

The ‘Return to Europe’: Ukraine’s Foreign Policy, 1994-1998

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Abstract

Within a decade of Leonid Kuchma’s presidency (1994-2004), the wish to ‘rejoin’ the West as a rightful member of the ‘European family’ has been stated many times. The declared intention to join the European Union (EU), however, has not been a consistent goal of the Kuchma Administration. In fact, Kuchma’s election as president of Ukraine in 1994 signified increased support among many members of the Ukrainian elite for closer ties with Russia. By 1996, however, a major shift of orientation took place within government circles with the president proclaiming that Ukraine’s foreign policy identity should be European. After Leonid Kuchma’s government declared European integration as an official policy and strategic goal in 1996, the ‘Return to Europe’ slogan became crucial to Ukraine’s domestic policies’ in shaping its national identity. The aim of this essay is to provide an analysis of the political discourse during the period 1994-1998 and Ukraine’s policy-making process. Such analysis offers an insight into the meaning that different members of the Ukrainian elite attached to the ‘Return to Europe’ slogan and how these meanings developed and evolved. The paper also reveals the intricate interplay between foreign policy declarations and the influence of different interest groups and networks.

Introduction

Following the demise of the Soviet Union, Ukrainian political discourse has been filled with references to ‘Europe’, used as a symbol of democratic fundamentals, economic prosperity, human rights and freedoms. In the course of Leonid Kuchma’s presidency (1994-2005), the goal of pursuing European integration has been declared as a foreign policy priority which could influence not only Ukraine’s external relations but also its internal politics and national identity. While an initial glimpse of the rhetoric of Ukraine’s politicians staunchly proclaiming their country’s European credentials - despite its failure to meet democratic and economic conditions - may seem superficial and, at times, contradictory, the deeper analysis reveals a number of interesting patterns. The aim of this essay is to contextualise as well as provide an analysis of the political discourse during the period 1994-1998 and Ukraine’s policy-making process. The paper examines the meanings that different

members of the Ukrainian ruling elite¹ attached to the ‘*Return to Europe*’ slogan as well as an insight into how these meanings developed and evolved. The paper also reveals the intricate interplay between foreign policy declarations and the influence of different domestic and international factors, including influence of interest groups and networks in addition to external pressures emanating from Russia, the European Union (EU) and the United States (US).

The paper is a part of the chapter from a PhD dissertation. The case of Ukraine presents several questions which are particularly appropriate for discourse theory, such as why do political leaders who reverted to neo-Soviet story-lines during the pre-election campaign stay within the pro-European discourse once elected to power? Has the myth of a ‘return to Europe’ being transformed into a social imaginary?² Who are the main subjects who compete for discourse hegemony by advocating the pro-European policy in Ukraine and what strategies do they use to achieve their goals? These are the guiding research questions for this paper specifically and the PhD dissertation in general. Before exploring these questions, the following section gives an overview of some of the concepts of the discourse theory which will then frame the discussion of Ukraine.

The Conceptual Framework

Discourse theory, particularly the approach developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (see Laclau, 1990, 1993, 2005; and Laclau and Mouffe, 1982, 1987 and 2001) has transformed the classical debates on democratisation, hegemony, nationalism and identity into another realm of postmodernity. While basing their theory on the Marxist and structuralist tradition, where ‘the whole social field is understood as a web of processes in which meaning is created’ (Jørgensen and Louise, 2004: 25), Laclau and Mouffe’s approach substantially differs in the way that it argues that meaning ‘cannot be fixed so unambiguously and definitely’ as scholars from structuralist tradition contend (*ibid.*). Analysing the attempts to fix the meaning, however, is crucial to discourse analysis in general and Laclau and Mouffe’s theory in particular. Crucial to this analysis is also the concept of *catachresis*, a term borrowed from classical rhetoric to explain ‘a figural term which cannot be substituted by a literal one’ (Laclau, 2005: 71). In other words, according to Laclau, one of the conditions of language is its ‘constitutive blockage’, ‘which requires naming something which is *essentially* unnameable as a condition of language functioning’ (*ibid.*, emphasis original). The meaning of ‘Europe’, for example, may change over time. Language may not be able to keep pace with the changes in order to accommodate any change in the meaning of the term. By applying discourse analysis to empirical work, researchers focus on the *process* of fixing the meaning whilst also unpacking the consequences resulting from this process.³

¹ There are different definitions of the concept of the ‘elite’, including governing, power, academic and/or ruling elite. This paper focuses on the discourse of the ruling elite, defined as ‘a group of people who occupy key positions in the major state institutions and are able to promote their interests’ (Nastych, 2003: 305). It is important to note that ‘some groups or persons are able to rule or extend their influence even without holding higher offices by means of resources – either material (wealth) or personal (connections, acquaintances and education) (*ibid.*). Therefore, the analysis will include the influence of those who make an impact on government policy by being in business as well as working for influential think tanks and academic institutions.

² In the attempt to achieve hegemony, political actors articulate discourse which turn into myths. If accepted by the rest of the society, myths achieve hegemony and turn into social imaginaries. Both, the concepts of ‘myth’ and ‘social imaginary’, will be discussed at greater length in the conceptual section of this paper.

³ For a fine analysis of this theory as well its empirical use, see Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000; Jørgensen and Louise, 2004; Torfing, 1999, 2005.

Several assumptions are central to the discourse theory. As has been mentioned, the central supposition is that 'all objects and actions are meaningful, and that their meaning is conferred by historically specific systems of rules (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000: 2). These meanings are attached within pre-established discourses (Torfing, 2005: 14). However, unlike the notion of structure, defined here as 'the closure of a topography, a construction, or an architecture, whose internal order is determined by a privileged centre' (Torfing, 1999: 85), discourse is not a complete totality and not governed by a fixed centre (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 11). Torfing elaborates on this core assumption of the theory, 'our cognition and speech-acts only become meaningful within certain pre-established discourses, which have different structurations that change over time' (Torfing, 1999: 85).

