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Ukraine

# From borderlands to bloodlands

- Debate - 2022 - Ukraine -

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**With Russia's annexation of Crimea and the military conflict in eastern Ukraine, the era of post-Soviet tolerance of blurred identities and multiple loyalties has ended. Borderlands have once again turned into bloodlands.**

Since the armed conflict in Donbas between the Kyiv government and pro-Russian separatists, the common discourse about "two Ukraines" separated by history and values looks like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Scepticism about the viability of Ukraine as a nation-state, shared by so many observers inside and outside the country, now appears well-founded. Yet the concentration of the conflict in Donbas and the decline of pro-Russian separatism in other regions in eastern and southern Ukraine also raises the question: what has happened to the East-West divide, and is Donbas all that is left of the "East" today?

In 2002 Transit published Mykola Riabchuk's article "Ukraine: One state, two countries" which was followed by a comment addressing the discourse of two Ukraines in a critical way. [\[1\]](#) I argued that a schematic juxtaposition of a pro-European, Ukrainian speaking West and a still-Soviet, Russified East is highly ideological, that some elements of the Soviet legacy still hold Ukraine together rather than separate it, and that the Russian language and culture can be a legitimate part of Ukrainian national identity.

I also argued that the "other Ukraine", i.e. the East, had no distinctive voice and that it lacked the symbolic resources necessary to construct its own version of a modern national identity. In subsequent years I returned repeatedly to these arguments in connection with my research on transformations, discourses and identities in the Ukrainian-Russian borderlands. Today, like many Ukrainian intellectuals, I ask how the country could have ended up in such a disastrous situation. What did we overlook? Why didn't we notice the obvious vulnerability of Ukraine's integrity? More worryingly still: did we ourselves contribute to the conflict with ideas and interpretations whose destructive potential has only now been revealed?

The Ukrainian historian and public intellectual Andriy Portnov recently criticized the popular discourse of "othering", in which Donbas is "orientalized" and turned into a negative archetype offering easy answers to questions of responsibility and guilt. [\[2\]](#) Certainly, one danger of the current war is that it has encouraged the creation of "enemies" and "collaborators". Yet it has also cleared the intellectual atmosphere and put the debate on Ukrainian identity back to zero. Journalists, academics and writers from eastern Ukraine, many of them Russian speaking but Ukrainian patriots, have had a refreshing effect on the public discourse. Recent events have proved that there is no such entity as "the East" or "the South-East". In facing the separatist threat and Russian aggression, Dnipropetrovsk, Odessa, Kharkiv and other big and small cities have rediscovered their "Ukrainianness" and are manifesting it in various ways. We don't know if Donetsk and Luhansk will remain part of Ukraine. Whether they do or not, the future of Ukraine as a nation is today being decided in the East.

In this article I shall reconsider some of my arguments from 2002 in light of the dramatic events that have meanwhile taken place in the Ukrainian-Russian borderlands. My questions are: why did the East of the country remain largely indifferent to the Euromaidan in Kyiv? What role did the legacy of Soviet modernization play in eastern Ukraine? How did the political and military crisis affect the traditional ambiguity of borderland identities? Why has the idea of Russkiy mir (Russian world), which was marginal in the 1990s, become so appealing in eastern Ukraine in 2014? Lastly, could Donbas be reintegrated into Ukraine if the pro-Russian separatists were defeated?

# 1. Ukraine's eastern borderlands: The end of

# ambiguity

Contemporary cultural studies likes the concept of "borderlands" because it seems to fit our complex, interrelated and dynamic world and provides an alternative to the homogenizing logic of nationalism and the related ideal of mono-ethnicity. In recent decades, borderlands have been re-construed as contact zones, as systems of communication and as social networks. As geopolitically amorphous zones "in between", they generate hybrid identities and create political, economic and cultural practices that combine different, often mutually exclusive values. Moreover, borderlands are associated with multiculturalism, cultural authenticity and cosmopolitanism. Yet from the nation-building perspective, their ambiguity is nothing to be celebrated. Mixed and overlapping identities and multiple loyalties pose a challenge to the nationalizing agenda and potentially threaten the integrity of a nation-state.

These two approaches clashed over eastern Ukraine, a former Soviet heartland and since 1991 a new borderland. From the perspective of some Kyiv and Lviv intellectuals the Russian speaking population of eastern Ukraine – which voted for the Communists and for oligarchic parties and was indifferent and even hostile to the national idea – were post-Soviet "creoles" lacking Ukrainian identity. They appeared the main cause of Ukraine's troubled transition from communism, as they still mentally lived in the Soviet empire. "Soviet", industrialized Donbas was often viewed as the antipode of an "authentic", European Ukraine; Kharkiv's cultural ambiguity in particular was perceived as dangerous openness to Russia. From this perspective, Ukraine's eastern borderlands represented the weakness of national identity and a threat to the project of a truly independent Ukraine.

