

Tomasz Stępniewski*

Russia–Ukraine War: Remembrance, Identity and Legacies of the Imperial Past

Abstract: *The paper analyses the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian conflict from the point of view of the struggle for remembrance and identity between two post-Soviet states. Will the war of the brotherly nations wreck Russia's long-term policy towards Ukraine? Will the conflict ruin Russia's plans of post-Soviet space reintegration whose pivot is set on Ukraine? Will the war stimulate Ukraine to deal with the issue of its identity, post-Soviet legacy and collective memory? Ukrainian crisis is also a challenge for the transformation of Ukraine's political system. The relations between Ukraine and Russia are extremely complex as they are built on a shared history, religion, language and culture and they should not be gauged with Western standards. Evaluating the current situation from a broader perspective, the fact that Ukraine plays a significant role in Russia's foreign policy needs to be emphasised. Ukraine is considered as the key post-Soviet state, a significant 'near abroad' country whose position, potential and geopolitical location are vital for the balance of power in both Eastern Europe and Europe in general.*

Keywords: Russia-Ukraine war, remembrance, Ukraine's identity, Russia's imperial past

* Prof. Tomasz Stępniewski, Ph.D. – Institute of Political Science and International Affairs, Faculty of Social Sciences, The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, e-mail: tomasz.stepniewski5@gmail.com.

Introduction

The paper analyses the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian conflict from the point of view of the struggle for remembrance and identity between two post-Soviet states. Will the war of the brotherly nations wreck Russia's long-term policy towards Ukraine? Will the conflict ruin Russia's plans of post-Soviet space reintegration whose pivot is set on Ukraine? Will the war stimulate Ukraine to deal with the issue of its identity, post-Soviet legacy and collective memory? Ukrainian crisis is also a challenge for the transformation of Ukraine's political system.

The establishment of the independent Ukraine constituted one of the most critical consequences of the fall of USSR).¹ The most significant factor determining Ukraine's independence was the division of Russian (then Soviet) political class into the so-called republican camps, whose representatives maintained the continuity of government in the newly emerged states. This exerted impact upon Russia's policy, especially upon reintegration voiced by its decision-makers with regards to Ukraine. They were well-informed on the weak condition of opposition in the newly emerged states, and were confident the opposition was incapable of having any real influence upon the power in these particular countries – as was the case in Ukraine. As a consequence, the emergence of Ukraine as an independent actor on the international political stage was perceived as a reason for the reinterpretation of Europe's political stage, and regarded as a factor changing the Federation's policy. Russia was forced to resign from the position of hegemony it held over Ukraine, the fact motivated by new conditions for cooperation- based on partnership rather than the dictate of the dominant.² However, Russia did not agree with the loss of Ukraine well due to the fact that the country was traditionally considered a 'younger brother', and whose territory offered a 'special role' resulting partly from its geopolitical location.³ Andreas Kap-

¹ Z. Brzeziński, *Wielka Szachownica. Główne cele polityki amerykańskiej (The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives)*, trans. T. Wyżyński, Warszawa 1998, pp. 49–50, 56; B. Meissner, *The Transformation of the Soviet Union*, „Aussenpolitik”, No. 1/1992, pp. 54–61; A. Lynch, *How Russia is not Ruled. Reflections on Russian Political Development*, Cambridge, Mass. 2005, pp. 128–130.

² Z. Khalilzad, I.J. Brzeziński, *Rozszerzenie demokratycznej strefy pokoju na Europę Wschodnią (Extension of the Democratic Zone of Peace to Eastern Europe)*, „Sprawy Międzynarodowe”, No. 3/1993, p. 31.

