Thematic section
The Russia-Ukraine War: Why the Conflict Was Not Prevented

Looking for Stepan Bandera: The Myth of Ukrainian Nationalism and the Russian 'Special Operation'

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Abstract
The so-called 'denazification' of Ukraine and the need to free the country from the radical nationalists was used by the Russian government as a central argument to justify the military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. However, the discussion of radical right-wing nationalist groups allegedly active in Ukraine and violently oppressing the Russian-speaking population have been maintained by the governing regime in Russia already since the so-called Euromaidan protests in 2013-2014. The word 'banderivtsi', disciples or sons and daughters of Stepan Bandera, the leader of the Ukrainian nationalist organisations OUN and UPA, became widely used, first, by Russian pro-governmental media who this way referred to what they presented as the nationalist population of Ukraine. Consequently, the Ukrainians started using the term themselves, in an ironic way, to re-appropriate it and re-establish the national identity reshaped by the years of informational and actual wars. The present piece discusses the centrality of the concept of Ukrainian nationalism in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. It examines how, seeking further separation from Russia, the Ukrainian government has been changing its memory politics towards a significantly modified perception and interpretation of the shared past.

It argues that building parallels between attacking 'nationalist Ukraine' and the victory over Nazi Germany central to the glorious past of Russia within the state memory politics was used by Kremlin to justify the military action in the neighbouring country.

Introduction

In November–December 2013, Ukraine made it to the front pages of the Western press. At the central square of Kyiv, *Maidan Nezalezhnosti* (Independence square), or simply Maidan, a peaceful protest of young people against the government's decision to put the Association Agreement negotiations with the European Union on pause was violently dispersed by the state security service. This resulted in the largest anti-governmental protest in the history of the independent Ukraine that lasted several months and ended with the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych's government fleeing the country.

During the first months of this protest, I was in Berlin, doing my doctoral studies at Humboldt University, and as a Ukrainian political scientist, I was invited to deliver a talk about the situation in Kyiv. After I spoke about the protest camps in the centre of Kyiv, self-support networks, and solidarity among the protesters, I was struck by the first question coming from the audience. I was asked whether I found problematic the fact that among groups at the so-called Euromaidan protests, there were fascists. It was my first encounter with the myth of Ukrainian nationalism. During the years to follow, I heard this question multiple times, presenting topics from LGBTQ rights to marriage migration and sexual education in Ukrainian schools. Even though far-right parties have never passed the 5% threshold to gain seats in the Ukrainian parliament and had rather scarce public support, the narrative on Ukrainian right-wing forces shaping the country's politics persisted.

On 24 February 24 2022, Russia launched the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, defining it as a 'special operation' aimed at the 'denazification' of the country. For years before that, the Russian government and national and international media maintained the narrative of extreme right-wing nationalism and oppression of the Russian-speaking minority in Ukraine (Kuzio 2022; Zhurzhenko 2014). Nevertheless, starting from 2014, the Western media actively discussed right-wing parties and groups in Ukraine, featuring pictures of the activists excessively using national symbols, particularly those related to the memory of the Ukrainian nationalist organisations OUN and UPA. These organisations are infamous for

cooperation with Nazi Germany, antisemitic ideology and killing civilians (Törnquist-Plewa & Yurchuk 2019).

The present article discusses the ideological foundation of the ongoing war of Russia against Ukraine, to which the concept of Ukrainian nationalism proved central. The aim is to explore how the notion of radical nationalisation of Ukraine constructed by the Russian propaganda served the purpose of justification of the full-scale invasion in 2022. In doing so, the article engages with postcolonial theory as a helpful instrument in understanding the memory politics in Ukraine and around Ukraine (Chernetsky 2003; Gerasimov & Mogilner 2015) and its criticism and alternatives proposed by several scholars (Korek 2007; Morenets 2006). The article's argument is two-fold. First, it demonstrates that as Ukraine sought approximation with the European Union and separation from the Kremlin's influence, the government's memory politics changed towards the significantly modified perception and interpretation of the past shared with Russia. As the Russian government has been determined not to let Ukraine get out of the Kremlin's control, this memory politics change was framed in the Russian public discourse as radical nationalism detrimental to the human rights of Russian speaking population of Ukraine. Building a parallel between nationalist Ukraine and Nazi Germany central to the glorious past of Russia and state memory politics was used by the Kremlin to justify the military action in the neighbouring country.

