,
- 1 – Kherson,
- 1 – Crimea,
- 1 – Kharkiv.

It should be noted that these regions are seen to be rather not inclined towards a Ukrainian nationalistic narrative due to many historical and contemporary factors.

Five interviews had a thematic focus on ethnically-based history and memory:

- 1 – Crimean Tatar (deportation and national movement topics),
- 1 – Holocaust,
- 1 – Crimean and Azov Sea Greeks,
- 1 – Ukrainian (Holodomor),
- 1 – Ukrainian-Polish relations.

According to their professional affiliations, the respondents represented the following areas (some of the respondents have experience of work in more than one sphere related to history or memory):

- 2 – employees of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory,
- 2 – university professors,
- 2 – authors of history TV projects,
- 1 – employee of state scientific institutions,
- 1 – professor of post-graduate teacher education institutions.

From them, some had additional functions as:

- 3 – representatives of NGOs,
- 3 – experts in non-formal education programs related to history/memory issues.

According to their academic degree, the respondents represented the following sections:

- 4 – MA in history,
- 5 – PhD in history.

Second Stage of research: Fall 2017

The second stage of research includes a total of 11 interviews with history teachers and museum workers in the Odesa and Kherson regions, i.e. the regions, where many minorities are represented, with their corresponding “ethnic memories” (Crimean Tatars, Jews, Greeks, Russians and other groups). These regions are seen as less nationalistic than the Western regions of Ukraine. In this paper, the term “ethnic memories” will describe the specific narratives related to a certain ethnic group. This includes the memory of historical events that are important for that particular group, the memory of heroes or victims, and particular interpretations of those memories (e.g. the deportation of the Crimean Tatars in 1944, or the Holocaust).

The following regions and professions were represented:

- Odesa and Odesa region: 3 – teachers, 3 – museum workers,

Kherson and Kherson region: 3 – teachers, 2 – museum workers.

In this paper, only the data from the interviews with the teachers will be discussed, while the museum workers' opinions on the inclusivity of the narratives will be published in a next paper.

Results

Expert reflections of the instrumentalisation of history in Ukraine since 1991

Being asked about what lies behind their interpretation of the past, so to speak their concept for the instrumentalisation of history, most of the expert-respondents have mentioned their epistemological and methodological position as a main cause (which was not the case for the teachers of history / museum workers). For example, some of the experts answered the question by saying that they are constructivists and regard historical memory as something constructed, and therefore they interpret the past in a certain way and not another. In the conceptualisation of instrumentalisation of history, experts discussed the relationships between instrumentalisation and academic history. In an attempt to define what instrumentalisation is, some of the respondents elaborated on their views on instrumentalisation as a construction of memory or a narrative (based on a mostly constructivist methodology and with a focus on social constructs) and on instrumentalisation as a manipulation of truth and lie (an artificial process, based on assumption that historical truth can be manipulated).

The interviewed experts see the following actors as responsible for the instrumentalisation of history: "us", "them", an undefined group, or a concrete person or institution. The goals of the instrumentalisation in the respondents' answers could also be categorised as a) bad goals, b) good as well, c) and as a process without evaluation. In any case, however, instrumentalisation is described as a goal-oriented process.

When it comes to the agents of instrumentalisation of history, they are described by the experts as: "all of us," individuals, families, NGOs/civil society, teachers, media, cinema/literature/art producers, academic historians, social movements, all political forces/parties (right/liberal/left), the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, presidents, any group that has its own identity (inhabitants of the same house, district, city, etc.).

The mechanisms of instrumentalisation depend on the level and the actor, as well as on the goal that one is attempting to achieve with the help of instrumentalisation. The goals of instrumentalisation were described by the experts as: to create or support identities (including family memory), to understand "who I am" (who we are), "why I support a certain movement" (self-identification process),

to release a previously forbidden or hidden memory and to heal from a traumatic past (psychotherapeutic goals, both personal and group), to “pay off” a negative experience in the past (in order not to repeat it), to start a wide discussion about it, to mobilise the electorate, to support pro-Ukrainian people in Crimea (in order to give them hope).

