

Ukraine: Transition Reset

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Partner organisation: The Congress of Cultural Activists, established during the Euromaidan civil unrest (2013), www.culturalactivism.org

“The aim of the Cultural Congress is to support the reform agenda in cultural politics, and foster dialogue and participation aiming at a progressive and inclusive cultural policy. In this respect, culture is seen as a means to involve citizen in social and political matters, comment on current debates and also provide opportunity for a new creative industry to emerge”.

Olena Pravylo, Chairperson

With the Maidan revolution, the process of transition has been reset. Three years into it, a difficult reform path has been launched, overshadowed by an ongoing war. While it has had some success stories, it has also had many setbacks. The Ukrainian partner in the Transition Dialogue Network, Congress of Cultural Activists, has worked on a series of audio and video interviews in Kyiv, Ternopil, Dnipro, Rivne, and Odessa, and organised public discussions and a conference for cultural activists. The organisation also hosted one of the meetings of the network. These were part of an effort to map the generation in transition in Ukraine. The following country profile is based largely on interviews conducted in Ukraine over the past two years. Interviewees were asked to talk about their memories and their experiences of transition. Our assumption is that many of the challenges we face today are legacies of the Soviet past and the first phases of transition.

Apart from the discussions and the conference, organised in Kyiv, we have conducted about three dozen audio and video interviews in Kyiv, Dnipro, Odessa, and Ternopil, as well as a few in Rivne. Ukrainians in Dnipro were especially patriotic in their political attitudes, but also rather passive in terms of civic engagement, with a strong focus on their daily life.

The main question in these open-style interviews was what the interviewee calls transition. Many do not think about transition in these terms, they perceive the situation as frozen or speak of changes occurring only in the last few years. In some regions people have a strong Soviet-time identity, in others they identify strongly as Ukrainians and acknowledge the fact that if change is to come, they need to be an active part of it with all the responsibilities that implies. In Donetsk, the understanding of the people is that the oligarchs will take care of them and that there is always someone else to take care of them.

The general sense, however, is that Ukraine is changing. De-communisation and decentralisation are key topics, but a broad and open discussion about them is missing. Many interviewees have a sense that they are excluded from the conversation about public space; communist statues get replaced by nation-centred groups with the same vigour as the Soviets replaced Ukrainian statues, and citizens disagree with the top-down approach being replicated.

Where It All Began

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the end of a process of dissolution that had begun for Ukraine in the late 70s and 80s. Launched with Gorbachev's "*perestroika*"⁴⁶, new multi-party principles were formed. By the time the perestroika movement emerged, the Communist party was already on an irreversible track of self-delegitimation, losing its standing and imposed solidarity. The rift between the ruling party and the societies was becoming

⁴⁶ Perestroika (Russian: перестройка; IPA: [pʲɪrʲɪˈstrɔjkə]) was a political movement, which stood for reformation within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union during the 1980s. It is widely associated with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and his glasnost (meaning "openness") policy reform.

even deeper. The elites were trying to protect the old system by introducing a basic level of pluralism, but this was not enough to save a system in a deep crisis, and it was destined to collapse. Ukraine had already seen the rise of informal oppositional groups and associations at the end of the 70s with the Ukrainian-Helsinki Group, which by the end of the 80s transformed from a human rights organisation into a political one. It was followed by the Ukrainian Democratic Union, the Ukrainian Cultural Club, the Ukrainian Christian Democratic Front and the Ukrainian environmental movement called Green World, supported mainly by intellectuals and students⁴⁷.

"After Chernobyl, the Berlin Wall no Longer Exists"⁴⁸

The words of the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard capture best the dynamics in Ukraine in early 1986. The disastrous nuclear accident that occurred in the restricted zone of Chernobyl removed any doubts about the murderous nature of the regime, which had claimed to care about the people, but instead cared only about its own survival. Trust was irreversibly broken.

“ *“Even if you were among the ones who believed that communism is possible, the concentration of power in the hands of very few in the beginning of its instalment should have ringed alarm bells for the upcoming disaster. In order to instil the ideas of communism, the public sphere had to be modified to fit the ideology. Since this did not happen easily, the ultimate consequences of the regime’s intervention were catastrophic – millions were sacrificed for the sake of the communist idea.”⁴⁹*

⁴⁷ Ukrainian History, *The Beginning of the Building of a Multiparty System in Ukraine in the late 80s - early 90s of XX century*, <http://histua.com/istoriya-ukraini/ukraina-v-umovax-nezaleznosti/formuvannya-bagatopartijnosti>

⁴⁸ J. Baudrillard, *L'illusion de la Fin*, (Stanford University Press, 1994)

⁴⁹ V. Vyatrovych, Olga Salo & Yasmin Yasynevych, *Чорнобиль і совок: розючі паралелі*, (LB.ua, 26 April 2016), http://lb.ua/society/2016/04/26/333911_chornobil_i_sovok_razyuchi_pareleli.html

“The main lesson from Chernobyl was ‘do not trust the authorities.’ The world saw the heroism of Ukrainians. The regime tried to hide the consequences of the explosion and its deadly consequences; it readily sacrificed us, but we never learned to demand the same sacrifice in return.”⁵⁰

Before Chernobyl, most Ukrainians did not question the nature of the Soviet regime; the nuclear catastrophe exposed its defects to a point of no return. The tragedy put many in a disastrous social and ecological environment and people were afraid for their lives. Many had to move away to the Caucasus or to other places in Ukraine, like Odessa.