At the same time, the local political and intellectual elites of eastern Ukraine, above all in Kharkiv, Donetsk and Luhansk, reinvented their regions as borderlands, first of all in order to justify the close cultural ties and economic cross-border cooperation with Russia. Stressing cultural diversity, bilingualism and the de-politicization of ethnicity, the concept of borderlands also helped legitimize the lack of a strong national identity. The Kharkiv region, historically "Sloboda Ukraine" (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), was re-narrated as a zone of joint Ukrainian and Russian colonization, characterized by an absence of ethnic conflict and peaceful co-existence between the two languages and cultures. Similarly, references to Soviet internationalism and the preference of class over ethnic identity served to construe Donbas as a "special case" that escaped the logic of the nationalizing state. The rejection of ethnic categorization and the emphasis on local identity was a typical reaction to what was perceived as the "nationalism" of Kyiv and western Ukraine. This defensive borderlands discourse was linked to the trauma of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. It evoked an undifferentiated, common cultural space with a local population that valued blurred or hybrid Ukrainian-Russian, eastern-Slavic, Orthodox or residual Soviet identities.

One can still debate whether it was the weakness of national identity in the East that paved the way to pro-Russian separatism and armed conflict, or whether the cause lies in the Ukrainian national idea was not sufficiently inclusive and failed to accommodate the eastern borderlands. The fact is that, with the annexation of Crimea and the military conflict in the East, the era of post-Soviet ambiguity and tolerance of blurred identities and multiple loyalties has ended. Borderlands have again turned into "bloodlands" (Timothy Snyder) and one can only guess what new constellations will emerge from this crisis.

Twelve years ago I wrote:

The Russian speaking Ukrainians and the Russians in eastern Ukraine are politically loyal to the Ukrainian state, but many of them do neither want to accept the imposition of a Ukrainian cultural identity based on ethnic/linguistic criteria combined with anti-Russian resentments, nor the opposition of a 'European Ukraine' to an 'Asiatic Russia'. [\[3\]](#)

In light of current events, every part of this sentence must be reconsidered. In fact, the loyalty of the Russian-speaking population to the Ukrainian state had never been tried. With the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the "Russian spring" inspired by Moscow, this brutal test has now come – not only for conscripts to the Ukrainian army, volunteers to the National Guard and those who care for wounded soldiers and refugees, but also for

those who voted for the Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics" and who raised arms against the Kyiv government. The majority opted for the Ukrainian state – some driven by considerations of safety and fear of violence, others inspired by a new sense of patriotism, by the pain of national humiliation and by solidarity with those fighting for the nation's territorial integrity. However, there were also those who did – and still do – sympathize with the separatists and with Russia. Some were seduced by promises of higher salaries and pensions, others rediscovered their Russian identity and had never felt at home in the Ukrainian state anyway. One of the difficult questions we will be confronted with after the war is how to live together again in one state.

At the same time, the Russian aggression has done what previous Ukrainian presidents from Kravchuk to Yanukovich had failed to achieve – catalyse 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 Russian speakers and Russians, as well as for Ukrainian citizens with other ethnic origins. A good example are the Crimean Tatars, who remained largely loyal to Kyiv after the Russian occupation of Crimea and are now perceived and celebrated as "true" Ukrainians. Moreover, cultural affiliation to the eastern neighbour felt by many Russian-speaking Ukrainians does not rule out anti-Russian sentiments. 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. However, there are still many for whom Russia is attractive: those who share anti-western attitudes, appreciate Putin's "strong hand" and are nostalgic for Russia's military glory. These people mainly belong to older generations and typically have lower levels of education. Yet the ugly face of pro-Russian separatism, the everyday terror and the anomy it has brought to Donbas, have had a sobering effect on many potential Russophiles. The Russian aggression, associated with the collective humiliation of the territorial loss of Crimea, has become a factor of national consolidation. According to several opinion polls conducted in March 2014, the overwhelming majority of Ukrainian citizens (85 per cent) rejected the annexation of Crimea; even in the East, only 24 per cent approved of Russia's actions on the peninsula. [4]

Perhaps even more important than the shift in the public mood is the emergence of an active pro-Ukrainian minority in big Russian-speaking cities such as Odessa, Dnipropetrovsk and Kharkiv. Former Euromaidan activists remain the motor of democratic change. Some have entered local government, others have created strong networks and grassroots groups that support the Ukrainian army, nurse the wounded and help refugees. Rather than focusing obsessively on language and historical memory, as was the case after the Orange Revolution, these groups are concentrating on the very practical issues of public safety, control of local authorities and humanitarian work. The Ukrainian identity they are performing is political and civic rather than ethnic and cultural. One indicator of this shift is that Ukrainian cultural symbols such as the vyshyvanka – the traditional embroidered shirt – have lost their ethnic particularity and become political symbols of resistance and national pride.

