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Playing Close to the Edge: An Analysis of Ukrainian Border Children's Responses to the Revolution of Dignity

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Abstract

Whilst socio-political events often have great implications for a country and its citizenry, it remains unclear if children are impacted by such happenings. Though surveys and interviews are typically used to measure responses to significant social and political developments, these methods—as well as academic studies more generally—often fail to include individuals under the age of eighteen. Also overlooked are the reactions of young people not living in the direct vicinity of the events, particularly those located considerable distances away and geographically on the peripheries of a country. To uncover the perspectives of this typically overlooked young cohort, the article draws on the perspectives of Ukrainian children in three of Ukraine's exterior regions—Zakarpattia, Volyn, and Chernihiv—following the Revolution of Dignity of 2013-14. The analysis reveals that Ukrainian border children are more than actively engaged with the social and political environment of their home country; they understand themselves to be part of the larger national collective. While this paper attempts to push beyond traditional approaches to citizenries' responses to socio-political events, the central argument is that children are actively engaged with both the socio-political milieu within which they find themselves and the nation they identify with.

Keywords: children; political events; affectiveness; Ukraine; Revolution of Dignity

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*«Не дивіться на Україну, як на землю своїх батьків.
Дивіться на неї, як на землю своїх дітей.
І тоді придуть зміни...»
-Святослав Вакарчук*

*“Do not see Ukraine as the land of your parents.
Look at it as the land of your children.
And then change will come...”
-Svyatoslav Vakarchuk (translation by Danya Pidlisetska, 2018)*

Does age determine whether one is affected by a socio-political event? Are young people's lives impacted even when they live across the country from, and are not actively engaged with, political processes or even an event itself? While these questions are critical for fully uncovering the impacts of socio-political events on a citizenry, the literature on children's responses to such happenings is remarkably limited. Related studies have focused on the ways that children's geographical knowledge, socialization, and educational experiences contribute to the development of certain attitudes, behavioral issues, and perceptions of difference/otherness, yet few have analyzed children within precocious social or political environments (see, for example, Barrett, 2005; Blank, 2003; Carrington and Short, 1995; Davis, 1999; Dekker et al., 2003; Drabick et al., 2006; Eaton, 2002; Hart, 2002; Hengst, 1997; Howard and Gill, 2001; Leonard, 2011; Nugent, 1995; Piquart and Silbereisen, 2004; Scourfield et al., 2006; Wells and Stryker, 1988). David Sears and Nicholas Valentino's 1997 piece offers chief insight by demonstrating that politics and political events do matter for preadult socialization in generating predispositions that persist later in life (see also Trew, 2004), but their findings, as well as the majority of the prior work conducted on children's responses and reactions to socio-political events, are framed primarily around children's long-term cognitive and psychological impacts, rather than on the immediate effects.

As such, this paper seeks to uncover if (and how) children absorb, and respond to, socio-political events, and the ways such reactions are manifested. To do so, the project draws on 45 essays and poems written by children in three of Ukraine's *області* (regions)—Zakarpattia, Volyn,

and Chernihiv—during the Revolution of Dignity of 2013-14. As a series of demonstrations that led to great civil unrest, the Revolution of Dignity is frequently cited as a catalyst for great changes in Ukraine today, including a new wave of Ukrainian nationalism, amplified pro-European and pro-democratic sentiments, and an increased desire to be distinct from Russia (see Kravchenko, 2016; Kulyk, 2014; 2016; Kuzio, 2000; 2001; 2002; 2015a; 2015b; Onuch, 2014a; 2014b; 2016; Onuch and Sasse, 2016; Shekhovtsov, 2013). Whilst this paper looks at the responses of children as a distinct cohort not typically cited in discussions about politics, the focus on children in border regions adds another dimension; these individuals are not only legally separated from politics because of their age, but were physically removed from the Revolution of Dignity in living significant distances away.

Literature Review

The ways children understand, and are affected by, social and political happenings are greatly understudied. One reason for this is that children are not considered to be full citizens with voting rights, and thus, empirical analyses measuring the responses of a citizenry to significant socio-political developments and change often exclude this young cohort. In addition, surveys and interviews are typically used to study public opinions, but such methods encounter ethical challenges when accessing, and interacting directly with, individuals under age eighteen (Beazley et al., 2009; Morrow and Richards, 1996). As children have a limited understanding of politics and geography, most studies have also avoided this age group with the assumption that the impacts of politics are miniscule, or less important, than those of adults. Studies that do involve children in analyses of political events have also often framed children as incomplete “adults in the making rather than children in the state of being” (Brannen and O’Brien, 1995, as cited in Sharma, 2014: 11), wherein a perceived binary is formed between ‘the child’—a term both essentialist and lacking in agency and rights—and ‘the [powerful] adult’ (Beazley et al., 2009; Heywood, 2018). It is because of this fabricated ontological divide, created *by* and *for* adults, that studies on children and political

phenomena have often emphasized children as human *becomings* without agency to articulate their own experiences (James and Prout, 1997) rather than as human *beings* worthy of study in their own right (Heywood, 2018; Sharma, 2014).