Surprisingly, not everyone has a negative recollection of the disaster. The younger generation, born in the late 70s and early 80s, remembers the period as an extended vacation time, away from home, at their granny’s house or at the seaside. While 1991, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, formally marks the beginning of the transition, the cracks in the system were already there in the 80s.

My Story or Your Story – our Ukrainian Story of Independence?

1991 was the year that marked the Independence of Ukraine. However, people’s recollection of that time differs greatly, emphasising the ambivalence of personal experience, memories, and interpretations. *“We first did not believe what was happening”,* one of the interviewees said, *“we were to raise the Ukrainian flag for the first time with my parents in the city centre of Ternopil”.*

“But for me, as a KGB officer in Dnipropetrovsk, this was a real tragedy; as officers, we were the elite and we did not see anything wrong about our work – we were just protecting our country, the USSR” (interview excerpts).

⁵⁰ V. Onopryushuk, *Чорнобильська катастрофа запустила процес розвалу Радянського Союзу*, (Gazeta.ua, 27 April 2016), http://gazeta.ua/articles/events-journal/_cornobilska-katastrofa-zapustila-proces-rozvalu-radyanskogo-soyuzu/693446



*"Comradery", façade of a public building in Russian in Ukraine
Source: Olena Pravylo*

Serhiy Oliferchuk, a lawyer from Kyiv, was born in 1972, and at 18 years old soldier in the Soviet Army, working nearby Moscow in the town of Naro-Fominsk. He remembers many Ukrainians in the army, following Ukraine's independence, including himself, immediately displaying the 'Tryzub' (the state coat of arms of Ukraine) on their belt buckles. This demonstrated their newly gained sense of national identity, but the commanders were very angry about it. As a result, when around that time Serhiy requested vacation time to go back to his family in Kyiv. He was put in a military jail, instead. His father helped him escape the detention and as soon as he got home, Serhiy joined the Ukrainian Army. This made him one of few soldiers who took oaths of allegiance to two different countries – the Soviet Union and Ukraine. Serhiy often reflects upon this split of identity and the multiple identities that continue to mark the lives of many of the citizens of the former Soviet Union.

Not everyone feels affected by the changes and even of those who do, not everyone feels positively affected. Aleksandr Dmitriev, who was born in 1973 and is a designer from Odessa remembers: "In the Soviet times my parents worked in a restaurant in Odessa. Work was good and they and I had many options to choose from, despite all the bandits. Now life has become much more difficult, there is

lots of competition and many more restaurants to keep pace with” (interview excerpt).

The Generation(s) of Transition

The generation born in the 70s vividly remembers the change of the system and can be considered to be the generation of transition. As teenagers, they experienced both perestroika and the dissolution of the Soviet system. This, too, is the generation that is most sceptical of transition, as its memories of the Soviet past are not just negative. The pseudo-security that the communist system provided was highly valued and is greatly mourned. Free healthcare is often mentioned as a social benefit that got lost in transition. This is not entirely true, as state healthcare continues to be almost entirely funded by the government. However, this does not mean its standards and quality are not heavily neglected.

The generation of the 80s has different memories of the Soviet past. They recollect years of poverty and a shortage of food and clothing. Still, the transition was a greater challenge for the generation of the 70s; it moved with the country from one period of life to another.

Tonya Mishova was born in 1980, and describes her peers as the generation of ‘pretenders’. *“We got prepared for life in a certain system, but we found ourselves in another one. We were not sure whether we are taking the right roles in our society now, we lost confidence, we were instilled with insecurities but kept going. We did not know how to be and this is why we pretended we did know. We pretend to be European too, but we are not. The next generation is really free, but ours is not”* (interview excerpt).

“ Pretending is common in times of change; faking an activity for the sake of imitating normality becomes normal. Persepolis, an Iranian comic-book, captures a similar moment – the family has no food but the mother is boiling water, pretending she is cooking, because if you have something to cook, you are not poor and if you are not poor, everything is normal.

"I only came to realise that perestroika has changed the country when I moved to the city from my hometown. I was smoking on the balcony watching a family of three collecting cigarette stubs for the father. These were times when people were really starving", remembers Taras Donenko, a designer born in 1977. *"The younger generation knows no fear. It was born free and is not afraid to act. My generation is full of fears"* (interview excerpt).

As is to be expected, the generation born in the 80s has fewer memories of the collapse of the Soviet Union, but remembers the hardships and poverty of their childhood. Many of them are filled with remorse, because of the shortages and the difficult upbringing they suffered through.