³ R. Solchanyk, *Ukraine, Russia and the CIS in: Ukraine in the World. Studies of the International Relations and Security Structure of a Newly Independent State*, L.A. Hajda (ed.), Cambridge, Mass. 1998, pp. 19–21; R. Szporluk, *Russia, Ukraine and the Breakup of the Soviet Union*, Stanford, CA. 2000, pp. 315–320; A. Motyl, *Making Ukraine, and Remaking It*, Cambridge, Mass. 2003, pp. 3–5.

peler observes that *‘the legacy of the tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union is one of the crucial factors for an understanding and an explanation of current affairs in the post-Soviet space. This is especially true for Ukraine and for Russian–Ukrainian relations. Russia regards Ukraine as a part of its own strategic orbit, while many Ukrainians want to liberate themselves from the Russian hegemony and advocate a closer cooperation with the European Union’*.⁴

1. Russia and Ukraine’s collective past – a challenge for Ukraine’s identity and memory

Wołodymyr Kulyk rightly states that *‘historical memory may be considered as one of the social identity’s elements due to the fact that it provides an answer to a significant issue of any community’s self-identification i.e. the question of its origin and future, which offers an explanation of the current state of communities’*.⁵ When referring to the origins of Ukrainian nationality, Kievan Rus’ (Ukrainian: *Київська Русь*) must be mentioned. However, Kievan Rus’ may be perceived as a starting point for three Eastern Slavic nations, i.e. Belarus, Russia and Ukraine. Such state of affairs leads to the rivalry of narrations among Ukrainian and Russian historian as to the Kievan Rus’ legacy and, de facto, Ukrainian history.⁶

⁴ A. Kappeler, *Ukraine and Russia: Legacies of the imperial past and competing memories*, “Journal of Eurasian Studies”, No. 5/2014, p. 107.

⁵ W. Kulyk, *Narodowościowe przeciwko radzieckiemu: pamięć historyczna na niepodległej Ukrainie (Nationalities Against the Soviet: Historical Memory in Independent Ukraine)* in: *Dialog kultur pamięci w regionie ULB (Dialogue of Memory Cultures in the ULB Region)*, A. Nikžentaitis, M. Kopczyński M. (eds.), Warszawa 2014, p. 163.

⁶ *‘Ukrainian and Russian historians offer two competing narratives of ancient Ukrainian history: The Ukrainian nationalist narrative refers to Kievan Rus’ as it existed before the Tatar yoke, as the exclusive ancestor of present-day Ukraine. The argument stresses that the bulk of the Kievan Rus’ was in the center of present-day Ukrainian borders, with Moscow and Novgorod at its northern limits. It rejects Russian claims that Kievan Rus’ was the common ancestor of the three eastern Slavic nations. It argues that the Russian nation emerged from a mix of Slavic and Finnish tribes inhabiting present-day northern areas of European Russia (Moscow included); it also claims that Ukrainians are pure Slavs, while Russians have a blood component from the Tatar invaders. The Russian narrative speaks of common origin of the three eastern Slavic nations, with the Tatar invasion propelling many Kievan principalities to join the Great Duchy of Lithuania (which later united with Poland), thus creating the split between them and those remaining under Tatar control and later unified by the great dukes of Moscow. It rejects the idea that Russians are an ethnically mixed nation, because the small Finnish tribes inhabiting Russia’s north were absorbed by the much more numerous Slavs, many of whom moved north to escape the Tatar invasion. It views Moscow as the Third Rome (Byzantium being the second) and heir of old Kievan Rus’, and the three eastern Slavic peoples as parts of a the same closely connected nation’* (M. Rywkin, *Ukraine: Between Russia and the West*, “American Foreign Policy Interests: The Journal of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy”, Vol. 36, No. 2/2014, p. 125).