Although there are few fruitful analyses on young people's reactions and responses to politics due to their assumed lack of agency and frequent existential suspension below citizenship, previous works suggest that socio-economic and political contexts greatly affect young people. In particular, studies have shown that political unrest, economic conditions, and authoritarian regimes can cause psycho-semantic problems, subjective anomie, and decreases in support for one's nation (Blank, 2003). Henk Dekker, Darina Malova, and Sander Hoogendoorn (2003) further purport that charismatic leaders, successful development, and rising geopolitical prestige can strengthen young peoples' national identities and opinions of their country, whereas the opposite is believed true when they feel their basic needs are not met (see also Davis, 1999; Wells and Stryker, 1988). Eugene Tartakovsky's 2011 article also asserts that socio-economic and political events greatly affect young people, but that the effects of such environments can be considerably complex, as they usually bring about both positive and negative psychological responses. The example he cites is the collapse of the Soviet Union, which brought greater individual freedom and the development of a market economy, but also economic hardships, corruption, and increased crime (see also Piquart and Silbereisen, 2004). Related studies have also suggested that geography, socialization, migration, political contests, and education greatly impact children, specifically in the development of certain attitudes, behavioral issues, and perceptions of difference/otherness (see, for example, Barrett, 2005; Blank, 2003; Carrington and Short, 1995; Davis, 1999; Dekker et al., 2003; Drabick et al., 2006; Eaton, 2002; Hart, 2002; Hengst, 1997; Howard and Gill, 2001; Leonard, 2011; Nugent, 1995; Piquart and Silbereisen, 2004; Scourfield et al., 2006; Sears and Valentino, 1997; Tartakovsky, 2009; 2011; Trew, 2004; Wells and Stryker, 1988). Whilst these studies offer important insights into children's

responses and reactions to socio-political events, the majority are framed primarily around children's long-term cognitive and psychological impacts, rather than the short-term and immediate reactions.

Particularly striking, too, are the number of studies (or lack thereof) involving children from less developed and non-Western countries. The experiences of children in Asia and Africa in particular have been documented considerably less frequently than those in North America and Western Europe (Beazley et al., 2009).² In Europe alone, those living in the former Soviet Union and even more specifically, Ukraine, have also been greatly under-researched. For many years, the main source of empirical data in the former USSR was the International Social Survey (ISSP), a study conducted among adults in 33 countries in 1995-96 and 2003-04. While several scholars have sought to further the literature on youth's involvement in politics and political mobilizations (see, for example, Diuk, 2013; Fournier, 2012; 2015; 2018; Krawatzek, 2017; Nikolayenko, 2011; Onuch, 2014b; Tartakovsky, 2011; Topalova, 2006), the surveys utilized in such studies have regularly failed to consider those under 'high school' age. Also unobserved are the ways these socio-political events are manifested in the young people's lives, aside from their political ideologies and likeliness for further civic engagement (Sears and Valentino, 1997; Trew, 2004). In a somewhat related work, Viktor Burlaka (2016) suggested that micro-level factors, such as parenting, socio-economic status, family dynamics, and socialization with those in one's immediate surroundings, significantly influence the developmental aspects of Ukrainian children's behaviors and lives more generally (see also Drabick et al., 2006). He later proposed, along with Yi Jin Kim, Jandel Crutchfield, Teresa Lefmann, and Emma Kay (2017), that exo- and macro- system factors, like emotional processes in society and socio-economic variables, greatly affect Ukrainian children's learning and cognitive

² Beazley et al. (2009) and Morrow and Richards (1996) suggest that while this is because of children's perceived lack of agency and rights, it is also due to the fact that scholars in the Global South have limited access to, and knowledge of, children's literature. Some researchers in non-native English-speaking countries also find it difficult to raise their concerns in English peer-reviewed journals due to their limited language skills, which then perpetuates the underrepresentation of these voices. Scholars from the Global North face other academic limitations when conducting research with children in other parts of the world, including language barriers, accessibility, and ethics board approvals, as parental consent cannot always be obtained.

development which, in turn, shapes their worldviews and interactions with others. Though providing a useful starting point, these previous works do not consider socio-political events as impacting children's lives, but focus instead on the systemic factors.

In largely concentrating on children living in major cities, which are undoubtedly the easiest to access, previous analyses on children's relations with political happenings, especially those in Ukraine, have also frequently excluded those living less centrally, such as on the peripheries of a state. As a person's identity and worldview are very much shaped by the physical place where they reside (see Delaney, 2005; Gottmann, 1973; Migdal, 2004; Sack, 1986; Standsbjer, 2010), individuals living near states' territorial boundaries are undoubtedly unique from those of non-peripheral communities, particularly because they are exposed to new (and more) networks and systems of interaction created by the formal and legal distinctions between polities (Baud and Van Schendel, 1997; Mudimbe, 1988; Paasi, 1998; Peisakhin, Forthcoming). Since cross-border interactions have increased with greater border permeability in recent years, in terms of both human mobility and cultural transferability (Wilson and Donnan, 1998), it is somewhat surprising that studies on borderlanders have not subsequently increased and that these individuals, especially those under the age of eighteen, remain understudied. Whilst it is important to recognize how individuals living near a country's political core respond to socio-political happenings near them, their reactions are expected and, in some ways, even predictable. It is thus interesting, and perhaps even more valuable, to understand if (and how) these same events impact the people living nearer to the states neighboring.

Methodology

This study is based on an analysis of 45 short essays and poems written by young people between the ages of nine and seventeen in three of Ukraine's regions: Zakarpattia, Volyn, and Chernihiv (see Figure 1). As Ukraine is neighbored by seven states (Russia, Belarus, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Moldova), the specific regions have been strategically selected for

analyses because they each border at least two different states, and are unique from each other culturally and economically (Sasse, 2010).³ The position beside the borders also allows for more direct exchanges of people, goods, and ideas with other states than is possible in a more central area or in Ukraine's ten regions that only border one state. Using these cases also moves the analysis away from the regions typically employed for studies of Ukrainian politics; namely, Lviv, Kyiv, Donetsk, Luhansk, and Odessa. In addition, Zakarpattia, Volyn, and Chernihiv do not house the capital city, Kyiv, where the primary protests and violence of the Revolution of Dignity took place, and are actually closer in proximity to the countries they neighbor than they are to Kyiv (an exception here are those living in some parts of Chernihiv). As the people living in the regions under analysis are considerable distances away from Kyiv's *Maidan* (Independence Square), the children surveyed in this study were physically removed from the events of 2013-14.

