

# **The Meaning of Belonging: Covid-19 and the Fluidity of Ukrainian Identity**

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Among the many effects of the Covid-19 pandemic scholars, have extensively explored its impact on national and ethnic identities. A number of studies have shown that the rapid spread of the novel virus is widely perceived as a threat to both individuals and collectivities with which they identify, with the manner of identification affecting people's responses to the perceived threat (Bavel and Boggio 2020; Collins, Mandel, and Schywiola 2020; Cruwys, Stevens, and Greenaway 2020; Kachanoff et al. 2020; Litam and Oh 2020). One of the most pervasive collective identities in contemporary world, identification with the nation has been reinforced by the states' nearly universal presentation of the pandemic, and their response to it, primarily in national terms. In the early days of the pandemic, national governments in various parts of the world closed the borders and fought with one another for medical supplies, allegedly to protect their respective nations; later on, they presented their efforts to fight the spread of the virus in comparison with those of other states, thus feeding the paradoxical perception of the global pandemic as a threat every nation must deal with largely on its own. Numerous observers interpreted this national response as contributing to the global rise of nationalism and even "re-nationalization" of the globalized world (Bieber 2020; Corbett 2020; Goode, Stroup, and Gaufman 2020; Su and Shen 2020).

It is not quite clear, however, *what kind* of nationalism is rising and *what kind* of nation is becoming more important as the object of people's identification. On the one hand, the very pervasiveness of Covid-19 means that, unlike other globally spreading infectious diseases such as AIDS (Lieberman 2009), it cannot be linked to certain lifestyles and certain groups associated with them and should thus be treated as a threat pertaining to all people of the country in question. Similarly, the states' protective measures – from the closure of borders to mass tests and

vaccinations – seem to be nationally inclusive rather than limited to particular ethnic groups. On the other hand, there is ample evidence that both the disease itself and lockdowns intended to limit its spread affect certain ethnic groups more heavily than others, thus exacerbating long-term inequality and divisions in societies (Kira et al. 2020; Templeton et al. 2020). Moreover, influential discourses in many countries implicitly exclude certain groups from the affected national collectivity, such as when political leaders address only citizens rather than all residents of the country (Corbett 2020). At the same time, various political parties and media outlets go as far as to explicitly associate certain migrant or ethnic minority groups with the spread of Covid-19, thereby provoking popular hostility or even violence against members of these groups as was the case with people of Chinese and other Asian origin in the US and elsewhere at the early stage of the pandemic (Bieber 2020). Ominous as these violent incidents are, scholars should by no means assume that the populations predominantly respond to xenophobic discourse of the elites by embracing the exclusionary perception of the nation (Su and Shen 2020), nor should we take for granted that they accept the inclusive civic representations most governments seem to adhere to (Goode, Stroup, and Gaufman 2020). Whether the Covid-19 pandemic urges people to view their nation in civic or ethnic terms should be a matter of empirical explorations in particular societies at particular periods.

We explore the impact of the current pandemic within the framework of a more general question of the fluidity of ethnic and national identity. For the last half century, scholars have firmly established that identity in general and ethnic identity in particular is not a biologically determined invariant but a dynamic social construct, a result of people's adaptation to changing contexts and attempts to maximize their life chances (Barth 1998; Tajfel 1982; Laitin 1986; Hale 2004; Wimmer 2008). Not only can ethnic identifications gradually change in response to the changing institutional and political stimuli, but they can also situationally adjust to particular interactional constellations (Okamura 1981; Gorenburg 1999; Posner 2005). Different choices between ethnic groups (or between ethnic and other groups) that people make in different contexts often reflect variation in the applied criteria of belonging to these groups and the perceived importance of such belonging for their social cognition and interaction (Nagata 1974; Laitin 1986; Kulyk 2018). In addition to usefulness of certain identifications for individuals as cognitive tools to navigate particular social situations, prioritizing a certain division of society into groups can be beneficial for particular actors in their struggle for power (Hale 2004; Posner 2005; Wimmer 2008). Although national identity is often seen as clearly different in scope and meaning from ethnic one, in many societies the state and

other influential actors seek to expand the boundaries of the ethnic majority so as to incorporate minorities, thus blurring the boundaries between the two kinds of identification (Wimmer 2008). As a result, the self-designation as a member of the titular majority can actually mean “either citizenship or ethnicity, or an undifferentiated mix of both” (Brubaker 2006, 213). In such societies, we can view ethnic/national identity as a continuum of different relative weights of identifications with a particular group and the entire nation. Against the background of situational fluctuations of individuals along this continuum, institutional changes and social cataclysms can bring about perceptible shifts on a *collective level* (A. D. Smith 1981; Posner 2005). At times of events regarded as collective threats, people can perceive them as primarily affecting their ethnic group or equally pertaining to all members of the nation (Lieberman 2009), a perception that can be expected to affect the relative strengths of identification with the two collectivities.