I asked the respondents about topics and themes that were the most instrumentalised in Ukraine between 1991 and 2017. According to the interviewed experts, these are:

- the Holodomor (the famine of 1932-33 as the main tragedy of the modern Ukrainian nation),

- the Cossacks (17th-18th century) as the symbol of Ukrainian freedom in the past,

- decommunisation (as a process of overcoming the Soviet memory in symbols, toponyms, the opening of KGB archives, etc.),

- “Two Ukraines” (as the political manipulation of the last 15 years that sharpened the regional differences between eastern and central/western Ukraine by insisting on the narrative of “Two Ukraines” that cannot be part of the same narrative),

- World War II (a variety of topics of the Ukrainian experience in WWII, in particular the UPA [the Ukrainian Insurgent Army], the Holocaust, Ukrainian-Polish issues, in particular the Volyn’ violence of 1943, etc.),

- heroes that have struggled for Ukrainian statehood from different historical periods (but were in opposition to the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union or the Russian Federation, and were thus addressed as traitors, betrayers and criminals in Soviet and Russian historiography).

Regarding the features of the memory policies by regional authorities, the experts interviewed have mentioned several aspects. First of all, they noticed an absence of a sophisticated coherent memory policy in independent Ukraine (no system, no strategy). It was also mentioned that in its post-imperial attempt to reconstruct itself as a nation-state independent from Russia, the central narratives (both governmental and non-governmental) were missing a region-specific, as well as an ethnic dimension. As a possible reason for this, it was mentioned that prior to 2004 (before the presidency of V. Yushchenko), Kyiv had left memory policy and practices to the regional elites in order to prevent a competition of memories at a national level. However, when national-regional or intraregional contradictions (or memory rivalries) appeared, the national mainstream either did not notice them or did not see the necessity or possibility to solve them. The experts interviewed also observed a conflict of identities and of their prioritisation in the regional policies (authorities vs. citizens, regional vs. national level, etc.), meaning that memory conflicts served as a screen for other relational conflicts. It opens the floor for yet other conflicting players. Not least, Russia was mentioned by the ex-

perts as a “co-player” in memory politics that instrumentalises history in Ukraine.

The problem of non-Ukrainian, ethnically-based memory in Ukraine was also addressed in the interviews, with the aim to gain a deeper understanding of the peculiarities of the instrumentalisation of history, be it radically nationalistic or not. The experts’ opinion demonstrated the following aspects of relations between the mainstream narrative and non-Ukrainian ethnic memories: both narratives – of ethnocentric Ukrainian national history and of Soviet internationalism (“friendship of peoples”) – are not inclusive for ethnic memories (e.g. Jewish, Crimean Tatar, Greeks), but are not repressive either. Considering the practical realisation of these politics, certain declarative symbolic gestures were adopted by the government or regional authorities (such as visits to the events on memorable dates of non-Ukrainian ethnic groups) and the Holocaust and the 1944 deportations have appeared in history textbooks within the last couple of years. In general, an inclusive approach to ethnic memory is practiced mainly by NGOs in non-formal education.

Ethnic and regional memory in the official narrative of history education

At the second stage of the research project (interviews with history teachers and museum workers), three indicators were elaborated in order to identify whether a national or regional narrative is inclusive and comprehends different perspectives of ethnic memory. These indicators are:

1. The search for a common narrative and for including the memory of the ethnic “Other” into “our” memory.

The presence or at least the search for shared narratives was considered as the main indicator for the inclusiveness of historical memory. This inclusion can appear as shared names, events and symbols of regional or ethnic memory in national school history programmes and textbooks. These events or symbols can also be controversial or tragic.

The inclusion of ethnic memory into the national or regional narrative describing Ukraine rather as a political or civic than as an ethno(centric) nation was also considered as an indicator for an inclusive representation of the past. A manifestation of a civic rather than an ethnic nation would be, for example, a regional narrative that includes memories of different ethnic groups represented in this region.

2. The recognition of regional history in the central national narrative was seen as another indicator of the inclusiveness of the central narrative in relation to the examined regional memory.

