

Graduate Student Symposium: “Exploring Ukrainian Identity: Gender, Ethnicity, and Statehood”

“The two things that made me really want to go to the symposium were its theme—Ukrainian identity—and its interdisciplinary character,” said **Margrethe Søvik**, PhD student at the Baltic and East European Graduate School, Södertörns Högskola, Sweden, and exchange student at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta.

Along with eleven other junior scholars, hailing from as far away as Alberta, New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio, she participated in the graduate student symposium “**Exploring Ukrainian Identity: Gender, Ethnicity, and Statehood**,” hosted at the Centre for Russian and East European Studies on March 12-13, 2004.

The major objectives of the symposium were twofold. First, it aimed at showcasing research done by graduate students from all over North America in the field of Ukrainian Studies. Second, the symposium was envisioned as a meeting place for future colleagues in the profession.

Graduate students who are making their way in academia have a lot to learn from senior scholars. The keynote addresses by **Serhy Yekelchyk** (Departments of History and Germanic and Russian Studies, University of Victoria) and **Dominique Arel** (Chair of Ukrainian Studies, University of Ottawa) provided the audience with food for thought. As Professor **Yekelchyk** noted in his talk with a special focus on Ukrainian identity during the Stalinist period, “Roxolana’s children are constantly re-imagining themselves as Ukrainians or Russians, workers or the new middle class, men or women, but the point is to worry less about the image than about their freedom of imagination.” Bringing the study of Ukrainian identity to the post-Soviet period, Professor **Arel** touched upon the recent phenomenon of Ukrainian civic identity without assimilating into Ukrainian culture. The keynote speakers generated a lot of discussion on the question of defining Ukrainian identity.

The debate over various facets of Ukrainian identity has continued throughout the next day. Working in the archives in Kherson or doing sociological research in Kharkiv, surfing Ukrainian Web sites or analyzing survey data, every participant had something to add to this debate.

The first panel drew the contours of Ukrainian identity through the prism of written word voiced by the 1980s generation of intellectuals, contemporary writers, and vertep performers. **Chrystyna Dail** (MA student in Theater History and Criticism, University of Maryland) used vertep as the case study of immigrated cultural performance in North America. **Mark Adryczyk** (PhD student in Slavic Literature, University of Toronto) argued that Ukrainian intellectual-characters are the key sites where post-Soviet identity is being constructed. Having taken Oleksandr Irvanets’s novel *Rivne/Rovno: The Wall* as the focal point of her literary analysis, **Oksana Tatsyak** (PhD student in Slavic Literature, University of Toronto) argued

that the metaphor “wall in the head” is useful to understand innate problems of what might be called Ukrainian split identity.

Building upon this theme, during the second panel, **Anita Petroski** (MA student, Columbia University) identified three areas of contestation in Ukrainian nation-building: language, religion, and regional ties. **Oleksandr Melnyk** (MA student in History, University of Alberta) discussed Soviet identity during the World War II period based on his archival research in Kherson region. **Mykola Polyuha** (Fulbright Scholar and Lecturer at Pennsylvania State University) took the identity question to modern-day cyberspace.

Moving beyond the common set of cultural markers, gender identity became the central theme of the third panel. **Oksana Babenko** (MA student in Slavic Applied Linguistics and Translation, University of Alberta) “explored how gender identity shapes individual approaches to writing online lonely-heart ads”. **Rory Fynnin’s** (PhD student in Slavic Literature, Columbia University) presentation raised grave concerns about the problem of women trafficking in Ukraine.

A number of student presenters used survey data to untangle the complexity of Ukrainian identity. Having conducted fieldwork in the region, **Søvik** elaborated on the impact of social identity on attitudes toward language and language use. The sense of national pride was the subject of analysis in the research presented by **Olena Nikolayenko** (PhD student in Comparative Politics, University of Toronto). **Ilya Khineiko** (PhD student in History, University of Alberta) explored attitudes toward national symbols across regions in Ukraine. Adding a cross-country comparative perspective, **David Orr** (PhD student in Political Science, Ohio State University) analyzed the activities of NGOs advocating environmental and women’s issues in Latvia and Ukraine.

The day was capped by a roundtable on “Future of Ukrainian Studies in North America,” chaired by Prof. **Marta Dyczok** (Departments of History and Political Science, University of Western Ontario), which brought together a remarkable set of senior scholars. It has been generally agreed that a shift from the humanities to the social sciences has recently taken place in Ukrainian Studies. Nevertheless, the challenge to make Ukrainian Studies attractive to non-Ukrainian students has become a matter of concern for professors in both fields.

Maxim Tarnawsky (Department of Slavic Languages and Literature, University of Toronto) brought to the attention of the scholarly community the need to improve the methodological underpinnings of language training. “Despite over forty years of Ukrainian Studies in North America and the creation of multi-million dollar institutional centres and foundations, the simplest of goals, the creation of a practical and functional model for the teaching of the Ukrainian language to university-level students has never been contemplated, let alone implemented,” said Professor **Tarnawsky**. “The future of a discipline, however, depends on foresight, planning, and implementation.”

On a more positive note, **Paul Magosci** (Chair of Ukrainian Studies, University of Toronto) praised the institutionalization of Ukrainian studies as a survival strategy by referring, in part, to the number of endowed positions in North America. **Wsevolod Isajiw** (Professor Emeritus, Department of Sociology, University of Toronto) considered the recreation of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy as a successful example of intellectual and financial cooperation between Diaspora and Ukraine. The concluding remarks by **Mykola Riabchuk** (Kolasky Memorial Fellow, University of Alberta's Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, and Research Associate at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy) testified to the cross-border exchange of ideas.

The scarcity of cross-Atlantic cooperation, however, was evident to the student participant from Sweden. "What struck me after the symposium is that we should be better at integrating the research on Ukraine done in Northern America with the research done in Europe," said **Søvik**. "I hope that this symposium might be a beginning of this kind of cooperation too."

The saddest part about any interesting event is that it must end. Nevertheless, the student organizers hope that this symposium will have a continuation. Looking through the pile of evaluation forms, they realized that any future symposium should be extended to provide more time for discussion. Four panels in one day left little time for question and answer sessions, and the time allotted to coffee breaks flew in the atmosphere of intense intellectual exchange.

"I left with a lot to think about and to incorporate into my own work," said **Nicole Pleten**, a graduate student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto. She is currently working on an MA thesis dealing with the discourse on language and identity of students enrolled in a Ukrainian-English bilingual program in western Canada.

As CREES Director **Peter Solomon** pointed out, this student-organized initiative reflects a long-standing tradition that has recently been revived by incoming graduate students. **Olena Nikolayenko** and **Oksana Tatsyak**, with the support from **Larysa Iarovenko** (CREES alumna, and the Petro Jacyk and Danyliw Programs Coordinator), organized the event. They drew upon devoted volunteer work of the University of Toronto graduate and undergraduate students **Alesia Kachur**, **Zara Keryan**, **Paul Pochapsky**, **Vanessa Podgurny**, and **Liliya Volovik**.

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