A discourse, in turn, is defined as 'the primary terrain of the constitution of objectivity as such' (Laclau, 2005: 68), 'a relations ensemble of signifying sequences' (Torfing, 1999: 85) which attempts to fix meanings by articulating them within a certain discursive domain (Jørgensen and Louise, 2004: 26). The concept of discourse has its roots in the linguistic tradition (Torfing, 2005: 6). Theoretical work by Saussure (1989) has transformed the linguistic theory by shifting the focus from the historic evolution of language to the social context within which meanings of language are constructed. Such meanings are analysed by focusing on the notion of 'sign', defined as 'a two-sided entity which joins a particular *sound-image* (signifier) with a particular *concept* (signified)' (Torfing, 1999: 87). Meanings of signs are interpreted in relation to other signs. For example, the meaning of 'liberalism' is understood by defining it against 'conservatism', while, 'socialism' is understood by also considering the meanings of 'capitalism' and 'feudalism' (Torfing, 2005: 14).

Discourse theory goes beyond its linguistic conception by including both linguistic and non-linguistic elements. Discourse can be understood as a totality of meanings which govern social relations. Laclau and Mouffe give the following example to explain this point:

Let us suppose that I am building a wall with another bricklayer. At a certain moment I ask my workmate to pass me a brick and then I add it to the wall. The first act – asking of the brick – is linguistic; the second – adding the brick to the wall – is extralinguistic. Do I exhaust the reality of both acts by drawing the distinction between them in terms of the linguistic/extralinguistic opposition? Evidently not, because, despite their differentiation in those terms, the two actions share something that allows them to be compared, namely the fact that they are both part of a total operation which is the building of the wall (Laclau and Mouffe, 1990: 100).

In order to understand how meanings are attached, it is important to grasp another set of definitions, including concepts such as 'elements,' 'moments,' and 'nodal points'. Elements can be defined as signs which may have several potential meanings but which have not been fixed to one in a particular discursive chain. However, moments are elements which have been temporarily attached to a meaning. Elements transition to become moments, but in a partial way since there is always the possibility of a discourse being dislocated which can break the discursive chain (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 110-11). Jørgensen and Louise (2004) use the metaphor of the fishing-net which helps to visualise a discursive chain with knots serving as moments with 'their meaning being fixed through their differences from one another' (*ibid.*: 28). The central sign around which other signs gain their meanings is referred to as the 'nodal point' which can 'partially fix meaning' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 113). Jørgensen and Louise (2004) further explain,

A nodal point is a privileged sign around which the other signs are ordered; the other signs acquire their meaning from their relationship to the nodal point. In medical discourses, for example, 'the body' is a nodal point around which many other meanings are crystallized. Signs such as 'symptoms', 'tissue' and 'scalpel' acquire their meaning by being related to 'the body' in particular ways. A nodal point in political discourses is 'democracy' and in national discourses a nodal point is 'the people' (*ibid.*: 26).

Analysing how meanings are attached to nodal points reveals power struggles among various groups and individuals. In their attempt to articulate meanings favourable to their subject positions, they create 'floating signifiers,' another crucial term in discourse theory defined as 'the signs that different discourses struggle to invest with meaning in their own particular way' (Jørgensen and Louise, 2004: 28). For example, 'air travel' may serve to mean a convenient method of travel whilst at the same time being referred to as one of the main contributors to CO² emissions and global warming. Business groups may attach their identity in a way that would attempt to exclude the meaning of 'air travel' as one of the main contributors to global warming which should be completely eradicated, a position which can be propagated by environmentalist groups. As Howarth and Stavrakakis (2000) conclude, 'meaning depends on the orders of discourse that constitute its identity and significance' (*ibid.*: 3).

The totality of meaning, in turn, creates the field of discursivity. It is constructed by a series of signs articulated in relation to other signs in an attempt to achieve a 'closure', defined as a 'temporary stop to the fluctuations in the meaning of the signs' (Jørgensen and Louise, 2004: 28). Although meaning can be partially fixed, discursive fields will always have some alternative interpretations, or a 'surplus of meaning', thus precluding a single discourse achieving a complete closure (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 11).

It is inevitable that some articulations will be excluded from the dominant discourse, in which case 'floating signifiers' attain a temporary state of stability. The field of discursivity is constructed by the surplus of meaning within the 'terrain of unfixity' which 'escapes the differential logic of discourse' (Torfing, 1999: 92). The degree of 'fixity' differentiates discourse from the discursive and determines the possibility of elements becoming moments (*ibid.*: 93). When the discourse is fixed, albeit temporarily, the consensus may reach the state of 'objectivity', defined as 'the term for what appears as given and unchangeable, for what seemingly does not derive its meaning from its difference from something else' (similar to the concept of ideology) (Jørgensen and Louise, 2004: 37). Alternatively, when the discourse is in flux, it can be referred to as 'political', characterised by struggles to fill 'empty signifiers' and create a sedimented discourse. In other words, 'Objectivity is the historical outcome of political processes and struggles', however the line between objective and political can be at times unclear and unstable (Jørgensen and Louise, 2004:36-7).

It is in the nature of politics to compete for power by attempting to hegemonise the content. Hegemonic struggles take place by means of articulation, defined as a 'practice that establishes a relation among discursive elements' (Torfing, 2005: 15). As Laclau puts it, 'The field of the social could thus be regarded as a trench war in which different political projects strive to articulate a greater number of social signifiers around themselves' (1990: 28). Despite the possibility of certain discourses becoming dominant, there is always a limit to its articulation since there are alternative meanings within the constitutive outside which may challenge the hegemony. A dominant discourse fosters its identity through the conflict with alternative articulations, or 'the Other' (Howarth and

Stavrakakis, 2000: 9). Hegemonic discourse pushes alternative discourses into a 'constitutive outside', comprised of social antagonisms (Torfing, 2000: 124). This particularly applies to cases when structural dislocation⁴ occurs. The collapse of the Soviet Union, for example, has challenged the communist discourse. Other examples of structural dislocation include events such as the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre, the Great Depression of the 1930s, and others.