*Public discussion, Kyiv
Source: Olena Pravylo*

Another interesting aspect revealed by the interviews is the sense of unity and solidarity Ukrainians share. Two-thirds of the interviewees testify that nowadays, as opposed to the Soviet times, there is a real sense of solidarity. The new wave of volunteerism that emerged after the Euromaidan protests is one example of the ability of Ukrainians to stick together. However, the other third of the respondents speaks with nostalgia about the informal networks of support that existed before 1991, which were based on mutual everyday support. They testify that this type of neighbourly help is very rare now.

“ People’s memories about transition and their understandings about them are very diverse and polarised. They are also very individualised and are based on the personal experiences or stories of the families a person has grown up with. Rather than being one grand narrative, they are associated with the personal choices individuals made in these difficult times.

1991 was a watershed for everyone, but many acknowledge that the changes began prior to that. For some, Gorbachev’s perestroika is the historical moment of change, but for others, the Chernobyl disaster is the symbol of the fall of the Soviet system, as trust was irreversibly breached. And while the fall of the Berlin wall has been noted, it is 1991 and not 1989 that marked the beginning of the transition. Everyone agrees that the transformation is not over and the elder generation admits it has made a mistake in being silent about the communist past.



"Director," sign on the door of a public administrative building in Russian in Ukraine with office hours

Source: Olena Pravylo

"We wanted to let the youth enter a bright future, free from the burden of the past. We realise we were not right" testifies one of the elder interviewees. The challenges related to the past are many, as Taras Donenko, born in 1977, stated: *"We will know transition is over when the people in the public service start smiling and behaving like normal people, not from a position of power, just like in the old days"* (interview excerpt). The latter alludes to problems of inherited 'Soviet-style' structures in politics and institutions and persistent centralisation – challenges, shared by many post-communist and post-Soviet countries. Our research and other encounters, organised for the project, have demonstrated that, while we share commonalities with all post-communist countries, the similarities are even bigger among the former Soviet republics. For these countries, transition is similarly chaotic and reforms similarly weak.

Through the work of the Transition Dialogue Network, we were able to put our experience in a comparative context, explore new venues of engagement and new formats of dialogue. At the 2016 Worpswede Biennale, the work of 29 Ukrainian artists was presented under the title of Transformation. Key areas of our work are de-communisation (including in Luhansk and Donetsk), dealing with nostalgia and the effects of ignoring the memories of the Soviet past and using the tools of civic dialogue and videos for education.

Lessons for Civic Education

One of the main objectives of the work of the Cultural Congress is to map the people of Ukraine's understanding and experience of transition. Our focus is not only on the political, but also on the social, cultural, public, and urban space transition captured in their personal stories. At the same time, the picture is complicated by events like the annexation of Crimea, the Russian invasion and war in Eastern Ukraine and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), and our society is deeply polarised.

“ There is a growing awareness that most of our problems stem from the unfinished transition and the unchallenged Soviet legacies. At the same time, we are not engaged in a large-scale discussion about who we want to be, what our national identity is and how we want to deal with our Soviet heritage.

This is the gap we are trying to address with our work. The generation of transition has a key role to play in this process, as this is the generation that is most active in formulating and executing reforms and helping the younger generation find its role in this process. In this respect, this generation is not very different from the same generation in other parts of the world, where it is involved in launching start-ups, running NGOs, and providing creative and collaborative spaces for new ideas. The freedom to travel, highly cherished by all our interviewees as a newly gained freedom in transition, has aided the transitional generation in following the same trends as many of their peers from around the world.

We have identified that dialogue on the local level is a key tool to map, but also to challenge, beliefs and attitudes related to the past that result in polarisation nowadays. An inter-generational dialogue is also an important component. We were able to discern that conflicts in society are to a large extent a problem due to the lack of dialogue between two conflicting versions of memory, and culture and art as mediums have an important role to play in facilitating harmonisation between these groups. Transitional dialogue is a useful comparative platform to look into Ukrainian's shared past, their beliefs and their attitudes, and to challenge these and use other country's experience in addressing them. This, however, should not be a process that evokes nostalgia, as it is skilfully used as a propaganda tool for a communist past that never was.

About the author

Olena Pravylo, the Chairperson of the Congress of Cultural Activists, a researcher, a creative entrepreneur, and an expert in cultural policy making and facilitation. Olena also works as a facilitator and local projects mentor for the Active Citizen Programme, in partnership with the British Council, which involves working with local communities and activists on social action projects and local strategy developments. In addition, she is a moderator for *Culture 2025. Platform for changes*. The main focus of the project is the development and implementation of Ukraine's 2016-2025 cultural strategy. Olena is an active researcher of cultural fields in small cities in the Lugansk and Donetsk regions, and uses the frame of the "MetaMisto" project in collaboration with the NGO "Garazh Geng". She is also involved in research in Armenia, examining the creative potential of cities and regions, and manages an advocacy campaign for cultural and creative industries in Ukraine. In addition, she is a short movies producer at a family production company "Kontora Pravylo", and the organiser of the multidisciplinary festival "Transkaukazja".