

## **POLITICS OF IDENTITY THROUGH SCHOOL PRIMERS: DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF LEGITIMATE IMAGE OF STATE, NATION AND SOCIETY IN SOVIET AND INDEPENDENT UKRAINE\***

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### **National Curricula and Politics of Identity**

Narratives and discourses introduced in school textbooks have unprecedented influence in the process of socialization and social production. Besides the obvious goal of imparting basic knowledge about society and culture, school courses also possess latent functions that are no less significant: by means of discourses introduced in the textbooks dominating ideologies, norms, values and behaviors are reproduced. School textbooks thus are powerful tools for the implementation of identity politics, and national curricula should be examined for their role as forms of “identity politics” (Apple and Christian-Smith 1991).

### ***Politics of Identity as Theoretical Concept and Social Practice***

Narratives presented in school curricula are symbolic tools that mediate shared experience within a community. In what ways is the legitimacy of the state, society and nation formed? How are their corresponding forms of identity reproduced? Who and what are taking part in the process? How exactly does identity formation unfold: as a process of enforcement (imposition) or recognition of identity? I will turn to the concept of identity politics to find the answers to these questions.

Identity politics emerged on the agenda of Western social sciences in the 1960s when many previously powerless and discriminated-against groups pressed on to claim their place in the changing world. Cressida Heyes (2007) argues: “Identity politics starts from analyses of oppression to recommend, variously, the reclaiming, redescription, or transformation of previously stigmatized accounts of group membership. Rather than accepting the negative scripts offered by a dominant culture about one’s own inferiority, one transforms one’s own sense of self and community, often through consciousness-raising.”

Identity politics may concern any type of identity – gender, race, professional, religious, ethnic, regional or national identity, etc. The content and forms of identity politics, as well as

its implementation and expression, are diverse just like the existing social fields. It is important to note that in post-socialist space identity politics finds especially vivid expression in the fields of national and ethnic identity. Despite the fact that “identity politics” is a term used rather frequently in scholarly literature on post-socialism, scholars of post-socialism have not treated the concept to in-depth analysis.

The essence of identity politics is found in concentrated form when we consider the “core issues” that motivate this politics. If for any political process the core issue is that of “who receives what,” for identity politics the main issue is “who controls the meaning and concept of identity in the society.” This leads to a further question: what are the tools for implementing identity politics?

Different theories offer various visions of the main question or essence of identity politics. Marxist and neo-Marxist approaches emphasize state control over identity politics; structural-functionalists highlight the influence of the social groups that people identify with; liberal political scientists ascribe primary roles to individuals; and post-structuralists assign major significance to the discourses used in everyday communication and practices. Clearly, the methods and instruments of implementing identity politics are diverse and include legal and educational systems, political movements and non-governmental organizations, literature and arts (cinematography and animation), and mass media, among others.

To understand processes of identity politics it is useful to consider the classification of forms and sources of identity formation developed by M. Castells (1997:8): 1) legitimizing identity – used by the governing social institutions to broaden and rationalize their rule over social actors; 2) resistance identity – used by the underappreciated and/or stigmatized actors; and 3) projective identity – used by social actors who are building a new identity on the basis of accessible cultural material that predetermines that social status and that is directed towards the transformation of the social structure. Identity politics is the field where

these forms and practices of identity construction meet and interact.

Inasmuch as in the modern context dominant social groups promote a singular and hegemonic worldview that is most beneficial for his or her own interests, national identity becomes imposed and identity politics takes on a form of enforcement. Researchers have noted that social scientists have tended to view national identity as something that the nation state endows or imposes upon the individual. In this view, it is logical to focus on the active role of the nation-state, since citizens are viewed as little more than “carriers” of national identity, albeit passive ones (Bechhofer et al. 1999:531).

Postmodernism grows out of the principles of pluralism and multiculturalism, eschews the domination of any specific group, and speaks against social or ethnic based privileges and discrimination (Шнирельман 1998:66-67). In this context, identity politics is conceptualized as the politics of recognition, and the circle of social actors who participate in the collective construction of this identity significantly broadens.

