**YEVHEN RACHKOV**

Ph.D., Associate Professor at the Department of Historiography, Source Studies, and Archaeology of the V.N. Karazin Kharkiv National University (Kharkiv, Ukraine)

yevhen.rachkov@gmail.com

**Symbolic and Ritual Practices in the Post-Soviet Urban World: Symbolic Space and Festivity in the Cities of Eastern and Southern Ukraine, 1990s–2010s[[1]](#footnote-1)**

During the 1990s to 2010s, urban communities in Southern and Eastern Ukraine went through a “search for” and “invention” of new traditions that produced new semantic models and forms of their representation. Urban symbolic and ritual practices were characterized by attempts to move away from the most objectionable manifestations of Soviet festive culture and to create a fundamentally new festive canon. These developments unfolded in the face of continuous tensions between various agents of memory and were to some extent initiated at the national level, while also receiving support of local elites and urban communities. Undoubtedly, socio-political transformations, particularly those connected with the the Orange Revolution (2004) and Euromaidan Revolution (2013–2014), the Russian aggression against Ukraine, and other events, contributed to this process. We should bear in mind that municipal traditions are connected in special ways with the cultural and symbolic space and cultural memory of the subject cities – Dnipro, Donetsk, Zaporizhia, Odesa, and Kharkiv. It is no coincidence that after 1991, the question of the time of the founding of cities became important – it not only had significance for their public image, but also served as ammunition in political confrontations at the local level. The historical and cultural heritage of cities became a fundamental issue. In all five of the subject cities, the national historical narrative began gaining ground. In their communal symbolic space, an increasing emphasis is placed today on images and symbols, including monumental sites of memory, which honor Ukrainian independence. Clearly, those aspects of festive culture that focus on the idea of national unity will continue to grow in importance. However, modern urban ritual practices in Ukraine are also characterized by fragmentation and decentralization. The festive landscape and topography are undergoing diversification. Most festive events are aimed at bringing together adherents of diverging socio-political views. At the same time, attempts to control the form and contents of nation-level celebrations and unify the holiday canon have become more and more noticeable in recent years, as state holidays are given a more sharply defined ideological direction.

Today, the main municipal holidays are city anniversaries and City Days. They have taken on the character of true popular festivals and embody the evolution of the Soviet festive canon: the transition from ceremonial mass marches through city centers to street entertainment in the form of costumed carnivals, happening in several locations at the same time. The celebration scenario presupposes the involvement of various social, professional, ethnic, subcultural, and age groups of residents. Nevertheless, no large-scale “ceremonial revolution” has taken place in the decades after 1991. The modern festive culture of large Ukrainian cities is quite eclectic, combining at least several components: a “new” style of festivity generally based on borrowed “Western” cultural patterns; “traditional” forms stressing national aspects and attempting to revive pre-Soviet cultural models; and “Soviet” forms that perpetuate the Soviet festive canon, often reinterpreted within the framework of the new urban tradition. Soviet symbolic and ritual practices have been partially adapted to these new traditions; they have begun to serve new purposes while continuing to influence the cultural and symbolic space of the subject cities and the *urban imaginary*. Overall, the process of constructing a new model of urban festivity in Ukraine is far from complete; this emerging cultural complex remains fluid and capable of “turning” towards the festive traditions of different historical periods.

1. This study is part of the project “CityFace: Practices of the Self-Representation of Multinational Cities in the Industrial and Post-Industrial Era” (<https://cityface.org.ua/>), sponsored by the Contemporary Ukraine Studies Program at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)