# RESEARCH NOTE

# Geopolitical Conflicts seen through Transnational Identities: a Case from the Ukrainian Community in Cagliari, Italy*

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## Abstract

*The case of the Ukrainian community in the Italian town of Cagliari is analysed in order to investigate how the dividing political and geopolitical events which have affected the independent Ukraine since 1991 have produced significant evolution in the sense of identity of this community, particularly through heterolocalism and transnational projections of ongoing conflicts and ethnic redefinition. Diasporas tend to develop their own peculiar relation and sense of belonging to the homeland, either tightening their ties with the place of origin, and closely reproducing the related representations, or producing new interpretations and visions. The aim of the research was to focus on some of the numerous aspects of ethnic identity redefinition in their transnational dimension, adding to these themes the further challenging consequences of geopolitical conflicts.*


## Introduction: transnational identities

The individual and collective identities and practices of diasporic migrant communities are typically influenced by transnational dynamics.[2] In fact, diasporas can often be seen as transnationally-organised 'imagined communities', social and cultural constructions supported and reinforced by communication and transportation links, which create a fluid and de-territorialised community.[3] The term 'transnational' can thus apply to 'de-territorialised nations' that span international boundaries while keeping significant ties with

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2 L. Basch, N.G. Schiller and C. Szanton Blanc, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects and the Deterritorialized Nation-State* (New York, 1994); R. Bauböck and T. Faust (eds) *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods* (Amsterdam, 2010); M. Koundora, *Transnational Culture, Transnational Identity: the Politics and Ethics of Global Culture Exchange* (London, 2012).
3 B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983); F. Adamson, 'Constructing the diaspora: diaspora identity politics and transnational social movements', in P. Mandaville and T. Lyons (eds) *Politics from Afar: Transnational Diasporas and Networks* (New York, 2012), pp. 25–42; N. Al-Ali and K. Koser (eds) *New Approaches to Migration? Transnational Communities and the Transformation of Home* (London, 2012); E Georges, *The Making of a Transnational Community: Migration, Development, and Cultural Change in the Dominican Republic* (New York, 1990).

their places of origin and reflecting or actively reacting to the social, political and cultural changes which occur in their respective homelands.[4]

Proper diasporic communities can be distinguished from other migrant groups by highlighting the strong national, ethnic or religious features which are maintained over long distances and time, and which create fertile conditions for the preservation of different aspects or declinations of their identity.[5] These ties, at local, regional or international levels, are nowadays strengthened by the use of modern technologies of communication and transportation, and can produce situations of heterolocalism, or projection of peculiar features along and within these identity networks.[6] In fact, according to Wilbur Zelinsky and Barrett A. Lee, members of certain newly arrived ethnic groups may be able to sustain their identity despite spatial dispersion.[7] Their concept of 'heterolocalism' implies that an ethnic community in a host country can exist even when the members of the group are scattered throughout a city, metropolitan area, or a larger territory, and when places of residence, work, social activity and shopping do not spatially overlap. Strong ethnic community ties are maintained through telecommunications, visits, and other methods at the metropolitan, regional, national, and even international scale, which is conceivable only under the socio-economic and technological conditions of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Social, political, ethnic and cultural leanings and kinships hold diasporic groups together, but can also reveal the existence of different sub-groups.[8] Several diasporic communities, such as Jews, Persians, Chinese and Cubans, keep experiencing complex political and identity issues with a strong transnational dynamic dimension, alternately uniting or dividing them into different sub-groups.[9] The recognition of a common tangible and intangible heritage is a key element for the creation and preservation of a sense of belonging to the nation, or to a particular aspect, representation and narrative of a nation's identity.[10] At the same time, like individual memories, social memories can also be highly

4 N.G. Schiller, L. Basch and C. Blanc Szanton, 'Transnationalism: a new analytic framework for understanding migration', *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 645 (1992), pp. 1–24, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-6632.1992.tb33484.x.

