Ukrainians as Russia's negative 'other': History comes full circle

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war, euphemistically called the "Ukraine crisis," draws attention to its ideological underpinnings that include a historically informed Russian hegemonic view of Ukrainians as "younger brothers" who should be both patronized and censured for improper behavior. The paper examines a particular aspect of this superior attitude as embedded in ethnic stereotypes — both "vernacular", primarily in folklore, and ideologically constructed, in both cultural and political discourses. In both cases, the structure of stereotypes reflects the dominant position of one group and subjugated position of the other within a more general paradigm of relations between Robinson Crusoe and Friday. A peculiar dialectics implies that a "good" Friday can be civilized and assimilated and become almost equal to Crusoe — "almost the same people", in a popular Russian parlance about Ukrainians. Yet, a "bad" ("wrong") Friday should be strongly reviled and thoroughly demonized as a complete evil, manipulated allegedly by hostile ("Western") Robinsons. The paper argues that the Russo-Ukrainian relations cannot be normalized until Russians learn to see Ukrainians as neither "good" nor "bad" but just different —as all the people around.

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In the last decade, Russian President Vladimir Putin has increasingly relied upon Russian nationalist and neo-fascist ideology from the post-revolutionary White émigrés and writers within the USSR and post-Soviet Russia. The most prominent influence upon Putin has been that of White émigré Ivan Ilyin who was 'a publicist, conspiracy theorist, and a Russian nationalist with a core of fascistic leanings' (Barbashin and Thoburn, 2015). Even after the defeat of Nazi Germany and the axis powers in 1945, Ilyin continued to believe in fascism and the manifestations of this ideology in Franco's Spain and Salazar's Portugal. Putin's turn to extreme nationalistic and fascistic ideology began to grow after the 2003—2004 Rose and Orange Revolutions, which he viewed as Western -backed conspiracies to install anti-Russian political forces, and from 2006 Putin 'began to feature the philosopher prominently in some of his major addresses to the public' (Barbashin and Thoburn, 2015). Putin's strident nationalism became public in his speech delivered to the 2007 Munich Security conference and the 2008 Bucharest NATO summit where Putin told then President George W. Bush that Ukrainians are not a 'people' and when he made his first territorial claims on what he later termed 'New Russia', or *Novorossia* (southern and eastern Ukraine). That same year Russian invaded Georgia and recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia which became a dry run for the annexation of the Crimea six years later. Hill and Gaddy (2015, 263) point out that Putin's justification for his invasion of the Crimea was not 'new' as 'He was circling around familiar territory.' Nevertheless, Russia's annexation of the Crimea contradicted everything Russian leaders had said since 1991 (Allison, 2014, 1267) and violated international law and the 1994 Budapest Memorandum (signed together with the US and UK) and 1997 Ukrainian-Russian inter-state treaty.

Putin has instructed his regional governors to read and study Ilyin who, like Putin and the contemporary Russian leadership, believed that Ukrainians have no right to statehood and Ukrainians cannot be permitted to develop independently of

Russia. Ilyin and other émigré writers, including former dissident and writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn, espoused views commonly found among contemporary Russian leaders. Most of them are convinced that Russia constitutes a 'unique' Eurasian civilization different from Europe and Asia; that the West is profoundly hostile and deeply engaged in an anti-Russian conspiracy; and the Russian Orthodox Church should play a particular role in the national 'spiritual revival.' After mass protests in Russia in 2011—2012, Putin and the Russian leadership turned to 'conservative values,' aligned with anti-EU nationalists and fascists in Europe and mobilized extreme nationalists and fascists Sergei Glazyev, Aleksandr Dugin and Aleksandr Prokhanov who were 'given center-stage' and becoming 'operational tools in the informational and psychological aspect of the new warfare that Putin waged in Ukraine (Hill and Gaddy, 2015, 372—373)

History has come full circle with contemporary Russian nationalists such as Putin drawing ideological inspiration from pre-Soviet and Russian émigré writers (descendants of the White Guard monarchists and provisional government federalists) who always denied Ukrainians were a separate people. As Anna Procyk writes, all Russian groups — even those calling themselves democrats — fought against an indepenent Ukrainian state in 1917—1920. Remarkably, Russian President Putin praised both of them for the heart-warming unanimity expressed vis-a-vis Ukraine: "What is curious, is that both the Red and the White camps were struggling to the death, millions perished in the course of that struggle, but they never raised the question of Ukraine's secession. Both the Reds and the Whites proceeded from the principle of [territorial] integrity of the Russian state" (Putin, 2013).

This article shows the deep historical roots of 'Ukrainian nationalism' as a negative other for Russian nationalists such as Putin who believe Ukrainians are not a separate people that have been promoted through stereotypes stretching back to the eighteenth century. Ukrainian writer and political activist Volodymyr Vynnychenko recalled that the 'liberalism' of Russian liberals ends at the Ukrainian border when they become nationalists and chauvinists. At the same time, while repeating the Tsarist era mythology of Russians and Ukrainians as 'one people' contemporary Russian leaders and nationalists find themselves living in a confused world with a majority of Ukrainians not accepting that they are the same as Russians. This was clearly seen in the abject failure of the 'New Russia' project's failure to mobilize Russian speakers in Ukraine's east and south who instead showed their Ukrainian patriotism; indeed, far more Russian speakers are fighting for Ukraine in the ATO (Anti-Terrorist Operation) than on the separatist side. Russia's annexation of the Crimea and its hybrid war and invasion of the Donbas has made Putin the most negatively viewed foreign leader in Ukraine and dramatically reduced support for integration into Eurasia (Razumkov, 2015).

The Red—White unanimity in regard of Ukraine is exemplified by new voices from various, sometimes the most unexpected corners, including the ardent critics of Putin's regime such as Aleksey Navalny, or Mikhail Khodorkovsky, or Andrey Bitov. In mid-March 2014, shortly after the Russian annexation of the Crimea, a collective letter in support of this brazen action was published on the official website of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation. More than five hundred culture figures, including prominent actors, musicians, theater and film directors signed a dull bureaucratic petition prepared reportedly by the deputy minster of culture in the best traditions of the Soviet "unanimous approval" (Deyateli, 2014). Khodorkovsky, a well-known former oligarch who languished in Russian prisons until his release in December 2013, supports Russia's annexation of the Crimea but criticizes Russia's war in the Donbas.