## 2. Upon the ruins of Soviet modernity

The Maidan 2013/14 has been widely interpreted as a delayed attempt to complete the de-Sovietization of Ukraine and to catch up with the 1989 revolutions in eastern and central Europe. Demands for the lustration of the ruling elite and the banning of the Communist Party reflect the popular view that almost all the problems facing Ukraine are connected to the Soviet legacy. Although most of the remaining Lenin monuments were destroyed as the Euromaidan rolled over the country, in the East – notably in Kharkiv, Luhansk, Donetsk as well as dozens of small towns in Donbas – they were not only left standing but received a new lease of life as sites of pro-Russian mobilization and symbols of discontent with the Kyiv government. However, is the clash of values and ideologies in Ukraine really about a final farewell to the remnants of the Soviet system?

Twelve years ago, opposing the thesis of the backwardness and inferiority of the eastern part of the "two Ukraines", I

argued that Ukraine had inherited both the industrial, communicational and cultural infrastructure of a modern nation as well as a framework of collective identity from the Soviet era and that this heritage is not necessarily something negative. At that time, I also believed that eastern Ukraine, with its industrial and academic potential, human resources and modern urban culture, was a vital part of Ukraine's European project. Eastern Ukrainian cities referred proudly to the legacy of Soviet urbanization and the Ukrainian modernism of the 1920s and early-1930s. Built in 1928, Kharkiv's Derzhprom (in Russian Gosprom) – the former House of State Industry – was one of the first skyscrapers in the early Soviet Union and is still a landmark and a symbol of the city, which likes to present itself as the "first capital of Ukraine" (1919-1934). In Donbas, industrial culture and the working-class ethos formed in the Soviet era was a source of collective pride and a cornerstone of local identity.

Today, more than two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, I am no longer so optimistic. Modernizing Soviet modernity is an almost impossible task, as the epic failure of Dmitri Medvedev's programme for Russian modernization demonstrates.

Of course, de-industrialization is a global trend and not something peculiar to the post-Soviet space. In developed countries, old industrial regions also suffer from structural problems – think of Detroit or the Ruhr valley in Germany. Reviving these regions requires investment, creativity and political will. However, in the case of eastern Ukraine, post-Soviet privatization and the local version of neo-liberal economics that went with it generally failed to bring a solution: on the contrary, the complex problems facing these regions were exacerbated. Rather than being modernized, the industrial assets and facilities inherited from the Soviet era were exploited to their limit. Post-Soviet capitalism in eastern Ukraine was a symbiosis of "red directors" and criminal clans; trade unions and institutionalized workers' movements were largely absent. [5] Today, those lucky enough to have a job work on temporary contracts and are entirely at the mercy of the management. Many small, mono-industrial towns – especially in Donbas – have become depopulated; people have either left to work in Russia, joined smuggler gangs or turned to small-scale subsistence agriculture. The urban infrastructure is obsolete and local mayors are considered successful when they provide some cosmetic improvements to city centres. The European football championship of 2012 left behind a few stadiums and hotels in Donetsk, Kharkiv, Kyiv and Lviv, but had nothing like the impact on the economy promised by the Yanukovych government.

The Ukrainian variant of post-Soviet capitalism corresponds to a specific type of political system rooted in eastern Ukraine. Donbas in particular lacked political diversity and competition, and it provided the model that the regional elites tried to impose on the entire country. The political monopoly of the Party of Regions, which represented the interests of a single oligarchic clan, prevented the emergence of political alternatives. As the strongest political holding company in the country, the Party of Regions could afford to ignore the electorate and to disregard ideology. As the Ukrainian political scientists Oleksandr Fisun and Oleksiy Krysenko have argued, this model laid a time bomb under the Ukrainian state, as elections turned into formal procedures for legitimizing an unfair and opaque system of power. [6] Social mobility was blocked and the population was employed at outdated, Soviet-era enterprises heavily subsidized out of the state budget. Unlike in other regions, there were almost no alternative elites in Donbas, which explains why local Euromaidans were marginal and why the anti-Kyiv protests that started in spring 2014 mainly attracted the losers of the post-Soviet transition. Similar tendencies could be observed elsewhere in the East of the country, for example in Kharkiv, where the governor Mykhailo Dobkin and mayor Hennadiy Kernes monopolized the political resources and took control of all financial flows, both public and private.