5 C. Bob, *The Marketing of Rebellion: Insurgents, Media and International Activism* (Cambridge, 2005); R.C. Carpenter, ' "Women, children and other vulnerable groups": gender, strategic frames and the protection of civilians as a transnational issue'. *International Studies Quarterly* 49 (2005), pp. 295–334, https://doi.org/10.1111/ j.0020-8833.2005.00346.x.

6 Z. Popova, 'Transnationalism', in T.H. Malloy (ed.) *Minority Issues in Europe: Rights, Concepts, Policy* (Berlin, 2013), pp. 161–188; M. Sheller and J. Urry, 'The new mobilities paradigm', *Environment and Planning A* 38 (2006), pp. 207–26, https://doi.org/10.1068/a37268.

7 W. Zelinsky and B.A. Lee, 'Heterolocalism: an alternative model of the sociospatial behaviours of immigrant ethnic communities', *International Journal of Population Geography* 4 (1998), pp. 281–98, https://doi.org/10.1002/ijpg108.

8 See R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas* (London, 1997).

9 Adamson, 'Constructing the diaspora'; A. Corsale and S. Krakover, 'Cultural tourism between local and transnational identities: Jewish heritage in Syracuse, Italy', *Tourism Geographies* 21 (2019), pp. 460–81, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2018.1497083.

10 S. Hall, 'Whose heritage? Un-settling "the heritage", reimagining the post-nation', in G. Fairclough, R. Harrison, J. H. Jameson and J. Schofield (eds) *The Heritage Reader* (New York, 2008), pp. 219–28.

selective, and often erase or disregard many elements or episodes which, from another perspective, could generate different narratives, identities and practices.[11]

According to various scholars, the connections between diasporic groups and their respective homelands, as well as their current places of living, can take different forms and involve positive, negative and mixed views, including feelings of alienation and 'in-betweenness'.[12] The complex and changing relations between the homeland and the diaspora, and among different diasporic sub-groups, also imply that dividing events, diverging political orientations and different identity declinations travel back and forth through individual, collective, material and ideal connections, dynamically producing significant impacts both in the place of origin and in the place of living.[13]

The case of the Ukrainian community in the Italian town of Cagliari, within the broader Ukrainian diaspora in the Western world, will be analysed in order to investigate how the dividing political and geopolitical events which have affected the independent Ukraine since 1991, particularly after the 2014 'Euromaidan' revolution, the Crimean crisis and the ongoing Donbass war, have produced significant evolutions in the sense of identity of this community, located in a relatively marginal town, also considering the changing relations with other Eastern European diasporic communities in the same context, through transnational projections of ongoing conflicts and ethnic redefinitions.

## Study methods

The study is based on a qualitative research method. The field study was made between May 2017 and January 2020 through repeated interviews of four selected stakeholders representative of the different sub-groups within the Ukrainian community in Cagliari (Greek-Catholic and Orthodox clergy, and two community associations), as well as 16 other Ukrainian people living and working in Cagliari, approached on purpose by the author after church services, at customary street markets, popular meeting places, and during public events, festivals and commemorations involving the community, or parts of it. The

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11 E. Mavroudi, 'Diaspora as process: (de)constructing boundaries', *Geography Compass* 1 (2007), pp. 467–79, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2007.00033.x; C. Ní Laoire, 'Editorial introduction: locating geographies of diaspora', *International Journal of Population Geography* 9 (2003), pp. 275–80, https://doi.org/10.1002/ijpg.286.

12 P. Basu, *Highland Homecomings: Genealogy and Heritage Tourism in the Scottish Diaspora* (Abingdon, 2007); A. Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting identities* (London, 1996); Cohen, *Global Diasporas*; W. Safran, 'Diasporas in modern societies: myths of homeland and return', *Diaspora* 1 (1991), pp. 83–99, https://doi.org/10.3138/diaspora.1.1.83; J.T. Shuval, 'Diaspora migration: definitional ambiguities and a theoretical paradigm', *International Migration* 38(5) (2000), pp. 41–57, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2435.00127; D.J. Timothy and J.K. Guelke (eds) *Geography and Genealogy: Locating Personal Pasts* (Aldershot, 2008).