Applying discourse theory to empirical studies allows researchers to dissect the process of identity construction by focusing on the construction of hegemonic discourses and social antagonism. For instance, the discourse of the clash of civilisations articulates the 'Western identity' by antagonising it to the non-Western ones. This is done by simplifying differences and similarities characteristic of these identities. Similarly, the politics of nationalism is constructed. As Torfing points out, 'To exercise hegemonic power one needs to hegemonise the empty signifiers of 'the nation' and 'the people' by giving them a particular content' (2000: 193). The constitutive outside, or 'the Other', is being articulated as enemies which preclude a nation from realising its identity. In cases of dislocation, when there are several different articulations of the nodal point of the nation, discourses rely heavily on articulating social antagonism with the aim to achieve hegemony.

In order to analyse the process of creating social antagonisms, discourse theorists use the concepts referred to as 'logics of equivalence and difference'. The logic of equivalence creates identities by overriding differences, thus articulating certain meanings equivalent to one another (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 124). The construction of the logic of equivalence is especially evident in cases of major external threats, such as war or natural disasters. Torfing (1999) provides the following example of the logic of equivalence,

Faced with the threat of Nazism, the Conservative Party and the Labour Party tended to stress their common commitment to liberal democratic values. The content of the values shared by the two parties was, of course, emptied to the degree that 'freedom' and 'democracy' became signifiers without a signified; merely symbolizing a communitarian space deprived of its fullness due to the presence of the evil forces of Nazism (*ibid.*: 125).

The logic of difference influences the identity in the opposite way from the logic of equivalence by 'incorporating those disarticulated elements into an expanding order' (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 1999: 11), thus making discourses more complex. The following statement helps to demonstrate the distinction between these two logics, 'Whereas a project employing the logic of equivalence seeks to divide social space by condensing meanings around two antagonistic poles, a project employing a logic of difference attempts to weaken and displace a sharp antagonistic polarity' (*ibid.*). Both types of logics are not self-exclusive and may exist simultaneously. Although one logic may take the dominant position within the discursive field, it is also often the case that both, logic of equivalence and difference interchange in cases of structural dislocation (Torfing, 2000: 126).

In the case of structural dislocation, it is important to also consider the role of the agency, defined here as 'an intentionally acting subject' (Torfing, 2000: 137). Agency is closely interconnected with structure, referred to as 'the complex and relatively enduring relationships that define the basic properties of the system and permit its continued reproduction' (*ibid.*). The relationship between structure and agency is fairly complex. While both, structure and agency influence one another, they

⁴ Dislocation is defined as 'the process by which the contingency of discursive structures is made visible' (Torfing, 2000: 13).

do not fully constitute each other. In the words of Laclau, ‘agents themselves transform their own identity in so far as they actualise certain structural potentialities and reject other’ (1990: 30). Analysing the process of dislocation within the structure demonstrates the efforts of subjects to come to terms with their ‘split’ identities by assigning meanings to new circumstances (Torfing, 2005: 15). For example, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, political leaders who traditionally identified with the Communist Party underwent the ‘process of subjectivation’⁵ and redefined themselves as national leaders of newly independent states (Torfing, 2000: 150).

Dislocations present decisive opportunities for social and political agencies to reconstruct their identities through articulating different solutions to the crisis. Such articulations take the form of myths, which if accepted turn into social imaginaries. It is important to distinguish between these two concepts. Myths provide an initial interpretation to the solution of the crisis. Myths which become deeply ingrained into hegemonic discourse and are ‘successful in neutralising social dislocations’ are referred to as social imaginaries (the Enlightenment, for instance) (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000: 15-6). The discourse of foreign policy may integrate different myths of national identity, globalisation, economic and political reforms in attempts to achieve hegemony. In the process of competing for hegemony, some myths become social imaginaries, whilst influencing the boundaries for possible policy articulations.

Events such as the collapse of the Soviet Union as well as numerous domestic crises that have happened in Ukraine since the country became independent can be considered as dislocatory experiences. Such dislocations created ample opportunities for different subjects to articulate their visions of reality as a way to solve the crisis. Politicians in Ukraine have competed for the ability to dominate political discourse. As Torfing notes ‘there are often struggles about the content of these solutions and the emerging hegemonic strategies are constantly reformulated as a result of the articulation of a plurality of discourses and identities’ (1999: 151). These struggles at times manifest themselves in what Hajer refers to as ‘discourse coalitions’, which are comprised of political actors who, based on shared interests and visions of reality, ‘produce story lines on specific problems, employing the conceptual machinery of the new discourse’ (1993: 46). Such coalitions may be constructed by ‘organic intellectuals’, who ‘aim to establish a certain leadership within the emerging hegemonic projects’ (Torfing, 1999: 151).

Despite the fact that many members of Ukraine’s ruling elite share a common background of being prominent members of the Communist Party in the former Soviet Union and/or have benefited from the massive privatisation during the 1990s, their visions of Ukrainian state and nationhood, in many cases, have evolved and substantially changed. Speaking at the University of California International Institute, a Ukrainian academic notes

There are many different oligarchs in Ukraine... Within ten years or so, oligarchs managed to privatize practically everything in Ukraine. So [today] they have much to lose... There are clear trends that oligarchs want stability, they want a more transparent economy, they need more rule of law... Thus there are signs that rather powerful economic forces in Ukraine are interested in political change (Riabchuk, 2004: 3).

⁵ The ‘process of subjectivation’ is referred to as the process of ‘becoming somebody...takes the form of an attempt to fill the empty space of the lack through identification’ (Torfing, 2000: 150). At times of dislocation, political actors emerge as ‘traumatised’ or ‘split’ subjects. They attempt to reestablish their identities by going through the process of subjectivation when ‘identifying with the forms of identity that are offered by various discourses’ (*ibid.*: 306).

