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# FROM 'BROTHERS' TO ENEMIES

## THE FUTURE OF THE UKRAINIAN- RUSSIAN RELATIONSHIP

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## **From 'Brothers' to Enemies:**

### **The Future of the Ukrainian-Russian Relationship**

Dr. Ostap Kushnir

There is nothing new under the sun in the Ukrainian-Russian relations, switching from “brothers” to enemies. This switch regularly reappears in the history under different guises and narratives. It has its roots in the geopolitical settings, historical experience, cultural differences, political outlooks, and – if you wish – even civilizational belonging. Samuel P. Huntington demonstrated the inevitability of the switch in the post-Cold war environment in a very straightforward way. He argued in the 1990s that Ukraine as a state was deeply divided. To illustrate this division he took the electoral map of the 1994 presidential elections. A clear line could be drawn between the regions which voted for Leonid Kuchma and for Leonid Kravchuk, respectively the ‘Soviet-type’ and the ‘pro-sovereignty’ candidate. The distribution was roughly 55:45 in favor for Kuchma. The “brothers” narrative prevailed in the public and political discourses after the collapse of the USSR.<sup>1</sup>

Earlier, in the inter-war period, Lancelot Lawton, in his 1935 address to the House of Commons, claimed that establishing pan-European security depended on resolving the East European – or Ukrainian – question. Lawton presented Ukraine as one of the most numerous continental nations, divided between four states. The ethnographic territory of Ukraine was three to four times the size of Great Britain. However, because of the inability of Ukrainians to withstand foreign oppression – above all from the side of Russia – the state had never come into existence. According to him this historical non-existence posed a threat to whole Europe as Ukraine’s resources, instead of serving its defensive needs, were used by Russia attack its Western neighbors. Lawton also concluded that because of a variety of differences, Ukrainians would

constantly reject Russian – or any foreign – rule as inimical. This would make Eastern Europe permanently instable.<sup>2</sup>

#### HALFORD MACKINDER'S "EURASIAN HEARTLAND" AND UKRAINE

The British geopolitician Halford J. Mackinder had drawn another geopolitical line, separating the “self-sufficient” Eurasian Heartland from the rest of the “dependent” world. Eastern Europe constituted the only viable corridor – or “gateway” – to the Heartland. Regardless of all existing sovereign and semi-sovereign entities along this corridor, it was perceived by Mackinder as a geopolitically integrated entity. It was originally a place of interaction between Asian nomads and European farmers. As such it was different from the region of endless Asian plains, the conquest of which led to the emergence of huge empires (first Mongol, then Russian). It was also different from the small surface of the European continent which allowed small states and nations to cultivate their unique identities. To be honest, Mackinder never clearly spoke of Ukraine as a potentially sovereign state stretching along that corridor, but the integrity and non-alignment of the latter was unequivocally suggested.<sup>3</sup> Today one may speculate that if Lawton's Ukraine would have emerged as a self-sufficient state along Mackinder's corridor in the interwar period, there would probably have been no reason for Huntington to draw his civilizational lines along the river Dnipro. There wouldn't also exist brothers-or-enemies narratives in Ukrainian and Russian discourses. However, it is very easy to speculate today.

#### HOW “BROTHERS” BECAME ENEMIES

The contemporary switch from “brothers” to enemies is caused, *inter alia*, by the Russian outward looking, expansionist political culture, Ukraine's inability to secure its interests in the face of a more powerful Eastern player, and Western neutrality. This combination – commonly regarded as a “proper” regional equilibrium – leads to the re-occurring fluctuations in Ukrainian-Russian relations. As two geopolitically different entities, Russia and Ukraine will remain “irreconcilable” if the above mentioned equilibrium does not change. At certain moments, when a group of people living in contemporary Ukraine – we may call them non-

conformist ethnic or political Ukrainians – will start to question Russian (or any other foreign) rule, the “enemy” narratives will gain momentum. However, the non-conformists risk to be defeated as they dare to face a more powerful and “centralized” adversary. The region will be “pacified” and the “brotherhood” narratives will make a comeback in the public and political discourses. This will last until the moment that a new generation of non-conformists emerges who will challenge foreign rule again. The “brotherhood” narrative is usually promoted by Russia, the traditionally dominant player, which aims to consolidate its domination. However, the “brotherhood” narrative will never perfectly fit the Ukrainian geopolitical realities. Russia is an empire with its center of gravity deep in the Asian region (i.e. Heartland), while Ukraine is a major Eastern European “gateway” region, which is very dynamic. Therefore, the “brotherhood” narrative may work well for Russian continental society, but not for Ukraine, which will constantly struggle to think “out of the box”. To ignore this fact leads to the emergence of the “enemies” narrative.