We examine the pandemic-affected interplay between national and ethnic identifications in Ukraine, a country where the distinction between them is particularly blurred as a result of the institutional design and boundary-making strategies of key political actors. Although ethnicity was thoroughly institutionalized in the Soviet times (Brubaker 1996), the post-Soviet Ukrainian state largely abandoned the use of ethnic categories in administrative practice and heavily reduced ethnic references in public discourse, thus inducing a shift from an ethnic to a civic understanding of Ukrainian identity (Kulyk 2013a; 2014). This shift intensified after 2014 when Russia’s aggression against Ukraine contributed to Ukrainian citizens’ stronger identification with their homeland and the reidentification of many members of the once very large Russian minority into Ukrainians (Kulyk 2016; 2018; Pop-Eleches and Robertson 2018; Barrington 2021). Predictably for a country with a weak institutionalization of ethnicity (Lieberman 2009), the Covid-19 pandemic has been presented in Ukrainian public discourse predominantly in inclusive national terms. Nevertheless, as our survey experiments demonstrate, a reminder of the Covid-19 challenge to Ukraine causes some respondents to abandon an inclusive understanding of Ukrainian identity in favor of a more exclusive one, which implies that the perceived threat urges them to think primarily about their ethnic “brethren” rather than all fellow citizens. Moreover, rather different responses to the question about the meaning of Ukrainian identity asked at two different stages of the pandemic further demonstrates the essential fluidity of ethnonational identity and its responsiveness to the changing social context.

## **Context: Ukraine from independence to the pandemic**

The main change in social context which could affect popular perceptions during the COVID-19 pandemic arguably resulted from influential representations of the nature and effects of the virus and the state's measures to limit its spread. Of course, these representations were perceived against the background of established views of the world and the nation which, in turn, were affected by institutions and discourses of the (recent) past, particularly the three decades since a radical change of 1991 when Ukraine became independent.

The years of independence were marked by the decreasing institutional groundedness and discursive prominence of ethnicity, which could not but affect individual self-perceptions. In the Soviet Union, ethnicity was thoroughly institutionalized at both collective and individual levels, namely in the "national" republics of major ethnic groups and in the largely fixed ascription of the supposedly descent-based "nationality" to individuals, albeit with a considerable mismatch between the two levels due to widespread migration and ethnolinguistic assimilation (Brubaker 1996). Although it was this institutionalization that made it possible for the Ukrainian Soviet republic to proclaim independence in the name of its eponymous nation, the new Ukrainian state presented itself as the homeland of all its residents regardless of ethnicity, which its leaders considered a precondition for international recognition and social stability. Not only did it grant automatic citizenship to all people permanently residing on its territory but also it discontinued registration of nationality in personal documents and largely refrained from discrimination on ethnic basis. While recognizing cultural rights of ethnic minorities in accordance with relevant international documents, the state sought to prevent politicization of their distinct identity by refusing to allow ethnically-defined political parties or territorial autonomies (Kulyk 2001; Stepanenko 2001; Shevel 2009). Although the question on nationality was retained in the census, references to ethnic differences in political and other institutional discourses became increasingly rare (Arel 2002; Kulyk 2006).

Notwithstanding such institutional environment, some regionally concentrated minorities, particularly the Hungarians, Romanians and Crimean Tatars, retained distinct identity due to their predominant adherence to their respective group languages, ethno-political mobilization, special treatment by the authorities or other factors (Stewart 2005; Kulyk 2013b). In contrast, the much larger and more geographically encompassing Russian minority was in most cases clearly separated from the Ukrainian majority by neither cultural practices nor state policies. In the urban centers of the eastern and southern regions where Russians (that is, people who were thus classified by the