Michael Rywkin made a very accurate observation on the issue of Ukraine and its complex identity. He claims that: *'Not many countries have an identity as confusing as Ukraine's. The name comes from the Russian word "okraina," which means periphery (as it is seen from Moscow) and appeared only near the end of the nineteenth century. During prerevolutionary times, St. Petersburg considered the three Slavic nations (Russia, Ukraine, and Belorussia) to be parts of the same nation, referring to Ukraine as "Malorussia," or Little Russia, and calling its inhabitants "Malorussy," or Little Russians, in contrast to Russians, who were officially listed as "Velikorussy," or Great Russians. Prior to the divisions of Poland in the eighteenth century, the Poles called western Ukrainians "Rusiny" and spoke of Russians as "Moskale" (Moscovites), and of Belorussians as "Ruskie" (with ones). In the West, western Ukrainians were for a long time known as "Ruthenians" and the land Ruthenia'*⁷

For ages, the territory of the present Ukraine has been under the influence of various political powers: beginning with Kievan Rus', Cossacks, Kingdom of Poland and then Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth up to the influence of Russian, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires and USSR empire. The issue is further complicated by the fact that nation building in Ukraine has to overcome over two centuries of colonial rule as stated by Orest Subtelny.⁸

Individual parts of Ukraine experienced long-term rule of several countries and empires, which is reflected in the ethnicity, religion and language of the country. Wołodymyr Kulyk indicates that *'differences in historical and national memory may be viewed as the most frequently supported by members of ethnical and language and regional groups main (meta)narrations of Ukrainian history and identity embodied in various public discourses'*.⁹ The fact that the myth regarding Cossacks is frequently used by Ukrainian historians in order to differentiate between Ukrainians and Russians is noteworthy. In the view of the above claims, such differentiation would not be possible in the framework of Kievan Rus, but is feasible in case of Cossacks. It is assumed that it was Cossacks who brought freedom to the lands constituting the present Ukraine.¹⁰

⁷ Ibidem, p. 119.

⁸ O. Subtelny, *Imperial Disintegration and Nation-State Formation: The Case of Ukraine in: The Successor States to the USSR*, J.W. Blaney (ed.), Washington, DC 1995, pp. 184–195; O. Subtelny, *Ukraine: A History*, 4th edition, Toronto 2009; also see: A. Lynch, P.R. Magosci, *A History of Ukraine. The Land and Its Peoples*, 2nd edition, Toronto 2010.

⁹ W. Kulyk, op.cit., p. 164.

¹⁰ S. Plokyh, *The Cossack Myth. History and Nationhood in the Age of Empires*, Cambridge 2012; see also: F. Hillis, *Children of Rus'. Right-Bank Ukraine and the Invention of a Russian Nation*, Ithaca and London 2013.

Andrij Portnow indicates that ‘Ukraine in its present borders, social and ethnical structure is an outcome of the Soviet policy... [...] Ukraine, a product of late 1980s and beginning of 1990s disintegration, de iure and de facto a successor of USSR, faced the problem of historical legitimisation, aggravated by the fact that there has been no change of the elites’.¹¹ Therefore, the relations between Ukraine and Russia are extremely complex as they are built on a shared history, religion, language and culture and they should not be gauged with Western standards. ‘The West must understand that, to Russia, Ukraine can never be just a foreign country’, wrote former U.S. secretary of state Henry Kissinger in a *Washington Post*. What it means to be a Ukrainian? The former Ukrainian president, Viktor Yushchenko, stated in an election advertisement in Channel 5 (28th January 2006): ‘Think Ukrainian. You are a successor to Princess Olha, Volodymyr the Great and Yaroslav the Wise, who are Equal to the Apostles. History requires from you confidence and trust in Ukraine. Think Ukrainian’.¹²

Despite the current war in Ukraine, which accelerated the formation of Ukrainian political nation (even in the south and west of the country), divisions remain. Recently, numerous researchers have claimed there existed not one, but two or several Ukraines,¹³ which are separate from each other, exhibit individual identity and pose a challenge for the development of a common national identity of the country. As a result of the conflict, the divisions have been neglected, but they do remain and continue to influence the frame of mind of Ukrainians from various parts of the country. Significantly, as a consequence of the annexation of Crimea and south-eastern separatisms, approximately 5 million pro-Russian (defined as pro-Russian) citizens were separated from Ukraine. In addition, the Donbass situation serves as a bitter example to those entertaining thoughts of separatism.

