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Brothers Grimm or Brothers Karamazov: The Myth and the Reality of How Russians and Ukrainians View the Other

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OLGA ONUCH, MAR 15 2015

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Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukrainians[1] and Russians[2] have been living peacefully in two separate and independent states for nearly a quarter of a century. Much has been said about the cultural and historical links between these two 'brotherly' countries, but also about the tensions between the two countries' different perspectives on nation building and democratisation processes (Jakubanećs, Supphellen, and Thorbjørnsen, 2005; Janmaat, 2000; Laba, 1996; Prizel, 1998; Puglisi, 2003; Shulman, 1998; Szporluk, 2000; Velychenko, 1992). Although Russian leaders, in the manner of an older brother, have consistently labelled Ukraine as the central element of Russia's 'near abroad' (Cameron and Orenstein, 2012; Rywkin, 2003; Trenin, 2006), the citizens and their foreign policies preferences have historically (i.e. on gas, on the Georgian War, on the EU and NATO) converged and diverged several times over the course of the last twenty-plus years.

Yet, even though there were sensitive moments during the last twenty-plus years of Ukraine-Russia relations (October 1996 crisis, 2004 Orange Revolution, gas crisis of January 2006, gas crisis of January 2009), the events of 2014 (the Euromaidan Protests, the annexation of Crimea, and the ongoing conflict in the Donbas[3]) are predicted by social scientists to not only sour formal relations between the two states, but also between 'ordinary' citizens. While there are many 'myths' about the way brother Russians and Ukrainians view the 'other' state and its people, the reality is much more complex, permeating with conflict, competition, and ideological disagreements, as in any other family. In such critical times, we must stop and ask: Do Russians and Ukrainians view the events of the last year differently? Or are there points of convergence? Do these events affect the way Russians see Ukraine and Ukrainians see Russia? If so, how? And can we identify any shifts in views overtime from before the 2014 crisis to today? Data on the topic is difficult to find and even more difficult to assess. This is specifically the case when so many contextual variables are in flux and when little, if any, of the available data consists of either a repeated and duplicated schedule of questions, or a panel (following citizens and their views) tracking preferences over time.

Thus, we must scour a variety of polls conducted at different times, by different institutions, to map out the views of Ukrainians and Russians. Employing a series of social surveys, this brief article aims to demonstrate that: a) most Russians and Ukrainians view the events of 2014 differently; b) on average, Ukrainians and Russians have very negative views of the other's state, military and political leaders; c) yet, concurrently, the majority of Ukrainians and Russians do not report having negative views of 'ordinary' citizens in the neighbouring country. But perhaps more importantly, it is necessary to keep in mind that the populations of each country are not homogeneous. And rather

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than focus on the more extreme minority views (which have unfortunately received much of our attention) it is interesting to look at the expanding Ukrainian and Russian middle classes, which seem to converge on policy preferences, peaceful external relations, and are not as easily susceptible to nationalist rhetoric.

Political science research on Ukrainian and Russian foreign policy (D'Anieri, 2012; Hagendoorn, Linssen, and Tumanov, 2013; Kravets, 2011; Taras, 2012), intergroup relations (Chinn and Kaiser, 1996; Hagendoorn, Linssen, and Tumanov, 2013; Sasse, 2007), and political behaviour and culture (Colton, 1996; Colton and Hale, 2009; Colton and McFaul, 2002; Frye, 2014; Hale, 2011; Meirowitz and Tucker, 2013; Pop-Eleches and Tucker, 2013; Robertson, 2009; Sakwa, 2013) is vast, and it is impossible to do it justice in this short piece. But what is certain is that there has not been any consistent study of Russians' and Ukrainians' perceptions of the other that has traced these views systematically over time. The best way in which to do this at present is to provide an overview of relevant recent public opinion data, collected in both countries, and contrast and compare it over time where possible.