An independent, 'Europeanized' Ukraine poses a strategic threat not so much to Russian national security as to Russian premodern, imperial identity. Ukraine's historical myths of seeking independence over a long period of time, its claim to sole historical title to the medieval principality of Kyivan Rus and other elements of historical symbolism conflicts with Russian nationalist historical and territorial claims. Ukraine remains a crucial part of the Russian imperialistic mythology and imagination and will remain a 'sublime object of desire' for too many Russians unable to reconcile with its sovereignty, independent development and integration outside the Russkii Mir (Russian World). Deconstruction of Russian imperial and great power nationalistic mythology and stereotypes of 'Ukrainian nationalism' as a negative 'other' is an important component of political, cultural, and psychological processes for the rebuilding of Russo-Ukrainian relations on a thoroughly new and democratic basis.

1. Discovering 'almost the same people'

The Russian imagination created the image of Ukrainians as 'Little Russians' a few centuries ago — alongside the appropriation of Ukrainian territory and history, and the transformation, under Tsar Peter the Great, of medieval Muscovy into the Russian Empire. Despite the popular notion that Ukrainians and Russians are kin nations, with allegedly very deep cultural and historical ties, their initial encounters and mutual apprehensions in fact date back only to the 18th century when the newly formed Russian Empire gradually absorbed the Ukrainian (Ruthenian) lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Kohut, 1988). Until the mid-17th century, Ukrainians occupied a very marginal place in Muscovite thought — something that is indirectly reflected in the relatively small number of ethnic references in the Russian folk proverbs and expressions recorded two centuries later. Tatars are the most frequently mentioned, followed by the Germans — under the generic name "Nemtsy" ("mute") that referred to all Europeans who spoke incomprehensible languages. Gypsies and the Jews come next, with Ukrainians ("khokhly", "malorosy") sharing fifth place with the other historical newcomer to the Muscovite realm — the French (Shevchenko and Zubkov, 2012). Another researcher applies a bit different method of calculation to the similar folklore material and finds out that the most intensively stereotyped groups are Gipsies, Jews, Germans ("Nemtsy") and Tatars. Ukrainians, again, are listed the fifth, sharing the place, this time, with Poles and Greeks (Belova, 2011).

There was no historical evidence of Muscovite interest in the Kyiv Rus legacy until it was "rediscovered" at the turn of the 17th century — ironically, by the Ukrainian ("Little Russian") intellectuals in the tsar's service (Keenan, 1994). The "invented tradition" was successfully appropriated by the imperial narrative and, in a heavily mythologized form, laid the foundations for the official version of the "thousand-year-old Russian history." Until then, however, all the occasional claims of the Muscovite rulers to certain tracts of Ruthenian land had essentially been patrimonial and contained none of the political, or ethnic, or cultural connotations so favored by the later imperial propaganda. Even the ecclesiastic ties had been very vague, as the Moscow clergy was highly suspicious of their Ruthenian counterparts, allegedly westernized and infected by Latinized learning and other Jesuit heresies. The Muscovites did not consider the Orthodox faith of Ruthenians who immigrated to Muscovy sufficiently "orthodox" and they had to be re-baptized (Kohut, 2011, 22). The newly acquired Ruthenian lands, including the proverbial "mother of all the Rus cities" Kyiv, had initially no symbolical value for Muscovites, and their rulers considered, quite seriously, the possibility of exchanging them for rather more attractive landholdings (Kohut, 2011, 305).

Throughout the 18th century, the Russians expanded their knowledge of the Ukrainians and vice versa, but from two different perspectives — imperial and dominant and provincial/subaltern. This was the time when Russia developed and firmly established the official view of Ukrainians as "almost the same people" and when the Ukrainians largely internalised that view, even though the content and scope of the adverb "almost" had never been fully agreed or clearly specified. This, paradoxically, not only facilitated the assimilation of educated Ukrainians into Russian culture and the Russian imperial super-ethnos, but also provided cover for the preservation of local identity and its relatively safe expression (Kohut, 2011, 28—34).

The Russians encountered essentially two different social types of Ukrainians and therefore developed two major stereotypes — those who were educated, loyal and basically integrated into the imperial culture, that is "Little Russians", and those who were illiterate local peasants — "khokhols," with a crude but picturesque aboriginal culture and a strange dialect. "Little Russians" (*Malorossy*) were "almost the same people" and therefore their stereotyping was relatively mild. They were deemed shrewd and cunning — inasmuch as they competed with the Russians at the court and in the imperial administration. They were deemed particularistic and treacherous — inasmuch as they cherished nostalgic memories of their glorious Cossack past and "golden liberties." They, finally, were considered backward and retrograde — inasmuch as the gap between the modernizing capital city and the provincialised "Little Russian" periphery grew ever wider (Saunders, 1985, 41—64).

The stereotyping of "khokhols" was harsher since it combined both ethnic and social "othering". Prince Dolgorukii's (1870, 242—243) sketches from his 1810 trip to Ukraine graphically illustrate this approach:

> The *Khokhol* appears to be created by nature to till the land, sweat, burn in the sun and spend his whole life with a bronzed face… He does not grieve over such an enslaved condition: he knows nothing better… He knows his plough, ox, stack, whisky, and that constitutes his entire lexicon… He willingly bears any fate and any labour. However, he needs constant prodding, because he is very lazy: he and his ox will fall asleep and wake up five times in one minute […]. I dare think, if this entire people did not owe a debt to well-mannered landowners for their benevolence and the respect for their humanity, the *khokhol* would be difficult to separate from the negro in any way: one sweats over sugar, the other over grain. May the Lord give them both good health!