Efforts by different political activists and business leaders to articulate their visions of their nation and state to the concept of Europe have important consequences for Ukraine's transition. Countries with newly established democracies are particularly vulnerable to deep dislocatory experiences and rely heavily on subjective factors and the personalities of the elite who compete for hegemony. Torfing, for example, notes '[w]hen structural dislocation goes deep down to the very bottom of the social [as was the case in Ukraine when the Soviet Union collapsed], the need for order expands infinitely' (1999: 152).

'Europe' and Ukraine's statehood: split subjects and empty signifiers

With its roots going back to Ukraine's powerful intellectual movement in the 1920-30s, the idea of 'Europe' has had multiple meanings with strong political connotations. During these years, several Ukrainian intellectuals articulated their wish for Ukraine to be independent (see, for instance, the works of Mykhola Khvylovyi, 1921, 1922, 1923). This intellectual discourse linked Ukraine's identity to Europe by creating a logic of equivalence that simplified differences and stressed similarities between Ukraine and its Western neighbours. Russia, in turn, was articulated as 'the Other', thus becoming a social antagonism within the discourse. The Ukrainian nation was portrayed as distinct, separate from the Russian nation, depicted as imperialist power (see Prykhoda, 2004, Wilson, 2000).

Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, many dissidents and other political activists with strong nationalistic feelings reignited some of the meanings attached to the concept of a Ukrainian nation which was articulated by the 1920-30s intellectual movement. While promoting Ukraine's independence, the nationalist discourse was guided by the 'creative intelligentsia', composed of many writers, journalists and cultural activists (Nastysh, 2003: 310). The nationalistic myth articulated Ukraine as a European nation in cultural and historical sense (see Wilson, 2000: 179-180). The discourse was able to compete for hegemony following a dislocation created by the Chernobyl explosion. The fact that the ruling elite did not inform the general public about the explosion immediately after it took place resulted in many fatalities. The growing social discontent resulting from the nuclear disaster as well as economic difficulties made it difficult for the ruling elite to maintain the communist hegemony.⁶

The political dissidents, many of whom were released in the late 1980s, attempted to define Ukraine, its statehood and nationhood, by using ethno-cultural and national history discourse. In 1989, for example, the Popular Movement for Perestroika in Ukraine (Rukh) was created, which created a logic of equivalence as a chain among various groups and individuals with different political backgrounds and wide-ranging views on reform united by the search for change.⁷ Within the dissident discourse,

⁶ A prominent Ukrainian historian commented on this period, 'Despite deep-rooted opposition from conservatives in the party and the society as a whole, Gorbachev launched his attempt to make the Soviet system, particularly its stagnant economy, more efficient... Before the impact of Gorbachev's reforms reached Ukraine, however, the country was shaken by a catastrophe of huge proportions and global significance. On 26 April 1986, a reactor at the huge Chernobyl nuclear plant, located about 130 km north of Kiev, exploded... In traditional fashion, Soviet authorities initially attempted to cover up the catastrophe, which, as was established later, resulted from human error, gross negligence, and the faulty design of the reactor' (Subtelny, 1994: 534).

⁷ For discussion about the dissident movement and Ukraine's ruling elite of the late 1980s, see Nastysh (2003), Subtelny (1994) and Wolczuk (2001), among others.

the nationalists attempted to use the concept of Europe as a consolidating tool by defining the Ukrainian nation and direction for state building reforms.

However, this discourse was not able to achieve hegemony. As Wolczuk notes, 'because of the tight cultural and political integration, anti-Moscow fervour was not an automatic response to the opening of public space initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev' (2001: 65). Many dissidents were sidelined and 'barely tolerated' by Ukraine's Soviet ruling elite (*ibid.*). Yet, as the Soviet discourse began to disintegrate and was unable to signify the changes that were rapidly unfolding, Ukraine's communist officials emerged as split subjects and identified quickly with the nationalist cause. While attempting to preserve their hegemonic positions, the ruling elite united with the dissident movement within the logic of equivalence propagating Ukraine's independence. The movement, however, was not guided by a clear vision of how Ukraine should pursue its transition and foreign policy (Wolczuk, 2001: 91).

Despite the cooperation between the former communist ruling elite and the nationalists, the proclamation of Ukraine's independence did not bring many dissidents into the government ranks, as was the case in its Western neighbours where independence brought many from exile and political prisons to lead their countries in the new direction. Nevertheless, the fact that Ukraine had a much more interdependent relationship with Russia than the Central Eastern European countries (CEECs) meant that the dissolution of the USSR created a massive dislocation in the country's political terrain, which had to redefine its internal and external policies almost from scratch. Even though most of the ruling elite had been in positions of government power during the Soviet Union, they had to identify with their new roles of being leaders of the sovereign country. On the one hand, as leaders of the independent state, they were no longer subject to domination from the Moscow political apparatus. On the other hand, the fact that they inherited a tight economic dependence on Russia and lack of established political structures corresponding to Ukraine's independent statehood created tensions within their subject positions.

Having attained independence, Ukraine's ruling elite articulated their visions of 'statehood', 'sovereignty', 'independence' and 'nation', all of which became floating signifiers without solidified meanings. 'Ukraine', as an independent country, became a nodal point around which these moments were attached to new meanings:

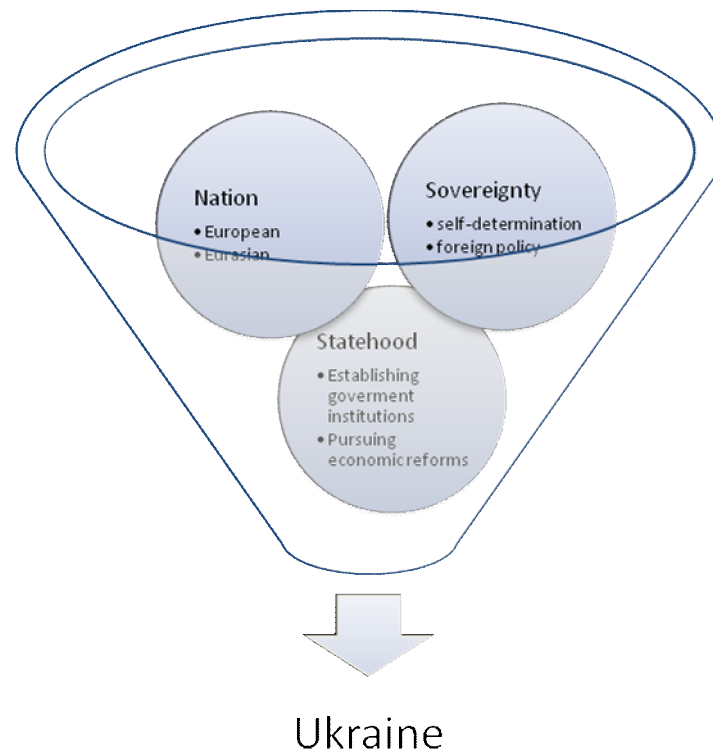


Figure 1

The post-communist political discourse illustrating some of the empty signifiers tied around the nodal point of Ukraine.

The ‘return to Europe’ was one of the myths to which the concept of Ukrainian nation was linked. As Torfing states, ‘[t]he homogenization and substantialization of the national space will take the form of a number of predicative statements defining what the nation is’ (1999: 193). The myth of Europe was articulated within the discourse on national identity and sovereignty. ‘Europe’ was portrayed as a symbol of political stability and harmony, economic prosperity and national unity, ‘an unattainable ideal’ (Prykhoda, 2004: 40).

However, the myth of the ‘return to Europe’ in Ukrainian post-communist discourses substantially differed from that in the CEECs. Wolczuk, for instance, highlights one of the important differences:

Ukrainian independence could not be equated with a break from the past and the ‘restoration of normality’ through a ‘return to Europe’, the metaphor which encapsulated the transformation embarked on in East-Central Europe, including the Baltic states... There could be no ‘restorative revolution’ in Ukraine in 1991, because of the paucity of collective historical memories which treasured a vision of a ‘golden past’ and the template of a ‘normal’ social and political order (Wolczuk, 2001: 93).

In the case of Ukraine, ‘Europe’ was articulated within the discourse of a cultural and political heritage rather than as politics and foreign policy, at least in the early 1990s. Ukrainian politicians did list the goal of European integration among other aims to be pursued; however, it was one of the myths which did not come to dominate the discourse on foreign policy. Nevertheless, elites drafting the ‘Declaration of Independence’ (1990) proclaimed Ukraine’s plan to become part of the European integration process. This point was reiterated on 25th December 1990, when Ukrainian policy-makers adopted the ‘Declaration on Ukraine’s Sovereignty and Foreign Policy’. Leonid Kravchuk, the first

president of post-Communist Ukraine, was especially instrumental in creating the logic of equivalence linking the nodal point of the Ukrainian nation to the concept of 'Europe' which in turn became a floating signifier.

Kuchma: from Eurasionism to Europeanism

Economic difficulties and political instability have partially undermined the credibility of President Kravchuk to lead Ukraine on its path to successful transition. Massive inflation and political uncertainty created internal dislocations which were further exacerbated by the prospect of elections in 1994. The pre-election campaign constructed a logic of equivalence which simplified differences between Russia and Ukraine and the causes of Ukrainian economic difficulties. This logic was propagated by the 'Eurasian' school of thought, which maintained that closer integration with the CIS provided an opportunity for Ukraine to prosper economically which would, in turn, guarantee its sovereignty (Prizel, 2000: 19-21). Before the elections, the popular discourse was dominated by struggles to attach meanings to such floating signifiers as 'sovereignty' and 'economic prosperity' which were linked to Ukraine's partnership with Russia. Kuchma used the pre-election dislocation embedded within rising inflation to articulate his neo-Soviet discourse with a vision of Ukraine as a victim of the West and a loyal partner of Russia:

The West has made it its goal to exploit all our reforms and efforts at restructuring, to ruin everything for us, and to turn the mighty Soviet Union, including the present independent Ukrainian state into an economic appendage providing raw materials and cheap labour. Nobody, [whether] in the USA, England, France or Germany, has any interest in a strong Russia and a strong Ukraine. We must find our own way out of the crisis, expecting help from nobody (Leonid Kuchma, Prime Minister of Ukraine, 1993, cited in Bukkvoll, 2002: 131).

Some authors argue that the election of Leonid Kuchma as the next president signified increased support for pro-Russian policy among the general public and a shift in power alliances among the Ukrainian elite (see Prizel, 2000, Bukkvoll 2002, Wilson, 2000). However, the myth that has linked the Ukrainian national idea to the concept of Europe has not been eradicated by the neo-Soviet pre-election discourse. Although the popular pro-Russian discourse was dominant before the elections, after Kuchma became president the wish to join the West through membership in the EU became a focal point in Ukrainian politics. Moreover, since 1996, the 'European' myth has shifted from the meaning of historical and cultural heritage to the discourse on foreign policy. The pro-EU discourse gained hegemony, culminating in the 1998 Strategy of Ukraine's Integration to the European Union, which laid out the primary direction for Ukraine's policy reforms required in order to attain the ultimate aim of EU membership⁸ (*Strategy*, 1998: 1). To account for such a shift from pre-election neo-Soviet discourse to the staunchly pro-European policy proclamations, it is important to consider Kuchma's 'process of subjectivation' (see footnote 8 for definition) by analysing how he identified

⁸ The main guidelines of the Integration Process, as outlined by the Ukrainian government, include: (1) approximation of legislation of Ukraine to the legislation of the EU (including the guarantee of human rights); (2) economic integration and development of trade relations between Ukraine and EU; (3) Ukraine's integration into the EU within the context of all-European security; (4) political consolidation and strengthening of democracy; (5) adaptation of the Social Policy of Ukraine to the EU standards; (6) sectoral cooperation; (7) cooperation in environmental protection. In addition, the strategy includes a description of internal support of the integration process, including organisational, financial, legal and informational forms of official support (*Strategy*, 1998: 1).

with his new subject position of being president of Ukraine. It is also important to analyse the structural factors, particularly the internal power dynamics, as well as the influence of Russia and the EU and the US on Ukraine's ruling elite.