It will be wrong to claim that Russia invariably followed the same “expansionist” *modus operandi*. After the collapse of the USSR it tried to Westernize or – being more precise – to Europeanize under President Boris Yeltsin. It tried to rediscover its alternative “organic” identity. This went along with the implementation of democratic values, transparent governance, and a free market. However, these attempts were devastating and even threatened the integrity of the state<sup>4</sup>. They were geopolitically unfitting. It is no surprise, therefore, that the political and economic crisis of the late 1990s evoked the restoration of “good-old” competitive authoritarianism which overlapped in time with Putin’s coming to power. This restoration embraced the adoption of a refreshed Soviet national anthem, the proclamation of a neo-imperial course supported by energy exports, quasi isolationism, and the spy hysteria of 2005–2007, the occasional confrontation with the United States, the proclamation of the post-Soviet region as a zone of Russian privileged interests, the rehabilitation of Stalinist policies, and other developments.

It was in the 1940s that Yuriy Lypa, a Ukrainian geopolitician, defined the Russian system of governance as invariably authoritarian and favouring imperial structures. These were typical for

Russia regardless of historical epochs and political regimes, creating a distinguishing feature of the state's policies. Therefore, Lypa and his disciples never drew a line between what was Russia, the Tsardom of Muscovy, the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union<sup>5</sup>. The paradox is, however, that the "heartland" Russia cannot conduct efficiently its outward-oriented policies without adopting Western ideas and inventions. Otherwise, to believe Toynbee, it will never achieve its full potential, failing to look magnificent and glorious in the eyes of its own citizens. Moreover, it will irrevocably fall back behind the West, its more active arch-competitor. Therefore, one of the major tasks for all Russian political elites throughout the centuries was conducting a "controlled westernization." The latter entails that only those Western ideas and innovations are allowed, which reinforce the conventional political arrangements. Assessing the issue from another perspective: no one, including Western actors, is interested in triggering instabilities in Russia, something what could be the consequence of a blind copy-paste of non-indigenous know-how.

#### RUSSIA'S THREE BASIC ELEMENTS OF GOVERNANCE

The Russian existential mode, which can be defined as an empire from the Asian plains which struggles to project its power into Europe and its close neighbourhood, requires three intertwined basic elements of governance. These basic elements existed throughout its history and allowed Russia to grow in size and become a global player:

- Primarily, there should always exist a leader who constructs his or her own hierarchy of power, which is commonly regarded as superior to law.
- Secondly, there should always exist a political society adhering to a set of outward-oriented values and recognizing the unquestionable authority of the leader, even if the latter appears to be wrong.
- Thirdly, there should always exist structures of the Russian Orthodox Church, which provides a moral justification for the subjugation of the society to the leader, as well as for both the leader and the society to pursue assertive foreign policies.

These three basic elements of governance are irreplaceable in Russia. No Russian citizen can – and is actually expected to – think and behave “out of the box.” If this happens, the state starts losing its power and integrity, as is proved by the reforms of President Yeltsin. In other words, the essence of leadership, “Russianness,” and Orthodoxy is hardly challenged in Russia. These three tenets are regarded as essential by all citizens, regardless of their ethnic origin and faith. These elements kept Russia together, which is a territorially vast and ethnically heterogeneous state. Paradoxically, even non-believers in Russia consider themselves Orthodox, in the same way as the indigenous inhabitants of the Far Eastern regions consider themselves as true Russians<sup>6</sup>.

#### RUSSIA’S NEO-IMPERIALISM

Looking at contemporary Russia, and specifically at its policies in the so-called “Near Abroad,” which includes Ukraine, it behaves as a revisionist, expansionist, and neo-imperial player. This happens because of a mixture of reasons. Primarily, it is “feeling uncomfortable” with a growing Western presence in what is considered to be the Russian zone of geopolitical interests, where it has always been an unchallenged superpower. Secondly, it is “feeling threatened” due to the lack of efficiency of its authoritarian – or even autocratic – political tradition and the successful democratic transitions of post-communist states. Thirdly, it is “feeling offended” in the same way as it felt offended after the collapse of the USSR, when the West launched an active cooperation with the post-communist states, some of these joining the EU. The latter is considered by the Kremlin as a geopolitical defeat: the Cold War “balance of powers” was undermined. Fourthly, current Russian leaders have accumulated enough resources to feel themselves confident in pursuing expansionist policies regardless of a condemnation by the West. They are also securing their domestic status through successes in the international arena. Finally, Russia follows the geopolitical patterns which have historically brought it to power and glory.