The essays and poems used in this project were submitted during an international literary and artistic competition in Ukraine in 2014. The initiative, called '*Життя – Тобі* (Your Life),' was a collaborative project between the International Institute for Education, Culture, and Connections with the Diaspora (MIOK) at the Lviv Polytechnic National University and the Norwegian-Ukrainian non-governmental organization, Maidan Norway. The children were instructed to creatively depict their lives through any media of choice, which resulted in the submission of more than 7000 works from approximately 1500 participants (under eighteen years of age) from all 24 regions of Ukraine, Crimea, and diasporic communities in Poland, Greece, France, Spain, Portugal, and Norway. While videos, audio, paintings, and other artistic works were among the pieces submitted, only short essays and poems are used in this analysis. Consent to use the texts was granted through participant waivers signed by the children when submitting their works to MIOK

³ Chernivtsi or Odessa would also offer interesting cases for analysis as they border Romania and Moldova; however, the author opted for a more in-depth analysis of fewer cases and attempted to include regions other than only those in Western Ukraine.

and through the author's correspondences with MIOK. To ensure the most accurate illustration and interpretation of the original works as possible, including subtle nuances that might not be understood in English, two translators were hired: Danya Pidlisetska and Roman Slobodyan, who are both Ukrainian citizens and fluent in Russian, Ukrainian, and English.

Figure 1. Map of Ukraine (Purple) with Selected Regions (Yellow) and Bordering Countries⁴



Map created by the author.

For a representative sample of the total works submitted, fifteen pieces from each region were selected. To conceal the identities of the children, their names and genders have been removed from the discussion; ‘Author’ is used in place of the child’s name and ‘they’ is used as a place-filler for ‘he/she.’ Although the works already represent a random sample of genders, ages, levels of education, schools, regions, and geographic locations within the selected regions (including different cities, towns, and both urban and rural locales), the pieces under study were randomly chosen from the region-specific files distributed to the author from MIOK. Unfortunately, the children’s ethnicities cannot be determined from the participant registration forms, nor can they be discerned

⁴ The author recognizes that Crimea is currently under Russian occupation; however, an updated QGIS shape file was not available at the time of writing.

from Ukraine’s census data as the most recent census was conducted in 2001.⁵ There is also no way to guarantee the children’s works were written entirely independent of their parents and teachers, however, there were no financial incentives involved, as the winning prize was publication in the final book project and on MIOK’s website. The instructions also clearly outlined that the competition was for school-age individuals only, and the registration waiver required the submitting participants’ birthdates to ensure they were under the age of eighteen. If a parent or teacher did assist the authors in any way, this only reiterates that children are incredibly sensitive to, and influenced by, the ideas and attitudes of their parents and the other adults they socialize with (Barrett and Davis, 2008; Barrett et al., 2004; Burlaka, 2016; Burlaka et al., 2017; Cheung and Li, 2011; Habashi, 2008; Moinian, 2009; Sears and Valentino, 1997; Trew, 2004).

Analysis

Zakarpattia

In line with the findings of previous studies, children in Zakarpattia demonstrated that politics do matter and, in fact, very much influence preadult experiences and worldviews. While only one author explicitly mentioned the Revolution of Dignity in their piece (Author Z3), and another used the more colloquial name ‘Euromaidan’ (Author Z9), the majority of the children in some way alluded to the movement’s underlying message and aims. Many made mention of the desire (both theirs and the protesters’) for increased European integration (Authors Z6, Z9, Z13, Z14), declared aspirations for “justice” from the government (Author Z6), and emphasized that “Ukraine is European Union too” (Author Z14). Despite not being physically present during the demonstrations, several authors described scenes from the *Maidan*, including the “[a]gitation in the crowd” (Author Z1) as thousands of people stood out in the cold with smiles on their faces “creating a solid symbolic front” (Author Z9). This idea of unity among diverse peoples was

⁵ For more information, see: <http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/eng/>.

prevalent in many texts, as was suggested with the term ‘our’ in the statement, “I see our own children in battle [a]s they lose their lives on *Maidan*” (Author Z10), as well as in the assertion that Ukrainians will “fight for our Ukraine everywhere with love” (Author Z5). ‘We’ was another word used to denote collectiveness among Ukrainians: “[w]e want to pave our children’s way [a]nd banish war and sorrow” (Author Z1) and “[w]e believe in a bright future” (Author Z12). The use of these words to describe the protests and other Ukrainians very much suggests they saw themselves as present on the *Maidan*, or equivalent to those who were, even while across the country in Zakarpattia.

Ukraine’s independence was hence a trope that wove through many texts. Several children reminded that many years have passed since Ukraine became “a united and indivisible, independent and sovereign state” (Author Z6), yet the country is not flourishing but “withering...[and] being destroyed” (Author Z13, but similar sentiments were expressed by Authors Z11, Z12, Z14). These expressions are very closely related to the theme of conflict, which arose in every text from Zakarpattia in some form. Several children made subtle references to war, including statements that “[m]y brother is a soldier” (Author Z2, but also Author Z8, Z9, Z10, Z13) and “[he] stood for the independence of Ukraine, [h]e lost his own life in the fight” (Author Z11). In comparison, other authors very blatantly and explicitly illustrated the violence and “bloody events” (Author Z12, see also Z3) that erupted on Independence Square following November 21, 2014 through their descriptions of the “fire, cobblestones, and slamming guns” (Author Z1, also Z8, Z11), “the enemy bullets” hitting innocent protesters (Author Z5), and the “Molotov cocktails” and “armed Berkut division attacking unarmed civilians” (Author Z14). Some children even overtly illustrated the war in Eastern Ukraine: “our soldiers are fighting back. Artillery fires everywhere. Everything is covered in smoke. People are screaming, there are many wounded, death is lurking everywhere” (Author Z9). Further images of war include Author Z13’s depiction of the “nightmare,” where there are “gun

shots, explosions, destruction everywhere,... projectiles, and destroyed military equipment” (Author Z6), as well as “the destruction of countless homes,... attacks on Ukrainian defenders,... [and] the wounding and killings of military men and civilians” (Author Z13). Here, the authors have more than discussed their desire for Ukraine’s independence, but suggested that images and stories of violent conflict consume their everyday lives.

