

IDENTITY AND PROPAGANDA IN RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN HYBRID WARFARE

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Introduction

Western media and experts refer to the violation of the territorial integrity of Ukraine, and the armed conflict in the Donbas region as: the “Ukrainian crisis”. The term “hybrid warfare”, however, serves as a better designation for the series of actions conducted by Russia against Ukraine, as it provides a more comprehensive understanding of the causes, orientation and nature of these events. “Hybrid warfare” is a military strategy that combines conventional war, cyber war, and small war tactics. Some of the fundamental components of “hybrid warfare” include information dissemination, psychological actions, and cyber attacks aimed at both the physical and technological infrastructure of a state and its citizens¹.

According to the Deputy Secretary General of NATO A. Vershbow, “‘hybrid warfare’ combines military threat, lurking intervention, covert supply of weapons and weapons systems, economic blackmail, diplomatic hypocrisy and manipulation within the media using straight misinformation”. Thus the American diplomat described Moscow’s actions in respect of Ukraine and the growing threat to NATO members from Russia².

When analyzing the discrete components of the Russian Ukrainian conflict, it is evident that the informational strategies and propaganda used by the actors on both sides of the conflict played a significant role in the war itself, and were an effective means of shaping public opinion. One of the most notable ways of conditioning public opinion was through the repeated invocation of “national identity”, or “identity” as a whole.

¹ **Stoltenberg: NATO Foreign Ministers approved a new strategy for a hybrid war.** <<http://ria.ru/world/20151130/1332861135.html#ixzz3vYQG0jU1>> (accessed November 20, 2015).

² **ESDP and NATO: better cooperation in view of the new security challenges.** Speech by NATO Deputy Secretary General Ambassador Alexander Vershbow at the Interparliamentary Conference on CFSP/CSDP, Riga, Latvia, 5 March 2015. <http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_117919.htm?selectedLocale=en> (accessed March 5, 2015).

In the post-Soviet scientific linguistic tradition, the term “nation”, as well as its derivative concept – “national identity”, not only denote civil concepts (as in the Western tradition), they also have strong “ethnic” connotations as well. The interpretation of national identity is not just limited to the political realm, it is also defined by cultural communities, which are united by ethnicity. The civil-political and ethno-cultural conception of identity has also become more intertwined in recent times. Cross-cultural interactions and the convergence of close ethnicities (e.g. Russian and Ukrainians in Donbas), combined with a lack of a clear official standardization of ethnicity, has resulted in the populace of Ukraine increasingly turning towards ethnic identity as an organizational focal point.

R. Ashmore, K. Doe and T. McLaughlin-Volpe generally define social identity as an aggregate of categorical accessories, i.e. a number of characteristics inherent to a person, which are (or implied) also shared by a group of people³.

According to L. Nagorna, the most effective social organizer is identity because it is fused with the political, cultural, and religious spheres, and is also interwoven with many other aspects. Identity is a determinant of the networks that connect humans to one another within a group, or within an institution, or to an idea etc. Thus, the term “identity” covers a complex array of meanings, expectations, representations, political preferences, and commitments to a particular system of values⁴.

There are many different kinds of identity, such as national, ethnic, linguistic, and religious. All of them share similar cultural classification criteria and often overlap and reinforce one another. Each of them independently or collectively can mobilize and sustain a strong community⁵.

It will be shown that the phenomenon of national identity can function as a tool to build social unity, but at the same time can also be manipulated by propaganda. The centrality of national identity in information warfare arises from its capacity to effectively distill and actualize issues related to language,

³ **Ashmore, Richard D.; Deaux, Kay; McLaughlin-Volpe, Tracy** 2004. An Organizing Framework for Collective Identity: Articulation and Significance of Multidimensionality *Psychological Bulletin*. Copyright 2004 by the American Psychological Association, Vol. 130, No. 1, pp. 80–114.