The exotic, orientalizing view of "khokhols" gained broad currency in Russian imperial discourses of the early 19th century — fully in line with the Enlightenment view of Eastern Europe as a "lesser," subaltern, semi-Oriental part of the continent (Wolff, 1994), and in conformity with our understanding today of Orientalism as a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said, 1980, 11). The only peculiarity here was that the role of the "civilised West" was assumed by the semi-Oriental Russia or, more precisely, by its Westernized capital city, vis-à-vis the "Oriental" peripheries, of which Ukraine was not quite "Oriental" and therefore had to be discursively adjusted to the due pattern:

> Little Russians are closer in appearance [than Great Russians] to the splendid inhabitants of Asia, [resembling Asians in their] facial appearance, frame, shapeliness of figure, laziness and carefree nature, [but] Little Russians… do not have those stormy, untameable passions characteristic of believers in Islam: a phlegmatic unconcern appears to serve them as a defence and a barrier from uneasy disturbances; and often from under their thick eyebrows a fire flashes; a bold European intelligence penetrates; a passionate love of the motherland and ardent feelings, clothed in pristine simplicity, fill their breasts (Sviniin, 1830, 31—32).

Pavel Svinin's essay was published in 1830, at the time when a Ukrainian cultural movement, however conspicuous, had not yet been perceived as a threat. Rather, it was considered a curiosity, with no political connotations, and therefore treated with humor, superiority but no clear animosity. The situation had changed a decade later when the ideas of modern nationalism reached the empire, causing dramatic changes in both Russian and Ukrainian cultural discourses. One of the most influential Russian intellectuals of the time, a leading literary critic Vissarion Belinsky, perceptively recognised the deadly threat that the nascent Ukrainian movement posed to the Russian imperial identity and all its founding myths. He vehemently attacked the beginnings of modern Ukrainian literature and historiography, applying the familiar orientalizing discourse — but in a much more aggressive and disparaging way:

> The history of Little Russia is just a tributary that flows into the grand river of Russian history. Little Russians have always been a tribe and never a nation, let alone a state… Neither the so-called Hetmanate nor Zaporozhzha had ever been a republic or state but just an odd community in the Asian manner. Their real and permanent foes had been the

Crimean Tatars, and the Little Russians fought them admirably, in the spirit of their nationality… It was a parody of a republic, in other words — a Slavonic republic that, despite all its disorder, still had some signs of orderliness. And that orderliness was based not on rights that freely evolve from historical processes but on customs that are a cornerstone of all Asiatic people. The customs had substituted for laws and tamed the unruliness of that courageous and indomitable, but muddle-headed and ignorant peasant democracy. Such a republic could be an excellent instrument for some strong state but per se it was quite a caricatured state that could only fight and drink *horilka* (Belinskii, 1955, 60—62).

2. Banal colonialism

From the 1840s onwards, the social dichotomy between the educated "Little Russians" and the illiterate "khokhols" became increasingly blurred — partly because of increased movement within the social dynamic that distorted the traditional social hierarchies, and partly because of the increasing attempts by certain "Little Russians" to inculcate a separate — "Ukrainian" — national self-awareness in the "khokhols" by means of literacy and education. This subversive type of Little Russian was dubbed "Mazepintsy" — after Ivan Mazepa, a "traitorous" Ukrainian hetman who sided in 1709 with the Swedes against Peter I. And by this time the nickname "khokhol" had extended its currency, to become a derogative for Ukrainians in general by transferring upon them the original connotation of a crude, illiterate, backward member of a tribe, or caste, rather than a nation (Kappeler, 2003).

Whereas the stereotype of a "Little Russian" was, by and large, a product of ideology, the stereotype of a "khokhol" had emerged, for the most part, from the direct contact and interaction between the Muscovites/Great Russians and Ukrainians/ Little Russians. In both cases, of course, these relations were of a colonial nature and reflected, in multiple ways, the dominant/superior position of one group and subaltern/inferior position of the other. However, contrary to the "Little Russians" who were belittled by means of orientalization, the "khokhols" were undermined — as in Prince Dolgoruky's sketch — by means of animalization. Russian proverbs reflect this subhuman character of "khokhols" when emphasizing their laziness and stupidity and, consequently, complete uselessness: "A turkey has hatched seven khokhols from one egg," "The belt of a khokhol went at three pennies and the khokhol himself was added for free" (Dal, 1862).

Since the great majority of Ukrainians had been peasants, that is, serfs, "laziness" was probably quite a natural way to sabotage their forced labor and avoid unrestricted exploitation. Perhaps it is not entirely surprising that this stereotype sharply contradicts the Ukrainians' auto-stereotype of a supposedly very diligent, hard-working people. The alleged "stupidity" might also have been a mask that protected the subjugated people from further trouble with their masters. At least, as a number of other proverbs imply, it was perfectly compatible with a certain smartness and trickery: "A khokhol is sillier than a raven but smarter than the devil", "Where a khokhol has passed by, a Jew has nothing to do", "A khokhol would not lie but he wouldn't tell the truth either". The proverbial "stubbornness" of "khokhols" ("Send him for water or for chaff, still a khokhol") might also be an irritant for the dominant group but was a quite rational element in the behavior of the subalterns. Actually, the only unambiguously positive feature of "khokhols" in Russian proverbs is their musicality: "A Russian is good at reading and a khokhol at singing"; "Khokhols are worth nothing but their voices are good" (Dal, 1862).

Overall, the system of stereotyping and negative othering of Ukrainians and other subjugated peoples served the imperial goal of belittlement, depreciation, and further subjugation, through discursive rather than coercive means. The major function of stereotypes was to induce and reinforce inferiority complexes within the subaltern groups, so that they would internalise the dominant deprecating view of themselves. The stereotypes also helped to legitimize the imperial status quo, to assert the "normality" of the de-facto racist hierarchies, and to sanction discursively any possible deviation from that fabricated "norm." It was a product of imperial knowledge enshrined in textbooks and academia, in high and popular culture, and last but not least in folklore which represented a common and, therefore, undeniable wisdom, a "banal colonialism," to paraphrase the title of Michael Billig's famous book (Billig, 1995).