### ***Education System as a Tool for Implementing Identity Politics***

Any society employs a wide range of practices triggering construction of national identity, which in turn is variously implemented via identity politics. Van Dijk pays special attention to the discursive fields where discursive practices of national identity construction take place: scientific and popular literature, the public arena (speeches and performances, political documents), semi-public discussions (focus groups), semi-private discussions (qualitative interviews), school curricula, and mass media (including Internet communications).

Not all types of discourse have equal value in the process of social reproduction. The national education system, which arguably aims to homogenize citizens, plays a particularly significant role in constructing national identity. School curricula create a so-called “matrix” in the students’ awareness that they then use as a reference point in their relationship with history and modernity, evaluation of self and the other.

Van Dijk (N.d.:17) offers a scheme of mechanisms of conceptualization and operationalization of identity that can be useful in researching ideology, school curricula and identity politics. He suggests the following

categories around which collective and individual actions create individual and group identities:

- Membership criteria: Who does (not) belong?
- Typical activities: What do we do?
- Overall aims: What do we want? Why do we do it?
- Norms and values: What is good or bad for us?
- Position: What are the relationships with others?
- Resources: Who has access to our group resources?

In any given society the educational system - at the most basic level of school textbooks - reflects these categories around which identity is formed, including national identity. In this way, education is involved in actively constituting national identity, and the education system is the instrument for implementing identity politics. At the same time, existing research emphasizes that “national identity should not...be seen as a fairly passive means by which citizens are bound culturally and socially to the state, but a far more interactive process whereby individuals have available the means for constructing who they are and who they want to be” (Bechhofer et al. 1999:530).

### **Examination of School Primers**

Despite a recent surge in interest in the analysis of school curricula - especially history textbooks in institutions of secondary and higher education - in the post-socialist region this interest has been limited mainly to academic historians and history teachers in schools. The topic has not been taken up by Ukrainian social scientists (Филиппова 2007). However, Western researchers of Ukraine and Russia have investigated various aspects of educational systems and the formation of national and ethnic identities among school students. Nancy Popson (2001) has discussed the conceptualization of the Ukrainian nation in school textbooks, and A. Portnov (2004) analyzed Ukrainian textbooks from the first decade of independence (1991-2001), paying special attention to discursive practices of legitimization of the image of the national past and concomitant images of “the Other.” Also, I. Snezhkova (2004) conducted comparative research between Kyivan and Muscovite school students that focused on understanding the process of formation of ethnic self-awareness; she argued that this process is

influenced by new humanities textbooks that promote the new national orientation of the ruling elites.

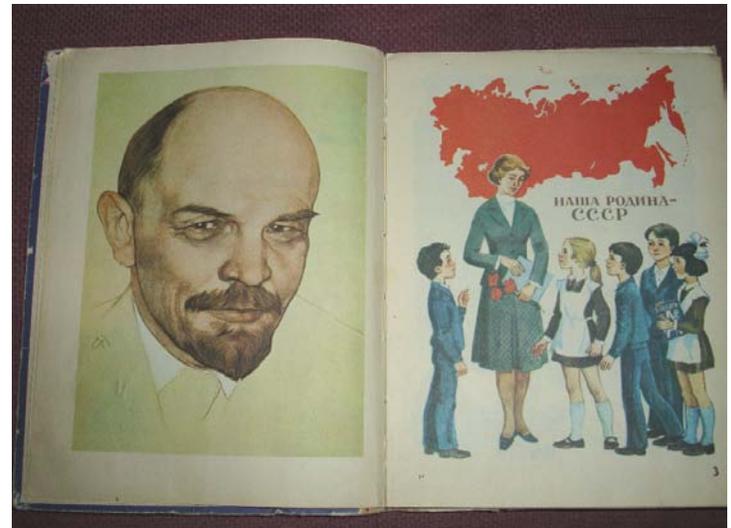
My project presented here offers analysis of school ABC primers – the very first school textbooks encountered by any primary school student – as visual images and texts with the most concentrated expression of the discursive practices that legitimize the image of the society, state, and the nation.