3. The interregional exchange of memory was seen as one more indicator for a practical realisation of inclusiveness.

The results of the interviews with history teachers in the Odesa and Kherson

regions will now be discussed according to these indicators of inclusiveness.

1. The search for a common narrative and for including the memory of the ethnic Other into our memory”.

The inclusiveness of ethnic memory can appear at two levels: in the national narrative (that may include one ethnic memory, but exclude others) and in the regional narrative (that may include ethnic memory perspectives, presented in the region, but be absent at the national level)

At the formal level of national education, there are special events in schools devoted to the memory of the Holocaust (round tables, discussions for the 10-11th grades). Further, several topics from Crimean Tatar history were added to the curriculum. The focus on some topics was shifted and became more differentiated, e.g. by showing not only violence between Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians in the 15th/16th centuries, but also the reasons and causes of such relations. This differentiated account can lay the base for a less violent future, according to one of the respondents.

In the Odesa region, the narrative presented to students embeds the ethnic history of Bulgarians, Greeks and Serbs into the context of Russia's imperial policy of “inviting” these nations to the Odesa region.

Thus, the students can nowadays see elements of ethnic memories in the official narrative, for example at intercultural festivals, as was mentioned in the teachers' responses.

Also, most of the teachers mentioned that they introduce elements of ethnic memory in outdoor activities for the students, in cooperation with NGOs that are specialised in memory practices, or with ethnic communities in the neighbourhood.

2. The recognition of regional history in the central national narrative

Formally, the school curriculum on history allows the integration of regional components, which was stressed by all respondents. In particular, in the end of each given topic, the teacher has one academic hour for regional reflections of this or that historical period. However, in practise, teachers in the examined regions reported about certain difficulties with the regional content in some historical periods. For example, one respondent from Odesa said that the medieval history of the region is not well presented in publications, whereas there is enough material for the period since the 18th century (the moment since these regions have been under the Russian Empire and on which Soviet historiography has produced publications). In Kherson, such difficulties (as reported by one of the respondents) are dealt with a practice of joint academia/school seminars and conferences, where university-based scholars share the results of their research with the teachers (teachers from rural areas still have limited access to such exchanges with schol-

ars, though). Other teachers seek other possibilities to include regional history into the curriculum, also linking the central narrative to its reflections in contemporary regional history. For example, when the topic of the lesson is related to a historical actor from the national narrative (e.g. Olga, the Princess, 10th century), whose name is affiliated with the city nowadays (e.g. an Olga medal awarded to a public person in the city), this teacher draws the students' attention to this representation.

However, when it comes to the representation of these regions at the national level, teachers reported that they hardly found any regional specifics in the curriculum or textbooks. For example, the Cossack period is included in the curriculum, but the Kherson region is not mentioned as a region with Cossack settlements. Thus, the Cossack narrative is related to the representation of other regions. The lack of recognition of one's own region in the official narrative was also described through the absence in national textbooks or exam materials of monuments and architecture visible in the region, which students from other regions did not know. In the view of the respondents, this produces the general impression that there were no interesting events or historical monuments in the region. However, this region should be represented as a proud frontier between two worlds, the European and the Ottoman, as was suggested by a teacher from Kherson.

When it comes to the Odesa region, the situation is slightly better. It is mainly represented in the national narrative of history education in the central topic of the Ukrainian revolution of 1919-1921, and there are mentions of two ancient settlements of the region in the curriculum, according to one of the teachers.

As for the actors of inclusiveness (i.e. those who promote a pluralist view on history), one of the teachers said that it is exactly the teacher who plays (or should play) this role, whereas others did not have any answer. Moreover, according to the observation of one of the respondents, some teachers do not make use of this regional history lesson at all, because it requires more effort and additional research from a teacher, and skills in working with controversial issues in the classroom.

3. The Interregional exchange of memory

An interregional exchange of memory is realised mainly in two ways: by visits of the students to other regions with the aim of becoming acquainted with the history and memory of the region on the ground, and by a professional exchange of teachers at interregional seminars.