⁴ **Nagorna, L.** 2008. Regional Identities: The Ukrainian context. Kyev: I. F. Kuras Institute of Political and Ethnic Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, p. 34.

⁵ **Panchuk, M.** 2013. To the question of identification of Ukrainian citizens. – Scientific notes of I. F. Kuras Institute of Political and Ethnic Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, № 5 (67), p. 14.

culture, history, and values. Thus it is a powerful organizational agent that can be used to further facilitate schisms between social communities, especially if these communities are already endowed with disparate identity markers. In the course of a conflict, the propaganda that is disseminated by each of the opposing parties will engender a new set of socio-cultural values and priorities, and will result in the creation of alternative perceptions, as well as the formation of new identities for the populace. (In the Ukrainian conflict, this was manifested by the process of “Ukrainianization” wherein national civic patriotism was strongly endorsed by the representatives of each of the different ethnic groups in Ukraine, or conversely became substantiated in the denial of Ukrainian identity by the pro-separatist residents of the Donbas region).

Identity as a propaganda tool

It is worthwhile to examine how propaganda can be used to manipulate identity markers, and more specifically to explain how it was used in relation to the conflict in the Donbas. The Russian propaganda machine works towards the popularization of three main ideas. First it asserts the alleged oppression of Russians and Russian-speakers by the new administration in Kyiv. This issue has, with varying degrees of intensity always been present in the rhetoric of Russian propagandists, but became particularly strident after the events of the Euromaidan and was further augmented by a fallacious depiction of far-right nationalists, “banderivtsi” and members of the “Right sector”, colluding to foment a “revolution” in order to bring a “junta” to power. Another important factor in intensifying the hysterical alarm over the fate of ethnic Russians, and Russian speakers in Ukraine was the hasty abolition of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, or the “Law on the Principles of State Language Policy”⁶. According to the Russian propagandists, this

⁶ From 1989–2012 the language policy in Ukraine was regulated by the Law on Languages, which was adopted at the end of the Soviet Union, during the perestroika era. This law ratified the Ukrainian language as the official state language, but at the same time enacted broad guarantees that the Russian language and other languages of national minorities would be protected and could be practiced in the spheres of education, media, culture and social life. The language situation in Eastern and Southern Ukraine is characterized by the ubiquity of the Russian language in social and everyday life. In these areas there is also disparity between ethnic and linguistic identity. A certain portion of ethnic Ukrainians and other national minorities in these regions consider Russian to be their mother tongue. The rights of the Russian-speaking (and other non-Ukrainian) populations are also protected by the Constitution and by

was essentially “the abolition and prohibition of the Russian language in Ukraine”. Hence the protection of Russians and Russian speakers was used as one of the primary rationales to justify the annexation of Crimea, and was also used as a reason to support the separatists in Donbas. The ensuing rhetoric of many officials of the Russian Federation in the summer of 2014 was rife with hyperbole, and denunciations. Even high-level Russian officials accused the Ukrainian government of undertaking “ethnic purges”⁷.

The second notion forwarded by propagandists sought to characterize the conflict as an ethnic one, wherein the South East regions of Ukraine, or the so-called “Novorossiya” (“New Russia”), had historically been part of Russia. The incident that actuated the broad popularization of this idea emerged from V. Putin’s press conference when the president stated that

*/.../ Kharkov, Lugansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Mykolaiv, Odessa were not parts of Ukraine in tsarist times. These territories were transferred in the twenties by the Soviet government, and why they did it, only God knows.*⁸

