Russia as Ukraine's 'Other': Identity and Geopolitics

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Russia's annexation of the Crimean Autonomous Republic and the barely hidden fomenting of the separatist movement in eastern Ukraine have brought the country to the edge of a new cold war with the West. Western media has depicted Putin's government as an antipode of all that is good and normal in international relations, as having been 'evil enough' (Motyl, 2014) to merit comparisons with neo-Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan. German Chancellor Merkel led an attack on Russia's president personally, starting with accusations of him living 'in another world' (Baker, 2014) and ending with a homegrown psychoanalysis of 'he acts the way he does to "prove he's a man"' (Ernst, 2014).

Ukraine, being in a de facto state of war with Russia's proxies in Donbas, has not fallen short of related rhetoric and sought to outdo its western sponsors in vilifying Russia and the Russians. A typical set of clichés includes 'a country of the insane' (Shchetkina, 2014) – although the WHO (2011) statistics shows the actual burden of mental health disorders in Russia to be one half of the western average – 'a fake, phantom country… biggest madhouse on Earth' (Kostyk, 2014), 'a large gas pump with atomic missiles' (Lutsenko, 2014), 'a special operation writ large' (Golovakha, 2014), and, of course, a 'Mordor' (Presa Ukraïny, 2014).

Both the 'Mordor' and the 'madhouse' designations crept into official and semi-official pronouncements of Ukraine's political elite: ministers, spokespersons for the government, and the like. An advisor to Ukraine's Minister of Defence, Oleksandr Danyliuk, vows to engage the relatives of the Russian army volunteers fighting on the separatist side in Donbas 'so that they would become the principal anti-war activists in Mordor' (Vidomosti, 2014). The Minister of Interior answers the question on chances for Russia's invasion by qualifying it as 'a type of question of when the madman will have his next bout' (The Insider, 2014). The deputy governor of the Dnipropetrovsk region Borys Filatov calls Russian politicians 'the Kremlin bastards' (Kostyk, 2014). All of this gets sympathetic press in the West, which, in turn, reinforces the vilification zeal back in Ukraine. As the title of a recent Bloomberg View article goes, 'Putin's Russia, Tolkien's Mordor: What's the difference?' (Bershidsky, 2014).

Clearly, such portrayal, if anything, reinforces the besieged fortress mentality that keeps Putin's regime going. Vilification of the opponent does not help to solve either international or inter-ethnic conflicts, just the opposite. And yet, the situation of a de facto breach of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, which the unlawful annexation of the Crimea represents, seemingly justifies the hostile rhetoric on Kiev's part. Equally, Russia's support of the separatist movement in Donbas cannot but trigger Ukraine's worst suspicions of a neighbouring country's desire to dismantle Ukraine by force. It appears natural, in such a situation, that Russia's image would get a serious beating in the eyes of the Ukrainian public. However, is it true that the current round of badmouthing Russia and the Russians is a purely situational development, a predictable reaction to the unfriendly actions of a neighbouring power? Or does it reveal something more profound than that, something perhaps indicative of not only the present state, but also the

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historic evolution of the Ukrainian national identity as such? Is Russia really a Ukraine's 'other,' and if it is, what are the factors that explain this distancing? Is Russia truly, as a Ukrainian philosopher recently observed, a 'Europe perverted, like Conchita Wurst, more or less' (Yermolenko, 2014)? Both framing and answering of the 'othering' question may be of direct importance to the resolution of the ongoing conflict.