Since Ukrainians were considered "almost the same people," they could easily fit into the established "norm" — inasmuch as they accepted the role of the proverbial "Little Russians" and neither questioned the formula "almost the same" nor tried to interpret the adverb "almost" too broadly. For example, to employ Ukrainian beyond certain ritualistic purposes or low genres, or to insist not only on certain peculiarities of their culture but also on its uniqueness and ontological coequality to the dominant Russian. Any deviation from the established "norm" had to be sanctioned — either by denouncing the offender as a "Mazepist" (or in later years as a "Petliurite" or a "Banderite"), which fell short of a criminal accusation that was tantamount to state treason, or by subtler (and persistent) reminders to the potential offender about his/her dubious "khokhol" provenance. What was used by Belinsky in 1843 in response to the spread of subversive "Cossackophilia" among educated Little Russians has been repeated on many occasions in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras; for example, by a Odesa police officer, who in response to a citizen's request to communicate with him in Ukrainian: "I don't speak a cow's language," (the state servant responded to the insubordinate aborigine —hardly polite but fully in line with the long tradition of imperial suprematism) (Odesa, 2014). All "Little Russians" in both pre-Soviet and Soviet times had to be fully aware of both forms of sanctioning in case they dared to question or overstep the boundaries of the sacred formula of "almost the same people". All of them could be either symbolically downgraded to the level of backward, uncultured serfs (or, eventually, kolkhoz slaves), or totally excluded socially from life as obsessed nationalistic freaks or, worse, malicious criminals.

3. By words and deeds

Under the Soviets, the situation did not change much, even though the Bolsheviks officially accepted the term Ukrainian instead of Little Russian, and restricted the usage of the nickname "khokhol" to informal speech and works of art. However, most importantly, the previous "norm" did not change: Ukrainians still had to be "almost the same people" as Russians, within the tripartite formula of a "Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian brotherhood" stemming allegedly from their common Kyivan Rus cradle. The Russians were assigned the role of the "older brother" within this triad, which underlined, quite crudely, their political dominance and cultural superiority.

Any Ukrainian (or Belarusian) deviation from the prescribed role was sanctioned – first and foremost by the dominant discourse, with all its hierarchies and stereotypes, but also by various institutions within the formidable police state. The unnatural structural formations and the inequalities created by colonialism had not been eliminated but rather deepened – by the forced collectivisation of agriculture that imposed a new kind of slavery upon the wretched rural "khokhols" and facilitated further Russification of the Ukrainian urban centers. The proliferation of "khokhol" images in Russian literature, and eventually in film, actually increased under the Soviets – due to more widespread literacy and the mass media, especially TV, and went far beyond the low-brow popular culture, as it also affected prominent authors like Mikhail Bulgakov (Shkandrij, 2001, 332–339) or Iosif Brodskii (1994). Rural "khokhols" could still be derided by Russian/Russophone urbanites as sub-humans – using animalistic nicknames like "byki" (bulls), "kuguty" (cocks) or "raguli" (horned), as well as nicknames that referred to various human inadequacies – like "zhloby" (greedy-guts), "selo" (country bumpkins) or "kolkhoz" (uncouth kolkhoz slaves).

The "khokhol" stereotype effectively prohibited all the rural migrants in the Russified cities from acquiring a Ukrainian rather than Little Russian identity. The Ukrainian language and culture – as its most conspicuous features – had been stigmatised within this discursive framework as symbols of backwardness, primitivism, and sheer stupidity. Most Ukrainians had to either give up their linguistic-cum-cultural deviations and accept the socially constructed "normality", or fight an uphill battle for their identity against the powerful "common sense" that automatically requalified their cultural deviation into political deviation. Alexander Motyl (1987, 100–101) aptly highlighted this problem some thirty years ago:

> Language use has a potent symbolic quality in a politicized linguistic environment: it immediately assigns the user to one of two sides of the ideological barricade […] The use of Ukrainian, they [the dissidents] realized, is tantamount to opposition to the Soviet state […] Although no laws forbid deviations from this behavioural norm (as one Soviet Ukrainian representative once told me, no one "is holding a gun to their heads"), non-Russians in general and Ukrainians in particular appear to understand that insistence on speaking one's native language—especially among the Russians—will be perceived as a rejection of the "friendship of peoples" and as hostility to the "Soviet people." Few Ukrainians are audacious enough to risk such unpleasantness as public censure, loss of employment, or even jail for the sake of linguistic purity. As a result, they signal their loyalty to the state and sidestep chauvinist reactions by speaking Russian.

The particularly defiant and stubborn "Little Russians," who did not yield to the "khokhol" stereotyping, were subjected to the more malevolent labelling aimed not so much at social downgrading and mockery as at political othering, exclusion and denouncement. Being historically stereotyped as "traitors" ("Mazepists"), they acquired under the Soviets the new nickname "Petliurites" – after the leader of the short-lived Ukrainian National Republic (1918–1921), Symon Petliura, who resisted the Bolsheviks and was eventually killed by a Soviet agent in Paris in 1926. And two decades later, the "wrong" kind of Ukrainian was given the even more sinister name of "Banderites" – after Stepan Bandera, the leader of the underground Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, who was ultimately assassinated by a Soviet spy in Munich in 1959. Perhaps the only thing the liberal socialist Petliura and the fascist nationalist Bandera had in common (besides being hated and killed perfidiously by the Soviets) was that they both symbolized a Ukrainian pro-independence, national liberation movement and both fought the Russian invasion with arms, not just words.