Soviet regime and/or perceived themselves as such) predominantly lived, they did not visibly differ from (people who were classified and/or considered themselves as) Ukrainians. People in both categories usually spoke Russian, thus making Russian-speakers the large majority of the local population. Rather than differentiating them by ethnicity, politicians tended to combine them into a large constituency on the basis of language, even if often addressing them in local or regional terms. Accordingly, the ethnic designation “Russians” were largely abandoned in political discourse in favor of the linguistic category “Russian-speakers” or a territorial delimitation of particular constituencies (G. Smith 1998; Wolczuk 2006; Kulyk 2009; 2019). The first post-Soviet census of 2001 demonstrated a large-scale reidentification from Russian to Ukrainian nationality (Stebelsky 2009), while anthropological studies in different parts of the country revealed that many people who used to be classified as Russians developed a Ukrainian identity with a primarily civic meaning (Polese and Wylegala 2008). The shift from Russian to Ukrainian identity intensified after 2014 when Russia’s aggression contributed to Ukrainian citizens’ stronger identification with their homeland and the discreditation of Russianness which came to be widely seen as a sign of support for the aggressor (Kulyk 2016; 2018; Pop-Eleches and Robertson 2018; Barrington 2021). The widespread “shedding” of Russianness in popular identifications was matched and reinforced by its almost complete disappearance from public discourse where the label “Russians” came to mean people across the border. Accordingly, the designation “Ukrainians” solidified its new inclusive meaning, which first manifested itself in the 2000s but now became predominant in institutional discourses and increasingly accepted by ordinary citizens (Kulyk 2010; Nedozhogina 2019).

Mainstream discourse on Covid-19 reflected and reinforced this inclusive meaning of Ukrainianness, even though in some instances certain groups’ belonging to the national collectivity was called in question. The pandemic has predominantly been presented as a threat to all people of the world, Ukraine, and particular regions or localities, albeit with the recognition of special vulnerability of certain categories such as the elderly people. Whenever accusations of complicity in the spread of virus were articulated in various fora, they usually targeted certain people for what they *did* (ignored the prescribed measures of precaution) rather than who they *are* (members of certain ethnic or social groups). In few cases, however, certain categories of the population were presented as contributing to the spread of COVID-19, particularly in the first weeks of the pandemic characterized by nearly total ignorance of the nature of the novel virus which fueled fear of its deadly effects. In particular, the initial spread of Covid-19 into Ukraine was widely associated with

those people who at that time happened to be in parts of the world where the virus appeared first. When the Ukrainian government, following an example of other states, decided in February 2020 to evacuate its citizens from the Chinese city of Wuhan where the virus had first been detected, people in several locations the authorities considered for the evacuees' quarantine vehemently protested against their accommodation as they feared pernicious effects of the unknown disease (P'ietukh 2020). In the following weeks, the large-scale return of Ukrainian migrant workers from Western and Central European countries where the pandemic jeopardized their work and livelihood was sometimes met with fear and hostility by other residents in their respective localities (Kobyliuk 2020). More ominously, some media outlets portrayed this "flight" as a danger to the entire Ukrainian population stemming from the predominantly West Ukrainian group of "Gastarbeiter," thus reinforcing the prejudice against the westerners that is shared by many people in other parts of Ukraine (Kharchenko 2020). Later in the spring, some mainstream media programs harshly criticized those devout Christian believers who insisted on attending in-person church services but did not adhere to precautions recommended by the health authorities (Zhuk 2020).

The only publicized case of an explicit COVID-related attack of a public official against an *ethnically* defined group pertained to several dozen Roma people in the city of Ivano-Frankivsk who its mayor argued were flagrantly violating the quarantine restrictions and, therefore, had to be forcibly displaced to their alleged place of permanent residence. This obvious discrimination on ethnic ground was promptly denounced by human rights activists, the ombudsperson, and even the interior minister, although many city residents reportedly welcomed the mayor's attempt to protect "Ukrainians" from unscrupulous Roma (Shchur 2020). Although scapegoating of Roma or some other groups could have contributed to their popularity among the titular majority, other local and national officials did not seem to resort to this well-known populist tactic. Whether imposing certain quarantine restrictions or objecting to them in view of their supposedly negative economic and social consequences, they presented themselves as protecting the entire population of Ukraine or the respective locality. Many mayors publicly criticized the national government for imposing harsher restrictions in their respective cities than nationwide because of their more severe epidemiological situation, and a few of them went as far as to announce their refusal to comply with the national regulations which they believed would do their city more harm than good (Ukrinform 2020; Lb.ua 2021). While the national authorities emphasized that restrictive measures were necessary to protect people's *lives*, local officials argued that those measures threatened people's *livelihood* by depriving

many of their jobs and income. In no case, however, was their position articulated in terms of protecting certain ethnic groups or protecting the bulk of the population *from* certain ethnic groups (as was with the Roma in Ivano-Frankivsk). Local officials usually referred to the “residents” or “community” of their respective cities, while national leaders, particularly President Volodymyr Zelensky, tended to address “Ukrainians,” a designation clearly intended to mean all Ukrainian citizens (Detector media 2020; Saakov 2020).