The Origins of Alienation

Ukrainian identity shaped through the centuries of counter-position to external overlordship. First, Mongol, then Lithuanian, Polish, and finally Muscovite incursions hardened the perception of separateness that descendants of the western branch of a once unified Kievan Rus' people felt toward their closest ethnic relatives to the North and North-East. Ukraine's ethnogenesis had been largely completed under the conditions of foreign domination of the erstwhile Kievan Rus' western lands. By the time it was over, the luckier eastern Rus'ians had managed to establish a new state of their own, resurrecting the tradition of the Kievan statehood in the Great Princedom of Muscovy. Ukraine stayed under foreign domination until the Liberation War of 1648-1654 and the conclusion of the Pereyaslav Agreement with the Russian tsar Alexis. The essence of the agreement, which brought Ukraine's Cossack Hetmanate and the lands it controlled under the protection of the Russian tsar in a rather typical vassalage relationship of the time, is still hotly debated in both countries. While Russians have perceived it as an act of reunification, Ukrainian nationalist historians see Pereyaslav as the beginning of 350 years of Russia's colonial domination, which trampled underfoot the early sprouts of liberty and self-rule – the sprouts that could presumably blossom into a European-type of independent Ukrainian statehood, were it not for the Muscovite treachery and bad faith.

The perceptions of Russia's 'betrayal' of Ukraine at the birth of the Ukrainian national sovereignty have led to the development of what John Morrison (1993, pp. 679-680) describes as a 'permanent inferiority complex and a lack of confidence in negotiating with Moscow' on the part of the Ukrainian political elite who cannot stop fearing 'that any deal with Russia is a potential trap, however favourable to Ukraine it terms might appear.' Hence, Ukrainian elites were among the first to reject the terms of the Novo-Ogarevo agreement that Mikhail Gorbachev hoped would modernise and replace the old Soviet Union treaty. Ukraine's president Kravchuk torpedoed a quasi-federal version of the agreement on the establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), following which, a rather insubstantial accord of loose regional affiliation was signed by Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. Finally, Russia's attempts to lure Ukraine into the Customs Union were met with a sense of distrust and apprehension: if Moscow was willing to cough up $15 billion in loans and lock-in its gas prices at a level 30 percent below the European average, there must have been a catch of some sort. That was a typical perception among the Maidan activists, who saw Russia's offer, which came concurrently with a technical delay in negotiations with the EU, as clear evidence of a plot to undermine the country's sovereignty and freedom of international association.

Had a similar offer come from any other country, it would, in all probability, be accepted with great enthusiasm. However, Russia's case is different. First of all, the Russian Empire and its successor state, the USSR, had been the two states most actively involved in shaping the Ukrainian national identity over the last 350 years. Second, the Russian imperial government had restricted the use of the Ukrainian language in printed media, on stage and in education on more than few occasions. Third, the Soviet regime was responsible for the worst tragedy in modern Ukraine's history – the great famine of 1933 ('Holodomor'). Against such a background, Ukrainian nationalists learned to perceive Russia as Ukraine's true Other, i.e. a nation as close to being Ukraine's opposite as could be reasonably imagined. In demonising Russia, they were much helped by a long shadow of history.

The Shadow of History

The would-be Ukraine experienced centuries of foreign domination: by Mongols, Lithuanians, Poles, and, in various parts of its future territory, Austrians, Hungarians, Romanians, Crimean Tatars, and Turks. However, it was Russia and the Russians that were destined to become the dreaded and hated Other in the eyes of the Ukrainian nationalist intellectuals from the early nineteenth century on. The paradox of the situation lies in the fact that, for the Russians themselves, Ukrainians have never been perceived as foreigners, but rather as a branch of the greater Russian tree, a marginally different part of the same 'all-Russian' ethnos. The protectorate that Alexis extended to the Cossacks

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and the subsequent annexation of a nucleus would-be Ukraine by Catherine the Great[1] were, to the Russian mind, as distant from the occupation of a foreign land as legal claiming of one's own inheritance could be from a highway robbery.

Russia's 'otherness' for Ukraine can be explained precisely by the degree of ethnic closeness and the soundness of the Muscovites' claim on the Kievan princes' patrimony. At the start of the Ukrainian nationalist mobilisation, its standard-bearers encountered a rather difficult dilemma of a disinterested 'Little Russian' population that seemed content with its 'ruski' identity – and the de facto subaltern status of the Ukrainian pen elite. After Ivan Kotliarevskyi's *Aeneid* (1798), there was no denial that the separate, even if closely related to the dominant language of the Russian empire, Ukrainian vernacular actually existed. Hence, a separate Ukrainian identity, still called the Russian ('ruski') in Galicia and other eastern regions of the Habsburg Empire, had entered the stage circa 1830s, and with it, a question: what to do with this separateness, once discovered?[2] The answer was easy in Ukraine's western lands, dominated by the non-Slavic ethnicities and the traditionally Ukrainophobic Polish *szlachta*. Ukrainians had to fight for their cultural and national self-determination. But what about the country's core, now safely within the dominion of Ukraine's ethnic and religious brethren – the Russians?

