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# UKRAINE AND RUSSIA: IN SEARCH OF A DIVERGENT FUTURE

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## **Ukraine and Russia:**

## In Search of a Divergent Future

Volodymyr Kravchenko

#### INTRODUCTION

The collapse of the Yanukovych regime in Ukraine, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the ongoing armed conflict in the Donbas, have placed Ukrainian-Russian relations in the international spotlight for some time. In terms of geopolitics, these events are at least as significant as the start of the Yugoslav crisis at the end of the 20th century, but their consequences are likely to far exceed it. Russia's policy in Ukraine has already agitated the question of integrity of the whole international security system, which is based on recognition of the inviolability of state borders and international guarantees. Moreover, the issue has arisen of the European Union and Russia's future both in terms of their borders and identities. Questions have also been arising to experts specializing in the study of countries of Eastern Europe.

It appears that the international expert community was caught unprepared by what has occurred, and might yet occur, in the Ukrainian-Russian borderlands.<sup>1</sup> When the Soviet Union was disintegrating in 1991, it reacted with a storm of emotions, waves of mutual accusations, repentance, and "Eureka moments." Both "totalitarianists" and "nationalists" celebrated victory, while "revisionists" rebranded themselves as cultural anthropologists; there was universal enthusiasm regarding the "archival revolution." Breathing a sigh of relief, many waited for the "end of history" and Russia's "return" to Europe.

As for the crisis in Soviet and Slavic studies, certain conclusions were drawn that facilitated the formation of new directions, concepts, and paradigms in these fields. Foremost among these I would consider the development of ethno-national studies and a "geographical turn" in the humanities. Combining the concepts of "imagined communities" and "imagined geographies" has produced noticeable results, as Western experts focus their attention on the complex, composite nature of the national identities of peoples-in-between, and on the discursive nature of their symbolic territories. The seemingly stable definitions of "Russia" and "USSR" have been deconstructed, and have begun to show their heterogeneous nature. Moreover, the territory east of the EU borders—which as yet has neither a recognizable name nor fixed borders—is today being re-conceptualized within the broad parameters of the *Eurasian historical-cultural borderlands* paradigm (anti-paradigm?).

#### THE EMANCIPATION OF UKRAINIAN STUDIES

As a part of this, since 1991 the field of Ukrainian studies has finally breached the bounds of its "ethnic" ghetto and won international recognition. At the very least, authoritative specialists in relevant subjects who have already commented the dramatic recent events on the Ukrainian-Russian border<sup>2</sup> are no longer pausing to reflect on whether Ukraine exists at all or "Does Ukraine has a history?"— as would have been the case some twenty years ago. In contrast to Russia, the West has accepted the "unexpected" appearance of the Ukrainian nation, and Ukraine's geopolitical significance within Europe has begun to be comprehended in the Western expert milieu. And thus it is likely a good time to suggest another intellectual "reboot" of Ukrainian studies as well as Russian studies.

In fact, the crisis in Ukrainian-Russian relations has brought to the fore some elements of crisis within the academic community. This is connected not only to the lack or obsolescence of the methodology but also to the low prestige of expert knowledge altogether. The difference between an *expert* and a *public intellectual* is continuously blurring, even though academic reputations seldom suffer from professional incompetence. Contemporary Western scholarship remains politicized to the same degree as in the Cold War years, and former defenders of the Soviet Union have today reoriented towards Mr. Putin. Meanwhile, those who yesterday made a name for themselves bravely fighting Ukrainian nationalism continue to do so today. It still remains to be seen if Ukrainian studies can influence those disciplines inherited from the Cold War epoch - including Russian and Slavic studies...

Certainly, this writer cannot claim to be impartial in evaluating Ukrainian-Russian relations. Indeed, my professional interests are limited to Ukrainian historiography issues in the era of the Russian Empire, and the historical Slobidska Ukraine region that straddles the Ukrainian-Russian border. And my political sympathies are on the Ukrainian side, unreservedly against Putin and his regime. I do understand the dangers of Ukrainian nationalistic, anti-Western, anti-liberal, and anti-intellectual discourse—but I am not inclined to exaggerate its influence. I believe in a democratic and liberal Russia, although I also realize that today the small group of "Westernizers" could fit entirely into a single train car.