To summarize, contemporary Russian expansionism is fueled by attempts to restore historical, cultural, and geopolitical justice as Russia perceives it<sup>7</sup>. This said, no state in the so called “Near

Abroad” is safe in the light of Russian outward-looking, assertive foreign policy. As concerns the Russian military aggression against Ukraine, it is not only triggered by the democratic aspirations of Kyiv, but also by Russian strategic objectives and interests. Regardless of Ukraine’s political preferences, Russia’s aim is to establish an efficient supervision over its neighbor, either through conquest or by negotiating unions (as it happened with Belarus). Edward Lucas states that Russia is building a “soft empire” in the post-communist space, supported by the secret services, corruption, financial flows, economic ties, and propaganda. This empire could be more robust and more dangerous than the USSR and may include more states than the USSR<sup>8</sup>. This empire will be based on the three aforementioned Russian basic elements of governance.

#### UKRAINE’S DECENTRALIZED COSSACK TRADITION

As concerns Ukraine, it has always been more democratic and less centralized than Russia. As the trans-continental corridor – or “gateway” – it is doomed to be so. Ukraine’s national idea did not require exclusiveness of nationality and unification around a specific leader. Von Hagen highlights that on the territory of Ukraine always lived significant Russian, Jewish, Polish, and German populations, making it comparatively multicultural.<sup>9</sup> Apart from this, historical Ukrainian states and semi-states - unlike Russia and the USSR - allowed the coexistence of religions. Indeed, Orthodoxy was always dominant there and interfaith conflicts regularly emerged, however, no residents were forced to abandon their faith. Finally, in Ukraine doesn’t exist an authoritarian, expansion-oriented tradition. Instead, the democratic legacy of Kyiv Rus and the Zaporozhian Sich supported the environment of multiple loyalties where numerous sources of power existed and competed with one another. In other words, the three basic elements of governance, which were upheld in Russia, were not applicable in Ukraine. They cannot be defined as the source of Ukrainian power and glory, but rather as a symbol of subjugation.

Sure, there exists a significant number of similarities between contemporary Ukrainians and Russians. This fact nurtures the narratives of a primordial “brotherhood” between the nations and provides a proper playground for Russia's trans-border policies. According to the World

Values Survey, citizens of Ukraine pay respect to the political authority of a harsh leader and they can justify patrimonialism. They also highly praise the role of the Orthodox Church in their life and cannot imagine themselves without practicing a religion. They also form a comparatively homogeneous society where “those who think differently” are not always welcomed. This said, Ukrainians are much more prone to support a democratic order than Russians (85,3% versus 67,3%). A significant number of them recognize the right to protest against an authority as their unalienable right. They are also more friendly to foreigners, what makes Ukrainian society a bit more inclusive and diverse. Unlike Russians with their understanding of true “Russianness,” Ukrainians do not have an exclusive compendium of national traits which may be presented as “Ukrainianness.” Finally, the church is for Ukrainians not so much an institution acting in accordance with societal axioms and the political leadership, but rather a “moral compass,” which at times criticizes contemporary life<sup>10</sup>.

Going deeper into the Ukrainian political tradition, which at a certain point becomes incompatible with the Russian one, it is based on two “grassroots” pillars, not on the three Russian basic elements. Ukrainian political tradition is dichotomous, as it reflects the historical experience of interaction between Asian nomads and European farmers. The Ukrainian society can be divided into two major social layers: conformists who – like Russians – prefer accepting political realities, not changing them, and activists, who dare to challenge realities instead of accepting them. The first layer constitutes the majority, which favors conservative values, rigid governance, exclusive faith, and adopts a defensive stance in social and political interactions. The second is a minority, which prefers republican, democratic values, accountable leadership, diversity, and inclusiveness. This dichotomy prevents the concentration of power in one hand, as is typical for Russia. Instead, it allows the existence of numerous poles of power in Ukraine (i.e. a permanent competition between oligarchs, embedded politicians, and street leaders), the coexistence of religions and nationalities, as well as the overall inclination of the state to decentralize. Needless to say that all three recent Ukrainian revolutions – 1990, 2004-05, and 2013-14 – started because of the readiness of the active layer to follow its behavioral logic and challenge the existing social and political arrangements.

