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# On the “Wrong” and “Right” Ukrainians

**Mykola Riabchuk**

**It seems that Vladimir Putin and his associates fell victims to their own propaganda. A simple fact that many members of the Ukrainian government, as well as the volunteers fighting the terrorists in Donbas, still speak Russian as their primary language is carefully omitted in Russian/pro-Russian media.**

Aleksandr Dugin, a Russian fascist philosopher and, unsurprisingly, professor at the respectable Moscow State University, has recently offered a radical recipe for a resolution of the pending Russo-Ukrainian conflict. “We should clean up Ukraine from the idiots,” he wrote on his Facebook. “The genocide of these cretins is due and inevitable... I can’t believe these are Ukrainians. Ukrainians are wonderful Slavonic people. And this is a race of bastards that emerged from the sewer manholes.”

It is not (yet) radicalism that makes Dugin’s statement remarkable. Within the past years and especially months, Russian intellectuals offered a broad range of measures to be applied against Ukraine—starting with a humble proposal from Igor Dzhadan to make a nuclear strike at a Ukrainian atomic station, to a more universal call by a leading SF writer Sergey Lukyanenko “to crush the vermin.” Dugin’s statement is interesting primarily as a paradigmatic illustration of the inability of Russian thought to accept an inconvenient reality—to recognize the existence of real Ukrainians and abandon their virtual image cherished by Russians for years.

True Ukrainians, in this mythical thought, are “younger brothers”—village cousins, rather dull but funny, especially with their folk clothes and songs and ridiculous dialect. They are nice but stupid and therefore need some brotherly care and occasional punches. Most Russians—exactly like Aleksandr Dugin—love Ukrainians (“wonderful Slavonic people”) but only as far as Ukrainians agree to play the role of obedient, subservient village bumpkins vis-a-vis Russian cultured, urbanized relatives. Students of (post) colonialism may compare this to the relations between Robinson Crusoe and Friday. Robinson “loves” his Friday—as long as the savage

recognizes superiority of his master and does not insist on his own culture, language, and dignity. But Friday who wants to be equal to Robinson and called by his real, however unspeakable name, looks apparently crazy or, worse, is being manipulated by some other Robinson—American, German, Polish or Jewish-Masonic. In a word, it is not a true “wonderful” Friday any more but a “bastard that emerged from a sewer manhole.”

### **East Slavonic “Ummah”**

Russian imagination created Ukrainians as “Little Russians” a few centuries ago—alongside with the appropriation of Ukrainian territory and history—during the transformation of medieval Muscovy, under Peter the Great, into the Russian Empire. Ukrainian intellectuals who grew up in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and had got some sort of European education were assigned to play an important role in the modernization plans of the new Russian ruler. It was them, ironically, who invented the modern idea of continuity between Kyiv and Moscow (and, eventually, St. Petersburg) and the very name “Rus-sia” (from medieval Rus) itself. Until then, the Kyivan Rus legacy was rather latent in Muscovites’ thought. They referred occasionally to their dynastic, ecclesiastic and patrimonial ties, but ethnization of Slavia Orthodoxa was a quite modern idea developed by Ukrainian clerics alongside the concept of “Little Rus” and “Greater Russia,” and was derived from the European humanism. Within this framework, “Little Rus” referred to the core lands of historical Rus while “Greater Russia” (like ancient “Greater Greece”) referred to the land of eventual colonization.

The Ukrainian intellectuals did not have any nationalistic agenda in modern terms. They pursued a corporatist goal—to assert their special role and therefore status within the new political milieu that emerged after a part of Ukraine broke with Poland and made alliance with Muscovy. The historical (and symbolical) analogue between Little Rus and Little Greece as Greece proper had to grant Ukrainians the central status within the newly born empire and bestow upon their land a special symbolical role as the cradle of Russian/Rus civilization. (One may compare this logic to today’s Aleksandr Lukashenko’s claim that “Belarusians are actually Russians, only of a higher quality” – “.. ..... ..”)

The Greek-style model, however, was soon reversed, and Realpolitik took predictably upper hand over historical symbolism. Great Rus naturally became the central part of the empire, whereas Little Rus was downgraded to the status of its provincial appendage. The “Kievan Russia” myth was established as a founding myth of the Russian Empire and promoted eventually to the level of the internationally recognized “scientific truth.” Its side effect, however, was very harmful not only to Ukrainians and Belarusians, whose existence as separate nationalities it simply denied (and who, to various degrees, internalized Russian view of themselves); it was harmful also for Russians whose development into a modern nation was strongly retarded.