Bandera seemed to be the more suitable for political stereotyping – partly because his name conflated phonetically with banditry, and partly because of his far-right leanings and the terrorist nature of his OUN (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists). He could be easily depicted as a fascist, and therefore a Nazi, and in consequence a collaborator with Hitler – even though the real story was much more complex: the Soviets never mentioned that he was arrested by the Nazis in 1941 and spent the rest of the war in Sachsenhausen, or that his followers fought not only the Soviets but also the Nazis, and that two of his brothers and a sister perished at the hands of the Gestapo. Bandera became the embodiment of all the worst possible features of a human, and the "Banderite" stereotype was successfully transformed into a powerful propagandistic weapon, a magical bludgeon against any Ukrainian particularism. An additional value of this specific stereotype was its West Ukrainian provenance. By labelling an individual a "Banderite", the Soviets not only implied political, cultural, and moral deviation but also linked that specific malady to a particular region (even though the denounced person might not necessarily have originated from it). The propagandistic benefit was two-fold. On the one hand, the political enemy (actual or potential) was crushed by a semi-criminal accusation difficult to refute. On the other hand, the entire subversive region (it was the least Sovietized and Russified) was effectively ostracised, demonized, and confirmed as a potential source of ideological contagion.

Even though "khokhol" and "Banderite" stereotyping worked hand-in-hand, their cultural premises and social targets were quite different. The former was "soft," the latter "hard"; the former primarily targeted peasants to discourage them from becoming Ukrainian, the latter primarily targeted Ukrainians to prevent them from Ukrainizing the peasants. The "khokhol"

stereotyping worked well in maintaining the belief that Ukrainians and Russians are "almost the same folk," but was much less efficient against those who had lost this belief or, like the majority of Western Ukrainians, had never acquired it. They lived in a predominantly Ukrainian-speaking world, and this world was not only rural but also urban, not only backward but also cultured and educated, not only traditional and archaic but also quite modern. They simply did not view the notion of "khokhol" as being synonymous with Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians; for them, the Russian language and Russian culture were not the only possible choice and not the only road to modernity. They did not internalise the "normality" promoted by the empire; their attachment to things Ukrainian, including the language, did not make them "khokhols," that is, social outcasts. So, they had to be made into political outcasts, and the "Banderite" stereotyping served this goal rather well, at least for those outside the West Ukrainian region.

4. Fighting the "fascists"

By the end of the 1980s, as Gorbachev's perestroika advanced, the political persecution of "bourgeois nationalists" (that is, all who did not fit the "almost the same people" pattern) had lessened, and eventually, with the fall of the Soviet Union and the removal of the KGB and the CPSU from the political scene, disappeared altogether. The discursive othering and ostracising, however, did not vanish. First, the official view of Ukrainians as "almost the same people" remained deeply entrenched within Russian society, so that neither the Ukrainian language, nor the Ukrainian culture, nor even Ukrainian political sovereignty have been ever considered as completely viable or legitimate. This, in turn, provided a breeding ground for both political and cultural resentment, with its expression seen in various statements, policies, cultural artifacts and media discourses (Sergiyenko, 2011; Nazarenko, 2014, 26—27).

Secondly, the "almost the same people" concept had been deeply internalised by many Ukrainians, as well as the local Russians who made up 22 per cent of Ukraine's population by 1991. The independent Ukraine that emerged as a legal continuation of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, inherited most of the latter's institutions and personnel, as well as formal and informal practices. Centuries of colonialism had fundamentally distorted Ukrainian society, which gave significant structural advantages to the predominantly Russophone urbanites vis-à-vis the mostly Ukrainophone inhabitants of the countryside. The post-Soviet elite (largely of Soviet origin) had neither the will nor the skill to fix the structural deficiencies, so their opportunistic policies were largely aimed at the preservation of the inherited status quo. In practice this meant the preservation of the de-facto dominance of the Russophone ("Creole") faction mitigated, however, by various symbolical concessions to the Ukrainophone "aborigines." A graphic example of such manipulation is the *de-jure* status of Ukrainian as the sole state language, enshrined in the Constitution but devoid of any laws or bylaws that would enable the practical implementation of that political declaration.

As a result, the established Russian-speaking "norm" has never been challenged in the Ukrainian urban centers, and the informal use of Ukrainian in public remained a deviation of sorts, even though the "aboriginal" language made certain inroads into public administration, schooling, and the media — at least in Central Ukraine (the historical lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth), although hardly at all in the south east (the proverbial "*Novorossiya*"). Both the mainstream Ukrainian media (predominantly oligarchic, that is, Russophone) and the local popular culture (in most cases oriented to the large Russian market) have largely retained the caricatured image of "khokhols" — essentially similar to that which was, and still is, produced by Moscow. Typically, they represented a country bumpkin, speaking in a ridiculous mixture of Ukrainian and Russian, miserly yet envious, and obsessively fond of pig fat. The oral stereotyping, as part of urban working-class folklore, was even harsher. It often employed animalistic or other subhuman nicknames to denigrate the "khokhols", nicknames that were an overt example of hate speech, and which as a consequence were barred, apparently for this reason, from the mainstream media. The only exception was the nickname "zhloby," because of its ambiguity: it could have social than rather ethnic connotations, as it refers to a dull yet greedy person, lacking in taste.

The "Banderite" stereotyping had relatively low currency in the Ukrainian media of the 1990s — partly because of its Soviet connotations, which were exaggerated yet somewhat obsolete at the time, and partly because it was effectively replaced by two different, but more suitable, nicknames — Galicians (to signify west Ukrainians as an insolent minority who try to manipulate the whole country) and "nationally preoccupied" ("*natsionalno ozabochennye*") — to discredit those who raised the issue of structural inequalities and demanded de-facto protection for Ukainophones' rights. The former referred to conspiratorial phobias similar to those exploiting the alleged "Judeo-Masonic plot," and the latter directly implied a similarity between social ("nationalistic") deviation and sexual perversion by hinting scornfully at a popular quasi-medical formula "*seksualno ozabochennyi*" ("sexually preoccupied").

Perhaps, the most persistent method of ethnic othering that has survived all the political changes in both Kyiv and Moscow was the purposeful employment of specific Ukrainian words in Russian texts/speeches, albeit in a distorted, poorly transcribed and deliberately caricatured form. Functionally, it resembled the comical imitation of any accent — either Jewish, or Georgian, or Chinese, but in the Ukrainian case it had one more peculiarity. Since Ukrainian and Russian languages are proximate and mutually comprehensible (to a degree), the purpose behind the use of specific Ukrainian words like "mova" (language) or "nezalezhnist" ("independence") implies that the concepts they signify are not quite real but should be perceived with an ironic distance, as they fail to match the fully-grown "language" ("yazyk", in Russian) or fully-fledged "independence" ("nezavisimost') (Shmeleva and Smelev, 2008). All things Ukrainian in the suprematist discourse had to be crude, amusing and explicitly artificial, as in a humorous operetta.