13 Cohen, *Global Diasporas*; Corsale and Krakover, 'Cultural tourism'; I. Djuric, 'The Croatian diaspora in North America: identity, ethnic solidarity, and the formation of a "transnational national community"', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 17 (2003), pp. 113–30, https://doi.org/ 10.1023/A:1025393027724; E. Kovács, 'Direct and indirect political remittances of the transnational engagement of Hungarian kin-minorities and diaspora communities', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46 (2020), pp. 1,146–65, https://doi.org/ 10.1080/1369183X.2018.1554315.

interviews focused on how the Ukrainian community in Cagliari perceives itself in terms of ethnic identity, through its language and religious practices, and also in relation to the Russian and Belarusian communities living in the same area. Other sets of questions focused on how the political and military confrontations which have affected Ukraine since 2014 have influenced the community's sense of identity. The interviews were done using the Ukrainian or Russian languages according to the preference and competence of the interviewees.

The author also consulted a range of secondary sources, such as statistical data on the Ukrainian diaspora and specific literature about the nation's ongoing identity redefinition in relation to the geopolitical context.

The combination of these different sources allowed an understanding of which aspects of this diasporic group identity are perceived as significant, and how they have changed according to the transnational ties with the homeland.

## Diaspora and geopolitics

During its difficult history, characterized by foreign domination, ethnic assimilation attempts and economic difficulties, Ukraine has produced significant emigration flows. Since the late nineteenth century, North America, the territory of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and Central and Western Europe have hosted large numbers of Ukrainians who left the homeland in different circumstances and for various reasons, creating a complex and multifaceted diaspora.[14] According to different estimates, the number of ethnic Ukrainians living abroad ranges between 12 and 20 million.[15]

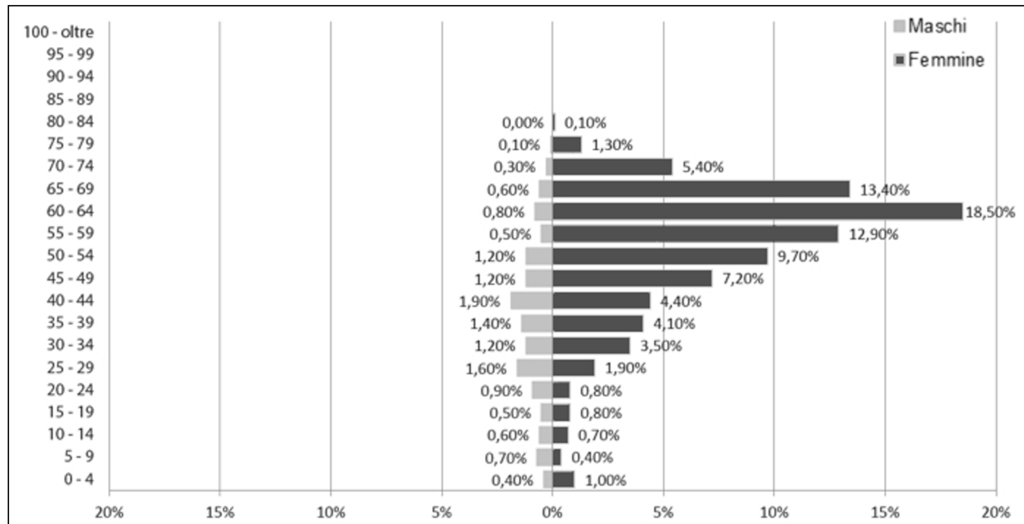
Italy has become a major destination for Ukrainian emigration since the late 1990s. In 2019 it hosted a community of 239,424 people (0.4 per cent of the total Italian population, 4.8 per cent of the foreign population). This population is 79 per cent female and is relatively elderly (average age 45 years). Two thirds are working in the social caring sector, followed by trade (12 per cent) and industry (12 per cent). This community is mostly concentrated in urban areas throughout the Italian territory, mainly in the central-northern regions.[16] Cagliari, capital city of Sardinia, hosts 1,001 Ukrainian residents (0.65 per cent of its total population, 10.7 per cent of its foreign population), who are mainly female (84 per cent) and elderly (average age 51 years) (Figures 1–3). This community has grown rapidly since 2000 (when it only counted eight people) and justified the opening of an honorary consulate in 2019. A larger Ukrainian community lives in the