### **Research Objects**

For the purposes of this project, I compare primers published in 1989 (Горецкий et al.), 1992 (Вашуленко et al.), and 2004 (Вашуленко and Гуздик). The publication of these editions corresponds to important stages of political and social transformations: in 1989 the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic was still part of the Soviet Union; 1992 came during the first few years of independence; and 2004 came on the heels of the first decade of Ukrainian sovereignty. In my analysis of the primers I will track changes in the system of social values and the content of national identity, as well as standardization of the school students' skills and knowledge. For the purposes of this study, I refer to these three primers respectively as “Soviet primer” (1989), “primer of transition period” (1992) and “Ukrainian primer” (2004).

### **Political-Ideological Socialization**

The very first pages of primers unfold before our eyes the political-ideological socialization of a child. The 1989 Soviet primer centrally displays a portrait of the proletariat's leader Vladimir I. Lenin - the main symbol of the Soviet ideology - opposite a picture of schoolchildren who stand with their teacher on the background of the map of the USSR titled “Our Motherland – USSR.” (Illustration 1)



**Illustration 1.** Soviet Primer

The 1993 primer does not display Lenin's portrait; however the symbols of the newly independent Ukraine are not yet represented. Instead, we are presented with a neutral picture representing school life without an ideological message. The accompanying text cites the lines from a popular children's song: “The first textbook, and the first bell – this is how the school years begin.” The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of new sovereign states created a situation where school textbooks (as agents of official discourse) no longer associate Ukrainian society with the Soviet Union; however the new markers of independent identity are not yet clearly developed. (Illustration 2)



**Illustration 2.** Primer of Transition Period

In contrast, the 2004 primer displays state symbols of independent Ukraine – the coat of arms (national emblem) and flag, as well as the text of the national anthem. (Illustration 3)



**Illustration 3.** Ukrainian Primer

Clearly, school students are involved in the process of identity formation from the first pages of their first schoolbook. This emerging social identity forms via children’s education according to the dominating ideology (e.g. 1989 primer) or national patriotism (2004 primer).

### **National Identity**

Educational systems use a wide range of meaningful symbols in the process of molding students’ sense of national identity: cities where significant historical events (deemed as such by the ruling elites) took place; events (symbols of “spatial” identity); and outstanding historical figures (personified symbols). The primers’ goal is first of all to introduce children to the capital city and the heroes of the state to which they belong as citizens. The Soviet primer (1989) displays the images of Moscow and Leningrad; the transitional period primer does not offer an image of the capital; and the 2004 primer has a picture of Kyiv. When Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union, the image of the multinational Soviet state was promulgated, with the capital city Moscow symbolizing Soviet unity. The 1992 primer’s lack of any capital city’s image speaks to the fact that Kyiv at the time still had not acquired the meaningful status of the capital of the sovereign Ukrainian state. The situation had changed by 2004 – when Kyiv was presented in the primer as the national capital.

Personified symbols are agents of identity politics. Therefore, it is important to analyze which agents are represented in the primers. The Soviet primer contains information about such classics of the Russian and Soviet literature as A. Pushkin, N. Nekrasov, L. Tolstoy, S. Marshak, V. Mayakovskiy, and K. Chukovsky. The primer from the first years of independence introduces both Ukrainian and Russian classics – Pushkin and Taras Shevchenko share the same centerfold. We see that Russian and Ukrainian cultural orientations are endowed with equal importance here. The 2004 primer presents classics of Ukrainian literature as well as modern Ukrainian writers, but includes almost no reference to the Russian literature classics.

Transformation and representation of the ethnic and national symbols is also of research interest, as it serves as a basis for national identity construction. The Soviet primer presents the images of children dressed in Russian national costumes, while the Ukrainian dress is shown only in the crowd of children from all other Soviet republics representing their costumes, with a single Soviet flag above them. In this way, the main idea of the Soviet national politics was inculcated into students’ consciousness: any ethnic identity was considered only in the context of internationalism, and the school student was expected to identify first and foremost as a citizen of the Soviet state. The 1992 primer contains a relatively large number of illustrations of children and adults wearing the Ukrainian national dress, while representatives of other national groups are absent. This demonstrates the move away from the politics of Soviet internationalism and a nascent foregrounding of the Ukrainian roots. In the 2004 primer, the Ukrainian national dress appears less frequently than in 1992, and when present it is usually worn by fairy tale heroes; however, more subtle (or even “hidden”) symbols of Ukrainian national identity are presented: rushnyky (hand-embroidered towels), pysanky (decorated Easter eggs), etc.