In order to explore this topic further, I will organise the discussion in the following sections: Russians' and Ukrainians' views of the other countries, their views on the other country's political leaders, their views on the Donbas conflict and annexation of Crimea, and finally their preferences on cross-border relations and foreign policy more broadly. I will attempt to highlight areas of divergence, identifying the most concerning differences, and will flag up areas with potential for convergence and, thus, opportunities for conflict resolution. Finally, I will conclude the discussion by employing limited evidence based on a small sample of informal interviews conducted in December 2014 with thirteen Russian and Ukrainian NGO workers, drawing attention to areas of collaboration among Ukrainians and Russians in the cases of aid to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and peace protest movements.

Figure 1: How Ukrainians View Russians

Surprisingly, there is very little openly available data on how 'ordinary' Ukrainians view 'ordinary' Russians and vice versa. Anecdotal evidence (from past focus groups conducted by the author) points out that while 'ordinary' Ukrainians and 'ordinary' Russians equally believe that the other is under the influence of 'un-free' media or western/US propaganda or nationalists, 'ordinary' citizens seem to find the other as generally a brotherly and reasonable group. Several Razumkov surveys (1999-2013) show that the majority of Ukrainians do not trust Russian media and think it is biased. In focus groups, conducted for another purpose (protest participation in the region in the aftermath of the Orange Revolution), Ukrainian participants frequently explained the difference between the size and scope of protest participation in Ukraine and Russia as a product of the different information Ukrainians and Russians are exposed to, which, according to them, helps to shape different political cultures. They often say 'it's not their fault, they are normal [zvychaini] people just like us.' This anecdotal evidence can be used to underscore the fact that any difference that 'ordinary' Ukrainians see with 'ordinary' Russians is not hostile. As we can see from a recent survey conducted by Pew, Ukrainians' views of Russians have not changed dramatically since 2009 (see Figure 1). Yet, the number of Ukrainian respondents who saw Russians very favourably or mostly favourably has not altered much between fall 2009 and spring 2014 (84%); the number of respondents that viewed Russians unfavourably seems to have grown from 8% in fall 2009 to 14% in Spring 2014. It is thus a reasonable hypothesis that 'ordinary' citizens distinguish between the country, the state, the politicians, and *the people* they lead. As we will see below, there is a stark difference between the former three and the latter.

Figure 2: Ukrainians' View of Russia

To demonstrate this ability to differentiate between the 'state' and its people, we turn to how Ukrainians view Russia. Over the last decade of Pew surveying, in the period after the Orange Revolution, we can observe a substantial decline of respondents who saw Russia very favourably (see Figure 2). According to the Pew Survey, the total accumulative number of respondents who saw Russia very favourably or mostly favourably also declined overtime. This made up 87% of the respondents in Summer 2002, 81% in Spring 2007, and a record low of 35% in Spring 2014. The reported decline of 2014 (period when the survey was conducted) coincides with the fleeing of former president Yanukovych to Russia and the Russian annexation of Crimea. Moreover, what we see specifically in 2014 is a dramatic increase in the number of Ukrainian respondents who see Russia 'very unfavourably,' which went from a consistently low 3% or less of respondents in past surveys to more than a third of respondents reporting that they view Russia very unfavourably (see Figure 2).

Unfortunately, this survey does not allow us to check if the percentage of Russian respondents who view Ukraine unfavourably has equally risen in 2014, nor does the available survey data provide us with a regional breakdown within Ukraine. It is certainly possible that there is some regional variation in the distribution of the respondents who see Russia unfavourably. Yet, as we will see below, this also may not be the case, and region alone may not be the best predictor of a divergence in preferences. Data that can be used as proxy for viewing a country unfavourably could be Pew's question posed to Russians: 'Which country do you see as the greatest threat to Russia?' In each instance the question was posed (2009, 2010), Russians saw Ukraine as a significant threat only outnumbered by the United States and Georgia (Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project Russia Survey 2009 & 2010). While this data does not tell us much about the current trends in public opinion, if we take the rising rate of respondents who reported that Georgia was the greatest threat following the 2008 Georgia conflict as a predictor, we may hypothesise that this rate would also rise for Ukraine during the ongoing conflict in the Donbas. In 2014, Pew did ask Russian respondents: 'Do you think the government of Ukraine respects the personal freedoms of its people, or don't you think so?' And although this is a very different question, focusing on a different sentiment to a respondent's view of a state, it is worth noting that an overwhelming 73% of Russian respondents reported that the Ukrainian government 'does not respect the personal freedom of its people'. This can be interpreted pointing to a high level of unfavourability of the Ukrainian state among Russian respondents. Thus, similarly, we can hypothesise that Russians have positive views of 'ordinary' Ukrainians, but not of the Ukrainian State.