The present article aims, yet again, to look at the Ukrainian-Russian conflict through the eyes of a historian.<sup>3</sup> I am above all interested in the national dimension of the conflict, which can only be understood through the long lens of a historical context.<sup>4</sup> In Eastern Europe, the traditional view is that "a poet is more than a poet" and history is more than an academic discipline. Unfortunately, the symbolism of events that occurred here hundreds of years ago has great mobilizing political potential. Thus, historians are among the most active participants in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict—but not only sitting at their computers or presenting at conferences. University graduates who majored in history or even PhD specialists are fighting on both sides of the Russian-Ukrainian borderline—which today lies *de facto* through Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts in Eastern Ukraine, but also exerts a symbolic influence far beyond the boundaries of the region of Donbas.

I believe that to seek motives for the annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas exclusively in the context of *realpolitik*—especially in terms of Russia's external security tactics—is, to put it mildly, unjustified. Moscow's current Ukraine policy is built as much on irrational and emotional factors as rational and pragmatic ones. The same can be said, as a matter of fact, about Kyiv's Russia policy... And there is a common reason: both countries are going through the next national mobilization stage in the process of nation-state-building that is taking place in a common symbolic space. To a great extent, the current Ukrainian-Russian conflict is one of national identities and their corresponding historical mythologies. The glaringly obvious asymmetry in their relations only makes the search on both sides for a political compromise more difficult.

#### **RUSSIAN NATIONALISM**

Modern Russian nationalism became ascendant in public life—or, to translate the popular rhetorical phrase, began to "rise up from its knees"—during the epic struggle between Gorbachev and Yeltsin.<sup>5</sup> At that time, the Russian Soviet elite began to revive its national identity, and the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic began to resurrect the attributes of national statehood that had been earlier sacrificed

to the Soviet experiment. The Russian Empire was presented as the "Golden Age" of Russian historical mythology ("The Russia we had lost"). In today's Russia, however, the main role of nation-building is played by the new mythology of the "Great Fatherland War"= 'Velikaia Pobeda" (Great Victory).

Does anyone remember today that it was the Russian Soviet elite, led by Mr.Yeltsin, that played a decisive role in the breakup of the USSR? President Putin has simply continued the policy of his predecessor to transform the remains of the uncompleted Soviet project into a new Russian national project. It was all the easier to do this, given that both were tightly interwoven. In fact, Russian Imperial-Orthodox nationalism survived Lenin's brief experiment of the 1920s and returned during Stalin's time later exacting its historical revenge in 1991. Thanks to their common mythological-utopian nature, the *Soviet/Russian* national dualism easily turned into the *Russian/Soviet* nationalism.

The contradictions between empire and nation in Russia are well known.<sup>6</sup> However, in the West the difference between *russkii* and *rossiiskii* is not often understood properly given the heterogeneous nature of the Russian national identity. In essence, this identity was created by combining the Byzantine type of religious Orthodox-Imperial doctrine with selected elements of early modern nationalism borrowed from the Poland. Further Western influences split Russian culture into "traditional" and "modern" camps, with the crack lying through the entire socio-cultural fabric of Russian society. A symbolic lineup of binary pairs—traditionalists versus reformers, Old Believers versus "New Believers," Slavophiles versus Westernizers, the *narod* versus the *intelligentsia*, the Village versus the City—can still be added to today.

Many observers expected that after the collapse of the USSR, Russia would take the path of modern nation-statehood and would cast off its imperial burden, but this did not happen. Today it is obvious that the present Russian nationalism has wrapped itself in the old imperial flag—although the former imperial national doctrine "Orthodoxy–Autocracy–Narodnost'" has undergone some modification, combining elements of old traditions with new realities. On the traditional side, the Russian Orthodox Church—which for a time had been replaced by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union—is back again, virtually unchanged since the 18th century. On the new side, while the idea of autocracy has always been popular in Russia, Putin looks more like a 20th-century charismatic authoritarian leader than an autocrat. Finally, the category "Nation" has acquired an ethno-cultural dimension and is now associated not as much with Orthodox peasantry as with Orthodoxy *and* the Russian language of the middle class.