However, in general throughout the 1990s, the ethnic othering and stereotyping in Ukraine was of relatively low intensity and typically, with the exception of certain marginal publications, did not pursue ideological goals. Rather, it functioned on an everyday level like the "banal anti-Semitism" discernible to a degree in most countries and reproduced unconsciously but unintentionally due to the residual mental and linguistic clichés. Perhaps the only difference was that we were not yet aware that in the "banal," everyday othering and stereotyping of most ethnic groups (besides Jews and Roma) there was a larger and more dangerous phenomenon that it is necessary to confront rather than to downplay as simply rudeness, boorishness, or impoliteness.

The situation in Ukraine dramatically changed in the early 2000s when dogged by scandals, President Leonid Kuchma chose the notorious governor of Donetsk, Viktor Yanukovych, as his prime minister and then nominated him as his preferred presidential successor. By 2004, Yanukovych's Russian spin-doctors had elaborated a strategy to discredit his main rival, Viktor Yushchenko, as well as his supporters, as fanatical nationalists. The old "Banderite" stereotype once again was resurrected, the anti-fascist rhetoric was revitalized, and the pictures of Yushchenko with a Nazi swastika appeared on the streets of east Ukrainian cities, primarily Donetsk.

The strategy failed to help since the image of the Nazi Yushchenko was too detached from reality. But it influenced a substantial number of Ukrainian citizens, reignited the old Soviet complexes and stereotypes, and antagonized society around a largely obsolete and artificial problem. To add insult to injury, the "Banderite," "neo-fascist" othering of the opponents did not stop at the end of the elections but was continued by Yanukovych and his Party of Regions within the rather comfortable (under democratic rule) niche of political opposition. The Nazi-bashing of Yushchenko and his Orange government was enthusiastically supported by the Kremlin as an excellent opportunity to discredit Ukrainian democracy, both domestically and internationally. Remarkably, the campaign did not cease even after Viktor Yanukovych's victory in 2010. A new, and possibly more plausible, version of Ukrainian Banderite fascism was created with the formation of the "Svoboda" party, originally a marginal far-right group that never gained more than one per cent of the electoral vote. In 2010, however, out of the blue, it won relative majority in local elections in three Galician oblasts and then, two years later, it achieved an impressive 10% of the vote in the parliamentary elections, with the help of mysterious sponsors and its surprising access to the major TV channels.

"Svoboda" was nurtured as a multifunctional technological project, with the ultimate goal of becoming the main rival to the incumbent Viktor Yanukovych in the 2015 presidential election and in reality the Party of Regions was the gravest threat to Ukrainian democracy, not Ukrainian nationalists (Kuzio, 2015a, b, c; Snyder, 2014b). Euromaidan has disrupted these plans but the extensive earlier work of political spin-doctors and propagandists has not been entirely wasted. The "Banderite" stereotype was central in (mis)representing the Euromaidan protests as a "fascist coup" in the mass media of both Yanukovych and Putin. The Kremlin appeared to be the main beneficiary of the invented story, since it provided a dramaturgical framework for all the events which unfolded — the occupation of Crimea under the pretext of protecting the local Russians from the "fascist putschists" in Kyiv, the staging of the rebellion in Donbas under the same pretext, the media coverage of the military invasion in the region as a local "anti-fascist" uprising, and the propagation of incredible stories about the cruelty of the "fascist junta", with its rabid nationalism, anti-Semitism, and Russophobia.

All the language was chosen to serve the purposes of militant propaganda. The Russia-sponsored and armed rebels were assigned the name "opolchentsy," which historically refers to peasant volunteers who joined the Russian armed forces during a foreign invasion, and is primary linked to the anti-Nazi mobilization in 1941. By the same token, the Ukrainian soldiers who fight the Russian and pro-Russian militants in Donbas are termed "karateli" ("punitive squads") — a very strong reference to the Nazi anti-partisan squads extensively portrayed in Soviet literature and films. Such use of militarized, explicitly anti-Nazi language, as Matthew Kupfer and de Waal (2014) aptly remark

> casts the Russian-Ukrainian conflict as a replay of the ideological divide of the Second World War, with Russia and Ukraine branded as "antifascist" and "profascist" respectively. These labels are weapons in a rhetorical conflict that fuels the fighting on the ground… And these terms are the result of a nearly seventy-year process that has turned a concept into a politicized accusation with a general application.

5. Pitfalls of Russian hybrid war propaganda

The vitriolic Ukraine-bashing has achieved rather limited propagandistic benefits on the international scene since no reliable evidence concerning "Banderite fascism" in Ukraine has been found. The poor results of the far right parties and their candidates in the Ukraine's presidential (May 2014) and parliamentary (October 2014) elections actually proved just the reverse. Nonetheless, such fictitious stories were much more successful in Russia itself where the overwhelming majority not only fully support the aggressive anti-Ukrainian policies of the government, but also fully believe in the unlikely stories about the "fascist junta" in Kyiv, the "genocide of the Russophones" in Donbas, and the global anti-Russian conspiracy concocted by Washington.

Many experts attribute this to the power of propaganda, propaganda that is extremely unscrupulous, manipulative and often completely detached from any reality on the ground. Peter Pomerantsev, the author of an excellent book about the Russian media today — "Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia" (2014) — argues that Putin's media are much more formidable than that of the Soviets because they do not just distort the truth, but make the very idea of truth irrelevant.