The “continuity” myth appeared highly anachronistic in the modern world as it overemphasized and fixed for decades the religious (Eastern Orthodox) identity of Eastern Slavs as a base of their quasi-national unity, and introduced the dynastic ties between Kyivan dukes and Moscow

tsars as the main institutional legitimization of the Russian state. Little if any room was left for modern civic identity and modern state institutions to evolve within this rigid and antiquated model. With due reservations, it can be compared to Islamic “ummah”—a spiritual community of true believers. Actually, West European “Pax Christiana” might provide even a closer analogue to Eastern “Slavia Orthodoxa.” The profound difference, however, comes from the fact that Pax Christiana has not been nationalized/etatized by any European nation, and no national identity in modern Europe was fused primordially with Pax Christiana and sacralized by this syncretic fusion.

Such an imaginary belonging and anachronistic loyalties clearly complicate development of modern national identities and nation-state institution building, rather than facilitate them. Not incidentally, today’s Russian conservatives claim to have more in common with the Islamic tradition than with Western liberalism. Alexandr Dugin believes, for instance, that “in the Islamic and Orthodox traditions, almost everything corresponds. We both reject specific aspects of secular, Western, European, individualistic conception of human rights.” The Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Church Kirill avers that “there are values no less important than human rights. These are faith, ethics, sacraments, Fatherland.”

### **Uneasy Emancipation**

The “Kievan Russia” myth as a sort of “invented tradition” dramatically hinders modern development of three nations: Ukrainians, Russians, and Belarusians, all of whom internalized it to a certain degree and still struggle with emancipation from its quasi-religious spell. The myth reinforces, and is reinforced by, the very strong anti-Western forces that emphasize the profound “otherness” of mythical, essentialized, East Slavonic, Eurasian, Orthodox Christian civilization and reject Western values and institutions, including the notion of human rights, civic national identity, and liberal- democratic nation state as a viable alternative to the pre-modern patrimonial empire. East Slavonic/Orthodox Christian “ummah” is highly instrumental in this rejection and preservation of pre-modern structures, habits, and institutions. Centuries-old controversy between the Slavophiles and the Westernizers is just a particular reflection of a more fundamental “clash of civilizations” and “clash of identities” in modern Russia—but also, to various degrees, in modern Ukraine and Belarus.

Of all three East Slavonic nations, Ukrainians, for a number of reasons, seems to be the most advanced in terms emancipation from the East Slavonic “imagined community.” It results in a higher political pluralism in the country and persistent rejection of “sultanistic,” authoritarian systems, so characteristic for Russia and Belarus and most of the other post-Soviet states. On the other hand, the unequal level of emancipation (nearly complete in the west of the country and very low in the east) determines internal tensions within Ukraine and its convoluted, incoherent development. Whereas the western part of the country had decidedly abandoned the Soviet legacy as colonial alien and opted for the European way of development following its western neighbors, the south-eastern part remained firmly attached to the Soviet values, symbols and way of life, and thus prone to the authoritarian “Eurasian” model predominant in

Russia and Belarus.

The regional and ideological polarization makes many observers conceptualize Ukraine as a cleft country where the West and the East not only epitomize incompatible values, orientations and attitudes, but also represent different ethnic and linguistic identities (Ukrainian/Ukrainophone versus Russian/Russophone). The reality, however, is much more complex. Firstly, there is a huge region of Central Ukraine in between, which mitigates the extremes and blurs differences. Secondly, both the West and the East themselves consist of different regions, which make the country even more heterogeneous. And thirdly, most importantly, Ukraine's divides are primarily value-based and identity-driven; and while they are partly determined by regions, languages and ethnicities, this is only a statistical correlation, not iron-clad deterministic dependence. In fact, as the regression analysis shows, the divide between the Soviet/Pan-Slavonic and anti-Soviet/Pan-European Ukrainians correlates much less with ethnicity and language of the respondents than with their education and age. Higher education and younger age predictably correlate with pro-Western orientations, whereas lower education and older age correlate with the Soviet nostalgia and Slavophile anti-occidentalism.

### **The “Two Ukrainians” Reconsidered**

The relative size of the “two Ukrainians” (or, rather, public support for the two respective projects) can be measured by popular vote in some crucial elections or referendum, tantamount to civilizational choice. In 1991, 90 percent of Ukrainian voters supported national independence but only one quarter cast ballots on the same day for the leader of democratic opposition and former political prisoner Viacheslav Chornovil as the president of the new independent state. Two thirds supported a former communist boss—a clear sign that only minority wished Ukraine to break radically with the Soviet past and follow the European way of development. The majority still envisioned the new Ukraine as a mere continuation of the old one, with largely the same institutions, habits, and personnel.