The article proceeds as follows. After discussing the use of postcolonial lenses for understanding the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine and its shortcomings, the analysis is structured in a form of three vignettes. The first one deals with the transformation of the perceptions of the Great Patriotic / Second World War in Ukraine and Russia in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine stressing the importance of the Great Patriotic War as one of the core components of the Russian national identity. The second vignette is dedicated to the figure of Stepan Bandera as related to the rejection of the emancipation of the Ukrainian nation and its separation from the so-called 'Russkiy mir'. Finally, the third vignette analyses the notorious article by Vladimir Putin 'On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians'. The latter can serve as an illustration of the fact that for centuries Russian propaganda has been denying Ukraine its agency and subjectivity; first, refusing to recognise the sovereignty of Ukrainians as a nation and, second, perpetuating modern Ukraine's dependency on the West.

Russian-Ukrainian relations through a postcolonial lens?

In the past, there was a tendency in postcolonial studies to focus primarily on the regions where European colonialism had political and territorial history. The last decades changed it as more and more scholars began applying postcolonial analysis to 'other' places and new contexts in need of building new theoretical

bridges (Mayblin et al. 2014). The attempts to use postcolonial analysis for the cases of Central and Eastern European countries, including Ukraine, got a mixed reaction from support to strong opposition. As Törnquist-Plewa and Yurchuk (2019: 701) point out, one of the central arguments of the opponents is that relations between Russia and Ukraine, unlike those of Western European countries with their former colonies, do not include the race component and that racial chauvinism cannot be adequately compared with national chauvinism. According to Ryabchuk (2013: 50), the 'post-communist world was not colonial *sensu stricto* because it did not have the idea of racial superiority in its ideological core and never made racial exclusion into political practice.' Instead, he stresses the centrality of the linguo-cultural component in Russian-Ukrainian relations, arguing that within Imperial Russia and later the Soviet Union, most Ukrainians, unlike other ethnic groups, were visually vaguely different from Russians. Unless they tried to challenge Russian cultural, linguistic and political hegemony, they had no reason to face persecution (ibid).

Shkandrij (2009) relates the overall reluctance of some Ukrainian scholars to apply a postcolonial lens to Ukraine to the fact that they consider the concept of 'colony' demeaning, related to backwardness and harmful to national pride and identity building. Moore (2001) argues that the Soviet dominance was understood by many Eastern Europeans primarily as occupation, not colonisation, and that 'colonial' status would be undermining their 'European' identities in the eyes of more developed Western countries.

Another problem connected to a rather one-sided view of Ukraine as an eternal colony that has always been under the rule of imperial centres (Poland, Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Russian Empire), as Yurchuk (2013: 151) argues, has resulted in 'a stereotype that Ukraine cannot be imagined outside the imperial context.' She points out that even independent Ukraine used to have the authorities, like Viktor Yanukovych's government (2010-2014), who largely contributed to the reproduction of neocolonial discourse aimed at reintegration of Ukraine into Russia on the political, economic and cultural levels. Also, Ryabchuk (2013) warns against misuse of the terms 'colonial', 'empire' or 'subaltern' in popular texts for a broader audience as they can be easily used for propaganda and manipulative arguments, for example, presenting the West as a new colonial power replacing the old from the Kremlin.

Nevertheless, with all these arguments in mind, several studies have applied postcolonial theories to analysing Ukrainian culture, literature and memory politics (Chernetsky 2003; Gerasimov & Mogilner 2015; Törnquist-Plewa & Yurchuk 2019). Instead of comparing imperial contexts or transferring all the concepts directly to the Ukrainian context, applying some of the tools of the postcolonial theory to shed some light on the deeper processes at the core of the current Rus-

sian invasion of Ukraine may be more helpful. For example, as Ryabchuk (2013) observed, the pattern when the imperialist tries to implant across the colonised territory the notion of the superiority of its own culture while the culture of the colonised is seen as peripheral, inferior or non-existent is the one that fits very well into the description of Russian-Ukrainian relations.