The Party of Regions, which claimed to represent Russian speaking eastern Ukraine, reflected the anti-democratic, anti-liberal political culture of their electorate which was interested less in representation than in protection. Paternalism – from food packages handed out to pensioners before elections to promises of protection from the "fascist threat" coming from western Ukraine – was the cornerstone of the Party of Regions' apolitical politics. Its bosses tried to ignore the Euromaidan protests and hired people – usually public service employees – to demonstrate in support of the Yanukovych government. Criminal bully-boys were used to harass Euromaidan activists and beat up protesters on the streets. Known as titushki, these former sportsmen were often informally

affiliated to the police and used as body guards and thug squads in local business wars, once again revealing the mafia background of parts of the local political elite.

Donbas turned out to be an extreme case. Yet many other eastern and southern Ukrainian cities – their frustrated populations still suffering from the economic consequences of the Soviet collapse, their business and political milieus controlled by Donetsk "overseers" planted in the local police and security services – provided the social and political basis for a Ukrainian Vendée. Hence, it is not the remnants of Soviet modernity that prevents the Europeanization of Ukraine but a monstrous neoplasm that has grown upon its ruins. That is why the aggressive anti-Soviet rhetoric of many Euromaidan activists misses the target. For them, the Lenin monuments are markers of a Soviet identity that has survived in the economically depressed industrial enclaves of the Ukrainian East. But what is currently confronting the Kyiv government has little to do with Soviet ideology and values; instead, it represents a phenomenon referred to by the Russian sociologist Lev Gudkov ten years ago as "negative identity" [7] which operates primarily with the category of the "enemy". From the perspective of pro-Russian protesters, this is the "Banderists" and "nationalists" from Kyiv and western Ukraine, who want to destroy "our monuments" and steal "our past". The Lenin monuments thus have become a site and symbol of pro-Russian mobilization – "empty signifiers" that carry no ideological value but mark local identity as being "anti-Kyiv".

### 3. Collective memory and political culture

The popular discourse of "two Ukraines" assumes that the East and the West have different cultural identities based on distinctive historical memories and different, often mutually exclusive values. The East, so it goes, has no tradition of a Ukrainian nationalist movement, its population, unlike that of the West, has internalized Soviet identity and suppressed the collective trauma of the Holodomor. What especially divides the East and West, according to this discourse, is the respective collective memories of World War II and the irreconcilable narratives of heroism and suffering. Indeed, while western Ukraine honours the heroes of the UPA, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, which fought for an independent Ukraine against both Hitler and Stalin, eastern Ukraine shares with the Russia the heroic narrative of the Great Patriotic war.

Twelve years ago, to me and many others this discourse seemed potentially dangerous and threatening to Ukrainian integrity. However nobody had a premonition of how its results would finally materialize. History was exploited politically, particularly during the presidential campaign of 2004 and the Orange revolution. Both camps operated a detrimental identity politics that essentialized the East-West division of the country and turned it into a political weapon. Old clichés about "nationalist" Galicia and the "fascist threat" were re-heated and pitted against the stereotypes propagated by the other side about "rootless", "criminal" Donbas. This memory war poisoned the public discourse for years.

The Party of Regions, which had strengthened its position in the East and the South in the local elections of 2006, continued to label its opponents as "fascist" and to present itself as an "anti-fascist" force. The local identity politics pursued by the Party of Regions in their electoral fortresses of Donetsk and Luhansk drew on a mixed repertoire of neo-Soviet symbols and narratives (such as the Great Patriotic War) and conservative Russian Orthodox values. It evoked the ethos of a hardworking people who "feed the rest of Ukraine" and a legacy of Russian language and culture that allegedly needing "protection from the Ukrainian nationalists".

The election of Viktor Yanukovich as president in 2010 barely altered the situation. Because he had little to offer western and central Ukraine and had no coherent identity politics at the national level, he continued to concentrate on his clientele in eastern Ukraine. Hence, the identity of Donbas continued to be defined against the "alien" cultural and political values of western Ukraine.

