

**WHOSE CRISIS?
RUSSIAN INTELLIGENTSIA
AND THE UKRAINIAN QUESTION –
COMING TO TERMS¹**

MYKOLA RIABCHUK²

(Instytut Badań Politycznych i Etnonarodowych Ukraińskiej Akademii Nauk)

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Abstract: Mykola Riabchuk, WHOSE CRISIS? RUSSIAN INTELLIGENTSIA AND THE UKRAINIAN QUESTION – COMING TO TERMS. „PORÓWNANIA” 15, 2014, Vol. 15, p. 199–208. ISSN 1733-165X. The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war euphemistically defined as the “Ukrainian crisis”, brought to the fore, once again, a striking inability of the Russian cultured and educated stratum to come to terms with Ukraine's cultural distinctness and political sovereignty, and to withstand soberly the unscrupulous propaganda of the Kremlin regime. The paper examines reaction of Russian intelligentsia to what they perceive as the “Ukrainian crisis” and searches for historical and cultural roots of what is in fact a profound crisis of Russian identity and nationhood.

Abstrakt: Mykoła Riabczuk, CZYJ KRYZYS? ROSYJSKA INTELIGENCJA I KWESTIA UKRAIŃSKA -TRUDNE ZBLIŻENIA. „PORÓWNANIA” 15, 2014, T. 15, s. 199-208. ISSN 1733-165X. Trwająca rosyjsko-ukraińska wojna, określana eufemistycznie jako „ukraiński kryzys”, uwyraźniła po raz kolejny fatalną niezdolność rosyjskiej warstwy ludzi wykształconych do pogodzenia

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² Correspondence Address: riabchuk@gmail.com

się z ukraińską odrębnością kulturalną i polityczną. Jak pokazuje przedstawiona tutaj analiza, zdecydowana większość wykształconych Rosjan bezwładnie ulega pozbawionej skrupułów propagandzie Kremla, wspierając entuzjastycznie jego agresywną politykę wobec sąsiadów. Esej wyjaśnia historyczne i kulturalne źródła tego zjawiska, sugerując, że tak zwany „ukraiński kryzys” jest w istocie przejawem i dramatycznym skutkiem coraz ostrzejszego kryzysu rosyjskiej tożsamości.

It might be an apocrypha but many Ukrainians like to quote the pun attributed to a leading Ukrainian writer Volodymyr Vynnychenko – that liberalism of all Russian liberals ends up at the Ukrainian border. Vynnychenko should have known what he said. As the prime minister of the short-lived Ukrainian National Republic (1918–1920) and a committed socialist he sincerely believed that the Russian Bolsheviks would never invade Ukraine insofar it is ruled by the leftist government that supports the proletarian cause. The Bolsheviks yet appeared much more concerned with the Ukrainian character of the government in Kyiv than with its proletarian pedigree.

In this, they did not differ at all from their deadly rivals – the White Guard monarchists. And, remarkably, the incumbent Russian president 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”³.

CHILDREN OF THE ‘COLLECTIVE PUTIN’

The Red-White unanimity in regard of Ukraine is a recurrent and well-researched story exemplified every day by new and new voices from various, sometimes the most unexpected corners, including the ardent critics of Putin’s regime like Aleksey Navalny, or Mikhail Khodorkovsky, or Andrey Bitov⁴. In mid-March 2014, shortly after the Russian invasion in the Crimea, a collective letter in support of the action was placed in the official web-site 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

³ V. Putin, *Interviu Pieroomu Kanalu i agenststou Assoshueited Press. “Kremlin.ru”*, 4.09.2013, <http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/19143>

⁴ See, e.g., M. Nazarenko, *Vtecha z utopii. „Krytyka”* 2014, nr 3–4, p. 26–27.

petition prepared reportedly by the deputy minister of culture in the best traditions of the Soviet “unanimous approval”⁵.

Some signatories felt perhaps uncomfortable with the text and tried to explain their move, rather awkwardly, in additional statements. “I have signed it”, Oleg Tabakov, a popular actor said, “because four different bloods run in my veins – Russian, Ukrainian, Mordovian, and Polish. There is no need to explain whatsoever else”⁶. His colleague, a popular actress Valentina Talyzina, followed the case: “It’s very sad that the new authorities in Kyiv thrust their way by bayonets, with the help of the fascists. It’s terrible. They went beyond any limits. I remember the WWII – it was awful. So I had never had any doubts that I should sign”⁷. “My father”, Karen Shakhnazarov, a film director explained, “fought the Nazis. So I obliged to do the same”.