There are at least two ways to use the postcolonial approach to analysing the current situation in the region. One would be, as Törnquist-Plewa & Yurchuk (2019) are doing, looking at Ukrainian politics of memory using the concepts of 'anticolonial nationalism' and 'hybridity'. As Loomba (2005: 146) defined it, anticolonial nationalist movements often drew on the ideas and vocabularies of colonisers to challenge colonial rule. However, while one may criticise such nationalism as shaped by the elites and perpetuating the subalternity of the colonised, we should not deny the agency of colonised people who challenge the colonial rule and use their own 'interpretive lens, and even using it to assert cultural alterity or insist on an unbridgeable difference between colonizer and colonized' (ibid). Törnquist-Plewa & Yurchuk (2019: 703) mention another important feature of anticolonial nationalism essential for the understanding of the processes in Ukraine. They stress the centrality of forgetting the colonial past and searching for national heroes and roots that would be instrumental in this separation. They point out that while this strategy can be helpful in this process of separation from the colonial past, it is rather a transitory stage of decolonisation and needs to be followed by the emergence of a new social consciousness (see also Fanon 1990).

This article does not aim to analyse the nationalist actors, scholars or political groups in Ukraine. There is already a solid body of literature not only exploring the Ukrainian far-right groups (Umland 2019) but also showing how exaggerating the role of these actors in Ukrainian politics was instrumental for the Kremlin in starting 'an alleged anti-fascist struggle against the newly established Ukrainian authorities' in temporarily occupied areas of Donbas (Shekhovtsov 2015). Instead, this article uses a postcolonial lens to explain why the Russian government treats modern independent Ukraine as an artificial entity that needs to be reintegrated into Russia as its historical part. Based on Spivak's thinking (2010), modern Ukrainians as 'subaltern' in their struggle for separation from Russia are not recognised in their attempts of self-representation because their self-representation does not fit into the expectations of those who 'imagine' Ukraine. The idea of Ukraine as an independent state goes against the image that the Russian authorities have of the country and its people. Therefore, the attempts of the Ukrainian government to re-interpret the shared past as the USSR and post-Soviet Russia presented it – and especially the revision of the Second World War by the Ukrainian government – are seen by

the Kremlin as an act of provocation, disobedience and separation that needs to be stopped.

Vignette 1 - Undoing Ukraine: decommunisation and reappropriation of memory politics

An important period to address in examining the construction of the ideological foundation of the Russian invasion is following the Euromaidan period of decommunisation of Ukraine and revision of the country's memory politics of World War II.

After Viktor Yanukovych, former president of Ukraine, fled Ukraine due to the Euromaidan protest, the new government with the president Petro Poroshenko declared strongly pro-European politics and launched a strategy aimed at cutting ties with Russia. His policy marked with the slogan 'Army. Language. Faith' included efforts to strengthen the Ukrainian military, which was in 2015 in quite a precarious weakened position, continuing Ukrainisation reforms and legitimising the Ukrainian Orthodox Church through getting the Tomos of Autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in Istanbul. Finally, concerned by the communist nostalgia still present among some parts of the population, in April 2015, the government introduced a package of four so-called decommunisation laws.

The four laws adopted in Ukraine included Law no. 2558 'On Condemning the Communist and National Socialist (Nazi) Totalitarian Regimes and Prohibiting the Propagation of their Symbols', banning Nazi and communist symbols, and public denial of their crimes; Law no. 2538-1 'On the Legal Status and Honouring of the Memory of the Fighters for the Independence of Ukraine in the 20th Century', elevating several historical organisations, including the OUN/UPA to official status and assures social benefits to their surviving members; Law no. 2539 'On Remembering the Victory over Nazism in the Second World War' and Law no. 2540 'On Access to the Archives of Repressive Bodies of the Communist Totalitarian Regime from 1917–1991', placing the state archives concerning repression during the Soviet period under the jurisdiction of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance. The laws were passed swiftly without public debate (Shevel 2016). In this article, it is worth discussing two of them, in particular, revising the memory of World War II and giving special status to the leaders of nationalist movements.

To better understand the appeal of the 'denazification' argument for the Russian audience and the supporters of Putin's regime, one has to be aware of the centrality of the Great Patriotic War to the Russian nationalism, Russian national identity and Russian memory politics. Called World War II by the rest of the world, the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945) was defined by the Soviet government as a war of

Europe's liberation from fascism in which the Soviet Red Army played the central role. Moreover, what many Central, Eastern European and Baltic countries saw as subsequent Russian occupation was presented as the liberation and the culmination of people's unity (Marples 2012; Alkatiri & De Archellie 2021). After 1965, the celebration of Victory Day, May 9, became the most important state holiday in the USSR, celebrated by a large military parade at the Red Square in Moscow. The central idea of the holiday is the victory over fascism with the slogan 'Never again'.