In 1994, as a 'split subject,'⁹ Kuchma, inherited the identity of the leader of the sovereign state. According to Laclau, following a dislocation actors go through the 'process of subjectivation' when they assume their new identities (1990: 60). There may be many points of identification, and the subject can decide within such terrain 'to identify with one of the emerging hegemonic projects that seem to offer a 'solution' to the 'crisis' of the structure' (Torfing, 1999: 150). For Kuchma, his identity as a leader of a sovereign state was challenged in the course of Ukraine-Russia negotiations. While citing interviews with two of Kuchma's political consultants, Vladimir Malinkovich and Mykhailo Pohrebins'ky, Chudowsky notes Kuchma's personal apprehension in dealing with Russia in the mid-1990s:

When dealing with Yeltsin, Kuchma often complained that the Russian president "would wag his finger at him as if he were only a provincial party boss" rather than president of a large country, or that Ukrainians were once again treated as "little brothers". When Kuchma visited the West, particularly the United States, on the other hand, he would receive honor guards and twenty-one-gun salutes (2002: 29).

Moreover, while the Ukrainian ruling elite were reaffirming their country's sovereignty, the Russian officials were pushing intensely for further integration among the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the affairs of which were considered by a separate CIS committee (a different one from the foreign affairs committee) (Solchanyk, 1998: 30). The Russian authorities questioned Ukrainian ownership rights over the Black Sea Fleet, claiming that it should be part of the CIS Strategic Armed Forces. The issue of the Crimea was used as a 'bargaining chip' in negotiations regarding the Black Sea Fleet (*ibid.*).¹⁰ Several personal interviews with government officials as well as those printed in the government newspapers mentioned many difficulties in constructing Ukraine's relations with Russia as on 'equal terms'. One of many of such interviews was published in *Uriadovyi Kurier* with Oleksandr Skipal's'kyi from the Ministry of Defence who directly referred to 'political games' that Moscow had been playing on the post-Soviet terrain (Skipal's'kyi, 1994: 8).

The fact that the Russian side had difficulties accepting Ukraine as an equal and independent state contributed to the growing dominance of the pro-European discourse. Discourses on foreign policy are closely linked to that on national identity. As Torfing states, 'To exercise hegemonic power one needs to hegemonize the empty signifiers of 'the nation' and 'the people' by giving them a particular content' (1999: 193). Through the logic of equivalence, actors attempt to unify chains of meanings into the nation, a process which also includes construction of 'enemies of the nation'. However, during and shortly after the presidential elections in 1994, for Kuchma articulating 'Russia' as an

⁹ The 1994 elections created a dislocation after which Kuchma emerged with a shattered identity. He had to define himself as a new leader of the country and identify with one of the discourses (i.e. specific policy directions), thus go through the 'process of subjectivation'.

¹⁰ The Crimea had been transferred to Ukraine in 1954 by the Soviet authorities. In 1992 the Russian Foreign Affairs Parliamentary Committee issued a resolution declaring the transfer of Crimea illegal, because it had been decided and implemented by the 'totalitarian leadership of the discredited Communist Party of the Soviet Union' (Solchanyk, 1998: 34). A similar argument was applied to Sevastopol, the city which, according to the 1948 decree adopted by the Presidium of the Russian Supreme Soviet, was technically an administrative unit. Russian officials argued Sevastopol did not belong to the Crimea and, therefore, had not even been transferred to Ukraine in 1954 (*ibid.*).

‘enemy of the Ukrainian nation’ was a difficult option. Ukraine remained economically and politically dependent on Russia.¹¹ Hence, Kuchma was hesitant to continue to articulate the pro-European myth constructed by his predecessor. Most of Kuchma’s speeches in 1994 referred to Ukraine as a Eurasian and/or Central European Nation while stressing the need to construct a close relationship with Russia. The Eurasian myth was, as Andrew Wilson rightly noted, ‘mainly cultural and historical, as exemplified by Kuchma’s claim in his controversial inauguration speech [in 1994] that ‘Ukraine is historically part of the [same] Eurasian economic and cultural space’ as Russia and Belarus’ (2000: 295).

Despite stressing close links with Russia, following the elections, Kuchma’s discourse continued to relate to the post-independence myth articulating Ukraine as an independent state. The empty signifier became ‘economic reform’ (see Kuchma, 1994, 1994a, 1994b), while the meaning of Eurasia was integrated into the Ukrainian sovereign nation myth. The post-election discourse has constructed Ukraine as an active power in the centre of ‘a second ‘Eurasian zone’, ‘a new geoeconomic corridor’ an alternative to Russian Eurasia, by uniting the interests of those ‘states of the CIS which bridge the post-Soviet space with neighbouring geopolitical regions’ (Wilson, 2000: 295). In other words, the myth of Eurasia, where Russia was considered a dominant power has been rearticulated to include Ukraine as a regional power.

Meanwhile, relations with Russia did not improve; in fact, tensions were growing over the issues pertaining to the Crimea, the Black Sea Fleet and the CIS affairs, as several government officials confirmed (see Horbulin, 1996: 5). In the midst of pressures from Russia, Kuchma’s speeches began to integrate into the chains of equivalence concepts of democracy, human rights and statehood to the myth of Europe (see Kuchma 1996, 1996a, 1996b). While reflecting on the mid-1990s, Kuzio highlighted, ‘In moving toward Europe, Ukraine can learn, Kuchma believes, from those countries where democracy has existed for a long time (Kuzio, 2002: 204). At the same time, by articulating Ukraine as a ‘European’ country, Kuchma was able to counterbalance Russian pressure as well as consolidate power in the domestic arena. Moreover, the pro-European myth constructed Ukraine as a European state in *political*, not just in a cultural and historical sense (as was the case in with the 18-20th century dissident movement and then post-independence years). The government discourse used the logic of equivalence to link the concept of Europe to economic progress and high living standards, democratic ideals and the Ukrainian nation, all of which has helped to consolidate power in the domestic arena. Anatoliy Zlenko, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, articulated the desire to attain European values stating:

European integration is not only our [Ukraine’s] strategic goal, for which we carry out our economic and political reforms. For us it has become an inalienable component of our long-term national development strategy, a factor which at the same time gives meaning, purpose and direction to the reforms. We may even think of it as a means of achieving our domestic development goals (Zlenko, 2002: 23).