All other explanations are equally odd and thoughtless – sheer copycats of old Soviet clichés and new Putinist propaganda: “I don’t want to see the NATO rock-ets near Voronezh... I believe in the Slavonic brotherhood and hope the reason would win”⁸. “We just cannot be indifferent... We should do everything possible to protect our compatriots and representatives of the Russian World”⁹. “The main message of the letter is that we would not allow anybody to divide us”¹⁰.

One may presume that Russian artists who signed the letter in Putin’s support did it partly out of conformism, partly calculation (many of them head cultural institutions fully dependent on state subsidies), but partly also out of a sincere belief in the right cause. Lev Gudkov aptly points out the vestiges of the imperial consciousness as well as a spontaneous emotional reaction (“ours are beaten!”) to the peculiar information cynically manipulated by the Kremlin spin-doctors. Power of propaganda stems not from rational arguments but from its sheer intensity, from a non-stop repetition and multiplying of the most incredible nonsenses with the main goal to put the opponent into position of a defendant and, at the same time, to disable any defence by simply ignoring any counterarguments and blocking the alternative sources of information.

But still, as Elena Faynalova of the *Radio Liberty* put it in her interview with professor Gudkov, “how did the ‘collective Putin’ manage to inculcate a fascist consciousness in so many people?”

Lev Gudkov argues that that type of consciousness had never faded away. “For 10–15 years, the authorities have been persuading the people that there was nothing terribly wrong in their history, all the nations have their skeletons in the

⁵ <http://mkrf.ru/press-tsentr/novosti/ministerstvo/deyateli-kultury-rossii-v-podderzhku-pozitsii-prezidenta-po-ukraine-i-krymu> (data dostępu: 11–13.12.2014, dalej tak samo).

⁶ www.snob.ru/selected/entry/73439

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ www.snob.ru/profile/5479/blog/73551

⁹ www.snob.ru/selected/entry/73439

¹⁰ www.classica.fm/2014/03/12/denis-macuev-vyskazal-poziciyu-po-ukrainskomu-krizisu

closets. The most important thing is, arguably, to be proud of your country. And of the authorities who support and recreate that pride. This blend of collective values, collective consciousness and ideas of violence penetrates people's mind and pushes away all other views, explanations and interpretations... The incumbent regime draws its technology of domination partly on this – on atomization of people, fragmentation of the information field. There is no general picture, no general logic of what is happening. And the second aspect is a great moral corruption of the people. Even if they understand that the authorities commit a crime, they do not care because it is not 'we' but authorities who do it, 85% believe this. Such a way of survival, of adaptation to the state comes from the Soviet times"¹¹.

Sociological surveys indicate that almost 60 per cent of the citizens of the Russian Federation use Internet on a daily basis¹². None the less, only a quarter of the respondents disapprove Russian military invasion in Ukraine. The solid plurality (43 per cent) justify intervention because, allegedly, "Russians in Ukraine are really threatened by bandits and nationalists, and only the Russian army can protect them from the threat of violence". And 28 per cent share the view but suggest a political solution by means of negotiations. Only 14 per cent recognize that there is no "threat" but just the Kremlin's intention to create as much troubles as possible for the new Kyiv government in order to prevent Ukraine's European integration (8%) and to detract the attention of their own people from numerous domestic problems by means of a "little victorious war" (6%)¹³.

And the most striking thing comes from the fact that as many as 68 per cent of respondents recognize that they understand nothing (or almost nothing) in Ukrainian events. None the less, 63 percent contend that Russian mass media, in their view, cover those events absolutely or mostly objectively. Self-confessed lack of understanding does not preclude them from sharing the official view that the "radical nationalists took power in Ukraine" (37%) or "there are no legitimate authorities in Ukraine" (62%)¹⁴. Remarkably, in Ukraine, only 4% of respondents consider their new authorities illegitimate, and even in the allegedly "secessionist" Donbas (in its non-occupied part) the figure does not exceed 10%¹⁵.