14 A. Corsale and O. Vuystyk, 'Long-distance attachments and implications for tourism development: the case of the Western Ukrainian diaspora', *Tourism Planning and Development* 13 (2016), pp. 88–110, https://doi.org/10.1080/21568316.2015.1074099; N. Khanenko-Friesen, *Ukrainian Otherlands: Diaspora, Homeland, and Folk Imagination in the Twentieth Century* (Madison, WI, 2015); V. Satzewich, *The Ukrainian Diaspora* (London, 2002).

15 Ukrainian World Congress, Annual Report 2018 [2018] https://www.ukrainianworldcongress.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2018-knyzhka-zvitiv-xi-sku.pdf [accessed 8 November 2021].

16 S. Salvino, *Per Minestra e per Libro: Donne Migranti dall'est e Pratiche di Transnazionalismo* (Cosenza, Italy, 2019); F. Vianello, *Migrando Sole: Legami Transnazionali tra Ucraina e Italia* (Milan, Italy, 2010).

**Figure 1** **Age pyramid of the Ukrainian population in Cagliari, 2020**



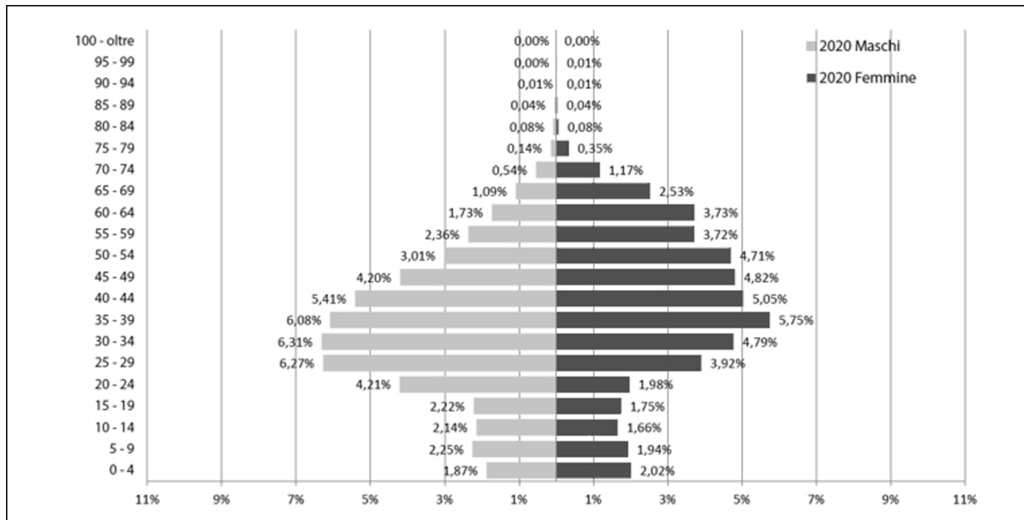

**Source**: Comune di Cagliari, *Atlante Demografico di Cagliari 2020* [2020] https://www.comune.cagliari.it/portale/page/it/atlante_demografico_2020?con tentId=DOC62427 [accessed 8 November 2021].

metropolitan area of Cagliari (1,525 people) and coexists with other Eastern European communities, such as Russians (124 in Cagliari and 270 in the metropolitan area) and Belarusians (respectively 43 and 87).[17] According to the municipal data, the Ukrainian community in Cagliari lives scattered across several districts, mainly central and semi-peripheral ones, where they often reside together with the elderly people they take care of, or share relatively large apartments with other fellow countrywomen.