The war of identities that for years had been smouldering beneath the surface finally erupted in the winter of 2013/14, when the Euromaidan provided a new source for eastern phobias about radical Ukrainian nationalism. Yet beyond this highly ideological East-West dichotomy, which draws on World War II and the Soviet Union's battle against Nazi Germany, there are other memories that actually matter more and explain better mass attitudes to the Euromaidan in the East. Both individual and collective, these are memories of perestroika and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The latter is remembered in the East not as a new beginning (the birth of an independent Ukraine) but as a rupture of the existing order, as an economic collapse and painful split with Russia. In eastern Ukrainian cities, where the Russian market matters a great deal for many big companies and small enterprises, fears of economic collapse resonated with the memories of the recession of the 1990s. As the violent confrontation in Kyiv escalated, parallels were evoked with Russia's constitutional crisis of 1993, when the political stand-off between president Yeltsyn and the parliament ended with street-fighting and the parliament building being stormed by the army. Despite national independence, many people in eastern and southern Ukraine experienced these events as part of their own history. Other, more recent memories of the Orange Revolution and Yushchenko's presidency also played a role in how the Euromaidan protests were perceived. Many eastern Ukrainians associate this period with the failure of local "Orange" politicians to fight corruption and carry out reforms, seeing it as a time of shrill and fruitless political conflict and endless intrigue. The relative stability that accompanied the consolidation of the Party of Regions was in fact welcomed by a "silent majority" in the East. Yet, while hundreds of pages have been written on the dividing memories of World War II in Ukraine, no research has so far been done on the collective memory of the recent past and its impact on local political culture and cultural identity.

Part of the political culture in eastern Ukraine is the conspiratorial mind-set that is also typical of post-Soviet Russia. Conspiracy theories attribute the collapse of the Soviet system to the secret operations of the CIA, western governments and the world Jewry. Similarly, the Orange Revolution was widely perceived as a western plot aimed against Russia and its geopolitical interests. Nine years on, the Euromaidan protests fell neatly into the same interpretative scheme. Widely disseminated by the Russian media in Ukraine, it affected the attitude of eastern Ukrainians to the events in Kyiv. Even those who refused to believe that the Euromaidan was the product of a US conspiracy found it difficult to accept that the protests came from below, rather than being orchestrated by powerful and clandestine actors. Behind this attitude was not just mistrust in public politics, but a firm conviction that action, whether individual or collective, cannot change anything. As the example of Kharkiv demonstrates this mixture of resignation and cynicism was cultivated by local political elites.

The last mass protests in Kharkiv were in the Summer of 2010, when citizens took to the streets against the privatization of the Gorky Park. It was the last sign of resistance to the hegemony of the Party of Regions, which was subsequently consolidated by the election of Hennadiy Kernes as mayor. During the time that opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko was imprisoned in a local hospital, the inhabitants of Kharkiv learned to perceive politics as a never ending show. Every day, a group of ardent Tymoshenko supporters, accompanied by teams of bored journalists, gathered outside the court and the hospital in which their heroine was detained, in order to stage the latest episode of the soap opera named Julia. When the governor and the mayor of Kharkiv flew to Moscow at the end of February 2014, a call went out to hurry to the city zoo with food, since the animals were supposedly starving to death on account of the empty city coffers. It seems that sympathy for animals compensated for lack of confidence in politicians and solidarity between citizens.

## 4. Exporting the "Russkiy mir"

The discourse of "two Ukraines" always found an echo on the pro-Russian side of the political spectrum and was shared and amplified by numerous politicians and journalists in Russia itself. In my commentary of 2002, I cited a Ukrainian politician who had argued that Ukraine essentially belongs to the "Slavic-Orthodox civilization" and therefore has a natural commitment to Russian cultural values, while Ukrainian nationalism, especially in its most radical and traditionally anti-Russian, Galician form, serves as a tool of the West to destroy this civilization. At the

time, this view seemed politically marginal and not really dangerous; apart for the Ukrainian Communist Party, which remained openly nostalgic for the Soviet Union, no serious political force in Ukraine supported re-unification with Russia. The state of the Russian economy was no less dire than the Ukrainian one, while the war in Chechnya and the series of terrorist attacks in Russian cities made Ukrainians appreciate the peace and relative stability at home. In the 1990s, Russia's ruling elites had other worries than Ukrainian independence. Humiliated by defeat in the Cold War, proponents of Russian messianism remained marginal, while Russian nationalists, despite some of them having fought in Abkhazia, Transdnistria and Yugoslavia, had little influence on mainstream politics in Russia.