The Kuchma Government did not necessarily follow through its pro-EU declarations, failing to implement the necessary reforms (see Wolczuk, 2003). Moreover, he was also precluded from

¹¹ Russia’s energy supplies amounted to over 60 percent of Ukraine’s imports, including 70 percent of oil, 50 percent of natural gas and 100 percent of nuclear fuel (Wolczuk, 2003: 38-41). Ethnic Russians constituted over 20 percent of the Ukrainian population, predominantly in the Eastern regions (Polyakov, 2001: 4).

achieving the closure of articulating Ukraine as a potential EU candidate due to external factors, including the policy expressed by European officials.¹² However, the pro-EU discourse created a chain of equivalence that unified various interests, including government officials charged with implementing Ukraine's foreign policy, a growing number of think-tanks (the majority of them staunchly pro-Western), as well as an emerging business lobby interested in Ukraine's closer economic cooperation with the EU.¹³ The external factors, which included foreign aid and investments, were greatly capitalised on in the official discourse in the mid- to end-1990s. For example, in 1998, Prime Minister Pustovoienko stressed the importance of Western aid and investment for Ukraine, citing that levels of foreign direct investments (FDI) increased threefold in 1997. The US, Germany and the Netherlands were cited as leading investors (Pustovoienko, 1998: 4). The news that the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) had finally been ratified by all EU member states was met with great enthusiasm by Ukrainian officials, citing Ukraine's road to economic reforms by following the 'European model' (see the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1998).

By the end of 1990s, Ukrainian politicians consistently repeated their country's aspirations to gain membership in the European community. By 1998, the myth was articulated as 'Euro-Atlantic integration'. As Semen Uralov, one of Ukraine's political commentators noted,

At that time [the end of 1990s] no one could comprehensibly explain what it [Euro-Atlantic integration] actually meant. But it sounded really impressive – there is something from the mythical Atlantis. A lot of derivatives appeared: Euroatlantic prospects, Euroatlantic intentions and so on. Only experts were aware that this term combines two different projects: integration into the EU and joining NATO... For some Ukrainian oligarchs Euroatlantic integration meant access to EU and US markets, other oligarchs could just hang out in Davos with the world elite as part of it. As a result of this ambiguity of interpretations Euroatlantic integration became a screen which hid the real intentions of the Ukrainian elite' (Uralov, 2007: 1).

It is evident that initially (1995-1998) Kuchma's foreign policy discourse was mostly dominated by the general reference to Euro-Atlantic integration, which often linked the EU to NATO integration.

¹² Following several declarations by the Kuchma Government at the end of the 1990s proclaiming Ukraine's wish to be recognised as a candidate state, the European Union never officially acknowledged such a possibility. In 1999, for example, the European Council adopted its Common Strategy which stressed 'support for the democratic and economic transition process' without acknowledging that Ukraine could potentially become a candidate for EU membership (see *Common Strategy*, 1999: 1-2).

¹³ By declaring European integration as one of its primary foreign policy goals, the Kuchma Administration took some steps towards institutionalising this choice. In 2000 the government established a working group to investigate the prospects of Ukrainian businesses within the EU, as well as researching the opportunities for increasing European investment in Ukraine (Cabinet of Ministers, 2000: 1). Moreover, the president issued a decree aimed at streamlining the organisation of executive bodies responsible for coordinating the Strategy of Ukraine's Integration to the European Union (*Rozporiadzhennia*, 2000: 1). In 2002 Kuchma endorsed the creation of the State Council for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration with the aim of increasing inter-governmental coordination for implementing the reforms required for EU membership (*Ukaz Prezydenta Ukraïny*, 2002:1). In addition, the Ministry of Economy and European Integration, and the Ministry of Justice, as well as the Department for European Integration under the auspices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, were responsible for fulfilling economic, legal and political membership criteria. In 2001, the Committee on European Integration was formed within the parliament (Wolczuk, 2004: 14-5). A majority of the established think-tanks that specialise in foreign policy and economy have also become strong advocates of Ukraine's pro-European policy. Kuzio, for example, have examined the following organisations with a European orientation, including Ukrainian Perspectives, Centre for Economic and Political Research, Institute for Transformation Society, Politychna Dumka, Centre for Political and Conflict Studies, Democratic Initiatives and Devos, among others (2002: 203).

Most political groups were unified within the pro-European logic of equivalence. This is due to the fact that ‘Europe’ has been associated as the policy aimed at economic and political well-being. The idea of ‘returning to Europe’ has also been supported by the majority of the Ukrainian population.¹⁴ At the same time, Ukraine stood little chance of realistically pursuing its membership in the European Union, thus allowing even those who would traditionally be pro-Russian to accept generally the pro-EU declarations of the ruling elite.¹⁵ The majority of the Ukrainian elite agreed that Ukraine was a European state in an *historical* and *cultural* sense and should therefore pursue the policy of a ‘return to Europe’, thus transitioning this myth into imaginary. However, the lack of any clear membership signal from the EU as well as Ukraine’s internal political disputes and weak economy have precluded the myth articulating Ukraine’s Europeaness in the *political* sense to become an imaginary.