On Russian "news" broadcasts, the borders between fact and fiction have become utterly blurred. Russian current-affairs programs feature apparent actors posing as refugees from eastern Ukraine, crying for the cameras about invented threats from imagined fascist gangs. During one Russian news broadcast, a woman related how Ukrainian nationalists had crucified a child in the eastern Ukrainian city of Sloviansk. When Alexei Volin, Russia's deputy minister of communications, was confronted with the fact that the crucifixion story was a fabrication, he showed no embarrassment, instead suggesting that all that mattered were ratings. "The public likes how our main TV channels present material, the tone of our programs," he said (Pomerantsev, 2014).

Pomerantsev (2014) admits that the Kremlin "tells its stories well, having mastered the mixture of authoritarianism and entertainment culture [...]. The point of this new propaganda is not to persuade anyone, but to keep the viewer hooked and distracted — to disrupt Western narratives rather than provide a counternarrative." It cares little about facts, evidence, credibility, internal coherence and possible contradictions. The new Russian propaganda machine tries not so much to "convince viewers of any one version of events, but rather to leave them confused, paranoid, and passive — living in a Kremlin-controlled virtual reality that can no longer be mediated or debated by any appeal to 'truth' (Pomerantsev (2014)."

Many observers highlight the strict censorship within the Russian mass media that effectively restricts access to alternative sources of information and facilitates the propagandistic brainwashing by the state-controlled media. Lev Gudkov (2014), a prominent Russian sociologist, argues, however, that censorship is not the only and probably not the main reason for the people's acceptance of the official line. Of a greater importance is their "stubborn unwillingness to hear what they did not want to hear, a conscious resistance to — and selection of — incoming information." This stems from a fear of freedom — and of the concomitant responsibility. The jingoistic hysteria promoted by the Russian mass media has unleashed the worst features of Homo Sovieticus. It has reinforced the archaic models of social organisation, "eliminated the issue of subjective personal development or aspiration, and the need to work on oneself to secure a better future [...]. The Ukrainian crisis has licensed people to act in accordance with old standards and the culture of violence that has persisted since the days of communist totalitarianism" (Gudkov, 2014)

In his perceptive analysis, Lev Gudkov seems to underestimate, however, the role that the old anti-Ukrainian stereotypes played in the Russian people's notable susceptibility to official anti-Ukrainian propaganda. Whatever the power of the new Putinist propaganda, the core of the problem resides in the historically informed inability of most Russians to recognize the significant differences between the two nations and to accept the raison d'etre of the separate Ukrainian state. As long as Ukrainians are perceived as "almost the same people," and any deviation from this formula is censured as a political affront and ideological sacrilege, all Russian policies vis-à-vis Ukraine will be determined and fueled by a deeply rooted cultural and political resentment.

The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war and the accompanying propagandistic madness is just an extreme expression of that resentment, a hysterical reaction on the part of the Russian political class, and Russian society at large, to Ukraine's manifest otherness that challenges and painfully undermines the Russian imperial identity. The serious discrepancy between the fictitious stereotype of Ukraine, created by Russian imagination, and the real Ukraine that evolved as a bold denial of the "almost the same people" stereotype, creates a cognitive dissonance in many Russians, not only among fascist hawks such as Aleksandr Dugin but also among certain moderates such as the prominent film director, Nikita Mikhalkov (2014a, b). Back in May, he recorded an emotional video-address to the Odessites who had bitterly disappointed him by not following in the footsteps of the people of Donbas in supporting the anti-government uprising — despite all Russia's efforts and investment. "Where and why should the Russian army come?" he asked rhetorically. "Whom to save and protect? A city where a million inhabitants live a normal life and only a host of activists fight? What should the Russian army do in a Banderite city where only a miserable minority fight the Banderites? Are you, Odessites, Russian? Prove it!" (Mikhalkov, 2014a, b).

The use of "Banderites" has been stretched far beyond its original reference to the militant followers of Stepan Bandera, to a degree where it loses any sense and logic. Now, it is not just a metonym for Ukrainian nationalists, or west Ukrainians, or Ukrainian speakers in general, but for all those inhabitants of Ukraine who do not wish to welcome the Russian army with tricolour flags and flowers. And since an absolute majority of Ukrainian citizens, according to various opinion polls and to the everyday behavior that can be observed, are not going to respond positively to Mikhalkov's (2014a, b) calls, all of them — of Ukrainian, Russian, Jewish, or any other origin — are downgraded to the level of "Banderites".

6. Farewell to the "wonderful Slavonic people"

The irrational attack on the so-called "Banderites" brought about, as a side effect, a dramatic reduction in and the virtual disappearance of the "wonderful Slavonic people," so vividly depicted by Nikolai Gogol in his Little Russian stories and so amusingly represented today in Russian (and Little Russian) popular culture. The Russo-Ukrainian war left no political space for the comfortably ambivalent "Little Russian" identity. The adverb "almost" in the traditional formula "almost the same people" dramatically disappeared under the militant pressure of "either/or." A minority of Ukrainian citizens, primarily in Donbas, rejected "almost" for the sake of "the same," whereas the majority — including most of Ukraine's ethnic Russians and Russophones — rejected "almost," together with the formula itself.

The war, as a Russophone scholar from the border city of Kharkiv aptly remarks,

> catalysed the creation of a political nation. Ukrainian identity, which for so long had been associated with ethnicity,
> language and historical memory, suddenly has become territorial and political and thus inclusive [...]. For the Russian-

speaking urban middle class, along with small and medium-sized business owners and the intellectual elites in the east, Russia's antidemocratic tendencies, its self-isolation and its growing hostility to the West make it easier to identify with a (potentially) European Ukraine (Zhurzhenko, 2014).

Through the overplaying of the "Banderite" stereotype, which thus slandered all patriotic Ukrainians, there was one more paradoxical effect. The term ceased to be derogatory in their eyes. They learned to view it ironically or even with a certain pride. Pomerantsev (2015), a son of Jewish emigrants from Soviet Ukraine, shrewdly remarks,

> the Maidan gave words new meanings. The term "Banderovets," associated previously with anti-Semitism, the slaughter of Poles, the Ukrainian far right and independence from Russia, was embraced by Russian-speaking Kiev Jews who see Poland as a political model and who took to calling themselves "Yid-Banderovtsi." 'Khokhol', the pejorative name for Ukrainians, was now used with pride. While the 2004 Orange Revolution had been inspired by a 19th-century, language-and-soil nationalism, this [Euromaidan] revolution seemed to open the way for a new Ukrainian.