It is hard to overestimate the symbolic importance of the Great Patriotic War for the Soviet Union and, later, for Putin's Russia. It is enough to observe the annual parades demonstrating the country's military power. A large monument to the victory is present in all the larger Russian cities, and most cities have Victory Avenue (*Prospekt Pobedy*) among their central streets. The day is connected to a large number of rituals, some of them coming from the Soviet era, such as bringing flowers to the eternal flame burning next to the monuments, watching war movies (many of them from the Soviet times) on the TV, giving presents and postcards to a few veterans who have survived until today and singing patriotic songs. Newer rituals include events like the Immortal Regiment (*Bessmertniy Polk*), massive marches in major cities involving people carrying pictures of family members who served in the Soviet Army Forces.

To sum up, the celebration is a massive spectacle aimed at proving to the public that Russia won in World War II but also managed to keep the grandeur of its statehood and power of military industry. In 2020, Vladimir Putin welcomed an amendment to the state's Constitution to enshrine Russia's status as a winner in World War II to cement this in the country's memory politics. Such one-sided narratives of World War II were already questioned in the last years of the Soviet Union's existence (Yurchuk 2017: 109), and the tendency became much stronger as former republics gained independence. As I mentioned above, for Baltic states like Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania, the liberation from Nazism was followed by Soviet occupation and the imposition of a new Soviet identity. Similarly, some pages of Ukrainian history were to be revisited.

In his speech on Victory Day the year before the large-scale invasion, Putin (2021) said that the Soviet people liberated Europe from the 'brown plague' of Nazism, yet that nowadays there are insulting attempts to revise history and glorify traitors and criminals. This reference was likely made to the changes introduced by the abovementioned laws.

Until post-2014, the celebration of Victory Day in Ukraine, like in Russia, followed a similar scenario inherited from the Soviet times; though the military parade did not occur every year, it happened at least once with each Ukrainian president starting with Leonid Kuchma in 1994. In 2001, Vladimir Putin, who had just replaced Boris Yeltsin as the president of Russia, attended the parade in

Kyiv. In 2012, under the presidency of pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovych, both Ukrainian and Russian flags were carried by the soldiers ahead of the parade. The parades that took place after the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the military conflict in the Donbas area were designed to demonstrate the growing and consolidating military power of Ukraine. The military machinery and vehicles in Kyiv were either coming from the areas affected by the conflict or were about to be sent there. Several times soldiers from NATO member states marched on Kreshchatyk too, and the leaders of the ministries of defence of respective states took part in the celebration, which signalled changes in the memory politics created and was promoted by the Ukrainian state.

Law no. 2539 'On Remembering the Victory over Nazism in the Second World War', cancels the older law 'On Remembering the Victory in the Great Patriotic War in 1941-1945' and replaces the term 'Great Patriotic War' with World War II 1939-1945. It starts with the statement that World War II was caused by the agreement between Nazi Germany and the communist totalitarian regime of the USSR and introduces a new holiday, a Day of Memory and Reconciliation, on May 8. The Victory over Nazism Day, May 9, was not replaced and remains a national holiday. The government also introduced a new symbol of Remembrance, a poppy flower, separating from the old symbol of the St. George ribbon and carnation used in the Soviet Union and Russia. The law also contained a vague phrase about 'not accepting falsification of the history of the World War II of 1939-1945 in scholarly research, textbooks, media' and other sources. One practical consequence of the law, among others, became the mass demolition of statues of Lenin that were still in hundreds of Ukrainian cities. In 2015-2016, more than 1,200 statues were taken down across the country (Shevel 2016: 261).

This visible separation from the shared communist past parallel to signing an association agreement with the European Union and being granted a visa-free regime for Ukrainians sent worrying messages to the Kremlin that, starting from 2013-2014, was promoting public discourse on Ukraine being manipulated and used by the West in their interests and was trying to gain control over at least predominantly Russian-speaking territories. Nevertheless, it was rather the change in Ukrainian state politics and the law 'On the Legal Status and Honouring of the Memory of the Fighters for the Independence of Ukraine in the 20th Century' that became particularly useful for the new denazification narrative.