WRONG TYPE OF UKRAINIANS

14 per cent of Russians who do not succumb to Kremlin's propagandistic machine is desperately few. It is far less not only than the number of the Internet

¹¹ <http://www.svoboda.org/content/transcript/25282557.html>

¹² <http://www.svoboda.org/content/transcript/25282557.html>

¹³ <http://www.levada.ru/13-03-2014/situatsiya-v-ukraine-i-v-krymu>

¹⁴ <http://www.levada.ru/13-03-2014/situatsiya-v-ukraine-i-v-krymu>

¹⁵ <http://opros2014.zn.ua/main>

users in Russia but also the number of people with a university education. How, indeed, so many educated people, with professional stance and free access to the web, could buy at face value the most stupid, ungrounded, unsubstantiated things disseminated by the pro-Kremlin mass media? Propaganda succeeds only where it is in demand, where it meets some mass expectations and draws upon the already existing assumptions and stereotypes¹⁶. Anders Aslund, a Swedish economist who, since the late 1980s, spent much time in both Russia and Ukraine, says he found Russians' attitude toward Ukrainians very strange: "Russians will tell you that Ukrainians are their brother nation, but at the same time they claim that Ukraine is not a real nation, Ukrainian not an actual language, and Ukrainians are intellectually backward. Russians can barely hide their superiority complex toward Ukraine"¹⁷.

The quintessence of this attitude can be discerned probably in a recent Aleksandr Dugin's entry in his facebook: "We should clean up Ukraine from the idiots. The genocide of the 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 sewage manholes"¹⁸.

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 from the humble Igor Dzhadan's proposal to make a nuclear strike at a Ukrainian atomic station¹⁹ to a more universal call by a leading SF writer Sergey Lukyanenko "to crush the vermin"²⁰. Aleksandr Dugin had been for years a professor at the respectable Moscow State University and, reportedly, one of the major Putin's ideologists. His statement is interesting primarily as a paradigmatic illustration of the inability of Russian thought to accept the 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-à-vis cultured, urbanized relatives. Students of (post)colonialism may compare this to the relations be-

¹⁶ M. Dubynians'kyi, *Anatomia vorozhnechi*. "Ukraiins'ka Pravda", 14.11.2014, <http://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2014/11/14/7044268/>

¹⁷ <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/what-kievs-democratic-turn-means-for-moscow/495143.html>

¹⁸ <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/Bv0ImZyIAAASEX6.png>

¹⁹ <http://www.russ.ru/pole/Operaciya-Mehanicheskij-apel-sin>

²⁰ <http://glavnoe.ua/news/n180943>

tween 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 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 sewage manhole"²¹.

EAST SLAVONIC "UMMAH"

Russian imagination created Ukrainians as "Little Russians" a few centuries ago – alongside with appropriation of the Ukrainian territory and history, and transformation, under Peter the Great, of medieval Muscovy into the Russian Empire. Ukrainian intellectuals who grew up in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and had got some sort of the 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' thought²². They referred occasionally to dynastic, ecclesiastic and patrimonial ties but ethnization of Slavia Orthodoxa was quite a modern idea developed by Ukrainian clerics alongside the concept of "Little Russia" and "Greater Russia", derived from the European humanism. Within this framework, "Little Russia" referred to the core lands of historical Rus while "Greater Russia" (like ancient "Greater Greece") referred to the land of eventual colonization²³.

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 but of a higher quality" – *so znakom kachestva*.)

²¹ For more detail, see my article *Dyskurs dominacji: z problematyki "asymetrycznych" stosunków ukraińsko-rosyjskich*. „Porównania” 2008, nr 5, p. 167–181.

²² E. Keenan, *On Certain Mythical Beliefs and Russian Behaviors*. In: S. Frederick Starr (ed.), *The Legacy of History in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*. Armonk NY 1994, p. 19–40.

²³ S. Plokhy, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations: Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus*. Cambridge 2006.

The Greek-style model, however, was soon reversed, and *Realpolitik* took predictably upper hand over historical symbolism. Great Rus became naturally 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 for Ukrainians and Belarusians whose existence as separate nationalities it simply denied (and who, to various degrees, internalized Russian view on 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 the 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 Church Metropolitan Kirill avers that “there are values no less important than human rights. These are faith, ethics, sacraments, Fatherland”²⁴.