While most readers and viewers were likely to register and accept this inclusive meaning, it cannot be ruled out that some minority members felt excluded by the leadership’s addresses only to Ukrainians, an effect such addresses arguably had in other countries (Corbett 2020). At the same time, the apparently inclusive meaning of the term “Ukrainians” in mainstream representations of the obviously non-discriminating pandemic could urge to embrace this meaning some of those who adhered to the traditional ethnic understanding of Ukrainianness. However, it is also possible that some people, contrary to dominant public representations, viewed the pandemic as primarily threatening – and calling for the protection of – a more narrowly defined collectivity and were inclined to adjust their perception of the nation to their perception of the threat. It is the impact of the pandemic on popular views of Ukrainianness that we seek to explore.

### **Research design**

Empirical studies of long-term evolution and situational fluctuation of ethnic identity in different societies have primarily been based on ethnographic research which is well suited to demonstrate people’s contextually determined identification with concurrent ethnic groups (Nagata 1974; Okamura 1981; Posner 2005; Polese and Wylegala 2008). Another group of studies have relied on census and survey data to detect changes in ethnic identification over longer or shorter periods of time (Silver 1974; Gorenburg 1999; Kulyk 2018; Sasse and Lackner 2018). In both cases, the focus has been on changes in ethnic self-designations, but some authors have also examined changes in the meaning people attach to their perceived belonging to ethnic categories and in the salience of ethnic identification vis-à-vis other kinds of identities. In recent decades, these two groups of studies have been supplemented by those based on survey experiments which make it possible to detect situational adjustment of identities. However, while experimental studies of the impact of ethnic identity on various attitudes have often inquired about the effects of the situational activation (“priming”) of certain identities (Transue 2007; Levendusky 2018), few experiments have been

designed to explore the opposite effect, namely an adjustment of identifications brought about by the activation of certain attitudes (Kuo and Margalit 2012). We seek to contribute to this kind of exploration, although our focus is not on changes in ethnic identifications per se but rather on changed perceptions of the meaning of belonging to certain identity categories.

We designed an original survey experiment in order to examine whether the increased awareness of the Covid-19 challenge modifies Ukrainian respondents' views of the *content* of Ukrainian identity (Abdelal et al. 2006). Having activated different groups of respondents' awareness of different ways in which Ukraine experiences the pandemic, we asked them what they think is most important for telling "who is really a Ukrainian," a common way of establishing the content of a certain identity (Wright, Citrin, and Wand 2012). By comparing the responses from such "treatment groups" with those of people who had not received any Covid-related information ("control group"), we were able to assess the impact of different facets of the pandemic challenge on the meaning people in Ukraine attach to one of the most salient identity categories.

Most importantly, we wanted to check for changes in the relative importance of ethnic and civic criteria of belonging to the Ukrainian nation and thus of imagining the nation itself. Numerous studies have demonstrated that ethnic and national identifications can be competing in some cases and complementary in others (Sidanius et al. 1997; Hierro and Gallego 2018; Wright, Citrin, and Wand 2012) and the self-designation as a member of the titular group can mean citizenship, ethnicity, or a mix of both (Brubaker 2006). As mentioned above, research on Ukraine has confirmed that the traditional view of Ukrainian identity as primarily ethnic is increasingly challenged by the perception of "Ukrainians" as including all citizens of Ukraine (Wilson 2002; Shulman 2004; Kulyk 2013a; 2018). With this ambiguity and fluidity in mind, the list of alternatives we gave the respondents included both ethnocultural (descent and language) and civic (citizenship and residency) criteria of Ukrainianness. We sought to determine which of these criteria the respondents consider most important and whether the increased awareness of the Covid-19 challenge modifies this perceived importance.