Having Ukrainian identity evolve so close to the Russian one and within the envelope of Russian state institutions presented Ukrainian elites with a choice between assimilation and revolt. Assimilation into the 'Little Russian' and, eventually, 'Great Russian' identity was not without its rewards, and became a path that Ukrainian aristocrats, clergymen, and pen elites treaded for centuries. No less figures than Nikolai Gogol, the writer, and Hryhorii Skovoroda, an eighteenth-century wandering philosopher, a 'Russian Socrates,' spring to mind.

The revolt started with Taras Shevchenko and continued with a host of intellectuals whose attitude to Russia is best described as Russophobic in a literal sense, or full of existential fear and loathing of *moskali* (a pejorative for Russians), who were blamed for all real and alleged misfortunes of the Ukrainian people. However, this anti-Russian nationalism faced two problems that had to be explained away: one of successful cooptation of the Ukrainian elites into the institutions of the Russian state, and another of intense cross-fertilisation and fusion of the two cultures. While the first could be presented as manifestation of a devious assimilationist plan, the second has been decried as a result of the colonial Russian influences on the Ukrainian mind. In both cases, 'alien' influences had to be rejected and reversed to avail 'purification' of the national spirit – a must-do prerequisite for a political autonomy.

Myth-Making as Geopolitics

Ukraine's nationalists fought off, and defeated, more Russophile members of the movement who, like Mykhailo Drahomanov, rejected the idea of political separation from Russia as preposterous. Instead, they chose to advance the negative identity of Ukraine as a 'non-Russia' *par excellence*. This was a no small feat, which required a good deal of rewriting of history in combination with geopolitical revisionism.

The historical construction focused on denying Russia's statehood its Kievan roots. The idea that Ukraine is part of Europe, while the 'Eurasian' Russia is not, can be found right at the beginning of a long tradition of Russophobic scholarship. An extreme version of this argument, originally advanced by an early champion of racial exclusivity, Franciszek Duchiński, in the mid-nineteenth century, has been recently reanimated in the Ukrainian political discourse (Molchanov, 2002, pp. 169, 222-227). Duchiński went to great lengths to underscore the 'Asianness' of the Russians, which in the Eurocentric universe of the time was tantamount to barbarism and accounted, in his view, for both the despotic and subservient propensities of the Russian psyche. To sever the Ukrainians from the Russians, he concocted a quasi-scientific explanation of ethnic differences between the two nationalities, imagining their descent from different and completely unrelated tribes: the 'Aryans' in the case of Ukraine, and the 'Turanians' in the case of Russia:

The Muscovites are neither Slavs nor Christians in the spirit of the [true] Slavs and other Indo-European Christians. They are nomads until this day, and will remain nomads forever. (cit. in Rudnytsky, 1987, p. 189)

The myth of the non-Slavic origin of Russians was enthusiastically embraced by the Ukrainian radical nationalists,

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and has had a certain impact on Western academia (cf. Paszkiewicz, 1983). It denies Russians not only the state and dynastic links to the Kievan Rus, but even a degree of ethnic kinship to the 'true' Eastern Slavs, presenting Russian origins as a result of interbreeding between Mongol invaders and local 'Finno-Ugric' tribes of the Volga basin. An underlying, though rarely stated, premise of this argument is racist: the truly 'Aryan' Ukrainians are not only sharply differentiated from but are presumed to be genetically and culturally superior to the 'Eurasian' Russians.