Views of Political Leaders

The next question to explore, given the lack of access to comparable data on the state, is what, exactly, about Russia and Ukraine do 'ordinary' Ukrainians and Russians disapprove of? First, we can look at how the respondents in each country view the political leadership in the 'other.' According to Russia's state-funded polling agency VTsIOM,[5] in the most recent poll of 1,600 Russians, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko is viewed mostly negatively by Russians. According to the analysis of the agency, 43% of the respondents agree that Poroshenko is a puppet of the West, 37% believe he is controlled by oligarchs, and 21% believe he is highly influenced by nationalists (VTsIOM, 2014). Moreover, 55% of the survey's respondents believe that Poroshenko cannot be recognised as a legitimate head of state. Yet, while not so hostile, Ukrainians are not overwhelmingly supportive of the crisis President either. Although Poroshenko won the Presidential elections in the first round and is a rather popular politician, according to a poll conducted between 6-13 November 2014 by the Rating Group (n= 2500), only 49% of Ukrainians surveyed fully approve his track record since election. Thus, looking at this data, although Russians seem to view Poroshenko as illegitimate or, worse, view him as controlled by foreign agents or nationalists, it is not so clear that Ukrainians have a very high opinion of him, either. Alas, it should be noted that in all surveys conducted in Ukraine by Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) and the Democratic Initiatives Foundation (DIF), Razumkov, and Rating Group, Poroshenko is seen as a legitimate leader by the broad majority of Ukrainian respondents, aside for in pockets of the Donbas. Thus, while 'ordinary' Russians and Ukrainians views of the Ukrainian leader are undoubtedly 'framed' by different public discourse of legitimacy and other propaganda, they do not diverge that dramatically on the whole.

Figure 3: Russians' Approval of Putin

On the other hand, Putin's support among Russian respondents has grown exponentially this year, from 65% to 85% (Chandler, 2014; Greene and Robertson, 2014; Keating, 2014). Yet, this popularity has not extended beyond Russia's borders. Crucially, Ukrainians, who have historically viewed Putin as a strong and even impressive political leader, have changed their opinion of the politician dramatically. If we compare survey data collected by the Rating Group, 47% of the respondents had a 'positive view' of Putin in October 2013 and only 16% of Ukrainian respondents reported the same positive view in August 2014. Thus, we see that on the question of Russian leadership, Ukrainians' and Russians' views part significantly.

Figure 4: Ukrainians' View of Putin

Moreover, Ukrainian respondents' 'confidence in Putin to do the right thing regarding world affairs' points again to a serious shift from 2007, when 56% had 'a lot or some confidence' in the Russian politician, to 2014, when a whopping 57% had 'no confidence at all' (Pew Research Center, 2014). Even if further survey and complimentary qualitative work is required to fully unpack this significant shift, these survey results highlight the possibility that while Ukrainians do not blame 'ordinary' Russians for the crisis, they do seem to blame the state and the political elite of Russia, and Putin is the most significant focal point.