We conducted similar experiments in two nationwide phone surveys that were administered by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) in April and October 2020, respectively, that is, at different stages of the pandemic with considerable differences in the numbers of infections and deaths, public representations of the virus and its threat, and state-imposed measures to counter it. Moreover, we used different cues to activate respondents' awareness of the Covid-19 challenge,



with the modification made in the second study intended to explore different facets of the challenge and remove factors that possibly have limited the effects detected in the first study. We will present the design and results of each study in turn, and then summarize main findings of the two.

## **Study 1**

In the experiment embedded in the April survey, KIIS randomly divided the sample of 2024 respondents into five roughly equal groups, all but one of which were then given different Covid-related primes. All treatment groups received the preamble “Ukraine is now faced with the spread of Covid-19,” after which a first group was asked to think about the Ukrainian leadership’s *performance* in response to the virus; the second about the *personal* dimension of its spread (an individual they knew or had heard of who had been infected); the third about the virus’ threat to the *economy*; and the fourth about “our people” who had been infected. We deliberately chose the formulation “our people” so as to evoke, against the background of the reference to Ukraine in the preceding sentence, a sense of shared *national community* without imposing on respondents any *particular definition* of that community. Respondents were asked to reflect on the aspect of the virus mentioned to them and to summarize their reaction in one word, an exercise meant to elicit enough cognition for respondents to access related considerations without scripting any particular view or answer that could contaminate the experiment (Sherman, Mackie, and Driscoll 1990; Sniderman 2018; Taber and Lodge 2016). In the next step, respondents were asked standard questions on the degree of their approval of the country’s president, prime minister, and the mayor of the urban locality or rural community they reside in. Concluding the experiment was the inquiry about “which of the following is the most important for telling who is really a Ukrainian and who is not,” with the list of alternatives including speaking the eponymous language, being of Ukrainian descent, having Ukrainian citizenship, and permanently residing in the country. We also registered those cases when the respondents volunteered the answer that they did not agree with any of the suggested criteria, although we did not inquire about what perceptions they favor instead.

Focusing here on the last question, we examined the differences between the treatment groups and the control group in the frequency of its members’ reliance on the particular criteria from the list and the volunteered “none of the above.” To make the results comprehensible for readers with no advanced knowledge of statistics, we employ the relatively simple analysis of means (t-test) for the binary variables associated with the preference of each of these criteria. Table 1 presents the

results for the entire sample, with asterisks indicating statistically significant differences between the figures for the respective treatment group and the control group. We also examine such differences for various subsamples defined by nationality, language, region, age, and education, and discuss most noticeable results without adding further tables so as not to overburden the readers with numbers.

Table 1. Frequencies of reliance on different criteria of Ukrainianness for the control and treatment groups (KIIS survey of April 2020; in percentage)

	Experiment groups				
	Control	Leadership	Personal	Economy	Our people
Speak Ukrainian	6.5	6.4	6.5	3.2*	5.3
Be Ukrainian by descent	14.1	15.9	17.8	14.9	17.9
Be Ukrainian citizen	27.3	27.0	26.4	30.3	31.1
Live permanently in Ukraine	30.6	26.6	23.3*	30.0	24.7†
NONE OF THE ABOVE	10.1	13.9†	15.0*	13.5	12.4
HARD TO SAY	11.4	10.2	11.1	8.1	8.7

Note. Differences significant at the following levels: †:  $p < .1$ ; \*:  $p < .05$ ; \*\*:  $p < .01$ .

As the figures for the control group indicate, the majority of respondents view Ukrainianness in terms of either residency or citizenship, with descent and language practice lagging far behind (at the same time, a considerable part favors some other criteria or remains undecided). This confirms the post-Soviet shift from ethnic to civic criteria of defining the Ukrainian nation which has been demonstrated in several survey-based and ethnographic studies (Wilson 2002; Shulman 2004; Polese and Wylegala 2008). At the same time, our data reveal that people in today’s Ukraine are no less likely to think of “Ukrainians” as including only permanent residents of the country than to extend the nation to encompass all Ukrainian citizens. Contrary to Western countries with their large-scale immigration, and similarly to its East-Central European neighbors many of whose citizens spend extended periods working abroad, in Ukraine citizenship is a more encompassing category than permanent residency. As most Ukrainians working abroad send regular remittances to their relatives in Ukraine and many even leave behind their spouses and children (Okólski 2001; Hrycak 2011), their strong ties with the country of origin and their belonging to the (civic) nation are not usually questioned in public discourse. However, their long-term absence from Ukraine and

a socioeconomic situation considerably different from most people staying in the country can lead some of the latter to exclude migrant workers from those “really belonging” to the Ukrainian nation. Moreover, this exclusion could be highlighted and reinforced by the above-mentioned “flight” of many guest workers to Ukraine in the early weeks of the pandemic when they were seen as potential carriers of the virus from the respective countries where its spread had begun earlier than in Ukraine. While Krastev’s assertion, with regard to his native Bulgaria, of the Covid-induced *replacement* of cultural nationalism with a “public health-oriented nationalism combined with an inverted xenophobia that is territorial in its nature and more inclusive” (Krästev 2020, 24) seems far-fetched, a more or less considerable *shift* from the civic to territorial perception of national belonging could well take place in that particular period.