Fully in line with pseudohistorical musings a la Duchiński, Ukrainian writers today deny the Russians their Slavic origins, arguing that 'in truth, they are the people that descended from the Finno-Ugric tribes' (Ukrinform.ua, 2014). Respected Ukrainian scholars, though not going that far, concur in arguing for Ukrainian primordial uniqueness and early separation from other Eastern Slavs. Academician Yaroslav Isaievych (1996) advanced the idea that ethnic differences between future Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians can be traced back to the times of Scythians and Sarmatians. A standard university textbook asserts that 'the origins of the Ukrainian culture are lost in the hoary antiquity,' that 'Ukraine is the ancestral home of the Indo-European peoples,' and that 'the main population of Ukraine has not changed since the stone age' (Ryabchenko et al., 2014, pp. 13, 33, 48). A pseudo-scholar opinion popularised in mass media and repeated in a high school textbook maintains that 'in the 5th millennium BCE ancient Ukrainians invented the wheel and the plough… domesticated the horse' (Serediuk, 2007; Krivich and Surgai, 2009, p. 81). Meanwhile, Russia is seen as an anti-civilisation, 'the Moscow *ulus* based on the traditions of the Golden Horde,' as 'the Asian (Russian, Russian Orthodox) civilisation' that 'has no future' (Hryniv, 2014).

The Uses of Othering

After the start of a war against the pro-Russian separatists in Donbas by the Poroshenko government, the 'othering' of Russia has been elevated to new heights. Russophobic and not infrequently racist pronouncements typically characterise in-house speeches and propaganda of the right-wing nationalist groups, such as the proto-fascist Svoboda ('Freedom') party, the former strike force of the Maidan – the Right Sector, the Patriot of Ukraine, the Ukrainian National Assembly-Ukrainian National Self Defence (UNA-UNSO), the Stepan Bandera 'Trident' ('Tryzub'), and others. Leader of Ukraine's Radical Party and the second runner-up in the 2014 presidential elections Oleh Lyashko demanded that the 'Moscow invaders and their accomplices' be executed by hanging (Baltija.eu, 2014; Lozovy, 2014). The website of the 'Tryzub' carries an appeal to 'dam the Kryvyi Rih quarries with corpses of the *moskali*' (Banderivec n.d.), while the website of the UNA-UNSO promises to dump the bodies of dead Russians into the Kerch Strait until such time when they form a bridge to 'reunite Kuban with Ukraine' (UNA-UNSO n.d.).

The nationalist volunteer militias, e.g. the Azov battalion, whose members also brandish the Nazi and SS insignia, have been at the forefront of Ukraine's civil war with pro-Russian separatists. The war, which they presumably fight to bring Ukraine closer to Europe, for many of them, including the Azov commander, Verkhovna Rada MP Andriy Biletskiy, is nothing else than implementation of the 'Ukrainian racial social-nationalism,' which, among other things, demands 'the racial cleansing of the nation' (Biletskiy n.d.). How so? The thing is, the Ukrainians, according to Mr. Biletskiy, form 'one of the biggest and one of the very best kind' parts of the 'European White Race – the Creator of a great civilisation and the highest human achievements.' The 'historical mission' of the Ukrainian nation, he goes, is 'to lead the White Peoples of the world in a final crusade for their survival – a crusade against the Semite-led subhumanity' (Biletskiy n.d.). As commentaries in Ukraine's social media attest, a sizeable portion of the country's 'netizens' would not be averse to the idea of consigning anyone suspect of the pro-Russian sympathies to the ranks of thusly defined 'subhumanity'. The Azov's recent transformation into a special regiment of the National Guard of Ukraine, and Biletskiy's promotion to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, both show that the government opted to turn a blind eye even to the most unpalatable declarations of its armed supporters.

The othering of Russia and the Russians produces surprising echoes of Biletskiy's pronouncements in speeches of Ukraine's top politicians and statesmen. The June 2014 speech by Prime Minister Yatsenyuk referred to the Donbas separatists as 'subhumans' and 'filth' (Uriadovyi portal, 2014), later replaced with 'inhumans' and 'evil' in the official English translation (Embassy of Ukraine in the United States of America, 2014). Presidential candidate Poroshenko had vilified the anti-government protesters in Donbas as 'terrorists, criminals and non-humans' that ought to be 'destroyed' as early as April 2014, and repeatedly designated armed opposition to his regime as 'non-humans' (Lb.ua, 2014; President of Ukraine, 2014a-b). A senior adviser to the Minister of the Interior indicated that his

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department was preparing suggestions on the curtailment of democratic rights and freedoms for the pro-Russian activists in Donbas: 'if a citizen wants to live in Russia, be my guest: Suitcase – station – Russia!' (Interfax-Ukraine, 2014).