Ilya Gerasimov, a renowned Russian historian and the editor of a reputable academic quarterly, "Ab imperio," notes that post-revolutionary Ukraine "largely ignores or creatively recodes the readily available historical precedents and symbols." In particular,

> the readily available political symbolism and historical mythology of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) and other forms of Ukrainian nationalist mobilization of the 1940s play a surprisingly marginal role in the country at war [...]. The free subjectivity of Euromaidan revealed itself in its arbitrary appropriation of the famous UPA greeting "Glory to Ukraine! — Glory to the heroes!" without feeling obliged to import the whole complex of twentieth-century identity-fixed nationalism associated with the UPA legacy… When Russian propaganda attempted to "troll" new Ukrainians as "Banderites" for repeating the old "fascist" slogan, they responded creatively, not reactively (by explaining, denying, apologizing, or any other form of enforced "troll-feeding"). Ukrainian Jews immediately produced the meme "Yid-Banderite" and actually developed it into a social identity that many proudly accepted. This is just one episode in a series of creative responses to Russian propaganda that demonstrate more than a good sense of humor: the identity-indifferent, value-oriented imagined community of new Ukraine is capable of accommodating any slur — on its own terms, leaving its adversaries in total confusion (Gerasimov, 2014, 29–30).

Gerasimov argues that this Ukrainian reaction to Russian attempts to seize the initiative through imposing its own absurd agenda — like discussing the story of the allegedly crucified boy or informing the viewers of Russian state TV that Ukrainian volunteers were promised a plot of land and two slaves for fighting in Donbas (Russian Channel 1, 2014) — may be spontaneous, but not unconscious. In particular, he illustrates this with President Poroshenko's appearance in a paramilitary uniform with the "Dill" insignia, interpreting this as a pastiche response to the public campaign in Russia that smears Ukrainians as "ukrops" (literally, "dills"). "Ukrop," Poroshenko said humorously, stands for "ukrainsky opir" ("Ukrainian resistance") (Poroshenko, 2014). One may also refer to the public appearance of Ihor Kolomoysky, a Ukrainian-Jewish oligarch, in a T-shirt with the slogan "Yid-Banderite" and the Ukrainian coat-of-arms (a trident) styled as a menorah (Kolomoysky, 2014).

> New Ukrainians can call themselves Yid-Banderites, Dills, or Khokhly, because they do not follow some preset fixed identities and national roles — instead, they negotiate new values and acceptable forms of social interaction. This is why they cannot be effectively "trolled" by identity-centered Russian propaganda, and this is what sets them apart not only from subalterns (people without articulated subjectivity) but also from most uncompromised anticolonial rebels. Ukrainians do not define themselves by negating everything "colonial" (thus effectively remaining within the hold of colonially imposed mental frames). They are creatively minding their business, inventing a new country for themselves, and when they have to respond to outside pressure, they frame the response in their own terms (Gerasimov, 2014, 31–32).

The remarkable development of an overarching, civic identity in Ukraine, based primarily on common values rather than ethnic or linguistic markers, poses a puzzle for Russian propagandists who still promote "Russkii mir" in terms of a common history and religion, language and culture, blood and soil, and still strive to "protect Russian-speaking compatriots" in Ukraine and elsewhere, completely ignoring the fact that Ukraine is as much home for its Russian-speakers as for its Ukrainian-speakers and that all of them consider each other to be "compatriots" rather than the citizens of the Russian Federation. The confusion forces Putin's ideologues to fluctuate somewhat chaotically between opposing and mutually incompatible statements — the Ukrainian government is anti-Semitic and the Ukraine is ruled by oligarchic Jews (Coynash, 2014; Zakharchenko, 2015); there is no Ukrainian nation and all Ukrainians are nationalists; the Ukrainian state is extremely repressive and there is no Ukrainian state, just total anarchy (Snyder, 2014a); the Ukrainian language does not exist and Russians in Ukraine are forcefully Ukrainized, to a degree that most fail to even recognise they have already undergone such Ukrainization and so vigorously deny that they have been forbidden to speak Russian (Prosvirnin, 2015).

Ukraine certainly is not yet as open or "postcolonial" as Ilya Gerasimov enthusiastically implies. Its reality is more complex, and some other features and tendencies such as neo-colonial or anti-colonial attitudes can still be discerned. Yet, as Igor Torbakov (2014, 202–203) perspicaciously notes

> The fundamental significance of the current political turmoil in Ukraine lies precisely in the attempt to go beyond divisions caused by regionalism and conflicting historical memories, create a new political mindset and build a new

Ukrainian identity on a qualitatively new foundation. What Euromaidan stands for is, first and foremost, a value-based vision of Ukraine as part of a wider Europe. It is adherence to a set of values born at the dawn of European modernity that could — and should — become a cornerstone of the overarching Ukrainian national identity. To be sure, what is truly important about these values — rule of law, division between public and private spheres, human rights, freedom — is not so much that they are European (although, historically, they are) as that they are universal […]. That's why the assertion of Ukraine's European value-based identity appears to be the most troublesome aspect of Ukrainian developments for the Kremlin leadership.

If the Ukrainians continue on this road of nation building, the notorious formula "almost the same people" will completely lose any sense, since it has always meant, in old-fashion terms, the proximity of soil and blood, language and culture, history and religion. The Ukrainians would like to be proximate to Europeans — Britons and Germans, Swedes and Danes, Poles and Czechs — in terms of values. The Russians too may join the family of "almost the same people" if they dare to reconsider, at some point, the notion of "sameness" in modern terms and to look for a new, more viable proximity to the Ukrainians within the realm of axiology, not ethnicity. Only then, would the ethnic stereotypes on both sides lose their harmful political connotations and become just a humorous element of our daily encounter with things unknown or things known too well.

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