The Orange Revolution and Moscow's failure to ensure the victory of the pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovich radically changed Moscow's perspective on Ukraine. The revolution was seen as a western coup aimed at undermining Russia's influence in its legitimate sphere of geopolitical interest. The pro-western Ukrainian elites were perceived as "traitors" of Slavic-Orthodox civilization, and associations were evoked with the Ukrainian national heroes Ivan Mazepa and Stepan Bandera, both of whom had turned against the Russian / Soviet state. Russian media presented the Orange government in Kyiv as a direct heir to the "Banderists", the Ukrainian nationalists who had "shot Soviet soldiers in the back". Moscow thus drew on old patterns of Soviet propaganda about Ukrainian nationalism and the black and white narrative of the "Great Patriotic War". The aim was to discredit pro-western Ukrainian elites as archaic nationalists and to present even moderate and democratic Ukrainian nationalism as "fascism" threatening Russians and Russian speakers living in Ukraine. As one can see, the rhetoric of the Kremlin was more or less congruent with the identity politics of the Party of Regions.

After the Orange Revolution, Moscow increased its support for pro-Russian groups and organizations in Ukraine, especially those who actively opposed the pro-western course of the Ukrainian government and defended the rights of Russian speakers against "Ukrainization". Protests in support of the Russian language, against NATO and against the glorification of Bandera and the UPA were organized along with the vandalization of "nationalist" monuments. The aim was not so much to impress the local public and the Ukrainian authorities as to create media events that gave the impression of strong opposition to Yushchenko's politics in Ukrainian society. United by an "anti-Orange" agenda, various actors – ranging from pro-Russian political parties (the Communists and Natalia Vitrenko's populist Progressive Socialist Party) to Soviet veterans' associations, Russian Cossacks and Orthodox brotherhoods – created a heterogeneous yet active, even aggressive milieu. In 2014, this became the breeding ground for pro-Russian separatism.

Denying Ukraine its distinctive national identity, Russia suggested alternative identities instead. They were largely based on the concept of *Russkiy mir* (Russian world), which during the 2000s advanced rapidly from being a marginal intellectual discourse to a new state ideology supported by the Russian authorities and the Russian Orthodox Church. [8] *Russkiy mir* is an ambiguous and open concept that initially signified "Russia" beyond its state borders, but that later became a synonym for the construct of an Russian-Orthodox-Slavic civilization. Broadly speaking, *Russkiy mir* refers to a supranational community united by Russian culture and language, by historical memory and traditional values, by the Orthodox faith and loyalty to the Russian state (which includes the Russian Empire as well as the USSR). Depending on the context, *Russkiy mir* has various connotations, ranging from the neutral ethno-cultural to the imperial and explicitly revanchist. In the interpretation of the Russian Orthodox Church, which is prominently represented in the Russian media, the three eastern Slavic nations – Russia, Ukraine and Belarus – constitute the core of *Russkiy mir*, with a spiritual and cultural fundament going back to prince Vladimir's baptism of Kyiv in 988. Ukraine (with the exception of Greek Catholic Galicia) is thus represented as part of a thousand year-old Russian civilization. These ties allegedly run far deeper than any recent, "artificial" construction of national identity. The Russian Orthodox Church is not the only institution spreading the ideology of *Russkiy mir* beyond Russia's borders. Another one is the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation which is a state sponsored organization created in 2007 by the Russian foreign ministry and ministry of culture. It has branches in several Ukrainian cities, mainly in the East and South and actively cooperates with Russian language schools. Formally focusing its activities on the support of Russian language and culture, the foundation also promotes the Russian narrative of imperial history and Russia's interpretation of World War II. Similarly, Russian universities and institutions of higher education have branches in Ukraine (mostly in Crimea) that promote Russian ideas and cultural values. Not least, Russian cultural



products (especially works of popular literature, films and television serials) dominate the Ukrainian market and serve to export Russian imperial history and Russian patriotism, to glorify the Russian and Soviet army and security services, and to excite anti-westernism.

After the annexation of Crimea, many commentators noted a new tone in the official Russian rhetoric. Appealing to Ukrainian citizens of ethnic Russian origin, Vladimir Putin legitimized his actions on the grounds that it had been necessary to protect his "compatriots while simply ignoring the new Kyiv government. Russkiy mir was thus reduced to ethnic Russian nationalism that bluntly equates Russians and Russian-speakers and denies the very existence of Ukraine – at least to the east of Dnieper. To re-identify this "other Ukraine", Russian media at first used the geographic designation "Yugo-Vostok" (south-East), which was still Kyiv-centred. Later, the much more powerful, geo-historical concept Novorossiia was coined which reduces several Ukrainian oblasts (Donetsk, Luhansk, Odessa, Mykolaiv, Kherson, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhia, Kharkiv) to an "historical" region attributed to Russia. [9] Far from harmless territorial branding, the creators of the concept of Novorossiia intend to constitute a new (geo)political reality. [10] Meanwhile, some sort of alternative nation-building is underway, including the foundation of formal state structures. A "Donetsk People's Republic" has been proclaimed along with a "Luhansk People's Republic", while other "republics", for example in Odessa and Kharkiv, may emerge any time. These entities cherish their own collective mythology, their heroes and martyrs (mainly invented by Russian media), and even have their own national mission: anti-fascism.