The othering of the autonomisation movement in Donbas before the very first shot in the conflict was fired helped transform what started like civil disobedience protests into a full-blown separatist guerrilla. Systematic abasement of the Donbas defenders in the Ukrainian press as 'subhumans,' 'bastards,' 'imbeciles,' 'potato beetles,' 'cockroaches,' and the like cannot but foment their desire to continue resistance. Parallel to that, the othering of Russia as a 'country that supports and finances terrorism' (Shulha, 2014), the Russian President as a 'd—head' (Culzac, 2014), and the Russians as 'not a people, but a rabble' (Gazeta.ua, 2014) both justifies Kiev's actions in the civil war in the East and encourages its further escalation.

The othering of the opponent understandably serves as a potent instrument of war-mongering on both sides. It boosts patriotic credentials of the elected politicians; entrenches new, post-Maidan elites; propels journalistic, academic, and artistic careers; and helps transform yesterday's thugs into tomorrow's statesmen. Unfortunately for the majority of the population, it also prolongs the war and suffering. The ethno-nationalist mobilisation, achieved by means of othering of the ethnic outgroup members, builds politicians' power bases and generates resources for political action in the situation where other resources are lacking or are sorely inadequate. Additionally, nationalist othering helps to disguise the struggles whose real objects are money, power, status, and property by representing them, deceptively, as mere identity fights (Molchanov, 2000).

Geopolitical uses of othering are equally important. Russophobia plays well with the established western tradition of treating Russia as 'Europe's other,' a 'barbarian at Europe's gate,' a constant historical 'irregularity' (Neumann, 1999, pp. 103, 110). Ukraine's influential allies in the West, starting with the right-wing Ukrainian diaspora organisations, 'have considered Russia, both tsarist and communist, their historical enemy because it had been the prime oppressor of Ukraine's freedom' (Ukrainian Canadian Congress n.d., *Community profile*). Interestingly, some of the most authoritative for today's nationalist champions of the Ukrainian cause are found among the Nazi collaborators that fought the Soviet Union in World War II. These 'long-dead Ukrainian fascists' (Snyder, 2010) are still being worshipped today by the most active fighters against the pro-Russian rebels in Donbas. Fully in line with racialised views of their interwar predecessors, some of the modern Ukraine's radical nationalists are, once again, seeing their main enemy as the 'Muscovite-Jewish mafia,' and, should such views become widespread, it must bode ill for the country's Russian and Jewish minorities (Padden, 2014).

While Ukrainian neo-fascism is less than welcome in the West, Ukrainian Russophobia might well be. Just as Russia has been Europe's Other for centuries, it has been constructed as the American 'other' by a group of professional cold warriors, such as Zbigniew Brzezinski, Dick Cheney, and John McCain. As noted by Andrei Tsygankov (2009, pp. 105-106), one of the long-standing ideas of anti-Russian lobby in the US foreign policy establishment has been the one of breaking the Russia-Ukraine connection and tying Ukraine unconditionally (and at Russia's expense) to the West. Hence, Ukrainian politicians' moves to ostracise Russia strike a chord with an influential group of western elites that include advocates of the Euro-Atlantic hegemony, the liberal hawks, and the militant western values promoters, as well as historically Russophobic Eastern European nationalists (Tsygankov, 2009, pp. 13-14).