Vignette 2 - Stepan Bandera and the Great Patriotic War: old villains and new heroes in post-Euromaidan Ukraine

The history of the OUN (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) founded in 1929 in Polish-controlled Galicia) and the UPA (the Ukrainian Insurgent Army formed by OUN leaders in October 1942 and active until 1952) is one of

two competing interpretations; one coming from the Soviet times and maintained until the present by the Russian government. By them, the OUN and UPA are presented as small radical groups of nationalists and fascist collaborators who did not consider the interests of ordinary Ukrainians welcoming the Soviets on their lands. In his notorious piece on the 'historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians', Vladimir Putin refers to OUN's leader, Stepan Bandera, as one of the 'war criminals' who 'collaborated with Nazis'.

Stepan Bandera, a leader of the Ukrainian nationalist movement in the first half of the twentieth century, became a symbolic figure heavily loaded with different political meanings for Russians and Ukrainians. An underground fighter against Polish rule in the 1930s, Bandera was arrested and got a life sentence in a Polish prison for local protest campaigns and assassinations of Polish officials. He left prison in 1939 during the outbreak of World War II and first saw, together with his followers, the Nazi invasion as an opportunity for Ukrainian independence. As L'viv was occupied in June 1941, his supporters, without the Nazi's permission, declared the creation of the Ukrainian state. As Bandera and his group refused to withdraw the declaration of independence, he and many of his supporters were arrested and spent most of the war in the concentration camps. In late 1942, the Banderites (supporters of Bandera) formed the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) that, according to different sources, included over 40,000 fighters (Yekelchyk 2015: 55). From 1942 to 1945 there were periods when the UPA fought against Germans and when Germans and the UPA observed neutrality, expecting the common enemy, the Red Army, to approach. However, the most problematic pages of the UPA's history are related to the Poles' massacres in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia, interpreted by many historians as ethnic cleansing. Nowadays, many modern historians admit that the war crimes of Bandera and the UPA are not to be overlooked and have to be critically addressed (as opposed to glorifying them as national heroes by some authors and movements). However, neither the OUN nor the UPA can be viewed as only 'fascist collaborators', ignoring the context of the Ukrainian people's struggle for independence, the Great Famine of 1932-33, and other atrocities visited by the Soviets upon the region (Yurchuk 2017: 115; Yekelchyk 2015: 56). Until the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine, however, the debates around Bandera's image and Ukrainian nationalism, also with regard to World War II, took place mainly in scholarly debates and some public discussions.

The Euromaidan, or the Revolution of Dignity, brought mythology around Stepan Bandera to the public sphere. Indeed, the figure of Stepan Bandera and the OUN/UPA had considerable importance for the right-wing groups in Ukraine who were present among Maidan protesters carrying Ukrainian nationalist symbols. Ironically, however, it is in response to the Kremlin's propaganda

calling Maidan fascist and nationalist that many protesters who did not define themselves as nationalists started calling themselves 'banderivtsi' (the Banderites) (Portnov 2016). While some people readily picked up this term without a deep knowledge of Bandera's past and questionable actions, it is worth noting that for the majority, re-appropriating this pejorative term used by Russian media was a response to the Kremlin's attempts to present these peaceful protests as non-democratic and led by a small group of fascists.

In this light, Law no. 2538-1, 'On the Legal Status and Honouring of the Memory of the Fighters for the Independence of Ukraine in the 20th Century', prohibiting disrespectful attitudes toward the recognised fighters for Ukrainian independence, got a somewhat mixed reception. Not surprisingly, together with other decommunisation laws, this one received strong criticism from the Kremlin, which accused Ukraine of false interpretation of history and a wrong vision of past events. Nevertheless, many Ukrainian scholars, political activists and public figures criticised the package of laws.

On the one hand, the decommunisation package of laws, as many authors point out, presented probably one of the major decolonisation steps in the history of independent Ukraine and a clear political statement of Poroshenko and his government (Yurchuk 2017). Nevertheless, this package was clearly designed in a hurry without due attention to the details and formulations. For example, Law no. 2538-1 did not define what can be considered a 'disrespectful attitude toward the recognized fighters for Ukrainian independence'. The laws also were not consulted and discussed properly with the experts and larger public and needed further edits.

As a result, at the international level, there were concerns about the freedom of expression that the law banning the communist party and ideology would imply. Some experts also voiced criticism that these laws can be read as the 'fascisisation' of Ukraine that would be something that the Russian propagandistic discourse could make use of (Yurchuk 2017: 11). In sum, as Shevel argues, the laws did not result in genuine decommunisation of the country and did not succeed in moving Ukraine from a largely politicised approach to history toward European standards of memorialisation policies (Shevel 2016: 263).