Russia's imperial mythology, symbols, and nostalgia were inherited by the Soviet Russian elite from the times of the so-called "Civil War" and from the 20th-century Russian émigré community. The

created image of "the Russia we had lost" is based on stereotypes that are easily discernible in paintings by Ilya Glazunov, films by Nikita Mikhalkov, and novels by Valentin Pikul' of the latter half of the 20th century. They reflect the surface features of imperial grandeur and the social roles played by descendants of "workers, peasants, and revolutionary sailors." The Orthodox political culture that is particular to all heirs of the Byzantine Empire and endows empires, nations, and the national territory with a sacred aura—appropriated effectively for the geopolitical doctrine of the *Russkii Mir* (Russian World) brand—is an important part of this heritage.

#### **UKRAINIAN NATIONALISM**

The reconstruction of a neo-imperialist Orthodox Russian identity cannot be successful without Ukraine.<sup>7</sup> Saddled with the epithet "Little Russia," it has been tightly woven into the fabric of Russian early modern national mythology. This is hardly surprising, since "Little Russia" and Kiev played an indispensable role in supplying the resources required for building the Russian Empire and nation. Educated Little Russians actively collaborated in creating the original *Russkii Mir* national doctrine and, in fact, the literary Russian language and culture. The image of Little Russia and Little Russians as an organic, perhaps even central, feature of *Russkii Mir*, as defined (with typical ironic overtones) by Nikolai Gogol in the early half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, determined the subsequent role of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic within the Soviet Union.

Ukrainian nationalism, it must be said, grew from this Little Russian root. The widespread stereotype about the emergence of modern Ukrainian nationalism in Western Ukraine is not true. Until the mid-20th century, at least, western Ukrainian lands were far less developed than the eastern and southern regions of contemporary Ukrainian territory. Modern Ukrainian nationalism emerged in the Ukrainian-Russian-Polish cultural borderlands in the Russian Empire, and only later took root in Western Ukrainians first adopted the Little Russian historical mythology, language, and symbols that came from the east, and only later, with support from the east, transformed it into a Ukrainian political project.

Ukrainian nationalism has a predominantly secular rather than a religious foundation. It is predicated upon the idea of an ethno-cultural community that gradually overcame regional and cultural specificities in order to coalesce into a territorial-political community. Some observers are of the opinion that today we are witnessing the climax of this process, which was expedited by the Ukrainian-Russian conflict of 2014. As distinct from "Little Russia," brand "Ukraine" consists of an independent sovereign

state *outside* the boundaries of the loosely defined sweeping Russian identity. Moreover, Russia has now become for Ukraine its principal "Other"—the only serious existential threat.

The new modern "Ukraine" that in the fast-moving 20th century came to replace the early-modern "Little Russia" did not fit in the national worldview of the Russians. From the outset, project "Ukraine" was considered by them to be an assault on the sacred integrity of Russian Orthodox identity—a fiction concocted by a Russia-hating West, an artificial construction with no grassroots support at all. In imperial Russia, the "Little Russians"—namely, a "regional offshoot of the unified Russian people"— were commonly distinguished from the Ukrainian elites, with which they supposedly had nothing in common.<sup>8</sup> Then, in the times of the Soviet Union, Moscow oscillated between "Little Russia" and "Ukraine" doctrines with the latter doomed to disappear altogether. Now, in Putin's national Russian state, there is not only no room for "Ukraine," there is none for "Little Russia" either.

After the Cold War the old-good "East-West" civilizational fault-line has moved to the East. Huntington's idea about "two Ukraines"—a Western (nationalistic) one and an Eastern (pro-Russian) one—heavily affected Ukraine's image both in Russia and in the West. Somewhat surprisingly, in Ukraine it has been reinterpreted in the Manichean spirit, as a struggle between modern "Ukraine" and the archaic Russian/Soviet "Little Russia." In fact, the "two Ukraines" metaphor has only a discursive nature, like the "two Italys," "two Spains," or "two Russias." Such a metaphor results from cultural divides that are provoked by superficial Western modernization in any nation that straddles the imaginary "East" and "West" of geographical Europe. In reality, these fault-lines have no distinct linear perspective on the imagined political map of Ukraine.