Russia intended to exploit the divisions in Ukraine for its own political objectives. In 2014, Putin started referring to these divisions and called for establishing ‘Novorossiya’ – the region of south-eastern Ukraine

¹¹ See: A. Portnow, *Постсоветская Украина: политики памяти и поиски национального прошлого* in *Перед выбором. Будущее Украины в условиях системной дестабилизации* (*Post-Soviet Ukraine: the Politics of Memory and the Search for a National Past*), L.A. Гиль (A. Gil), Т. Степневский (T. Stepiński) (ред.), *Перед выбором. Будущее Украины в условиях системной дестабилизации* (*Facing a Dilemma. The Future of Ukraine under Systemic Destabilization*), Люблин–Львов–Киев 2013, pp. 227–248.

¹² T. Kuzio, *National identity and history writing in Ukraine*, “Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity”, Vol. 34, No. 4/2006, p. 407.

¹³ M. Riabczuk, *Dwie Ukrainy* (*Two Ukraines*), Wrocław 2004; М. Рябчук, *Дві України*, <http://www.ji-magazine.lviv.ua/diskusija/arhiv/ryabchuk.htm> (last visited 20.07.2015).

inhabited by Russian speakers. While the exploitation of Russian speakers proved fruitful and allowed Crimea to be annexed, the Novorossiya project did not fare well. As a consequence, Russia scrapped the plan altogether.

Taking reference to works of such authors as Andrzej Nowak, Włodzimierz Marciniak, Adam D. Rotfeld, James Sherr, Dmitri Trenin, Alexei Miller, devoted to imperial Russia's thought and works of analysts such as Marek Menkiszak, Kadri Liik, András Rácz and others as well as statements from Russian politicians, especially Vladimir Putin's, from the 2013–2014 period, the fact that we are dealing with the development of a certain Russian foreign policy and security, especially regarding the post-Soviet regions, may be acknowledged. A particular spiritual and civilizational community, the so-called Russian World (Russkiy Mir), constitutes a vital element of Putin's doctrine. The doctrine establishes that regardless of their citizenship and ethnical background, a community of Russian speakers who identify with the Orthodox religion and culture and share values, forms around Russia.¹⁴ The Russian-Ukrainian-Belarusian community constitutes the core of the Russian World. Therefore, if Ukraine is the core of the Russian World, the question of Russia-Ukraine war's validity arises.

2. Why Ukraine is not Russia?

We are witnessing an attempt at stopping Putin's Russia neoimperial policy. Russia's invasion of Ukraine (hybrid warfare) came several years too late.¹⁵ Immediately after the dissolution of USSR, Ukraine as a newly formed state, whose statehood was only emerging, was susceptible to Russia's influence. The same was true for Ukrainians. However, the reality changed in the course of time, generational change and the growth of Ukrainian national identity. As a consequence, a political nation, which was non-existent at the moment of the dissolution, emerged. What is more, the emergence of the political nation was boosted by Russia's neoimperial war against Ukraine. Annexation of Crimea and destabilization of south-eastern Ukraine led to the permanent separation of Ukraine from Russia. Hostility between Ukrainians and Russians, but

¹⁴ M. Menkiszak, *Doktryna Putina: Tworzenie koncepcyjnych podstaw rosyjskiej dominacji na obszarze postradzieckim (The Putin Doctrine: The Formation of a Conceptual Framework for Russian Dominance in the post-Soviet Area)*, „Komentarze OSW”, No. 131, 27.03.2014, <http://www.osw.waw.pl> (last visited 15.06.2015).

¹⁵ A. Eberhardt, *Ukraińska wojna o niepodległość (Ukrainian War for Independence)*, „Nowa Europa Wschodnia”, No. 3–4/2015, p. 42.

also between Russians and Ukrainians, has risen. Common Soviet past is becoming alien to Ukrainians. It is perceived as unwanted, limiting the freedom of action, choice and tyrannizing the country and its people. We are witnessing a gradual withdrawal of Ukraine and Ukrainians from the post-Soviet political space.¹⁶ Removal of more than 500 monuments of Lenin in 2014 in Ukraine, including eastern Ukrainian towns, is the best example of the phenomenon. Therefore, Ukrainians are seen as renouncing their Soviet legacy, division into the Ukrainian and the Soviet.