A unique characteristic of the 2004 primer that distinguishes it from the 1989 and 1992 editions is the proliferation of illustrations with religious content. Thus, Kyiv – the capital of Ukraine, is presented as a panoramic photograph on the background of Orthodox Church domes. We also see the images of kulich (an Easter bread) with eggs as symbols of the important religious Easter holiday. Therefore, the

recent edition of the primer clearly connects the Ukrainian national identity with Christian Orthodoxy.

National holidays are an important clue into processes of identity construction. The primers described in this paper present national holidays in different ways which reflect corresponding social transformations. The 1989 primer displays celebrations of Soviet holidays, the significance of which was defined by the Soviet ideology: 7<sup>th</sup> of November (anniversary of the October Revolution), May 1<sup>st</sup> (May Day), and May 9<sup>th</sup> (Victory Day). No holidays unrelated to the state ideology are presented in this edition. (Illustration 4)



Illustration 4. Soviet Primer: Celebration of November 7

The transitional period primer barely engages with the topic of national holidays. There is only one illustration of a celebration; however we cannot clearly determine its theme. (Illustration 5)

The 2004 primer begins presenting religious celebrations (Easter), personal celebrations (Birthday parties), and commonly celebrated secular holidays (New Year's). (Illustration 6)

Illustration 5. Primer of Transition period: Unidentified celebration



Illustration 6. Ukrainian Primer: Easter and birthday celebrations



Because the primers are the very first school textbooks that students use to learn reading, they use visual images more than text. Readings are included only at the end of the primers. In this inquiry I focus on those texts that contain information about “events of pride.” Texts devoted to the development of the space industry present an especially illustrative example of transforming ideas.

The Soviet primer introduces the topic of space exploration with a rhyme about pilots and cosmonauts. It is followed with text emphasizing that the first man to fly in space was a Soviet man. (Illustration 7):

*“Soviet man was first to fly to space. [...] The whole world knows the first cosmonaut – Gagarin. [...] I have a big dream – to be a cosmonaut. My father told me: ‘Study well, exercise every day, and harden your body and mind. You dream will surely come true.’”*



Illustration 7. Soviet Primer: Soviet space exploration

The text in the transitional primer devoted to the first cosmonaut is entitled, “Yuriy Gagarin.” It does not mention the word “Soviet”:

*“Yuriy Gagarin – is the first cosmonaut on planet Earth. He is known and loved all over the world. [...] He was the first to fly around Earth on the spaceship ‘East.’ He saw it from the faraway space. Many children also dream to visit space. The doors to this dream were opened by the first cosmonaut Yuriy Gagarin.”* (Illustration 8)

The same section of the textbook also contains an assignment: students are asked to write down the phrase “Yuriy Gagarin – the first cosmonaut on planet Earth” in their exercise books.



Illustration 8. Primer of Transition Period: Yuriy Gagarin

The Ukrainian primer contains text entitled “The dream has come true:”

*“When the first astronaut on Earth – Yuriy Gagarin – flew to space, the Ukrainian boy Lenya Kadenyuk was 10 years old. At the time, he lived in a Bukovynian village. Lenya dreamed of repeating the heroic deed of Yuriy Gagarin. He studied diligently and played sports. Leonid Kadenyuk did make his dream come true. [...] Many children dream of flying to space. However, you must not only dream, but prepare for your dream. Then your dream will surely come true.”* (Illustration 9)

As an assignment for this section, students are asked to write down in their exercise book the phrase “Leonid Kadenyuk – a Ukrainian cosmonaut.”