Among the push factors of these flows are, as already mentioned, the difficult and deteriorating economic and political relations between Ukraine and Russia, which, starting from an already complicated background (Tsarist Russification policies, the Bolshevik Revolution, Stalinism, World War II and post-war turmoil and repression, renewed Russification attempts, and diverging post-communist geopolitical strategies), dramatically worsened after 2014. The 'Euromaidan' revolution, the unrecognised annexation of Crimea and the conflict in the Donbass region have led to a profound redefinition of identity in Ukraine. This has reverberated on to the language dimension (manifest in a consistent switch from the Russian to the Ukrainian language) and the religious one (revealed in the increased distance between the Greek-Catholic church and the Orthodox churches of the rival Moscovian and Kievan Patriarchates), as well as daily life (reciprocal embargoes and

17 Comune di Cagliari, *Atlante Demografico di Cagliari 2020* [2020] https://www.comune.cagliari.it/ portale/page/it/atlante_demografico_2020?contentId=DOC62427 [accessed 8 November 2021]; Ministero del Lavoro, *La Comunità Ucraina in Italia* (Rome, Italy, 2017). Istituto National de Statistica, *Popolazione e Famiglie* [2021] https://www.istat.it/it/popolazione-e-famiglie?dati [accessed 14 September 2021].

**Figure 2 Age pyramid of the foreign population in Cagliari, 2020**




**Source**: Comune di Cagliari, *Atlante Demografico di Cagliari 2020* [2020] https://www.comune. cagliari.it/ portale/page/it/atlante_demografico_2020?con tentId=DOC62427 [accessed 8 November 2021].

boycotts of products) and symbolic representations and narratives (divergent approaches to the celebration of Victory Day in World War II).[18]

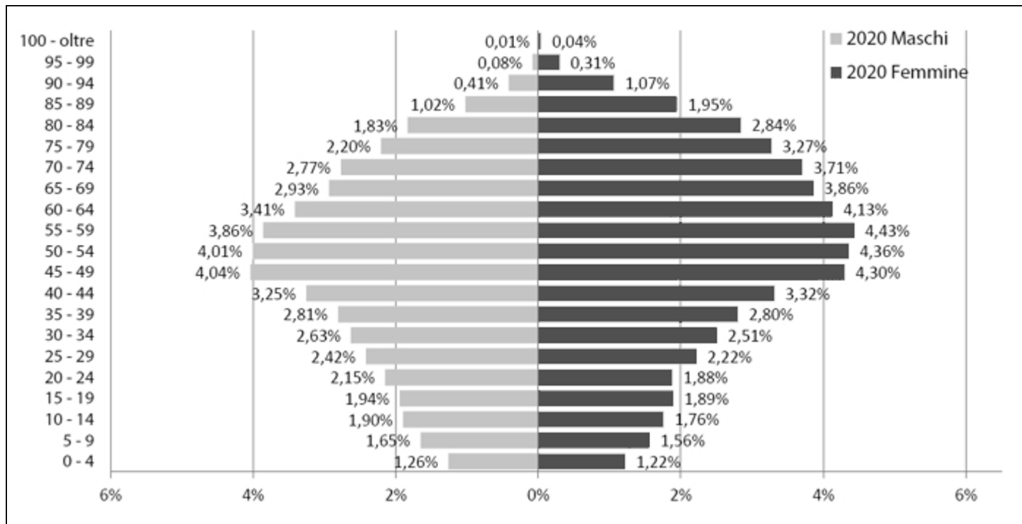
## Research findings

According to the interviews and observations made by the author, the events listed above have been producing significant effects on the Ukrainian community in Cagliari since 2014, in different fields. During the research, a separation emerged between a 'Nationalist Ukrainian' and a 'Russian-Ukrainian' sub-group, although the description and definition repeatedly changed according to the dimensions being examined, mainly revolving around religious practice, language use, daily life habits and public events. The political orientations were not explicitly cited by the interviewees as significant divisive factors, although they did occasionally emerge in terms of siding with or against 'the Government' or 'Putin'.