#### POST-SOVIET PERTURBATIONS

National processes in the former Soviet republics of Russia and Ukraine were developing in a slow and controversial manner since they were delayed by the Soviet and Rus' Orthodox intellectual heritage. It permits us to understand why the split between Russia and Ukraine—the two largest Soviet republics, both armed with huge nuclear arsenals—turned out to be unexpectedly peaceful and only now has reached its boiling point. Both Russia and Ukraine hesitated as to the formulae of their respective national identities: Russia was split up between an imperial and nation-state doctrines; Ukraine was fluctuating between territorial-based and ethnic-based models of national consolidation; both of them were searching for their respective geopolitical identities. President Yeltsin's rhetorical question, "What

are we to do with Ukraine?" was encountered by Ukrainian President Kuchma's statement "Ukraine is not Russia" +(what exactly Ukraine is or supposed to be remained for him unclear).

Moscow initially followed its usual, i.e. Soviet patterns of Ukrainian policy. Neither the title of Soviet Republic granted to Ukraine by Lenin, nor the UN membership provided by Stalin, nor Crimea's subordination to Kyiv arranged by Khrushchev, made the slightest difference in the real (not symbolic) "Little-Russian" status of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic in the Soviet Union. Russian elites nursed hopes that Ukraine's sovereignty and independence "game" would be as "decorative" as the name—Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic—with its fake statehood. Sooner or later, like a prodigal son or, in this case, daughter Ukraine will return "home," so is it really necessary to argue over trivialities, like defining the border between Belgorod and Kharkiv oblasts? Russia finally signed—first, the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, which guaranteed the inviolability of borders and territorial integrity of Ukraine, and then also a grand Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership between Ukraine and Russia in 1997. However, both of these documents and respective obligations were hardly taken seriously by Moscow. I am not in a position to analyze the Western guarantor's real motives and calculations.

For all of the twenty-some years since the collapse of the USSR, Russia has made every effort to re-integrate Ukraine. For this it marshalled the resources of Soviet culture, organized massive propaganda campaigns, and signed numerous agreements on cooperation between adjacent border regions. Just in case, the Russian elites rehearsed both "carrot" and "stick" scenarios for Ukraine. According to Roman Kupchinsky, Yeltsin and his foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, discussed the possibility of launching a nuclear strike against Ukraine.<sup>9</sup> Echoing this attitude, preparations for possible war ensued in 2004 on the Russian border with Ukraine after Victor Yushchenko came to power.<sup>10</sup> But "stick" measures weren't only reserved for "disloyal" Ukrainian presidents: recall Russia's encroachment on Tuzla Island in the Azov Sea under Leonid Kuchma in 2003, and its trade war with Ukraine on Viktor Yanukovych's watch in 2013. Nonetheless, there was no bloodshed until a new generation of nationalists grew up and came to power in Russia.

#### PUTIN'S POLICY OF FORCED REINTEGRATION OF UKRAINIAN TERRITORY INTO RUSSIA

Putin stepped over the line with his forcible reintegration of Ukrainian territory into Russia exactly when Russian society became ready to accept and support his nationalistic hard line, both internally and externally. There were numerous indications about growing Russian nationalism turning into Fascism but the West wasn't alarmed; why indeed, it was always considered "normal" for Russia to be a little bit eccentric... Contrary to this, Ukrainian nationalism once again proved to be re-active, not pro-active. Ukrainian nationalists openly rebelled after the fragile consensus in the society was broken by the regime of President Yanukovych. His U-turn in geopolitical orientation in 2013 from Europe to Russia was the last straw since it put Ukraine into the orbit of growing Russian nationalism; it was a direct existential challenge to Ukrainian national project. However, in this case the West remained to be as suspicious to the phenomena of Ukrainian nationalism as it was in the early 90s when President George Bush (senior) delivered his "chicken Kiev" message to Ukrainians.

And so, the Soviet/Russian era of ambivalence, multiple loyalties, and contradictory combinations of differing historical legacies on the Ukrainian-Russian borderlands turned into the era of mutually exclusive identities. Ukraine's "peaceful divorce" with Russia ignited an armed conflict, the first one in a hundred years of Kiev-Moscow political relations. This war has led to national consolidation on both sides of the border, and to further political, economic, and cultural parting paths of both countries. However, this process is not even—so far, the strategic initiative and the advantage have been on the Russian side. Russia appears to be much more consolidated around its newly acquired nationalistic platform than Ukraine is. There is no sign that the policy of national mobilization in Russia with Ukraine playing "the Other" is over.