It is, therefore, not surprising that narratives of conflict, and the Revolution of Dignity more generally, influenced how young people in Zakarpattia described a ‘Ukrainian.’ Frequent references were made to someone who is brave (Authors Z7, Z8, Z9, Z12, Z13); protects their country (Authors Z2, Z8, Z11, Z14); and is “hard-working, strong, and determined” (Author Z9, as well as Authors Z2, Z3, Z6, Z10, Z11, Z12, Z13). “Kind” (Authors Z6, Z7, Z10) and “hospitable” (Authors Z9, Z14) were other words used frequently to describe Ukrainian people, and a strong emphasis was also placed on the fact that “Ukrainian people have always lived honest. They gave up their lives for freedom and honor” (Author Z3, also Author Z12). Interestingly, history was used often to make sense of modern-day events. One child asserted that Ukrainians are capable of making history, as there are “countless examples in history books” of them overcoming any obstacle necessary to better their lives and the lives of their loved ones (Author Z13, also Author Z9). Other young people similarly referenced the past through their mentions of Ukraine’s national icons, such as the fearless Cossacks defending the Ukrainian people (Authors Z9, Z12, Z14) and famous Ukrainian authors, like Taras Shevchenko and Ivan Franko, whose works conveyed desires for peace and the protection of Ukraine (Authors Z1, Z13). Some youth explicitly drew the similarities between these historic individuals to those of modern Ukrainians: “the Cossacks fought for independence [in the olden days], and today—it is all Ukrainians” (Author Z12, also Author Z9). Others did not create such a stark ontological divide between the historic and the modern; particularly striking examples include Author Z9’s claim that Ukrainians are “of Cossack descent

after all” and Author Z1’s assertion that, “I have faith in my great nation, [t]he people of Shevchenko and Franko.” One author even referred to the deaths of the *Небесна сотня* (Heavenly Hundred) during the Revolution of Dignity as new national heroes, who courageously protected Ukraine and will always be remembered (Author Z5, see also Authors Z1, Z3, Z9, Z10, Z13, Z14).⁶ As is evident in these statements, the children in Zakarpattia see the *Maidan* protesters, the soldiers in Eastern Ukraine, and even themselves as continuing the legacy of, and thus embodying the same characteristics as, these national heroes.

Also noteworthy is the fact that many children in this region referenced concrete and tangible aspects of the Ukrainian nation when writing about their lives. Particular examples include national symbols, such as their own support for the Ukrainian flag (Author Z14) and love for the Ukrainian anthem (Authors Z9, Z13, Z14), as well as mentions of Ukraine’s flag colors, blue and yellow (Authors Z9, Z14). Although these mentions were not always connected to the events on the *Maidan*, many children still connected similar symbols to the events in 2014; for instance, Author Z9 emphasized that a new “blue and yellow nation” arose from the Revolution of Dignity. As this author further explained, the fact that the Ukrainian nation continues in spite of the attacks during the Revolution demonstrates the truth in the anthem’s words, “the glory and the freedom of Ukraine has not yet perished.” Such a statement suggests that children in Zakarpattia are engaging with, and transforming, the dominant Ukrainian myths and national discourses in ways that make sense to them in light of the current events (Leonard, 2011). Through this cognitive process of semiotics, or meaning-making, the children are simultaneously trying to understand what makes someone ‘Ukrainian’ as much as they are trying to place, and make sense of, themselves within the dynamic socio-political environment and conflict brought about by the Revolution of Dignity.

⁶ The ‘Heavenly Hundred’ is the colloquial name for the first one hundred people killed on the *Maidan* during the Revolution of Dignity by the Berkut (Ukrainian Special Forces) and government snipers.

Volyn

The sentiments and expressions found within the Volyn children's texts very much resemble those from Zakarpattia. Explicit references to the Revolution of Dignity and Euromaidan were again made; however, more in Volyn than Zakarpattia with four and one mention, respectively (Authors V1, V6 V14, and V10). The authors also conveyed the same pro-European sentiments found in the texts from Zakarpattia, such as "Ukraine is Europe" (Author V10), and a desire for Ukraine to be a "recognized European country" with a "developed economy" and "perfect legislation standing at the guard of its people's rights and freedom" (Author V9). Overt descriptions of the violence and conflict on Independence Square also emerged in the Volyn texts, including Author V1's assertion that "[w]ithout a warning, snipers opened fire. They started shooting at innocent unprotected people who were part of a peaceful protest," as well as Author V10's illustration: "[t]he bullet went through and drew the cross he wore around his neck into the deadly wound" (similar sentiments were expressed by Authors V6, V7, V9). The authors in this region also similarly placed themselves on the *Maidan* and amongst those protesting in 2013-14. For example, Author V6 described the center of Kyiv in the height of the protests: "[m]ore dead were just brought back from Instytutska Street. Bodies of many covered in blood and wounds. Even the earth looks crimson red, painted with blood. A dense dark wall of smoke is covering the skies, beams of sunlight barely making it though. Everything around reminds of hell." A similar account was found in Author V1's piece through the statement, "[t]hose crimson rivers of blood, no longer paint the streets, but will forever remain fresh in our hearts and our memories."