Turning to the figures in the further columns, we see that the pandemic also challenged the civic understanding of the Ukrainian nation in other ways, namely by urging some people to embrace an ethnocultural perception or rejecting all of the suggested criteria of belonging. To be sure, the Covid primes did not radically alter the structure of popular perceptions of Ukrainianness, as demonstrated by the fact that most of the differences between the frequencies of certain criteria in the treatment groups and the control group are insignificant. The indicators of significance in Table 1 confirm that for the sample as a whole, there are only a few significant effects scattered across the four treatment groups. Both the Personal and Our people groups manifest decreasing reliance, compared to the control group, on the criterion of residency in Ukraine, which can perhaps be explained by these primes’ activation of concerns extending to Ukrainian people who permanently or temporarily live abroad. The plausibility of this interpretation is enhanced by the fact that for the Our people prime, this effect is particularly strong among respondents of Ukrainian nationality, Ukrainian native language and Ukrainian private language who are arguably more likely, even in “normal” times, to include (ethnic) Ukrainians beyond state borders in the national community. The two latter categories combine the decreased reliance on residency and the increased reliance on citizenship, thus indicating that the Covid challenge urges members of these categories to imagine the nation as including those compatriots currently living abroad. They also respond in a similar way to the Leadership prime, a rather surprising result if we think of the national leadership’s activities as primarily affecting people *within* the country (but then some respondents might also think about state measures to bring back home those Ukrainians who found themselves abroad when the pandemic erupted). In any event, these two primes appear to be inducing shifts in the direction

opposite to the increased territorialization of Ukrainian identity which we assumed might result from the perceived threat of infection brought by guest workers returning from abroad in the early weeks of the pandemic. This assumption thus needs to be treated with caution, at least until it is supported by further research.

For the group that was reminded about the economy, we see a decrease in reliance on the linguistic criterion of Ukrainianness, which makes sense in that the national economy clearly involves not only speakers of the titular language, so thinking about it is likely to boost more inclusive perceptions. This effect is particularly noticeable among those categories of respondents who normally manifest relatively frequent reliance on the linguistic criterion but whom a reference to the Covid-induced problems for the economy urges to reconsider its relevance. These categories include people reporting Ukrainian as their nationality, Ukrainian native language, and Ukrainian as the main language of private life. In some categories, the reference to the economy also triggers reshuffling between the two civic criteria but its direction is not consistent, for which do not have a ready explanation. Perhaps most remarkably, both the Our people and Personal primes urge those respondents who do not seem inclined to think of Ukrainianness in terms of descent, particularly those declaring Russian nationality and native language, to significantly increase their reliance on this criterion. This effect seems paradoxical as such people respond to the Covid challenge by opting for a criterion that puts into question their own belonging to the national community. One possible explanation would be that these people who do not consider themselves fully Ukrainian feel excluded from the national community by Covid-related discourse featuring “Ukrainians,” and the reminder of the pandemic activates this feeling of exclusion.

The most consistent effect, however, is a considerable increase in the percentage of respondents who do not agree with any of the suggested criteria of Ukrainianness, which turns out to be significant for two groups (Leadership and Personal) in the entire sample and for at least one group in all but a few of the examined subsamples. The most plausible interpretation of this remarkable finding is that the challenge of Covid-19 undermines many Ukrainians’ established perceptions of nationhood and either leads them to think about it in some other way than usually articulated in public discourse or leaves them uncertain about its meaning. Of course, this interpretation needs to be tested in further studies, particularly by qualitative methods which allow for detailed exploration of underlying motives of attitudes and behaviors.