The student exchange was mentioned as a positive practice both for getting to know the memories of other regions, and for rethinking one's own regional narrative. At the same time, such exchanges are possible only if financed by the parents or through NGO programmes. Both approaches depend on the teacher's ability to organise such an exchange

One of the respondents described an exchange as a means to fill a gap of under-representation of history by material artefacts in one's own region.

Seeing architecture, remains of castles or fortifications, monuments, etc. in other regions can provide information about shared historical actors or events. This experience, in the opinion of the respondent, gives a feeling of our history, which the reading of documents or texts accessible in one's own region is not able to produce.

The professional exchange was mentioned by a respondent as a very powerful measure that is nevertheless not systematically applied by the educational authorities. As a result, mainly NGOs offer such possibilities for the teachers to share their perspectives on regional history, and to relate and discuss the connections of the regional narrative with the official curriculum. Through the implementation of pedagogical practices from other regions, the teachers are able to introduce their regional narrative to other regions, and they can link a particular ethnic memory (e.g. Jewish) with examples of other ethnic memories from other regions.

Discussion

For solid conclusions about the instrumentalisation of history in Ukraine, it would be necessary to conduct an interdisciplinary analysis of the memory narratives in policy documents and the legislation, mainstream media, cinema/art production, official dates and introduced practices of commemoration, as well as the main tendencies in academia. This paper proposes three indicators for the inclusiveness of regional and ethnic memories. Other indicators could be introduced to address ethnic memory as a content or a conflict issue in the official national narratives. However, some findings can possibly provide answers to the questions: 1) is history instrumentalised in Ukraine? and 2) if yes, should this instrumentalisation be categorised as ultra-nationalistic?

In the expert part of the interviews, a variety of actors engaging in instrumentalisation were mentioned. According to them, instrumentalisation can be interpreted as a rather natural process, as a tactic that is applied by different social actors and entities to achieve different goals. It was also stated that everyone is to a certain degree able to instrumentalise history, not only political or state entities. Therefore, history is in general a subject of instrumentalisation and interpretation, in particular in Ukraine. The existence of such a variety of actors also raises the question of who has legitimate power over history and memory, and who is responsible for it. This can potentially create conflict, until there is good will and efforts are undertaken to reach an agreement in society. And, in this ideal case, history would be instrumentalised for the sake of unity and cohesion of the political nation.

If instrumentalisation is described as a tool that everyone can use and is using,

it would be a narrowing judgment that instrumentalisation is nationalistic by default. When it comes to individuals and families, who also instrumentalise history in order to create a narrative of their life or of the family traditions, nationalistic lenses can still play a role, but do not necessarily define the whole narrative.

At the same time, the experts interviewed mentioned that the official narrative is rather exclusive with regard to non-Ukrainian memory, or to the memory of those regions, where the dominant history narrative is much less Ukrainian than Russian or Soviet (or at least still based on Soviet historiography). Obviously, exclusion can lead to certain levels of prohibition, i.e. of banning a certain memory narrative in the legislation, or to the forgetting or absence of a representation. To verify these expert assumptions, I interviewed history teachers in Odesa and Kherson.

As was evident in the respondents' view, the Jewish and Crimean Tatar memory have gradually become visible in public education. However, it was noticed that other ethnic memories (Greek, Bulgarian, German, Polish, Moldovan, etc.) are not represented in the classroom, as they are not part of the curriculum. In both regions, other ethnic cultures are included in socio-cultural life rather through everyday contacts than through history. It also depends on the teacher and whether he or she adapts the official narrative to the ethnic or religious groups represented in the classroom. Still, inclusiveness or cultural sensitivity as an approach to the classroom practices is not widespread as a teacher skill or competence. For example, a textbook can portray Christian-Muslim relations in a way that would not exclude Muslim students and their perceptions. However, this does not mean that the teacher him- or herself would follow the same inclusive narrative.

Hence, there is space for inclusive narratives on ethnic memory, but whether this space is used or not depends on several factors: the teacher's character, the access to historical sources, the possibility of cooperation with other institutions, such as NGOs, the academia, museums, ethnic communities, etc.