Figure 5: Russians' and Ukrainians' Views on the Crimean Referendum

Figure 7: Views on Russia's Right to Defend Russian Speakers Abroad

Views on Current Relations between Ukraine and Russia

Thus, as we can see, the further we investigate, the more we can observe a growing distance between the way 'ordinary' Ukrainians and 'ordinary' Russians view each other's state, politicians, and politics. The next question requiring our exploration is how differently do Ukrainians and Russians view the conflict itself. According to the same VTsIOM study quoted above, 79% of Russian respondents believe that the guerrilla groups fighting in the Donbas are 'mainly made up of local residents', 20% believe that they are 'made up of hired mercenaries', and only 15% believe that the guerrilla groups are 'made up of Russian "volunteers".' In a more detailed study conducted by the Levada Centre, Russian respondents were asked repeatedly over the course of the last year: 'What do you think about the fact that Russian volunteers are fighting in Ukraine with militia?' The number of Russian respondents who view the role of Russian volunteers 'very positively' has decreased from 24% in May to 12% in November (see Figure 6). However, according to the Levada study, 50% of Russian respondents report that Russia is justified in defending the interests of Russian-speaking Ukrainian citizens residing within the borders of Ukraine (see Figure 7), and a significantly large portion (65%) do not believe that Russia is actively supporting the guerrillas in the Donbas (see Figure 8). Thus, while Russians feel Russia would be justified in supporting the guerrillas in the Donbas, the majority of respondents in Russia do not believe that their country has done so yet.

Figure 8: Views on Russia's Current Involvement in Ukrainian Crisis

The Levada Center worked actively with two Ukrainian sociological institutes, the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) and the Democratic Initiatives Foundation (DIF), for the execution of the survey, and many of the questions were also posed to Ukrainians (KIIS, 2014; Levada-Center, 2014), thus allowing us to compare the views more systematically. When asked: 'Do you agree with the view that Russia actively supports pro-Russian oriented forces in eastern Ukraine?' over half of the Ukrainian respondents agreed (see Figure 8). Thus, there is a substantial difference in the manner in which Ukrainians and Russians view the issue of Russia's involvement in the Donbas. Therefore, we can increasingly identify a growing divide among how 'ordinary' Ukrainians and Russians view the 'other,' specifically in terms of the on-going conflict.

But we must also note that there is some significant divergence among Ukrainians on the topic. A study conducted by Germany's largest market research institute GfK on behalf of Pact-Uniter (for USAID) polling residents of Ukraine, plus an (unrepresentative) sample of those residing in Crimea and a targeted sample of some IDPs currently residing in other parts of Ukraine, highlights some interesting trends among the survey respondents (Mikhanchuk and Volosevych, 2014). The study found that the majority of Ukrainians tend to blame Russia for the military operations in Crimea and the Donbas. A significantly large 65% of Ukrainian respondents believe that Russia 'provided both funds and weapons to local criminals', and 62% believe that 'the conflict was organised by the Russian special services'. The study found that IDPs agreed for the most part that Russia was involved with the financing and organising of the conflict in the Donbas. Yet, among the residents of Crimea surveyed, there is a general disagreement. The majority reported that they believe that Russia is not responsible for the conflict. Instead, 62% believe that the local citizens in Crimea and the Donbas have been forced to fight against the spread of nationalism. This being said, the study notes that even the residents of Crimea acknowledged the differential role of Russian TV propaganda. While there is no reliable data from the Donbas region, it is possible that this divergence will also be found among the residents of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts.

What is most concerning in the way 'ordinary' Ukrainians and Russians view the 'other' is how they understand the boundaries of conflict itself. While Russians believe that the conflict is an internal Ukrainian problem caused by localised conflicts between Russian-speakers and Ukrainian-speakers, Ukrainians view the conflict as one that directly involves (and is fuelled by) a foreign state – Russia. Levada and KIIS/DIF asked their respondents whether they 'agree with the view that there is a war between Russia and Ukraine?' The divergence in responses is overwhelming, and should be a reason for concern.

The surveys find that 70% of Ukrainian respondents believe that their country is at war with Russia, while only a quarter of Russian respondents agree (see Figure 9). It is possible that the two surveys' divergent findings are caused by an event that took place between August, when the Russian survey was conducted, and September, when the Ukrainian survey was conducted. The only significant event that comes to mind is the confirmation (by EU, OSCE, and NATO) that up to 2,000 Russian troops entered into Ukrainian territory, which occurred in the second half of August 2014. It is possible that this temporal discrepancy could have affected Ukrainians' views on the topic. Even so, this finding is still concerning for two reasons. First, looking at the divergent views on this question, as well as the other listed above, it is clear that the conflict is being reported on and framed very differently in the two countries. Second, and more importantly, there is a possibility that this differential view will not only shape broader attitudes of Ukrainians to Russians, but can also create opportunities for radical groups to promote acts of violence as justified by the 'de-facto war status.' Therefore, this divergence could make the further escalation and geographic contagion of the conflict more likely. While completely out of the scope of this brief article, it is necessary to further investigate the distinct way 'ordinary' Ukrainians and Russians view the conflict and, thus, also the 'other.'