specific legislation. At the same time, it should be noted that the socio-cultural heterogeneity of Ukraine and the varied historical experiences of each of the regions precipitates the rivalries that occur between the regions, and language is often used as a pretext for political infighting. The language issue is also often used as an effective means of mobilizing the electorate. In order to rally more loyal pro-government voters in 2012, the Party of Regions (the party of ex-President Viktor Yanukovich) adopted a new “language law”: “the Law on the State Language Policy”. The new law retained the Ukrainian language as the official state language, but at the same time stipulated that “regional languages”, could also be declared as the official languages of each of the administrative-territorial regions of Ukraine, if at least 10% of the population were non-Ukrainians and they wished to make their mother tongue the official language. This law was very controversial, and its opponents argued that it was a camouflaged attempt to elevate the status of the Russian language. Pre-election opportunism and the symbolic nature of the law are evidenced by the fact that since its adoption nothing has actually changed in the state language policy, and in fact nothing was ever even implemented. Thus it was only a weak and symbolic gesture undertaken by the Party of Regions to demonstrate that it would fulfill some of its pre-election promises. The hasty abolition of the law in 2014 following the post-revolutionary euphoria of the Maidan movement was the perfect gift for the Russian propaganda machine, which immediately launched an offensive. The new government was accused of seeking “the prohibition of the Russian language” in Ukraine. The interim President, O. Turchynov quickly vetoed the repeal of the law, but the propaganda had already hit its mark.

⁷ **Lavrov: In Ukraine they are enacting scenarios of ethnic cleansing.**

<<http://ria.ru/world/20140617/1012419004.html>> (accessed December 10, 2015).

⁸ **Putin’s speech: New Russia and other bright quotes.**

<<http://news.bigmir.net/world/809994-Vystuplenie-Putina---Novorossija--i-drugie-jarkie-citaty>> (accessed December 05, 2015).

Soon after the press conference, with the efforts of both the regular Kremlin propagandists and representatives of the academic community, the concept of “Novorossiya” began to gain purchase, and went on to acquire specific territorial and qualitative characteristics, yet still remained faithful to the principles outlined in the president’s statements.

And finally, the third postulate, which completes the logic of the first two, is that the creation of new separatist entities, which are united by the epithet “Novorossiya”, are the realization of the self-determination of another, non-Ukrainian (i.e. Russian) identity that is inherent to these territories. The Chairman of the Supervisory Board of the Institute of Demography, Migration and Regional Development of the Russian Federation, Yuriy Krupnov calls this identity – “the people of Novorossiya”. “According to the UN Charter, the people of Novorossiya have a right to self-determination, and courageously seek to exercise this right⁹.

Trends of propaganda with the usage of the image of identity

An examination of the main groups targeted by the propaganda apparatus is also informative:

- 1) For the population residing in the conflict zone, the appeal to identity typically occurred in the initial stages of the conflict. Much of the rhetoric was colored by fear, threats and the inevitable cultural genocide of the Russian-speaking residents of Donbas. This hyperbole was instrumental in inciting the populace to protest and occupy the administrative and police agencies of the region. The population in the conflict zone was also subjected to continual informational distortions of the Russian media as it made free use of terms such as: “junta”, “banderovtsy”, “karатели” (punishers) etc., to characterize the Ukrainian government and army.
- 2) In the unoccupied territories of Ukraine, Russian propagandists attempted to foster mutual antipathy between the populace by inventing torture incidents, broadcasting humiliations suffered by Ukrainian soldiers, and forcing Ukrainian prisoners of war to march through the streets of Donetsk on Ukraine’s Independence Day, August 24, 2014. These “special events” as well as many other carefully orchestrated incidents

⁹ **Krupnov, U.** 2015. Kremlin must defend the UN Charter and to give the people of New Russia to realize the right to self-determination. <<http://istina.com.ua/news/yuriy-krupnov-kreml-dolzhen-zashchitit-ustav-oon-i-dat-narodu-novorossii-vozmozhnost-realizovat-pravona-samoopredelenie>> (accessed December 01, 2015).

were designed to provoke Ukrainian patriots, and foster mutual feelings of disgust and hatred among the residents of the Donbas region. The actions were undertaken with the intention of initiating an acrimonious separation between the ethnicities of the region, which would then show that Ukraine could not maintain stability in the region, and thus doom any hope of it remaining as a part of Ukraine.