Despite all this fair criticism, however, the period from 2015 to 2021 was a period of gradual decommunisation of Ukraine when both people and the government were trying to deal with their post-imperialist vs. post-communist past in the process of building a postcolonial national identity against the background of long-lasting Russian aggression in the eastern part of the country. The steady process of separation from the Russian dominance through language, religious separation, strengthening of the military and though inconsistent revision of the history and dealing with the memory politics was also sending a message

to the Kremlin. All these changes were regularly reported in the Russian state-controlled media as strong rise of radical nationalist sentiment in Ukraine compared by the Russian authorities to the Nazi regime.

Zhurzhenko discusses the controversial restrictions on Russian mass culture in post-Maidan Ukraine as an element of a complex palimpsest of post-Soviet culture wars as the government in Ukraine banned Russian TV channels and put restrictions on the import of Russian books and magazines; many Russian actors and artists were banned from entering Ukraine for supporting the Putin regime and visiting annexed Crimea (Zhurzhenko 2021). While this step was partially mutual, as Russia also limited the inflow of Ukrainian authors and pro-Ukrainian artists to the state channels, and anti-Ukrainian propaganda was largely present in Russian media, these restrictions still provoked concerns regarding freedom of art and expression as well as the limits of state censorship. Finally, but not least, the Russian government also used these restrictions and cultural struggles to support the discourse on Ukrainian radical nationalism and oppression of the Russian-speaking population, justifying the invasion in 2022.

It is also important to stress that radical right groups, though small, gained somewhat more acceptance during the state's forceful attacks on the protest when many protesters were shot. More organised, *Pravy Sektor* (Right Sector) and *Svoboda* (Freedom) (names of right-wing groups) activists were, therefore, more active and visible (Shevtsova 2017; Yekelchyk 2015). At this critical point, some symbols and slogans of right-wing forces originating in OUN/UPA struggles were introduced to the protest culture and later in the broader public discourse. The most known one, 'Slava Ukraini!' (Glory to Ukraine!) and its response, 'Heroiam slava!' (Glory to the heroes!) acquired new meaning on the Maidan (Yekelchyk 2015: 108). Another nationalist slogan from the 1940s, 'Slava natsii, smert voroham!' (Glory to the Nation, Death to Enemies), did not catch on in 2014. However, it acquired a new wave of popularity after the full-scale invasion in February 2022.

In other words, with the Euromaidan and the so-called European choice of Ukraine against the background of the Russian military aggression, Stepan Bandera stopped being just a historical figure for the broader population of Ukraine and Russia. For Ukrainians, it turned into a symbol of resistance, of defining Ukraine through everything that Russia is not, of independence and freedom – which may have little to do with the real historical figure of Stepan Bandera. For the Kremlin, on the contrary, the image of Bandera and 'banderivtsi', mythological Ukrainian nationalists aiming to kill the Russian-speaking population, proved to be instrumental in creating a narrative on the Nazification of Ukraine and the call for liberation of the 'brotherly nation'.

As the next section shows, all the transformations in the memory politics of Ukraine, some more efficient while others rather controversial, were to serve

the purpose of the self-identification of Ukraine as an independent state with close ties with the European Union and the symbolic West and separation from Russia. Often it has been done as an attempt to re-set the country's identity as not inferior to Russia, to define itself often through something that Russia is explicitly not.[1] Many postcolonial scholars tend to be very critical of such self-definition, arguing that such changes are often elitist and tend to only replace older discriminatory structures with new ones that keep existing inequalities instead of challenging them (Balibar 2015; Doran 2019). However, some Ukrainian scholars demonstrate that there is an alternative dimension to the changes, the hybrid one, which opens up a space for negotiations, critically approaching the past and looking for new meanings between Soviet and postcolonial historical narratives (Törnquist-Plewa & Yurchuk 2019: 17).

Nevertheless, finding out what direction these changes will take in post-war Ukraine is a topic of important future research, while the point of this piece is to show how the Russian government instrumentalised the same transformations to build up the image of neo-fascist Ukraine, manipulated and exploited by the West. Such perceptions are reflected in the notorious article by Vladimir Putin, 'On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians', discussed in the following section.