Finally, the othering of Russia and the Russian activists in Ukraine justifies the new elite's grab of power and property. The current government in Kiev is as oligarchic as ever, yet signifies an important change in the relative weight of different business clans that control the country's economy: the beginning of the demise of the Donetsk clan. Instead, the Dnipropetrovsk faction under the leadership of the billionaire-governor Ihor Kolomoisky is back, and ready to expand into the Donbas region (Prostakov, 2014). Supporters of the victorious faction have to be rewarded, and are being rewarded – by political appointments, concessions, and new acquisitions blessed by the state. Nationalisation of the titanium mining and processing plants previously controlled by Dmytro Firtash, and their de facto transfer to Kolomoisky, portends a new round of property redistribution (Boiko, 2014). In this battle, everyone designated as 'Moscow's agent' stands to lose, while primitive corporate raidership by victorious oligarchic groups gets glorified as defence of national interests.[3]

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Conclusion

The seeming intractability of the conflict in east Ukraine can be explained by more than one factor. The explanation prevailing in the West is that of a 'bad' Russia pressuring Ukraine to abandon its European dream and consistently undermining the very sovereignty of the Ukrainian state. The 'bad Putin' theme is a variation on the topic. More perceptive analysts remind the readers of the NATO expansion to the East and argue that the West provoked Moscow into action (Mearsheimer, 2014). 'Nationalising policies' in Ukraine and the plight of the Russian-speaking minorities have also been invoked on more than one occasion (e.g. Molchanov, 2014; Petro 2014). Regional alienation and de facto exclusion from the political process in Kiev played a large part. Had it not been for the Maidan activists twice – in 2004 and 2014 – overturning the results of what people in Donbas saw as a legitimate presidential election, the rebellion perhaps would not have started. Had it not been for killing of the pro-Russian demonstrators in Odessa on 2 May 2014, and the shelling and bombing of the Donbas cities during the 'anti-terrorist operation' by the Ukrainian army, the protest would not, perhaps, have morphed into a civil war.

This war is much helped by demonisation of the opponent, which goes on all sides of the conflict, inside and outside Ukraine itself. Moreover, ethnicisation of the essentially political and economic differences between Ukraine's regions makes compromise more difficult to reach. The invocation by the Ukrainian politicians and diplomats of the identity markers of a savage, beastly outgroup, a 'scum' (Portnikov, 2014), 'subhumans,' 'bastards,' when referring to separatists in Donbas, cannot but confirm the worst worries of those who might still be leaning to the idea of devolution and power sharing. The threats of legal punishment and political marginalisation propel continued resistance.

As the late Samuel Huntington argued, identity is a given that cannot be changed. An attempt to build a new Ukrainian nation by othering its Russophone components is doomed to backfire. By the same token, political mobilisation against the 'Russian aggressor' can be, at best, a temporary solution to the problem of civic unity. Russia may eventually close its borders with Ukraine, just as Kiev desires, and stop supporting the self-proclaimed *Novorossiya republics*. Kiev may eventually succeed in bringing the embattled region to heel. But will it succeed in reintegrating Donbas after the devastation caused by the war? Will Donbasites agree to be the second-class citizens in the ethno-nationally streamlined, Russophobic society? At the moment of this writing, it seems impossible to envision such an outcome. Perhaps the war against Donbas separatists has solidified Ukraine's political nation; yet it has also made it abundantly clear that the pro-Russian activists do not fit in there. It is entirely possible that Ukraine's ethno-regional split can still be healed. However, to make it happen, authorities in Kiev need to change their attitude to Russia and the Russians. Chanting 'Suitcase – station – Russia!' will not help.

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[1] See maps on the historic evolution of Ukrainian borders in Nicolai Petro's chapter in this volume.

[2] It must be added that many Galician intellectuals at the time kept craving unity, rather than separateness from Russia, pledging, in Markian Shashkevych's (n.d.) words, eternal bonds to their 'Russian hearts and the Russian faith.'

Russia as Ukraine's 'Other': Identity and Geopolitics

Written by Mikhail A. Molchanov

[3] The importance of 'the shield of nationality' for protection of foreigners against corporate raidership has been noted in Wellhausen (2015). As a corollary to this proposition, we should not be surprised to find out that a symbolic stripping of nationality in the act of othering paves the road for dispossession of rival groups within the same society.

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