- 3) The Citizens of the Russian Federation were inculcated with the idea that the Russian people living in Eastern Ukraine were facing severe oppression, and it was necessary to assist them. This depiction of events was instrumental in instigating the mass volunteer movement “to defend our brothers in Donbas”, and became a de facto endorsement of the occupation of the Ukrainian state.

Demeaning depictions are often used as a way of minimizing empathy towards an opponent, and ensuring that they are not recognized as humans who are also capable of thinking, feeling, and deciding independently. The adversary becomes dehumanized and is perceived simply as the enemy. The use of derogatory names such as “ukropy” and “koloradu” (dismissive slang terms for Ukrainians and separatists, respectively) to characterize the opponent, were adopted by both parties in the conflict.

- 4) There is a sustained attempt to convince the international community that Ukraine is divided into two culturally distinct areas: Asian and European. This is further enhanced by the allegation that Ukrainian forces are comprised of far-right nationalists and neo-Nazis. To some extent there are a handful of politicians and military battalions that do fit this sobriquet, but by accepting the impression that this is the prevailing state of affairs, and perpetuating the idea that Ukraine is a Nationalist haven that is hostile to European values, the relationship between Ukraine and the European community becomes ever more tenuous. Furthermore, by accentuating the civil and socio-cultural split of Ukraine, and promoting violence as the only way of maintaining the unity of the state, it becomes easier to affix the label of failed state to Ukraine.

Identity as an object of propaganda

The ways in which identity and, more importantly, self-identification are transformed by propaganda are considered here.

The various propaganda operations, the empty rhetoric, and the emphasis on ethnic tension in “Novorossiya” are in fact repudiated by the extensive use of the Russian language both by members of the Ukrainian military, and

the considerable number of non-Ukrainian soldiers presently serving in the Ukrainian army and volunteer battalions. These armed forces are comprised of natives from the Mykolaiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Odessa, Kharkiv regions, which are precisely the same regions that were so casually incorporated into “Novorossiia” by the Russian propaganda juggernaut. The presence of these ethnic Russian and Russian speaking soldiers in the Ukrainian armed forces, roundly refutes Moscow’s statements accusing Ukraine of oppressing Russians and Russian-speakers. If this were true, it would be very improbable and illogical that these soldiers would fight on the Ukrainian side. This begs the question, how could a Russian-speaking Ukrainian supporter, let alone patriot, even consider joining the Ukrainian forces if his national and cultural or linguistic rights were being oppressed?

In a survey of the residents of Donbas conducted in 2013, only 6.3% felt that linguistic issues were among those most in need of reform¹⁰. A simple fact that also puts this in perspective is that Russia denounced Viktor Yushchenko for being a “nationalistic” President, and further alleged that during his presidency attacks against the rights of Russians had intensified. Yushchenko was also accused of hampering Russians in their efforts to learn and retain their mother tongue. The aforementioned survey however contradicts these allegations and found that the only 16.6% of Russians residing in the Donbas region felt that they were being disenfranchised, and only 6.9% perceived that there was a lack of opportunity to develop their national culture¹¹.

Furthermore, despite this ostensible cultural crisis in Ukraine, and in the Donbas region in particular, such “persecution” never galvanized a significant pro-Russian movement, or pro-Russian organization of any consequence. In the parliamentary elections of 2012, the “Russkiy bloc” party won a miniscule 0.4% of the vote in the Donetsk region, and gathered only 0.47% of the vote in the Lugansk region¹².

¹⁰ **The most pressing problems for residents of Donbas are of a socio-economic nature.** See <<http://press.unian.net/pressnews/976722-naibolee-aktualnyimi-dlya-jiteley-Donbasayavlyayutsya-problemyi-sotsialno-ekonomicheskogo-haraktera-issledovanie.html>> (accessed October 08, 2015).