## 5. Revolution, war and peace

Have the Euromaidan protests deepened the old division between East and West, or have they helped consolidate the Ukrainian nation? The pro-Yanukovich media presented the protests in Ukraine as a radical nationalist movement with its mass basis in western Ukraine. While radical nationalism was certainly present on the Maidan, the overwhelming majority protested under a democratic banner – for a pro-European Ukraine and against government corruption, police violence, unconstitutional restrictions of human rights and media freedom. These forces were also reflected at the symbolic level: while controversial nationalist symbols such as Stepan Bandera and the red and black flag of the OUN-UPA [11] were certainly present on the Maidan, pro-European symbolism (especially during the first stage of the protests) and Cossack tradition (the Maidan as reincarnation of the Zaporozhian Cossack Sich) dominated. [12] According to a survey conducted by the Demokratychni Initsiatyvy Foundation in December 2013, while western Ukraine was most strongly represented on the Kyiv Maidan (51.8 per cent during the mass rallies and 42.4 per cent among the permanent protesters), central Ukraine (30.9 per cent and 34.4 per cent) and eastern and southern Ukraine (17.3 per cent and 23.2 per cent) were also present. [13] Moreover, in the final stage of the mass revolt against the Yanukovich government, demonstrations also took place in cities in the East and South. The Lviv historian Vasyl Rasevych suggested that the time had come when destructive identity politics drawing on irreconcilable historical memories were ready to be replaced by a unifying narrative: "The Revolution of Dignity and the war for a sovereign independent Ukraine – this is already common Ukrainian history, the history of an emerging political nation, the history of the victory of Ukrainian civil society." [14]

However, this new unifying narrative of a victorious revolution against a corrupt authoritarian regime came too late for Crimea. There, the scarecrow of Ukrainian radical nationalism, in the form of the Pravyi Sektor (Right Sector), revived fears of ethnic violence and Ukrainization among the Russian speaking population. The collapse of the ancien régime and some first unfortunate steps of the new Kyiv government (such as repealing the 2012 law giving Russian the status of a regional language, a decision that was immediately revoked) seemed to confirm these fears. These mistakes were exploited by Russia in a well-prepared operation that ended with the sweeping annexation of Crimea, despite the protests of the pro-Ukrainian minority and the Crimean Tatars.

In the East and the South of the country, the power shift brought different developments. In Donetsk and Luhansk,

the local bosses of the Party of Regions encouraged mass protests against Kyiv, which they used as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the new government. In Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhia, Odessa and Kharkiv, former counter-elites and opportunists from the Party of Regions managed to stabilize the situation. What helped to keep the aggressive pro-Russian minority at bay was not so much support by the pro-Ukrainian part of the local population as the common effort of the local elites to prevent the collapse of the state institutions, to secure the loyalty of the police and security services, and to demonstrate determination and responsibility. A new alliance of local business, civil society and former counter-elites emerged around the basic agenda of providing peace, stability and security – an agenda that has turned out to be de facto pro-Ukrainian. Especially telling is the case of Dnipropetrovsk, where the local oligarch Ihor Kolomoyskiy used his financial and organizational resources not only to prevent a pro-Russian separatist coup along the lines of Donetsk and Luhansk, but also to help active pro-Ukrainian forces. In this way, an industrial, Soviet-type city that until recently voted for the Party of Regions has become a bastion of civic Ukrainian nationalism. [15] In Kharkiv, now a frontline city, the local Euromaidan transformed into a grassroots network of volunteer groups supporting the poorly equipped Ukrainian army and caring for wounded soldiers and the flood of refugees from Donbas. In Odessa, which is only slowly recovering from the violent clashes of 2 May that cost dozens of lives, the new authorities and civic activists have initiated a public investigation and a reconciliation process intended to heal the city's trauma. [16]

One can say, then, that the "East" or "South-East" in the old sense no longer exists. The dramatic developments of spring 2014 have demonstrated that collective identities are situational and contextual and can rapidly change, especially under conditions of territorial secession, external aggression and military conflict.