Figure 9: Views on War Between Russia and Ukraine

Views on How Relations between Ukraine and Russia Should Look Like

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While there is already a clear distinction in the manner in which 'ordinary' Ukrainians and 'ordinary' Russians view each other, their states, their politicians, and their involvement in the ongoing conflict in the Donbas and Crimea, in order to better understand how these two populations view each other, it is useful also to inquire how they feel the relations between their two countries and their two peoples 'should be.' A recent survey conducted by KIIS along with DIF in 8-18 February 2014 (n=2032, representative random sample, all Ukraine including Crimea) asked respondents: 'What would you like to see the relationship between Ukraine and Russia look like?' The survey finds that 68% of all Ukrainians would like to see the two countries as 'independent but friendly states with open borders'. And whilst we would assume that respondents who have a negative attitude towards the Euromaidan protests would be much more likely to support border unification, only 21% out of such 'types' of respondents want to unite with Russia into a single state. When we look at the same question divided between the different macro regions of Ukraine, we see that most Ukrainians, regardless of region, agree. Even if in the centre, West, and South there was a slightly larger per cent of support for closed borders and visa regimes, and in the South and East there was slightly more support for the two countries uniting into one state (see Figure 10). What we can take away from this survey is that the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians want 'peaceful and friendly relations' with their neighbours to the East.

Figure 10: Ukrainians' External Policy Preferences

The Levada Centre also conducted a similar survey in 21-25 February 2014 (n=1603), and its data can be used for comparison. In Russia also, 53% of respondents want both countries to be independent, but friendly, with open borders, without visas and customs'. It is notable that since November 2013, the numbers of respondents who agree with this preference has increased by 4% in Russia and decreased in Ukraine by 5%. On the other hand, the unification of the two countries into one state is supported by 12% of Ukrainians and 32% of Russians. The survey's analysts also point out that those over the age of 40 are more likely to support the unification of the two countries (KIIS, 2014; Levada-Center, 2014). But again, we see that the broad majority of both countries' populations want to have 'friendly and open relations' between the two states. And although this number has diminished ever so slightly in Ukraine, we see that most Ukrainians and Russians want to maintain good ties with their neighbours.

Figure 11: Ukrainians' Foreign Policy Preferences

The most significant shift is how Ukrainians view their foreign policy priorities. As reported by Razumkov, since 2011, there has been a trend whereby an increasing proportion of Ukrainians believe that the European Union – as opposed to Russia – should be their foreign policy priority (see Figure 11). In 2014, 52% of those surveyed believed that the country should focus on relations with the EU rather than Russia (16%) (Razumkov Sociological Poll, 2014). The 2014 Pew survey confirms this trend, but adds the level of complexity required in Ukraine by also asking if both should be equal policy priorities. Even in this case, the majority of respondents (43%) reported that it is more important to have strong ties with the EU, 27% reported that both are equally important, and even fewer reported that Russia should remain a priority focus (see Figure 12). Thus, once again, we see that Ukrainians have moved away from Russia and its leadership as a result of the crisis, even if wishing to maintain close ties with Russians.

Figure 12: Ukrainians' Foreign Policy Preferences II

The issue of electoral diversity within the two countries (regional, urban-rural, socio-economic, etc.), as well as the rise of the Russian (and Ukrainian) middle class, should not be overlooked. As I reported elsewhere (Onuch, 2014), the middle class was a significant supporter and participant of the Euromaidan protests across Ukraine. This is not insignificant and lends well to the often-studied role of the middle class median voter in achieving democratic stability. We see a similar type of Russian urban middle class in Moscow and St. Petersburg, who supported the Euromaidan and protested in 2014 against the annexation of Crimea and the involvement of Russia in the Donbas conflict. According to SONAR, an independent monitoring group that counts protesters passing through security checkpoints, more than 26,000 joined in the Moscow protests back in March 2014. While the protests died down over the summer, most recently on 21 September 2014, tens of thousands protested again across several cities 'against what they say is a covert Russian war in eastern Ukraine' (RFE/RL's Russian Service, 2014).