The teachers were also asked about their strategies to deal with controversial or conflicting interpretations in history education. We discovered that the differences between teachers in their regional narratives or the divergence of the teacher's own narrative and official history (for example, Soviet vs. Ukrainian) were not seen as a problem or controversy. Mostly, the respondents perceived the absence of such regional stories and actors in the national narrative, which would create a feeling of positive involvement of regional memory into the central national one, as a conflict. The main concern for the respondents is about what is worthy of being presented during the lessons and what is not, based mainly on the wish to see more elements of history they are or would like to be proud of. This concern also reflects the fatigue of some teachers of always teaching a national narrative based on tragedy, misery and victimisation.

This provides the basis for concluding that any decision by a certain actor (state, local authorities, teacher or NGO) about what should be included (to textbooks,

street names, class or outdoor activities, public events, etc.) makes him or her become an agent of memory policy who instrumentalises history “for good or for bad”. In the Ukrainian context, this means that a teacher is also involved in the instrumentalisation of history, by deciding about which regional or ethnic memory to include in the class, by his or her emotional reaction – pride, feeling of unity, and by his or her interest in diversity and in complex historical processes or individuals in a given historical moment. Then, the key question is: what kind of a historical narrative is adopted by this or that memory policy? Central, regional or ethnic? Is the described society democratic, pluralistic and liberal, or is memory used to create another kind of unity in need of legitimisation, self-confidence and self-esteem? And, do all the difficulties and events and personalities fit well enough into such a vision of society that is described by the word *we*? Then the question of memory policy is who is able to influence it or have his/her part in the decision-making process on different levels of society and in different regions of Ukraine. And can such a complex and plural historical narrative describe the desired common identity of a political nation? Then the question of memory policy is about defining the actors that construct this narrative on both regional and national levels of Ukraine.

A few more conclusions can be added:

1. In its post-imperial attempt to reconstruct itself as a nation-state that is independent from Russia, the official Ukrainian approaches to memory should involve both regional and ethnic memories in a way that would create a unity of Ukrainian political identity based on a plurality of memories. In history education, certain steps towards this inclusive approach are undertaken, but they do not yet include ethnic or regional memory in an equal way. Also, if this movement for inclusion does not spread to commemoration and other spheres of ethnic and regional memory, it can lead to competition between the Ukrainian state narrative and local or regional ones, which in turn can be used for political purposes.

2. A complex and (to a realistic extent) comprehensive memory policy should also involve work on regional memory, although this must happen in a very balanced way. Working on the inclusiveness of memory in its cultural, communicative, visual forms, and on the involvement of diverse population groups in the discussion of controversial topics, events and figures would serve as a preventive mechanism. Otherwise, one (Soviet) narrative will simply be substituted by another one (ethnic Ukrainian narrative), or a variety of narratives will lead to a kind of eclectic segregated existence that exist parallel to each other.

3. The construction of a national narrative, where every ethnic or regional group could recognise its memory as a part of the common narrative of the political nation would promote democratic values in memory policy, as an alternative to a narrative that is competitive and creates exclusion. This construction of a common narrative is seen as a product of various joint efforts between stakeholders and actors.

About the author

Iryna Brunova-Kalishetska holds a PhD in Psychology. Thesis title “Psychological self-efficacy as a factor of cross-cultural adaptation”.

In the last 5 years, Iryna has taken part in the “Berlin seminar: truth, justice and remembrance” of the Robert Bosch Stiftung and other conferences and forums on memory conflicts in Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland.

Since 2000, she has been involved in conflict and peace studies projects as a researcher, trainer, dialogue facilitator, author of manuals with a focus on identity-based conflicts. Iryna has been involved as an expert, trainer, and facilitator of various projects related to dealing with memory conflicts. From 2012 till present, she has been an expert and dialogue facilitator in historical dialogues of the project “Ukrainian action: Healing the past” of the Foundations for Freedom; in 2016, she facilitated a working group on the memory policy elaboration within the project Ukrainian Peacebuilding School, etc.