Notably, significantly more children in Volyn than Zakarpattia described the battlefield in Eastern Ukraine. Most of these references resembled the scene in Author V11's essay: "[f]ragments went flying everywhere. Several fighters were forced to move in the trenches. The moaning of those wounded was drowning in the roaring of the cannons" (see also Authors V1, V2, V3, V5, V6, V10, V14, V15). Although similar illustrations of war arose frequently, the children in this region

expressed mixed sentiments about the conflict. Some authors, such as Authors V1 and V12, depicted the sadness and pain associated with war: “the numbers of those killed and ruined cities will forever be carved into my memory. In my soul, I will always hear mourning mothers crying, I will forever feel the pain of unhealed wounds” and “she touched each of the five bullet holes that took away that which she cherished most. This one went into his heart. This one, this burglar, stole her hope” (see also Authors V3, V4, V6, V7, V8). In contrast, other Volyn authors were supportive of the war and determined to “overcome the enemy” (Author V5, but also V2, V3, V4, V6, V7, V11, V12, V13, V14).⁷ This was demonstrated by the following lines: “war has united us all and made us stronger, certain of our victory” (Author V15), “we are not going to retreat” (Author V14), and “I will not repent before you, Muscovites, nor will I let you take Ukraine!” (Author V11). As is exemplified by the above statements, the children have simultaneously internalized feelings of loss associated with war and strengthened their attachment to their country in cognitively understanding its value in response to the Revolution of Dignity and subsequent conflict (Burlaka et al., 2016; Sears and Valentino, 1997).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the Volyn authors frequently referenced Ukrainian symbols and historic figures when describing the conflict, and even more frequently and explicitly than in Zakarpattia. Seven references were made to the Ukrainian flag (Authors V6, V9, V11, V12, V15), including a statement that the Ukrainian flag is one’s “most valued possession” (Author V6), and four authors mentioned the colors blue and yellow (Authors V1, V11, V12, V15). Similar to Zakarpattia, national historical figures were referenced, such as Taras Shevchenko (Authors V6, V13) and Lesia Ukrainka (Author V2), albeit significantly less often than in Zakarpattia. In contrast, the Volyn children placed considerably more emphasis on the role of Cossacks: Authors V9 and

⁷ The ‘enemy’ was not always the same person/thing in the texts, but included Muscovites, Viktor Yanukovich’s (previous) government, the Berkut, and any others who injured and/or killed protesters during the Revolution of Dignity.

V11 repeatedly mentioned the “noble” Cossacks who were willing to sacrifice their lives for their nation, and Author V3 explained that it is only those who remember the glorious days of their Cossack ancestors whom are, in their hearts, “true Ukrainians.” The link between past national heroes and the present-day socio-political milieu was also overtly present in the Volyn texts through the assertion that the Cossacks have become a modern symbol of “invincibility, willpower, and loyalty to the homeland” (Author V1). A similar connection between the past and present was found with references to the national anthem. While one youth acknowledged the significant truth in the anthem’s words, “Ukraine has not yet died, neither her glory, nor her freedom” (Author V9, see also Author V1), another developed this link by noting that the true heroes referenced in the anthem—those who laid their souls and bodies down for Ukraine—are the Heavenly Hundred and ATO soldiers (Authors V6, V10). In addition to this reference, the ‘Heavenly Hundred,’ as both a collective of people and a symbol of the nation’s past, was a trope used frequently; ten mentions were made in seven of the fifteen texts. While these references centered primarily on discussions of the anthem, some authors declared that the Heavenly Hundred will be remembered forever because they were “innocent people who gave up their lives for our freedom and independence” (Author V1). Author V13 offered a related message in connecting the Heavenly Hundred to the future of Ukraine: “[n]o one will ever again bring it to its knees: this new country is built on the bones of the Heavenly Hundred!” As this statement suggests, the children are reflecting on the role of icons in their nation’s history, both from the distant and not-so-distant past, and finding ways to reproduce them in the modern day (Barrett et al., 2004; Cheung and Li, 2011; French, 2012; Habashi, 2008; Moinian, 2009; Nora, 1989).

It is seemingly logical and almost expected, then, that this young cohort would use references to, and/or the same characteristics as, the Heavenly Hundred when describing a ‘Ukrainian.’ Examples include Author V6’s claim that a Ukrainian is someone who expresses

“determination, courage, and devotion” (similar sentiments were expressed by Authors V1, V4, V11, V12, V13, V14), as well as someone who is sincere, “honest, hardworking, and cheerful” (Author V14, see also V2, V7, V9, V11). Also unsurprising is the fact that ‘hero’ was used frequently (23 times) to depict both the Heavenly Hundred and a ‘Ukrainian.’ As one child stated: “[n]ot everyone out there is ready to sacrifice themselves for others to have a chance at life. So few are capable of such a deed—only heroes” (Author V1). Another author explained that their father was “a hero, one of the Heavenly Hundred, and a father like that deserved a brave [child]” (Author V13). Quite notably, this child, like those from Zakarpattia, were not the only ones to suggest that Ukrainians are ‘brave.’ Authors V2, V4, V6, V9, V10, and V14 did so as well. While the use of the same term suggests that the children understand ‘Ukrainian’ in the same way, the repeated context within which the term is being used also implies they are using it intentionally to define who they are, and who they must be, in order to follow in the footsteps of the nation’s ‘heroic’ protagonists. In this way, the Volyn texts hint at how understandings of the Ukrainian nation are adapting, and changing in response to, the country’s socio-political context.