The ongoing war in Donbas will have profound and long-term consequences for the region. While the armed conflict has certainly deepened anti-Ukrainian hostilities in some parts of the local population, it has taught other parts to appreciate security, stability and strong state institutions. If the Kyiv government and its army and police force prove to be a guarantee of security for the population, the first step along the long road of re-integrating Donbas into Ukraine may have been made.

However, armed conflict has also perpetuated the "othering" of Donbas in public discourse. [17] While Russia is a driving force behind the separatist movement, a significant portion of the local population actively or passively has supported the Donetsk and Luhansk "republics", at least at the beginning. While Ukrainian liberals continue to discuss how to win over the local population to the national project and to inculcate Ukrainian identity, nationalists cultivate social hatred and even consider mass cleansing. Tens of thousands of refugees have flooded Ukrainian cities, while hundreds of Donbas men continue to fight against the Ukrainian army. In this strange war, there is no front line: civilians holding out in the conflict zone are either separatist sympathizers or their hostages, depending on your point of view. Hundreds of them have already been killed or wounded; thousands have lost their property. One way to cope with the horrible reality of war is to blame the victims: they are paying the price for their pro-Russian sympathies. And many families in western and central Ukraine do not understand why their sons and husbands should die for Donbas, when it does not even consider itself part of Ukraine. Yet the war has already imprinted Donbas on the imaginary national map, with local toponyms such as Sloviansk, Krasnyi Luch or Torez now familiar to the whole country. Donbas has become the land where Ukrainian independence, democracy and the future of the nation are being defended, and therefore, from now on, Donbas is Ukraine. [18]

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[1] See Transit: Europäische Revue 23 (2002): 172-88 and 196-202. Republished in [Eurozine](#): I

- [2] Andriy Portnov, "The Ukraine and its 'far East': On Galician reductionism and its genealogy" (in Ukrainian), in: [Historians in UA, 1 August 2014](#):
- [3] Loc. Cit. (fn. 1), 201
- [4] Source: Tyzhden, 31 March 2014, [tyzhden.ua/News/106351](http://tyzhden.ua/News/106351)
- [5] Cf. Kerstin Zimmer, *Machteliten im ukrainischen Donbass: Bedingungen und Konsequenzen der Transformation einer alten Industrieregion*, Münster 2006.
- [6] Oleksandr Fisun, Oleksiy Krysenko, "Causes of destabilization in South and Eastern regions of Ukraine", 29 April 2014; [www.kennan.kiev.ua/Analytics/140429...](http://www.kennan.kiev.ua/Analytics/140429...)
- [7] Cf. Lev Gudkov, *Negative Identity* (in Russian), Moscow 2004
- [8] For more on the ideology of Russkiy Mir in relation to Ukraine see: Yablons'kyi et al., "Ukraine and the Russkiy Mir project: Analitychna dopovid", Kyiv: National Institute of Strategic Studies, 2014; Wilfried Jilge, "Die Ukraine aus Sicht der 'Russkij Mir'", [www.bpb.de/internationales/europa/r...](http://www.bpb.de/internationales/europa/r...)
- [9] The borders of historical Noworossija do not coincide with this newly invented concept, however
- [10] Maria Snegovaya, "Creating a new political reality", in: [Vedomosti, 19 May 2014](#):
- [11] OUN: Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists. The faction of the OUN led by Stepan Bandera organized the first partisan units that were combined in February 1943 to form the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA)
- [12] Wilfried Jilge, "Geschichtspolitik auf dem Majdan: Politische Emanzipation und nationale Selbstvergewisserung", in: *ZerreiÃŸprobe Ukraine: Konflikt, Krise, Krieg*, eds. Manfred Sapper and Volker Weichsel, *Osteuropa*, nos. 5-6 (2014): 239-58
- [13] Cf.
- [14] Vasyl Rasevych, "New heroes and a new common history" (in Ukrainian), [zaxid.net](http://zaxid.net)
- [15] Cf. Andriy Portnov, "[Dnipropetrovsk: Where Ukraine starts from](#)", [gefter.ru](http://gefter.ru), 27 June 2014:
- [16] See Tanya Richardson, "[Odessa's two big differences \(and a few small ones\): Life after the Maidan and 2 May](#)".
- [17] [Andriy Portnov, "Ukraine and its 'Far East': On Galician reductionism and its genealogy"](#).
- [18] Stanislav Kmet, "The Ukrainization of Donbas" 8 September 2014, [durdum.in.ua/ru/main/article/articl...](http://durdum.in.ua/ru/main/article/articl...)