The question ‘Why Ukraine is not Russia and why we are witnessing the two countries’ ways part?’ needs to be addressed. Roman Szporluk is of the opinion that the origin of the conflict is the Ukraine’s drive towards becoming a part of Europe, its willingness to be a member of democratic, independent and lawful states. Russia, on the other hand, does not seek to be a part of Europe, which brings about issues with Ukraine. To paraphrase, Ukraine is not Russia because Russia does not want to be in Europe.¹⁷ According to Szporluk, due to the conflict, relations between Russia and Ukraine have reverted to the model present several centuries ago. Adam Eberhardt claims that we are dealing with the greatest blow to Russia’s influence upon Ukraine, the influence which has been developed since the Treaty of Pereyaslav 360 years ago.¹⁸ On one hand, Ukraine is gravitating towards Europe. On the other hand, Russia rejects Europe and cooperation with the West by its assertive policy, contesting the post-Cold War order and strives to develop a new set of rules. The weakness and internal problems of the EU (threat of Brexit) along with the inconsistent approach towards the eastern neighbours have had their effect on the growth of Russia’s neoimperial policy. The lack of eastern strategy encourages all geopolitical actors, including Russia, to compete with the EU (the West) for influence in this part of Europe.

Conclusions

In conclusion, one needs to refer to Ivan Krastev’s statement: *‘For us (Europeans), everything that is happening is post-Cold War. For the rest of the world it is very much post-colonialism. Turkey and Russia, for example – they were empires, but because they were peripheral empires they have imperialism and at the same time a feeling that they themselves have been colonised by the West. As a result we have a different idea of what is going on in Ukraine. We see the*

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ Author participated in the lecture given by Prof. Roman Szporluk titled *Why Ukraine is not Russia*, Harvard University, July 15, 2015.

¹⁸ A. Eberhardt, op.cit., p. 49.

Ukrainians' struggle for independence. They got formal independence in 1991, but it was simply the decision of the Soviet elite who moved to gain control over the assets for themselves. People who voted were not sure what they wanted and who they were. And now they want to be truly independent and sovereign'.¹⁹

When evaluating Russia-Ukraine conflict, the fact that Russia in its foreign policy, especially towards post-Soviet states, is driven by the imperial mentality cannot be forgotten. As George Soroka indicates, how would USA react to e.g. desire for installation of Russian military bases on Cuba. Would we not witness USA's reaction, an attempt at stopping or preventing the desire turning into facts?²⁰ Such Russian decision makers' frame of mind seems to be acknowledged by Andrej Krickovic who claims that Russia *'only respects powers such as USA, China and Germany. People do not understand that. The Kremlin is constantly speaking about independence but never respects it. However, Russia's independence does not take small nations into consideration. America ought not to interfere in Russia's or China's affairs. Small states, however, well, they present prospective spoils'.²¹*

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¹⁹ I. Krastev, *Speaking Tough on Russia is not Enough (interviewer: Matthew Luxmoore)*, “New Eastern Europe”, 30 June 2015, <http://www.neweasterneurope.eu/interviews/1639-speaking-tough-on-russia-is-not-enough> (last visited 30.06.2015).

²⁰ Author participated in the lecture of the Harvard Summer School course: “Introduction to Comparative Politics” by George Soroka, PhD (Lecturer on Government and Assistant Director of Undergraduate Studies, Harvard University).

²¹ K. Wężyk, *Niedźwiedziowi wolno więcej (rozmowa z Andrej Krickovic) (Bears are Allowed More (Interview with Andrej Krickovic)*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, 18.07.2015, <http://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/1,146875,18384515,niedzwiedziowi-wolno-wiecej.html> (last visited 18.07.2015).

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