Chernihiv

Similar to Zakarpattia and Volyn, the sentiments expressed by the Chernihiv children in their writing were in response to the Revolution of Dignity. For instance, the words ‘Europe’ or ‘European’ arose 27 times in the fifteen texts in the contexts of ‘European values,’ ‘European future,’ and ‘European country’ (see Authors C1, C5, C12, C14). While only one author directly cited the Revolution of Dignity (Author C14), and none referenced the Euromaidan, scenes from the protests were prominent in the Chernihiv texts through depictions of how “[p]roactive young people, students took to the streets of the capital to show their disapproval of Ukraine’s chosen course” and “to protest against disorder and injustice taking over the country” (Authors C14 and C5). The violence that occurred on the *Maidan* was also clearly portrayed in descriptions of the

“overflowing flames of countless Molotov cocktails” (Author C6), the ways “the government started reacting with daring, frank cruelty, resulting in activists being arrested, kidnapped, tortured, [and] their cars burnt” (Author C14), and the determination of the protesters, who “straightened out their blistered backs” only to be “slaughtered by the socage” (Author C8). Similar scenes to those drawn in Zakarpattia and Volyn were also used to paint the conflict in Eastern Ukraine: “[a] few men on the front line stood strong, defending their positions and fighting the enemy as best as they could. I glanced over and saw Vas’ko—unconscious on the ground, receiving heavy blows from the attackers. They kicked his pale and bloody face, the agile ones would swing their batons, chasing and hunting down unarmed activists, like animals” (Author C6, see also Authors C10, C11, C14). As was displayed in this statement, many Chernihiv authors, like those of the other regions, geo-cognitively placed themselves on the *Maidan* and on the frontlines in Eastern Ukraine. It should be noted that not all children participated in this ontological exercise; for instance, Author C5 stated, “[I] was always thinking about the East—about the people living there, about the gunshots, about the death.” Yet, the fact that the authors who did not geo-cognitively place themselves in the midst of the conflict still greatly emphasized the *Maidan* and Eastern Ukraine in their writing, as seen with Author C5, suggests that these physical places, and the events that occurred there, have very much impacted the children’s daily lives.

While the desire to defend, and fight for, Ukraine again arose as a prominent theme in Chernihiv, it took a new form. Whereas children in Zakarpattia and Volyn used the Cossacks or Heavenly Hundred as tropes for the nation’s heroes and defenders, those in Chernihiv placed more emphasis on birds, and specifically the falcon, which is believed to symbolize strength, maturity, and bravery (see Author C3).⁸ As Author C14 noted in their text, falcons are “birds who strive for

⁸ Insight provided in discussions with Danya Pidlisetska and Veronika Tkachuk.

freedom” by “defending” their territory and “battling the enemy.”⁹ This author interchangeably used ‘falcon,’ ‘Cossack,’ and ‘hero’ throughout their text, thus suggesting the terms are synonymous and representative of someone who is “brave,” a “gifter of hope,” and “forever an eternal symbol” of those who sacrificed their lives during the Revolution of Dignity. Author C13 expressed a similar sentiment in their symbolic use of ‘falcons’ as a placeholder for ‘soldiers:’ “[c]ome back alive, our dearest falcons, [y]our mothers wait for you at home.”¹⁰ To connect the falcons to the present-day socio-political milieu, and specifically, the individuals who went to fight for Ukraine, the child prefaced the above sentence with a prayer, asking that the earth no longer weep in sorrow or mourn its “devoted sons.” Through this expression of sadness and loss, Author C13 suggested that the earth is fundamentally more than a mere physical entity, but the ‘parent’—and specifically the ‘mother’—of the “lost honorable sons” who perished during the Revolution of Dignity (Author C14). Though not as overt as this example, the personification of land was found in the works of children from all three regions often through the use of terms like ‘Motherland’ and ‘Fatherland’ (see Authors C2, C6, C10, C14, V1, V10, V11, V12, V14, Z2, Z3, Z6, Z14, Z15). Placing a similar importance on land as their parent(s) implies Ukrainian children are replicating and generalizing their feelings toward the individuals in their immediate social environment, specifically their family, to their larger country and nation (Barrett and Davis, 2008; Rapoport, 2009; Tartakovsky, 2011).

While references to family members and the anguish they experienced as a result of war were common in the works from all regions, such citations occurred more frequently and explicitly in Chernihiv. Descriptions of the authors’ mothers crying and waiting for their sons to return from war—symbolized as either the ground or a human figure—emerged often through assertions that

⁹ While Author C14 did not explicitly explain who/what is “the enemy,” the context of the piece very much implies they are referring to Viktor Yanukovich’s (previous) government, the Berkut, and any others who injured and/or killed protesters during the Revolution of Dignity.

¹⁰ The anguish of mothers waiting for their sons to return from war and/or learning of their losses was also articulated in the pieces by Authors C7, C10, and C14. Author C4’s sentiments were directly related, but depicted the sadness experienced by a child when waiting for their father to return from war.

their mother's eyes had been "filled with sadness ever since the *Maidan*" (Author C5, see also Authors C8, C9), and descriptions of exhausted mothers' hearts "pulled to pieces" after learning about the loss of their sons (Author C7, see also Authors C4, C13). In outlining the emotional hardships associated with the Revolution of Dignity and the subsequent war, the Chernihiv texts revealed that the children recognize the desire of many individuals to sacrifice themselves for Ukraine. Although this was implicit in the number of mentions of family members going off to war, it was also explicitly suggested in references to previous generations. Specifically, grandfathers and great-grandfathers were cited as individuals who had "loved and saved" the Ukrainian nation (Author C12, see also C2, C10). Though these mentions were used both literally to describe one's personal ancestors and figuratively to represent earlier members of the nation, such individuals were named repeatedly for their "victory," "courage," and "freedom spirit[s]" (see Authors C2, C4, C6, C8, C10, C12, C13). The same descriptors were also used when referencing other Ukrainian historic figures like Shevchenko, Franko, and Ukrainka. While young people in this region made significantly fewer references to these individuals than the children in Zakarpattia and Volyn, the Chernihiv authors still depicted the courage and desire of these heroes in believing in a better future for Ukraine; for example, Author C1 asserted that Shevchenko's words, "[f]ight and you will win," will guide Ukrainians toward the ultimate victory of independence, democracy, a high standard of life, and happiness (see also C2, C3, C13, C14). Interestingly, one author even connected these famous individuals to their family by stating, "we, grandchildren of Shevchenko" (Author C13). Evident, here, is that the intergenerational transmission of myths, about the nation and one's own family members, has allowed such narratives to gain new life in the contemporary context of the Revolution of Dignity.