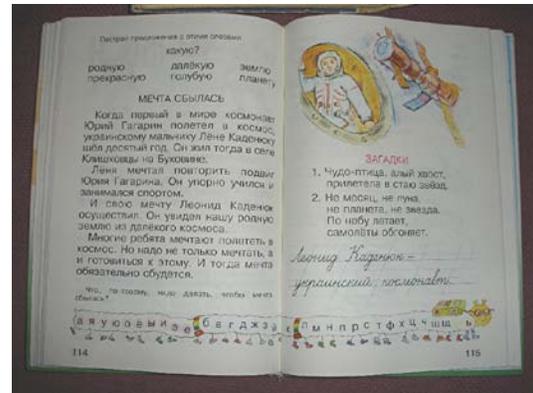


Illustration 9. Ukrainian Primer: Leonid Kadenyuk, Ukrainian cosmonaut

Unlike the Soviet Union, sovereign Ukraine does not have its own space program, and only one cosmonaut – Leonid Kadenyuk – has been in space during the entire existence of the Ukrainian independent state. However, space exploration is a significant event of the recent past, and being a part of it invokes a sense of pride and promotes positive identification. The change in texts about space exploration is a clear example of “repossessing the past;” in this case, repossessing this past is accomplished via new Ukrainian heroes such as L. Kadenyuk.

### School as Social Institution

The primers presented in this paper also employ different education strategies. Children portrayed in the Soviet edition are always shown in strict school uniforms, listening to the teacher who is explaining something to them. In this way, the norms and examples of the learning process are translated to schoolchildren. The Soviet educational system was hierarchical with a standardized learning process where the teacher presented the information to students, and they were expected to internalize it. Information was presented as brief ideological banners that children could easily understand and remember: “USSR – is the state of Soviets;” “Peace, Mother, Moscow.” Studying was presented as one of the methods of molding a person for future construction of the communist society.

The 1992 primer continues the strategy of the previous years – children are dressed in school uniforms, attentively listening to the teacher. Studying is presented as a strictly regulated process with students as recipients rather than active participants of the learning process. However, communist ideals are no longer well defined in the 1992 primer. The value and significance of studies *per se* come to the forefront. Activities unrelated to ideological moments come into focus: classrooms no longer have teachers writing communist slogans on the blackboards, and the illustrations often display rather mundane scenes from everyday life at school. Students rarely are wearing a red pioneer scarf or an October pin.

The 2004 primer is a major contrast to the previous editions. The school is represented as a democratic institution (which in its turn creates a corresponding transformation in the children's awareness): children are relaxed at their desks, they feel free to turn around and speak to their neighbor, and they are not confined by strict discipline. Through these images, school is constructed as a fun and interesting place to learn and receive knowledge. Children are actively involved in the learning process.

This evidence demonstrates how primers reflect the process of transformation of the social understanding of education as an institution – and school as its constituent part. Previously, the school focused on imparting strict discipline and inculcating communist ideals in children. Currently, schools have reoriented towards allowing children more opportunities for their activities and enticing more interest in the process.

### **Conclusion**

Analysis of ABC primers from three historical epochs demonstrates how each of them presents children with those values, norms, and standards of behavior that are prioritized in the society at a particular moment. Via these media, we can trace not only the values and norms inculcated in children, but also a broader picture of the society at a given historical moment. Thus, the Soviet primer was faithful to the communist ideology. A child was brought up as a future builder of communism and a citizen of the Soviet Union. National identity was constructed within frames of the ideology of Soviet internationalism.

Whereas the Soviet primer had a clear ideological line running through it, the primer from the transitional period was no longer tied to ideology. The state that has already declared its independence had not yet created the mechanisms and strategies for implementing new values of this sovereignty. Symbols of statehood are barely present, and the value system is not yet constructed.

In contrast, the 2004 primer reflects qualitatively new characteristics of the Ukrainian society. It is presented not only as a nation-state, but also as a democratic state, which also fits well into the worldview circumscribed by the Orthodox Christianity. In sum, the primer, like any textbook, is an agent of socialization. It also reflects the epoch and its dominating values and identity politics.

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