UNEASY EMANCIPATION

The “Kievan Russia” myth as a sort of “invented tradition” hinders dramatically modern development of all three nations – Ukrainians, Russians, and Belarus-

²⁴ As quoted by R. Coalson, *Russian Conservatives Challenge Notion of ‘Universal’ Values*, “RFERL Newswire”, 10.12.2008.

ians, who internalized it to a different 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, seem 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 prone to the authoritarian “Eurasian” model predominant in Russia and Belarus.

The regional/ideological polarization makes many observers to 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. First, there is a huge region of Central Ukraine in between that mitigates the extremes and blurs differences. Second, both the West and the East consist themselves of too different regions that make the country even more heterogeneous. And third, most importantly, Ukraine’s divides are primarily value-based and identity-driven; they are partly determined by regions, languages and ethnicities, but this is only 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 Ukraines 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.

FORGING A CIVIC NATION

Ukraine is a bi-lingual 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 the south-eastern Ukraine was ready, like the Crimea, for grab – 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 Moscow to send not only mercenaries but also regular troops to Donbas – just because too few locals are willing to fight. And the Putin’s associates 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 Russia’s efforts and investments. “Where and why the Russian army should come?” he asked rhetorically. “Whom to save and protect? The city where a million of inhabitants live a 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!”²⁵

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, regretfully, many foreigners. Ukraine, since its very inception, has been built as a civic, inclusive nation, – despite notorious dysfunctionality of state institutions, predatory elites, and untiring Russia’s efforts to undermine or even destroy Ukraine’s sovereignty. It seems, ironically, the results are the opposite. The “wrong” type of Ukrainian identity based primarily on a 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 civic liberties, rather than of language or ethnicity.

Pavel Kazarin, a columnist of the reputable Moscow-based *Novaya gazeta*, argues that Kremlin deliberately ignores a civic character of the Ukrainian nation

²⁵ www.youtube.com/watch?v=STB-zVg4Al8

and imposes an outdated ethno-linguistic matrix upon both Russia and Ukraine. "Because, to describe Ukraine in political categories would mean to recognize the specific values upon which the nation is built. And this may lead to a highly unpleasant comparison of the values in both countries"²⁶.

Igor Torbakov, in his perceptive study of Russian-Ukrainian relations, develops the similar argument in a more academic way. He contends that the notion of identity cannot and should not be reduced to "ethnicity and/or language or to the ways the past is remembered and represented" because it also includes "axiological dimension – that is the value system that social groups or a society at large uphold". So, he argues that, ultimately, "it is precisely in the realm of axiology, not ethnicity, that the identity conflict between Ukraine and Russia is currently taking place"²⁷.

The war, despite all its ugly or even deadly aspects, creates paradoxically a window of opportunity for the Ukrainian government to thrust ahead all the much needed and badly delayed reforms. It provides also an answer to the underlying question that all the previous Ukrainian leaders have tried opportunistically to avoid: who we are, what kind of a nation we want to build, and in which civilisation we would like to belong? The Russian aggression, as a Russophone scholar from the borderland 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 anti-democratic tendencies, its self-isolation and its growing hostility to the West make it easier to identify with a (potentially) European Ukraine"²⁸.

In the meantime, the Kremlin is likely to continue all sorts of pressure and provocations, keeping Ukraine in the purgatory of neither peace nor war, with an apparent goal to prevent any serious international investments in the country and prove it is a failed state. This is a powerful challenge for both Ukraine's elite and its population at large. It is also a great stimulus and perhaps the last opportunity to finally come to terms with civic maturity, national consolidation and much-needed institutional reforms. It might be also a chance for Russians to come to terms with Ukraine's cultural distinctness and political sovereignty, and to move forward from the 19th-century imperial geopolitics to the 21st-century civic identities and modern values.

²⁶ P. Kazarin, *Utro ukrainskogo mira*. "Novaia Gazeta", 1.12.2014; <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/comments/66324.html>

²⁷ I. Torbakov, *This Is a Strife of Slavs among Themselves': Understanding Russian-Ukrainian Relations as the Conflict of Contested Identities*. In: K. Bachmann and I. Lyubashenko (eds.) *The Maidan Uprising, Separatism and Foreign Intervention: Ukraine's Complex Transition*. Frankfurt am Main 2014, p. 185.

²⁸ T. Zhurzhenko, *From borderlands to bloodlands*, "Eurozine", 19.09.2014, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2014-09-19-zhurzhenko-en.html>