Looking deeper into history, one may discover that the existence of these two layers is connected to the Cossack medieval tradition in Ukrainian political culture. This is something totally alien to the Russian tradition. While the conformist society may be influenced by the three basic elements of Russian governance and accept the “brotherhood” narrative, promoted by Russia, the active layer of the society will be constantly challenging it. This makes Huntington’s East-West civilizational division dependent on what social layer dominates the national discourse at what period of time. In other words, one may expect “brotherhood” narratives to be curtailed when the active minority layer gets the upper hand. The Cossack medieval tradition explains this social and political activism, as well as its mechanisms to influence national decision-making. The first written records about Cossacks can be traced back to the years 1489 and 1492. Cossacks represented a grassroots movement of people – usually hermits and fugitives – who tried to escape the restricting realities of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. They moved to the Black Sea steppes to avoid social and religious oppression, feudal obligations, state taxation, or simply to establish households on rich unpopulated lands. Cossacks also took the burden of ensuring security in the steppes which were poorly protected by central authorities. In a word, Cossacks were “western” and “settled” colonizers of the “gateway” region which had been historically dominated by “eastern” nomads<sup>11</sup>. It is the effect of the Cossack values and lifestyle which makes Ukrainians so decentralized and “detached” from rigid “true leadership” and “true religion.” Contemporary Cossack-type activists are aware that welfare and security can be ensured only by themselves with “centralized” rule sometimes becoming an enemy. The freedoms and self-governance enjoyed by the Cossacks made Russian Empress Catherine proclaim them bandits and destroy their major fortress, the Zaporozhian Sich, in 1775. However, the Sich became an example of a semi-sovereign formation, which suited best the geopolitical “gateway” region.

#### THE COSSACK TRADITION: A DEMOCRATIC FLAVOR, BUT NO STATE

Unfortunately, the Cossack experience is not enough for contemporary Ukraine to prosper and feel itself secure. Cossacks failed to create a full-fledged state, limiting themselves to a semi-sovereign formation. The latter had its unique set of laws and democratic flavor, but lacked a

mature and “catch-all” political consciousness. Therefore, it failed when it was attacked by a more centralized entity, the Russian empire. To paraphrase, the Cossack legacy to contemporary Ukrainians is about the appreciation of a democratic tradition, not about the feeling of a state. In this light Michał Kuź raises an argument that Ukraine muddles in its post-communist transformation because it did not manage to gain independence in the interwar period<sup>12</sup>. That would have mattered more than the Cossack historical experience. In other words, the absence of an institutionalized state in the collective memory of Ukrainians cannot propel the development of their state when it finally came into existence. Thus, Ukraine constantly reinvents new versions of the semi-Cossack “hybrid regime,” instead of becoming a democracy (as happened in the case of the Baltic states, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia).

Post-communist Ukraine is in the midst of implementing reforms which it missed for centuries. It gradually evolves into a unique geopolitical entity which, finally, acquires a fair chance to be consistent and self-sufficient. This includes above all strengthening democratic institutions in order to ensure the constitutional rights of every citizen; optimizing state governance by appointing competent people to decision-making positions; fighting corruption in the state apparatus and business environment; improving the business environment through diminishing the influence of oligarchs; completing the reformation of the judiciary, armed forces, domestic security services, intelligence, and counter-intelligence; ensuring the freedom of speech, and other steps. This evolution, though reflecting the indigenous democratic inclinations, can never go smoothly and flawlessly. The Cossack experience, which serves as the only geopolitical point of reference, provides no clear answer to how to build a proper functioning modern Ukrainian state. In this light Western guidance in the Ukrainian transition is of a vital importance. It may also become a major blow to Russia’s neo-imperial expansionist ambitions<sup>13</sup>. In the first place, it may put into question the value of the historical and cultural heritage connecting both nations, thus undermining the entire concept of the Russian “Near Abroad.” Secondly, it may provide the proof for other post-Soviet republics that the Russian factor should not be overestimated in setting the state’s objectives, as well as that Russian aggression may be contained. Thirdly, it may also allow Ukraine to grow into a regional powerhouse and security guarantor aligned with the West. Finally – and this is the most important point – it will secure the maturation of an

indigenous Ukrainian political culture which is very likely to reject the Russian “brotherhood” narratives as unfitting. However, if the West takes a neutral stance today – as it frequently happened in history – a “decentralized” Ukraine will fall again under the centralized Russian assault. On the other hand, if Russian expansionism is contained with Western assistance, there emerges a fair chance to establish a new equilibrium in Eastern Europe. In this case Ukraine and Russia will remain neither “brothers,” nor “enemies,” but become partners and there will also be no observable shifts of Huntington’s civilizational lines in Mackinder's geopolitical region organized in accordance to Lawton's vision.

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