It should be noted that none of the interviewees, either 'Russian-Ukrainian' or 'Nationalist Ukrainian', ever questioned their belonging to a single Ukrainian community, nation, and state. This seems to reflect the reality of the Ukrainian national identity in the homeland, where, according to the last available census (2001), only 67 per cent of the population considered Ukrainian to be their native language (followed by the Russian language at 30 per cent), but, at the same time, 78 per cent of the population considered

18 P. D'Anieri, R. Kravchuk and T. Kuzio, *Politics and Society in Ukraine* (New York, 2018); G.M. Hahn, *Ukraine over the Edge: Russia, the West and the New Cold War* (Jefferson, NC, 2018); A. Krawchuk, and T. Bremer (eds) *Churches in the Ukrainian Crisis* (Basingstoke, 2016); T. Kuzlo (ed.) *Contemporary Ukraine: Dynamics of Post-Soviet Transformation* (London, 2015); A. Reid, *Borderland: a Journey Through the History of Ukraine* (New York, 2015).

**Figure 3 Age pyramid of the total population of Cagliari, 2020**




**Source**: Comune di Cagliari, *Atlante Demografico di Cagliari 2020* [2020] https://www.comune. cagliari.it/portale/page/it/atlante_demografico_2020?con tentId=DOC62427 [accessed 8 November 2021].

themselves ethnically Ukrainian (followed by the Russian ethnicity at 17 per cent). This shows a tendency towards a composite concept of nation where, in spite of different spoken languages and often radically divergent political opinions, a basic sense of unity is not irreversibly jeopardised.[19]

In fact, none of the interviewees declared themselves to be 'Russian', even those who only speak the Russian language and show pro-Putin political views. However, distinct chain migration networks, which stem from different regional roots, tend to keep the 'Russian-Ukrainian' and the 'Nationalist Ukrainian' sub-groups separated both socially and spatially. They often share apartments with people from similar regional and social backgrounds, and are part of distinct informative networks related to constant job search, mutual aid and socialising.

*Religious practice*

As reported by both the Greek-Catholic clergy and the Ukrainian Orthodox clergy of the Moscovian Patriarchate, who run two distinct churches located in the historic centre of Cagliari, a deepening separation between Greek-Catholic and Moscovian Orthodox followers has been observed during recent years, with the followers of the Orthodox Kievan Patriarchate caught in the middle and themselves splitting between a group who have kept attending the Orthodox church functions and another who have abandoned the

19 D'Anieri *et al.*, *Politics and Society in Ukraine*; Krawchuk and Bremer, *Churches in the Ukrainian Crisis*; Kuzlo, *Contemporary Ukraine*; Reid, *Borderland.*

parish and have chosen to attend the Greek-Catholic one. Both priests confirmed that these changes have clear ties with the deteriorating Russian–Ukrainian international relations. According to the interviewees, both churches host an average attendance of 100 people during main religious celebrations, entirely Ukrainian in the case of the Greek-Catholic church (which uses the Ukrainian language) and mainly Ukrainian, but with a significant Russian, Belarusian and Moldovan presence, in the case of the Moscovian Orthodox one (which uses the Russian language).

Unverified claims emerged during the interviews referring to alleged public blessings for the Russian President Vladimir Putin during the Orthodox functions, which caused outrage within a part of the community. The author could not verify these claims, but they are nevertheless evidence of tension and incomprehension between the two groups.

*Language use*

In spite of the coexistence of the Ukrainian and Russian languages within the community, the language factor appeared during the interviews as a major element of social separation. The proficiency and practice of the Ukrainian language is constantly growing both in the homeland and in the diaspora, particularly within the younger generations; but, due to the older age of the Ukrainian community in Cagliari, the Russian language is still rooted and solid, and favours the interaction with the Russian and Belarusian communities. At the same time, the Ukrainian native speakers in Cagliari tend to keep a certain degree of proficiency in Russian, which means the communication barrier between these groups is not rigid. Both groups tend to gather in parks and squares during their free time (particularly in the weekends, or on Thursdays, the common free day for caring workers in Italy), where both languages can be heard, spoken by distinct crowds.