By 2004, the “European” Ukraine defeated the Soviet Ukraine in a dramatic Orange revolution but the preponderance of the former over the latter was too small, unstable and wasted ultimately in political infighting. By the end of 2013, incompatibility of the two projects evoked a new crisis -- after president Yanukovich shelved the Association Agreement with the EU, so dear symbolically for the pro-European Ukrainians, and put his bets on the Eurasian integration. Euromaidan brought a crushing defeat to Ukraine's neo-Soviet orientation—despite a hysterical Russian reaction and occupation of parts of Ukrainian territory. In May 2014, for the first time in Ukrainian history, all the main presidential candidates represented pro-European political platforms whereas their Sovietophile rivals gained mere seven percent of vote altogether.

Opinion surveys graphically confirm the shift that occurred within Ukrainian society—partly because of its internal development and diffusion of Western ideas and values, and partly because of the Russian invasion that caused a dramatic split in Donbas but also an impressive consolidation in the rest of the country (beyond the Russia-occupied Crimea). In July, as many

as 86% of respondents in a nationwide survey declared themselves “patriots of Ukraine” (6% did not), a 12% increase since April 2012, despite a 7% fall in Donbas, from 76 to 69%. Still, only 10% of respondents in Donbas declared they did not consider themselves patriots of Ukraine—hardly a sign of the separatist fever that reportedly affected the region. An earlier (April 2014) survey by another company revealed that only 16% of the proverbial “Russian-speakers” would like Russian military to “protect” them,—contrary to what Putin and his propaganda claim. In five regions of Putin’s proverbial “Novorossiia” (Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhia, Mykolayiv, Kherson, Odesa), only 4 to 7 percent of respondents would like to see Russian “peacekeepers” on their soil. Only Donbas and Kharkiv are different—in the sense that people there are twice as supportive of Russian invasion but even there this number is balanced by a similar number of people who intend to fight Russian aggressors with arms—and who are actually doing so today as volunteers.

It seems that Vladimir Putin and his associates fell victims to their own propaganda. For years, they promoted the notion of Ukraine as an “artificial” state, deeply divided and ready to split. For months, they brainwashed their own citizens and gullible foreigners with hysterical invectives against the “fascist junta” in Kiev which allegedly persecutes ethnic Russians and forbids Russian language. A simple fact that many members of that “ultra-nationalistic” government including the president and his interim predecessor (as well as the volunteers fighting the terrorists in Donbas) still speak Russian as their primary language is carefully omitted in Russian and pro-Russian media, like many other inconvenient facts.

## Forging a Civic Nation

Ukraine is a bilingual country, where most people have a good command of both Ukrainian and Russian and often use them interchangeably, depending on circumstances. Russian strategists miss—or deliberately ignore—the fact that the absolute majority of Russian-speaking Ukrainians and a solid plurality of ethnic Russians in Ukraine are patriots of their country, not of Russia,—exactly like Irishmen or Americans who speak English remain patriots of their respective countries rather than of England. This confusion leads Russian leaders to dramatic mistakes and miscalculations, including their belief that all of the south-eastern Ukraine was ready, like the Crimea, for takeover—just because so many people there speak Russian and therefore are “almost the same folk,” in Putin’s terms. Yet, for better or worse, they are not. And this forces Putin to send not only mercenaries but also regular troops to Donbas, because too few of the locals are willing to fight. And the Putinists are increasingly puzzled with a strange disappearance of “true Ukrainians” (“wonderful Slavonic people,” in Dugin’s imagination) and a sinister emergence of the “wrong” (Banderite) ones.

Back in May, a prominent film director and ardent Putin’s loyalist Nikita Mikhalkov recorded a hysterical video-address to the Odessites who had bitterly disappointed him and his patron by not following the Donbas footsteps and supporting the anti-government uprising, despite all the efforts and investments Russia made. “Where and why the Russian army should come?” he asked rhetorically. “Whom to save and protect? The city where a million of inhabitants live their

usual life and only a host of activists fight? What should the Russian army do in a Banderite city where only a miserable minority fights the Banderites? Are you, the Odessites, Russians yourself? Prove it!”

A seemingly simple fact that ethnic Russians can be political Ukrainians—exactly as they can be political Americans, Germans or Estonians—is still very difficult to grasp by most Russians in Russia and, regrettably, many foreigners. Ukraine, since its very inception, has been built as a civic, inclusive nation; despite notorious dysfunctionality of the state institutions, predatory elites, and Russia’s relentless efforts to undermine or even destroy Ukraine’s sovereignty. It seems, ironically, that the results are the opposite. The “wrong” type of Ukrainian identity based primarily on symbolical distancing from Russia as the main “Other” becomes the only viable type, and the distance is increasingly perceived as political (in terms of democracy, human rights and civil liberties), rather than of language or ethnicity.

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