## Study 2

Some of the differences between the treatment groups and control group in the first study might be insignificant, we suspected, because of the rather small size of these groups resulting from the fact that there were too many of them. Moreover, the primes we used combined a general reference to the Covid challenge to Ukraine and a specific reference to the pandemic's impact on a certain group of people or a certain domain, hence the effects we registered represented a response to the two stimuli whose contributions we could not differentiate. In the second study conducted in late September and early October 2020, we tried to address these problems by, on the one hand, reducing the number of treatment groups from four to two and, on the other, making one of the primes basic and the other a composite with a second layer on top of the first. That is, the former prime merely reminded respondents of the Covid challenge to Ukraine (replicating the first sentence in all of the April primes), and the latter added a reference to "our people" who got infected (replicating the respective prime from April). We analyzed the results similarly to how we did this in the first study, namely by means of t-tests for the entire sample of 2040 respondents and subsamples defined by the same ethnolinguistic and demographic characteristics. Similarly to the previous section, we only provide the table for the entire sample but discuss noteworthy results also for the examined subsamples.

The first remarkable thing in Table 2 pertains to the control group: the distribution of frequencies for different criteria of Ukrainianness in the fall is considerably different from that established in the spring, which confirms fluidity of perceptions informing ethnonational identifications in today's Ukraine. While the two surveys are similar in that the civic criteria were reported much more frequently than the ethnocultural ones, the prevalence of the former over the latter visibly strengthened between the surveys. No less important, the relative frequency of the two civic criteria is reversed, namely citizenship was slightly behind in April but became well ahead in October. Although we cannot be sure that this shift was caused by the dynamics of the pandemic, it is in accordance with the less inclusive representations of the early stage of the spread of Covid-19, in particular fears of contagion associated with people returning to Ukraine from China and various European countries. After more than six months of the pandemic, not only did the virus become more accustomed and, despite the increasing numbers of infections and deaths, less frightening<sup>1</sup> but

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<sup>1</sup> This is confirmed by responses to the question on whether they were afraid of Covid-19 which we asked the respondents in both surveys. While in April the cumulative share of those who said they were

also public discourse came to overwhelmingly discuss it in inclusive terms without blaming any ethnic or social groups for its spread among Ukrainians.

Table 2. Frequencies of reliance on different criteria of Ukrainianness for the control and treatment groups (KIIS survey of September-October 2020; in percentage)

	Experiment groups		
	Control	Covid	Our people
Speak Ukrainian	5.7	8.5*	6.1
Be Ukrainian by descent	9.0	11.2	10.7
Be Ukrainian citizen	45.0	35.1**	37.6**
Live permanently in Ukraine	24.5	27.2	26.3
NONE OF THE ABOVE	5.4	10.6**	11.0**
HARD TO SAY, REFUSED TO ANSWER	10.4	7.4	8.3

Note. Differences significant at the following levels: †:  $p < .1$ ; \*:  $p < .05$ ; \*\*:  $p < .01$ .

At the same time, our experiment demonstrates that a situational reminder of the pandemic is more likely to cause Ukrainians to resort to more *exclusive* criteria of defining the national community. In both treatment groups, we see a considerable decrease of popularity of the citizenship criterion compared to the control group and, accordingly, increased frequencies of reliance on the other criteria<sup>2</sup>. Although for the entire sample most of these increases fail to clear the threshold of significance, the reliance on the linguistic criterion is significantly higher in the Covid group (one that was given the basic Covid prime) and the rejection of all suggested criteria, in both treatment groups. While the effects detected in the entire sample are also significant for many of the examined subsamples, in some of them we also see significant increases in the reliance on descent or residency. Similarly to the first study, people declaring Russian nationality and Russian native language respond to the Covid prime by an increasing reliance on the language criterion, thus lending more support to the perception that excludes themselves from the Ukrainian community (but then the majority of respondents of these categories retains their preference for the civic criteria).

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very afraid or afraid exceeded the share of those not much afraid or not afraid at all by 15 percent, in October the difference in size between the two groups shrunk to merely 3 percent.

<sup>2</sup> An additional analysis shows that both primes also induced a significant reduction of the cumulative share of those who relieve on civic-territorial rather than ethnocultural criteria.

The strongest of the detected effects is a drastic increase, from 8 to 22 percent, in the reliance on the descent criterion among the respondents under 30 in response to the Covid prime, an impressive shift toward a more exclusive perception of the national community in the face of a perceived challenge to that community.