Vignette 3 – 'On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians'

On 12 July 2021, half a year before the full-scale invasion, an article allegedly written by Vladimir Putin was published on the official webpage of the President of Russia. The article is available in the Russian, Ukrainian and English languages. This piece, titled 'On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians', can serve as a condensed yet very clearly articulated summary of the post-imperialist and post-communist narratives mixed in the modern Russian ideology justifying; first, the annexation of Crimea and the support of separatists in the eastern part of Ukraine, and, later on, the full-scale invasion framed as the 'denazification' of the Ukrainian state. There are already quite a few works going into detail over the manipulations and historical inaccuracies in the text of the aforementioned article (see, for example, Mankoff 2022). This section, therefore, will only focus on some parts of the text that illustrate Russia's rejection of Ukrainian agency and subjectivity.

In his interview published on the Kremlin's website the following day, Putin comments that this 'analytical article' is a response to the 'anti-Russia' project and numerous threats to the state security of Russia. He also claims that millions of Russians whose interests need to be protected live on the territory historically belonging to Russia [the territory of modern Ukraine] (Kremlin.ru 2021).

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1   A good illustration of this goes back to the year 2003 to a book entitled 'Ukraine is not Russia' written by Leonid Kuchma, the second president of Ukraine.

The text goes through the history of Ukraine and Russia in a rather frivolous way, selecting seemingly random episodes over the long period starting from the foundation of the Kievan Rus and highlighting the moments in which, the article argues, the closeness and similarity of Ukrainian and Russian peoples are particularly apparent. This interpretation of history is quite close to the one presented in the Soviet history books. All attempts of the Ukrainian territories to gain independence from Russia are claimed as traitorous and have negative consequences for the ordinary people.

As Spivak (1988, 2010) argues, colonised people as subaltern are denied political and cultural self-representation; similarly, Ukrainians are denied the right to write their history. Instead, their history is re-written and interpreted *for* them. Colonisation or occupation is framed as 'liberation', a civilisational project realised by the dominant nation. For example, the War for Independence in 1648–1654, led by Ukrainian Cossacks that failed and made Bohdan Khmelnytsky, their leader, sign the protectorate agreement with Moscow, is presented in Putin's article as

> a war of liberation. It ended with the Truce of Andrusovo in 1667. The final outcome was sealed by the Treaty of Perpetual Peace in 1686. The Russian state incorporated the city of Kiev and the lands on the left bank of the Dnieper River, including Poltava region, Chernigov region, and Zaporozhye. Their inhabitants were reunited with the main part of the Russian Orthodox people. These territories were referred to as 'Malorossia' (Little Russia)' and later the name 'Ukraine' was used more often in the meaning of the Old Russian word 'okraina' (periphery), which is found in written sources from the 12th century, referring to various border territories.

Even though the article speaks of the 'unification' of two 'brotherly nations', as can be seen above, Ukraine in this picture is given the role of the 'Little Russia' and periphery. At the same time, the Ukrainian language is largely overlooked through the text, and Russian is presented as universal and superior, the language of brotherhood and solidarity, which largely ignores its imposed nature and the fact that often the predominance of spoken Russian in some parts of Ukraine is the result of the ethnic cleansing, resettling of people and language policies.

For Western colonialism, the central point of the civilising mission was race (Pekanan 2016), yet for the case of Ukrainians who can 'pass' for white Russians by appearance, the artificiality of other characteristics, such as language or culture, is stressed. The Ukrainisation (i.e. the introduction of the Ukrainian language

as the official) is presented as imposed on 'those who did not see themselves as Ukrainians'. The 'large Russian nations' was artificially divided by the Soviets, giving concessions to the pressure of nationalists on 'three separate Slavic peoples: Russian, Ukrainian and Belorussian . . . a triune people comprising Velikorussians [Great Russians], Malorussians [Small Russians] and Belorussians'.

The article then goes into criticism of the existing nationalism in Ukraine as it is usually portrayed in Russian media as aggressive and hostile towards Russians:

> Today, the 'right' patriot of Ukraine is only the one who hates Russia. Moreover, the entire Ukrainian statehood, as we understand it, is proposed to be further built exclusively on this idea. Hate and anger, as world history has repeatedly proved this, are a very shaky foundation for sovereignty, fraught with many serious risks and dire consequences.

With this phrase, the article justifies 'defending' Russians living in Ukraine and Russia from aggressive nationalists who are compared to Nazi Germany earlier in the text and from whom Russia already liberated Europe – and Ukraine – once already. Therefore, Putin announces,

> All the subterfuges associated with the anti-Russia project are clear to us. And we will never allow our historical territories and people close to us living there to be used against Russia. And to those who will undertake such an attempt, I would like to say that this way they will destroy their own country.