While these protesters represent, perhaps, a 'minority view' among Russians more generally, they do represent a group of Russians who not only see Ukrainians very positively, but also have collaborated with Ukrainian counterparts. Ukrainian NGO practitioners and activists interviewed by the author have explained that they have communicated with Russian organisers of the protests quite frequently – even though stressing that they were in no way part of the organisation and mobilisation process abroad (author's interview). They also have explained that Russian activists and NGOs have actively sought ways in which they can work with Ukrainian groups to provide basic care, food, and medicines to people living in the Donbas conflict zone and help with resettling IDPs (author's interview). While these are far from representing the majorities in each country, and for the most part this is only anecdotal evidence, it does point to a positive opportunity for reconciliation between the two populations. Specifically, the cooperation on humanitarian grounds and with the resettlement of IDPs, as it does not require similar ideologies, policy preferences, or agreement on the causes of the conflict – it only requires the willingness of these neighbours to remain friendly.

Conclusions

Thus, while Ukrainians and Russians do not generally view the 'other' in a hostile manner and both believe that there should be friendly relations between their countries, they do have very different views on where relations between their two countries actually stand. Russians and Ukrainians equally distrust the other's political leadership and view the other's country in an unfavourable light. Moreover, Ukrainians and Russians strongly disagree about Russia's involvement in the conflict in the Donbas. Namely, while most Ukrainians believe their country is at war with Russia, most Russians view this situation differently as an internal conflict caused by locals needing to defend themselves against the spread of nationalism. These harsh differences should be further analysed and systematically traced, as it is clear that these two populations are receiving very different information, which is framed in a very different manner. The most worrying aspect of this divergence is that it can create the opportunity for radical groups to escalate violence and further divide the two populations.

But lastly, there is a glimmer of hope. There have been a few instances of convergence in public opinion, but also in cooperation between activists, journalists, and NGO practitioners who wish to put political difference aside and cooperatively deal with the humanitarian crisis that has unfolded in the Donbas. These instances of cooperation may be few, but it would equally be worthy for political scientists to explore under what conditions (and which types of) 'ordinary' Russians and Ukrainians come together and cooperate.

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Brothers Grimm or Brothers Karamazov: The Myth and the Reality of How Russians and Ukrainians

Written by Olga Onuch

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[1] For the purpose of this article, all references to Ukrainians means citizens of Ukraine (residing in Ukraine).

[2] For the purpose of this article, all references to Russians means citizens of Russia (residing in Russia).

[3] The Donetsk Basin: Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts of Ukraine, together commonly called the 'Donbas.'

[4] There are several limitations to the data presented below, and the way in which we are currently able to analyse it. Due to the nature of the data presented below (not always available in full), and because it is derived from multiple sources, it is not possible at this time to conduct any meaningful statistical analysis.

[5] The state-owned and government-run institution reports to the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (also spelled wciom and vciom).

About the author:

Olga Onuch is a Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Manchester and an Associate Fellow, at Nuffield College, at the University of Oxford. She specialises in the comparative study of protest politics and elections in democratising states in Latin American and Eastern Europe. Olga is an expert on protests and activism in Ukraine and is the principle investigator of the Ukrainian Protest Project and co-investigator of a 2014 NSF funded Ukrainian Electoral Survey (Henry Hale P-I). She is a member of the OSF-funded Strategic Advisory Group, tasked with advising the government and president of Ukraine. Her book *Mapping Mass Mobilizations* (2014) investigates mass-mobilisation in Ukraine and Argentina. Her research has also been highlighted on Al Jazeera English, BBC World Service, NPR, IBT and Radio Free Europe. Follow her on Twitter @oonuch.