The Russian critic Aleksandr Sevastianov wrote, "Today, no kind of federation, or even a confederation, on the territory of Ukraine is in our interests anymore—in fact, it's clearly against them... Anything that we can exact from a new Ukraine we should exact immediately. For us this is a vitally important problem..."<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the popular writer Sergei Lukianenko had this to say about Ukraine: "No more negotiations. We need to strangle the bitch. The ways and means aren't for me to decide. But she needs to be strangled totally, mercilessly, without emotions or hesitation..."<sup>12</sup> And the prominent political scientist Aleksandr Dugin, a professor at Moscow University who chaired its Department of International Sociology for five years, declared: "Ukrainians must be killed, killed, and killed—I'm telling you this as a professor."<sup>13</sup>

I am not sure that Ukrainian universities have similar professors to contradict Dr. Dugin in the same way; the rhetoric of the Ukrainian elites seems to be much more restrained. We must also remember that the battle—both the symbolic one and the military one—has so far been taking place on Ukrainian territory. The emergence of the Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics" was as a result of continued erosion and nationalization of the Soviet Russian legacy by the new Russian doctrine. The regional identity in the Donbas today is defined and directed by the militant Orthodox, anti-Western nationalistic discourse of Putin's policy. It seems like the Byelorussian still-Soviet model of identity

policy, that is the lesser of the two evils, is not achievable any more for the deeply Sovietized region of Donbas. Ukraine's national identity, on the other hand, is defined by evolving doctrine that has moved from ethno-cultural to territorial-political model. It still remains to be seen if it can re-integrate the Donbas and, theoretically, the Crimea into the Ukrainian European-oriented project.

#### WHAT NEXT? ...

It is hardly possible to assert that the Russian Orthodox-imperial nation can be transformed into an ethno-cultural one, nor that the Ukrainian ethno-cultural nation has converted into a political one. However, considering their previous experience, it is doubtful whether either of these relatively new national projects is capable of resolving the predicament of the heterogeneous cultural borderlands in the nearest future. Even imperial and Soviet resources were not up to the task. Therefore, the result of the Ukrainian-Russian war will be determined, in the long run, by the capacity of either side to supply their citizens with two things that are crucial for any borderland—security and modernization. This would be possible only if Ukraine and Russia can come to terms with their common historical and cultural legacy of the USSR and the Russian Empire, including the millions of Russophones who live in the borderland.

Today, the majority of the Russophone population of Ukraine, at least those living in the megapolices like Kharkiv or Odessa, is choosing Europe, not Russia, and Putin's aggressive, anti-Western "great-power" policy is mainly to blame. Moscow's creation of and support for militarized enclaves around the perimeter of the imaginary *Russkii Mir*—Transnistria, South Ossetia, DPR, LPR, so-called "Cossack oblasts" etc.—could possibly be somehow understood in the context of a Byzantine, or the similarly bipolar Russian/Soviet, geopolitics. But this policy provokes uneasiness in the current world, and will lead to Russia's international (self) isolation. The fate of Crimea's annexation by Russia is a clear illustration of the inadequacies of the current Russian policy, as residents of the peninsula have so far been rewarded with neither security nor modernization to say nothing of the human capital of diversity.

Due to the intertwined histories and overlapped territories, Ukraine, in order to survive, is destined to create "other Russia" based on the Western tradition and symbols, an attractive alternative to Moscow-based historical matrix of the Russkii Mir. For this, Ukraine shall have to "reboot" its own national doctrine, to reorient its development vector from the past to the future, and to present "Brand Ukraine" not as a mythical "thousand-year nation-state" constantly under attack from aggressive neighbours, but as a new, flexible, and constructive entity, open to innovations and based on rational,

not mythologized, picture of the world. As I have already written, one essential condition for this has to be the reinterpretation of not only the *national text* but the *context*—that is, the historical legacy common to both Ukraine and Russia.

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14