Finally, the text reproduces the idea of Ukrainian dependency on the 'neo-colonial' West:

> In the anti-Russia project, there is no place either for a sovereign Ukraine or for the political forces that are trying to defend its real independence. Those who talk about reconciliation in Ukrainian society, about dialogue, about finding a way out of the current impasse are labelled as 'pro-Russian' agents.

Therefore, Sovereign Ukraine is portrayed as something absurd: unless a part of Russia, in historical unity, it will be absorbed and exploited by the West. Ukrainian emancipation from Russia, in other words, is impossible and useless since 'true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia'. Through the text, the author often slides to what can clearly be read as threats

or warnings if Ukraine chooses to define its path independently. The speeches of Putin and Russia's representatives internationally in the period following June 2021, and especially before the invasion, were in line with this text and maintained the same idea: being essentially one nation, two countries are separated now due to the manipulations from the West and actions of radical nationalists inside Ukraine, all acting against popular interests. As the same information has been translated to the Russian population through the state-controlled media for years, it was well-received and believed by a large part of the population.

Russia has been promoting the idea that Ukraine is run by a fascist junta since Euromaidan in 2014, stressing the power of radical right groups. More recently, the separation of Ukraine from Russia has been interpreted as a 'forced change of identity' – forced on a 'triune', as the article defines it, nation; as a result, the article states, 'the Russian people in all may decrease by hundreds of thousands or even millions'. This invasion, in other words, is now also presented as saving the Russian people from being forcefully converted into Ukrainians. The war against Ukraine, approached from this perspective, is also a question of survival for the Russian nation.

Concluding remarks

Since the Euromaidan protests in 2013-14 and as a consequence of the annexation of Crimea and the military conflict in Donbas, the government of Ukraine declared its intentions for further approximation with the European Union and NATO supporting this declaration with specific steps, such as a substantial change in legislation and domestic and foreign policy. Against the background of this legal and political transformation, the change in societal perceptions and attitudes was taking place as more and more scholars and public figures were openly questioning the past and challenging the firm beliefs of the population. Growing ties with Europe led to a change of values, both at the societal and governmental level threatening Russia's presence and influence in the region. The slogan of former president Petro Poroshenko's campaign, '[Ukrainian]Army, Language, Faith', marked strong intentions of cultural and political separation from the imperialist power; strengthening the military to fight back against the Russian military presence; promoting the Ukrainian language to strengthen Ukrainian national identity; granting autonomy to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church to steadily decrease the influence of Moscow Patriarchy over the population of Ukraine.

This article argued that all these changes were driven by the desire for final separation from the Kremlin's influence rather than the radical nationalist spirit. While many of them had a strong rationale, they were also often rushed. Decision-making, in many cases, lacked transparency and could benefit from bringing more exerts and civil society activists to the discussion. Some moves,

like the ban of numerous TV channels and online resources, restrictions on the import of the literature, and vague formulations in the laws, could not withstand the criticism of Ukrainian and international experts, provoking concerns about the freedom of expression, speech and limits of censorship. How effective those changes were in shaping the new national identity and in strengthening national security, further research will show. However, it will be difficult now to separate the effects of the decolonisation/decommunisation struggle from the general effect of the full-scale war launched by Russia in 2022.

Finally, these separation efforts covering multiple spheres, from national legislation to teaching history in schools, were instrumentalised by Russian media and the Kremlin's propaganda to create an ideological foundation for the full-scale invasion of Russia to Ukraine in February 2022. With the centrality of the Great Patriotic War and liberation of Europe from fascism narrative supported by the long-lasting idea of Ukraine being an integral part of Russia, a smaller 'brother nation' that needs to be brought home from neo-colonial dependency on the West, the idea of a 'special operation' on the 'denazification' of Ukraine gained broad support among some groups of the Russian population as well as in some countries that remain Russian allies. With the invasion of 2022, it is clear that the Russian government is still not eager to recognise Ukrainian sovereignty, subjectivity and agency. However, it seems that Ukraine got the momentum to leave its postcoloniality behind and get broader international recognition and support. As the war is in its acute phase, it remains to be seen what the situation of the Ukrainian government and the people of Ukraine, who now have high hopes for rebuilding a new, more democratic state post-war, will be. It also remains to be seen if the Western world will meet these hopes and expectations and if we are about to see a more democratic Europe with an expanded European Union in the coming years.

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