Perhaps unsurprising, then, similar adjectives were employed in descriptions of contemporary Ukrainians as individuals who are "brave, [and] dedicated" (Author C14, but similar

sentiments were expressed by Authors C1, C2, C3, C6, C8, C10). Just as in Zakarpattia and Volyn, the ways the children described a ‘Ukrainian’ in Chernihiv was very much influenced by their family members, specifically their parents and grandparents, and the attitudinal loyalties they feel towards these people (Barrett and Davis, 2008; Cheung and Li, 2011; Habashi, 2008; Moinian, 2009). The Chernihiv texts, like those of the other regions, included several mentions of the Ukrainian nation’s tangible and material markers, such as the flag (Authors C2, C6, C12) and the colors blue and yellow (Authors C2, C5, C6, C12), with six references of each. Whilst mentioning the national anthem, the children in Chernihiv placed significantly less emphasis on it than in the other regions. In fact, only one author in Chernihiv mentioned the anthem in their piece—compared to three authors in Zakarpattia and four in Volyn—and only when describing the burial of a soldier (Author C6). Although it cannot be concluded from this that the children in Chernihiv place less value on the anthem or the Ukrainian nation than the children in other regions, the significant difference in emphasis suggests that the young people in Chernihiv do not perceive the anthem to be an essential part of their everyday lives, or as important as the other national symbols they did mention. It further suggests that perhaps symbols of the Ukrainian nation are less important in Chernihiv children’s lives than the impacts of the Revolution of Dignity and subsequent war.

Discussion

Although children are often considered to be a “function of adult expectations” (Heywood, 2018: 9), this paper has revealed that they readily adapt to their own particular environments, including historical, economic, geographical, and cultural forces, and perhaps even more than what is typically realized. One of the most noteworthy examples is the repeated use of the nation’s heroic fighters, namely the Cossacks and the Heavenly Hundred, in the works from all three regions. As a prominent symbol in Ukrainian literature and folklore, it is relatively unsurprising that several authors mentioned the Cossacks as the children likely learn about these figures in school and/or are

exposed to them in other ways, if even unconsciously. It is interesting, however, that many children also connected, and even conflated, the Cossacks with the Heavenly Hundred as this latter group would not hold any significance if not for the Revolution of Dignity. Words such as ‘noble,’ ‘trustworthy,’ and ‘leader’ were frequently used to describe both the Cossacks (Authors C10, V3, V11, Z9, Z12, Z14) and the one hundred “courageous” individuals, or “heroes” who “sacrificed their lives” on the *Maidan* (Author Z3, see also C11, C14, V1, V4, V6, V7, V8, V10, V13, V14, Z4, Z5, Z9, Z10, Z12, Z13, Z14). Interestingly, the children did not extend this link to other groups who might also resemble the Cossacks, such as Ukrainian soldiers, or people who were similar to the Heavenly Hundred, like the early peaceful protesters. The Ukrainian adage, “Glory to Ukraine! Glory to the Heroes!” was also referenced in all regions when referring to both the Cossacks and the Heavenly Hundred, as those who will be “forever carved into the history of [Ukrainians’] hearts” (Authors V1, see also C12, V3, Z14). While the children are not alone in reconstructing the historical freedom-fighter narrative in modern times—this narrative is now colloquially understood by adults in Ukraine—the fact that 28 references to the Heavenly Hundred were made in 45 texts (which translates to an appearance in approximately 62 percent of the pieces) suggests the children understand the significant importance of the symbol for their nation and are similarly reproducing it.

Still, the use of national myths and narratives was not limited to the reproduction of the Cossacks; nature was repeatedly cited to connect time and space. In previous works by Ukrainian authors, specifically those written by the individuals referenced frequently in the texts from all regions (Shevchenko, Ukrainka, and Franko), the imagery of birds, and particularly cranes, serves as a reminder of returning home.¹¹ Author C13’s piece provides a vivid representation of such symbolism: “we welcome back the cranes [w]ith *п’рушники* (embroidered towel) in bright embroidery adorned.” Author V9 expressed related sentiments about cranes returning home after a sorrowful

¹¹ This insight was provided in discussions with Danya Pidlisetska and Veronika Tkachuk.

leaving: “up in the skies, just like today, one could [again] hear the cranes singing. Their hearts were filled with immense joy.” Some children even explicitly used the symbol of a bird to represent the return of those who fought to protect the Ukrainian people (see, for example, Authors C4, C7, C11, C13, C14, V9, V11, V12). Whereas the importance the children placed on birds as icons may only be an indicator of their connection to their nation and homeland, particularly noteworthy is the fact that the song now connected with the Revolution of Dignity is the old Ukrainian folk song, *‘Плуве кача по Тисині.’* Translating directly to ‘the duckling swims,’ the traditional song is a dialogue between a mother and her soldier son, and has acquired new meaning in the twenty-first century as both a powerful warning of war and the anthem to commemorate those lost during the Revolution. The symbolic representation of birds as soldiers in the children’s works is likely not a coincidence; it pays homage to the writing style of the Ukrainian authors the children study in school. Such deliberate uses also highlights that the children are using familiar narratives to understand their nation in times of conflict.