The use of language has clear political dimensions, but not in absolute terms, as some interviewed Russian speakers declared themselves neutral in relation to the geopolitical conflict. As in the homeland, the Ukrainians from the western regions preferred using the Ukrainian language during the interviews, while those from the central, eastern and southern regions showed a stronger attachment to the Russian language. Both language groups use the internet and printed magazines as main sources of information.

*Daily life*

Russian–Ukrainian tensions reverberate on to several aspects of daily life, particularly in the commercial dimension. The group identifiable as 'Russian-Ukrainian' tends to buy grocery products and other goods, such as books and handicrafts, in a circuit of Russian-speaking shops and street sellers located in Cagliari, together with Russian and Belarusian customers. The other group, instead, tends to avoid that circuit and regularly gathers around Ukrainian-speaking street vendors who travel back and forth between Italy and the Ukraine transporting both goods and people. Since 2014, the cross-sanctions between Russia, on

the one hand, and Ukraine and the European Union, on the other, linked with the Crimean and Donbass crises, have been interfering with these trade circuits, as Russian products have become more difficult to find even through these informal networks.

*Symbolic events*

Diverging perceptions, representations and narratives of national histories and both distant and recent events tend to split the Ukrainian community into different groups. As observed and recorded, the commemoration of the Holodomor (the Great Famine of 1932-1933), for which a stone memorial has been erected by one of the Ukrainian organisations in Cagliari in one of the main city parks, is deeply revered by a part of the community, but is not known or recognized by the 'Russian-Ukrainian' component. In fact, the Government of Kiev officially considers those historical events, which led to the death by starvation of millions of Ukrainians within the Soviet Union, a deliberate genocide against the Ukrainian nation, while Moscow denies the genocidal nature of those events and tends to overlook them.[20] On the contrary, the commemoration of the Soviet victory against Nazi Germany, 9 May, is visibly celebrated by the 'Russian-Ukrainian' component together with Russian and Belarusian immigrants in public places within Cagliari, while the rest of the Ukrainian community negatively associate that date with Stalinist oppression.

## Conclusions

In spite of its relatively small size and recent origin, the Ukrainian community in Cagliari encompasses a wide complexity in terms of identities and practices, reflecting the composite nature of the Ukrainian nation. Different regional backgrounds and religious and language belongings, together with related habits, social interactions and political orientations, show changing dynamics linked to a transnational projection of ongoing geopolitical and ethnic redefinition processes. At the same time, diasporic groups tend to develop their own lenses when they relate to the homeland, because their migration experience lets them interact with the foreign host society and with other migrant communities as well, exposing them to different representations and narratives. Hence heterolocal diasporas can react to this additional and enlarged identity dimension, either by tightening their ties with the homeland, and closely reproducing the related representations, or by intensifying the interaction with other groups and producing new interpretations and visions.

The aim of this research was to focus on some of the numerous aspects of ethnic identity in their transnational dimension, through international migrations, features of heterolocalism and diasporic dynamics, adding to these themes the further challenging consequences of geopolitical conflicts. In this specific case, an already composite diasporic

20 Y. Bilinsky, 'Was the Ukrainian famine of 1932–1933 genocide?', *Journal of Genocide Research* 1 (1999), pp. 147–56, https://doi.org/10.1080/14623529908413948; Hahn, *Ukraine over the Edge*.

community in a provincial town has experienced complex dividing and divergent influences, although not to the point of losing the self-perception of a single national group.

Further research steps might keep following the evolution of these dynamics, in terms of similarities or differences with the ethnic redefinition phenomena which are still taking place in the homeland. Also, a deeper focus on the information channels which link the homeland and the diaspora, and their role in these connected identity flows, should be considered. Finally, the socio-economic and logistic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic ought to be assessed in the near future.