But the most remarkable and somewhat paradoxical finding of this study is that most effects are stronger for the Covid group than for the Our people one, which demonstrates that a general reference to the Covid challenge is more powerful in changing people's perceptions of the national community than a reference to *both* the pandemic and its impact on members of that community. We are inclined to interpret this surprising finding as evidence that a challenge to the established order (a threat) acts more strongly than an evocation of an identity. In other words, a reference to the Covid challenge to "Ukraine" makes respondents think of a Ukraine they consider mostly affected and/or primarily care about, thus undermining their established (one can say, "politically correct") understanding of Ukrainianness as encompassing all citizens of Ukraine. And when a reference to "our people" is added on top of the Covid challenge, it can in fact weaken the latter's working by returning the respondents to the more established perception of (ethno)national identity.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The two studies presented in this paper confirm essential fluidity of ethnic identity in today's Ukraine and establish the Covid-19 pandemic as one of the factors stimulating this fluidity. Most people tend to think of the community of "Ukrainians" in an inclusive way, with membership extended to all permanent residents regardless of descent and language practice or even to all citizens regardless of residency in Ukraine or abroad, meaning that this community is no less national than ethnic. However, the perceived challenge to this ethnonational community presented by an unknown and rapidly growing disease urged many people to reconsider its parameters. On the one hand, the degree of predominance of the inclusive perceptions and the frequencies of each of them turned out to be considerably different at the two stages of the pandemic, with residency being somewhat more popular in the spring and citizenship clearly prevailing in the fall. On the other, the situational reminders of the Covid challenge to Ukraine induced significant shifts in perceptions, usually in the direction of more exclusive criteria of belonging, albeit with a considerable variation depending on the specific reference to the challenge, the category of respondents, and the time/context of survey.

In the April study, the references to both personally known people who were hit by the virus and the affected “our people” in general caused a decrease in the reliance on residency, without a clear increase in the popularity of any other criteria. The most consistent response to the Covid-related primes in that study was an increased share of respondents rejecting all the suggested criteria, although our design did not allow to establish which perceptions they favored instead. The pattern was clearer in the October study when the main effect turned out to be a noticeable shift from the citizenship criterion toward the more exclusive perceptions prioritizing language practice and descent, respectively, or toward the withdrawal of support from all the suggested criteria. Quite remarkably, this shift was stronger for the basic Covid prime than for the one combining the reminder about the pandemic and the reference to problems it creates for “our people.” Although the latter prime clearly pertained to members of the (however defined) national community, its impact on the perceptions of that community was not as strong as that of a perceived threat to the established order which urged many people to reconsider their established views.

We can thus conclude that the most noticeable response to this perceived threat turned out to be a shift away from the “politically correct” inclusive criteria, whether to embrace some more exclusive criteria or to reject all the criteria traditionally discussed in public discourse. It is quite noteworthy that this shift away from the inclusive criteria occurs despite the predominantly inclusive representation of the Covid challenge in Ukrainian public discourse and the low salience of ethnic divisions in Ukrainian society in recent years. It turns out that the threat urges many people to care primarily about their ethnic “brethren” rather than all fellow citizens, which implies that the Covid-induced nationalism has a strong ethnic component. But then the majority of the population retains the inclusive perception of the national community and, at least in Ukraine, was more willing to extend it to compatriots living abroad as the threat became less new and frightening.

It should be noted that changes in the *perception* of Ukrainianness do not necessarily mean changes in *self-identification* according to ethnonational categories. Although a reconsideration of what it means to be Ukrainian may lead some people to also reconsider whether, or to what extent, they are Ukrainians themselves, for others a change in the content of ethnonational identity may be related to change in its salience vis-à-vis other identities in their repertoire and/or in some attitudes affected by the former identity. After all, the traditionally strong Russian identity has become so discredited in Ukraine because of the Russian aggression that the category “Ukrainian” is now virtually the only ethnonational game in town (Kulyk 2016; 2018). In the two studies reported here,



we wanted to establish ethnonational self-designations and the salience of Ukrainian identity without interference of experimental treatment, hence we placed the respective questions on the survey questionnaire either before or long after the embedded experiments.<sup>3</sup> While giving us “undistorted” information for our main purpose, such design prevented us from assessing the impact of the Covid-related primes on other important dimensions of ethnonational identity. This task is just left for future studies, not only on Ukraine but also on other societies, particularly those where previous research gives the reason to expect considerable fluidity of ethnic/ethnonational identities, to which the challenge of Covid-19 may contribute.

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of placement choices in survey experiments having to do with identity, see Klar, Leeper, and Robison 2020.

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