Nature was also used symbolically in the texts to express the children’s desire for Ukraine’s peace. Clear examples are the use of cranberries and doves in Author Z7’s statement, “I hope one day we will forget the pain and tears, ... [t]hat men will not be called to war again. Cranberry branches shining bright in red, [a]nd doves of peace high in the sky we will see” (see also Authors C11, C13, V11, Z3, Z13). Authors V2 and V5 also conveyed their yearning for the end of the conflict in the following statements: “I wish for spikes of wheat and cranberry bristles to bring smiles to the young and old, bringing promise of a happy life,” and “for us to finally see [t]he end of war, and peaceful [c]lear blue skies above us.” Similar illustrations were recurrent in the texts from all regions, and even those without such explicit appeals still implicitly pointed to the tranquility they longed for in Ukraine, with its “mighty mountains, golden fields, endless steppes, magical forests, bustling rivers, crystal clear rivers, and boundless seas” (Author C14, but also Authors C5, C10, C11,

C12, C14, C15, V2, V3, V5, V6, V7, V9, V11, V15, Z3, Z6, Z7, Z9, Z10, Z11, Z13). As such imagery very much depicts Eden, or an ‘ideal’ world, especially when juxtaposed against the violence of the Revolution of Dignity, these references indicate the children have attributed semiotic meaning to nature as a space for growth, healing, and rejuvenation (French, 2012; Nora, 1989). This communicative process of semiosis is common in Ukrainian folklore: a clear example is that of Ukraine’s famous river, the Dnipro. Equally interwoven into the Ukrainian landscape as Ukrainian folklore, the Dnipro is glorified in numerous legends, songs, and *Dumas* (words of wisdom) as “a symbol of national pride, of Ukrainian glory” (Author Z6, but also Authors C5, C14). Steppes and fields of gold are also a direct link to the Ukrainian nation’s prosperity and welfare; wheat, grain, and bread are important symbols of Ukraine—the country is often called the ‘breadbasket of Europe’ because of its fertile soil—and are used symbolically in discussions around famine. Hence, the parallel to nature is not merely a representation of land or the children’s birthplaces, but a metaphor for their country’s strength, peace, and continuity in never again facing hardships and oppression.

Concluding Thoughts

In answering if age determines whether one is affected by a socio-political event, then, the paper is clear. Albeit under the age of eighteen, the children surveyed in this study demonstrated that they very much experience and understand their country’s political environment. Repeatedly, the authors described how the Revolution affected them personally, such as Author C5’s “[p]lease come back home, dear dad,” as well as illustrated the ways their nation and country were impacted by the events of 2014: the “Heavenly Hundred were mourned not only by widows, parents left with no children, and orphans—all of Ukraine shed tears for them” (Author C14). While not every author mentioned the Revolution of Dignity—some instead wrote stories or poems about their lives (for example, Authors C9 and C15)—most implied that they understood their importance in fighting for, and shaping, their country’s future, regardless of their age. As Author Z15 also offered, “I worry a

lot about the situation in our country, and often think how I can help...once I grow up. I want to be useful.” Other children mentioned that they “care about the future” (Authors Z12, Z13) and “whole-heartedly love... [their] Motherland” (Author Z3). Whilst the impacts of the Revolution of Dignity cannot necessarily be generalized to all children in Ukraine, nor can it be assumed that children in other countries would respond in the same way due to Ukraine’s unique socio-political context, it can confidently be discerned that young people are often engaged with political happenings, and even more so than what is typically recognized.

In addition to age, this analysis has revealed that distance and geographic location do not prevent one from experiencing politics and socio-political events. Quite surprisingly, only five of the 45 authors mentioned their home region—Authors C5 and C14 in Chernihiv, only Author Z14 in Zakarpattia, and Authors V2 and V10 in Volyn—and only one child referred to their general direction within the country: “I live in the west of Ukraine” (Author V14). Further, and in contrast to previous literature, no authors referenced the countries neighboring their region, or even external states at all, aside from Russia and the ‘West.’ When Russia was referenced, it was described as the only unfriendly neighbor that Ukraine has (Author Z6), the “enemy,” and an “assailant” (Author Z3, see also Authors Z10 and V12). Conversely, the ‘West,’ while never defined as a distinct country or group of countries, was illustrated as someone (or something) always able to help and support Ukraine (Author Z14). Many authors also drew a divide between Eastern Ukraine and the rest of Ukraine, whether conscious or not, by juxtaposing the “war” in the country’s eastern territory, especially in Luhansk and Donetsk, to the peace of the rest of the country (see, for example, Authors C4, C5, V2, V5, V6, V6, V9, V10, V11, V12, V14, V15, Z6,Z9, Z12, Z13, Z14, Z15). As these findings suggest, the authors’ geographic locations and distance from either the *Maidan* or conflict in Eastern Ukraine had little, if any, bearing on how they responded to the events of 2013-

14, but instead, influenced how they understand Ukraine's geography and their own geographic positions within the country.

Although individuals' reactions to politics are likely influenced by the ways they receive information, it remains uncertain exactly where the children absorbed the messages they (re)produced in writing. From the analyzed pieces, it can be assumed that sources of information include various television stations (Authors C5, V14, Z12, Z13, Z14), school and teachers (Authors C5, V14, Z6), the Internet (Authors, C5, Z14), and their parents or other family members (Authors V14, Z14). Author C5, for instance, explained that their "mom would spend her nights glued to the TV screen, religiously watching TSN—the local news program." Still, it must be noted that the children's access and exposure to information does not necessarily translate to their understanding of political events. In fact, some authors explained that they did not always understand the information that was presented to them; Author Z14 stated, "[w]e hear so much information from all around, but according to our parents, often it is untrue. Following the situation on TV, there are, of course, things we do not fully understand." Thus, it is interesting that even while not completely comprehending the situation, and while living across the country, so many authors still vividly illustrated scenes from both the *Maidan* and the war. One explanation is that the children recognize that these events happened/are happening in their own country, and consequently, are affecting people like them. Perhaps more probable, though, is that the Revolution of Dignity helped the children recognize themselves as integral members of the Ukrainian nation, which "[rose] from the ashes" (Author V3) and became "stronger than ever" (Author C14, see also Z13). Hence, it appears that only physical space separated the children playing near Ukraine's boundaries from the Revolution of Dignity.

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