Moreover, by the end of 1990s, there were still some differences within the hegemonic pro-EU discourse between those who believed that Ukraine is an Eastern Slavic country, the belief which ‘sees no contradiction between being both European and an eastern Slavic country’ and those who proclaimed that Europe was the sole root of Ukraine’s identity and foreign policy (see Kuzio, 2002: 202). The divide between these groups is difficult to define, since at times of dislocation the ruling elite tend to redefine their identities in pursuit of hegemony. As Nastych puts it, ‘Another peculiarity of the post-Soviet elite is their desire for power and the neglect of means to reach ends’, which can result in drastic changes in policy positions (2003: 319). In a study examining foreign policy orientation and domestic politics, Kuzio (2002) provides an interesting overview of the general party positions. The following figure illustrates the transition of foreign policy orientation among various political groups during the 1990s:



Figure 2

The views of the Ukrainian elite regarding Ukraine’s national identity and foreign policy.

¹⁴ According to a poll conducted by the Razumkov Centre in 2002, ‘57.6 of respondents are sure that Ukraine should join the EU’ (see Pashkov and Chaly, 2002: 3).

¹⁵ For example, during the round-table organised by the Razumkov Centre, where different members of the Ukrainian political elite discussed issues concerning foreign policy, a Communist representative, Yevhen Marmarov, said that ‘the Communists were not against European integration’ but believed that ‘Ukraine is simply not ready for it and has to strengthen the national economy first’ (see Pashkov and Chaly, 2002: 3).

Concluding Remarks

After gaining independence, Ukrainian politicians have made general references to Ukraine's place in Europe. Leonid Kravchuk, the first president of the post-Soviet Ukraine (1991-1994), can be characterised as pro-Western insofar as he articulated Ukraine's European vocation as a matter of its sovereignty. In large measure this was the result of the insecurity felt in ensuring the country's independence during tense negotiations with Russia. The myth of a 'return to Europe' has been one of the continuing discourses. However, it was expressed only in general terms. It did not list the goal of integration with the European structures as an urgent priority (as was the case with some of the Central European countries), but rather included it among other foreign policy goals. Kravchuk's pro-Western discourse was easily displaced by the campaign during the presidential elections in 1994. Leonid Kuchma, who won the elections, used the neo-Soviet story-lines linking Ukrainian economic development to its close partnership with Russia and blaming the 'West' for its difficulties in reforming. Kuchma linked Ukraine's sovereignty to its economic well-being. Associating that with the need to work closely with Russia thereby appealed to those who wanted both economic stability and cooperation with Russia. Nevertheless, the neo-Soviet pre-election discourse stands in sharp contrast to the discourse articulated by Kuchma in the years following his election. After 1995, and especially after 1996, the wish to join the West through membership of both the EU and NATO has become a focal point of the hegemonic discourse propagating membership in the Euro-Atlantic community.

It appears then that following Ukraine's independence most of its political actors who attained leadership have referred to the concept of 'Europe' in one way or another. Despite reverting to the neo-Soviet discourse before the elections, once in power politicians do not seem to challenge the general pro-Western course. However, the meaning of 'Europe' has changed in the last decade. Moreover, in the course of Ukraine's democratisation, the role of the political activists who are not part of the government but, in some instances, have some influence on it, such as members of the business, think-tank and, in some instances, academic community, have also been transformed.

Discourse theory suits this case study particularly well. The concept of 'Europe' has been integrated into many aspects of Ukraine's political discourse. Several authors noted the importance of analysing both structural factors and matters relating to agency (i.e. the role of individuals and groups, including politicians, business alliances as well as think-tank and government institutions). Discourse theory fits such a holistic approach particularly well. Moreover, Ukrainian officials are often blamed for not implementing the necessary reforms to realise their declared policies. For example, Kataryna Wolczuk (2001) conducted a study where she concluded that the Kuchma administration pursued (at least in a declaratory sense) a policy of EU integration but without the necessary reforms. The discourse theory helps in understanding the gap between government rhetoric and the process of policy implementation.

In addition, the concept of the 'split subject' and the subject positions is helpful in understanding why the political leaders changed their policy rhetoric after the elections, as was the case with Leonid Kravchuk and Leonid Kuchma. Although many authors tend to categorise Ukrainian politicians as

either pro-Western or pro-Russian, such classification tends to disregard the complexity of the post-communist transition inherited by Ukraine. The research demonstrates how and why the ruling elite have been articulating the concept of 'Europe' and the role that such articulations have played in the Ukraine's transition. This study also shows that the meaning that Ukraine's political leaders have attached to Europe has drastically changed in the last decade. In the early 1990s, President Kravchuk was embedded within the nationalist discourse, borrowing from the dissident tradition (despite the fact that nearly 80% of the ruling elite had been members of the former communist government under the Soviet system). In the mid-end 1990s, the concept of 'Euro-Atlantic integration' became the 'nodal point' around which several 'moments', such as 'economic reform', 'national identity', 'security', 'the rule of law', 'political reform' and others, were constructed. Although 'Euro-Atlantic integration' generally came to signify integration with the EU and NATO, the nodal point was emptied of its meaning, thus becoming an empty signifier. This allowed the political actors to adopt the European subject identity without fulfilling their promises to implement necessary reforms for Ukraine to reach the EU economic and political standards.

The notion that Ukraine is a European country in terms of its history, geography and culture became a myth and successfully transitioned to become a social imaginary. Most Ukrainians, both members of the elite and the general public, believe that Ukraine is a European country (all of the interviewees have confirmed this point). In the late 1990s to early 2000s, and especially after the Orange Revolution, the Ukrainian elite began to articulate a myth that Ukraine is a European state in the political sense. However, several internal and external dislocations have precluded a 'closure', or 'partial fixation', from the belief that politically Ukraine is a European state. The political identity has been articulated to mean an EU candidate country. The lack of any signal from the EU on membership, consistent pressure from Russia, Ukraine's weak economy and inadequate political institutions, have all precluded this myth from becoming a social imaginary. This has several consequences, which are further discussed in the complete chapter of the PhD dissertation.

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