¹¹ **Features of the language situation in Ukraine.** <http://inlang.linguanet.ru/Cis/CisLanguageConditions/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=2560&SHOWALL_1=1> (accessed November 16, 2015).

¹² **Central Election Commission.** Election of the People’s Deputies of Ukraine 2012. <<http://www.cvk.gov.ua/pls/vnd2012/wp302?PT001F01=900&pf7171=56>> (accessed November 16, 2015).

This clearly demonstrates a marked lack of public support for these parties that were ostensibly formed to protect the rights of Russians and Russian speakers and furthermore demonstrates a complete absence of harassment by state authorities.

Although the conflict in Ukraine is not confined to ethnic categories it does not mean that identity has not played a role in it. Generally speaking, identity will become a marker for opposing sides in any conflict and is not necessarily limited to only ethnic disputes. In every war, a clash of identities is inevitable, because one faction must somehow demarcate the enemy from “the self”, and then espouse for their destruction. In this way, mass consciousness generates the stereotypes that sustain the attendant propaganda, which is then used to construct a reality that of “us vs. them” and “friend vs. foe”.

In the Ukraine’s case, it is important to realize that this binary separation was not present before the conflict, but rather arose in the midst of it, while the Donetsk People’s Republic and the Lugansk People’s Republic were being formed. Any sentiment that argues otherwise is a clear post factum fabrication and is part of a determined effort to convince individuals and communities that the altered political reality was a natural event, rather than the result of ulterior motives. An extremely subjective and emotional text from one Donetsk blogger highlights the fact that there were no grounds for conflict prior to the war:

It’s hard to believe, but two years ago a lot of Donetsk residents carried Ukrainian flags and sang the anthem. I was among them. There were the Euro-2012 football matches, which were an incredible emotional high, and we communicated perfectly with the guys from Franik (Ivano-Frankivsk – S.P.), Poltava and Kyiv. For my separatism, I would like to first of all thank Ukrainian television, the online media and, of course, the valiant Ukrainian army in all its manifestations. It was you who made us enemies, you who pitted the Ukrainians against each other; you who forced them to kill each other; and you who keep doing it. You killed the Ukrainian in me, bastards.¹³

It would, however, be specious to think that an alternative non-Ukrainian identity shared by the residents of Donbas was the consequence of only military operations. The aforementioned state of affairs did not happen by accident and was actually the result of an altogether different set of socio-cultural circumstances peculiar to the area of Donbas. The Donbas region is inhabited by many so-called biethnors. Biethnors are people with mixed Ukrainian-

¹³ **And I am new as a separatist.** – Lieve Magazine “Lair intolerant medieval obscurantists”. <<http://shrek1.livejournal.com/971999.html>> (accessed November 17, 2015).

Russian ethnic heritage who have not traditionally defined themselves according to situational changes in ethnic identity, or by the very small role that ethnicity plays in the hierarchy of identities.

They rather have affiliated their identity with the territory or the region in which they live. This special form of territorial patriotism or regional identity was formed before the war. It became more fixed during the conflict when the region itself started to become more antagonistic towards Ukraine. Current studies need to consider that, in addition to ethnic and national conceptions of identity, “territorial patriotism” and its attendant connections is perhaps an even more important impetus in identity formation. According to Charles Rick, a factor of the regional identity is “nationalitarian” meaning that this phenomenon is similar in nature to the national sense of identity, but is a type of patriotism that endorses a region or seeks to give voice to a regional group¹⁴.

The components that comprise the regional identity of the Donbas region include: Ukrainian-Russian biethnicity (a dual identity wherein the line between Ukrainian and Russian identities is blurred), the dominance of the Russian language, and an industrial culture that exalts the Soviet past and its accompanying symbols. This reverence for the previous Soviet culture naturally extends to the current Russian state. The distinct linguistic-cultural and ethnic features of the region mean that the affinity with other regions is unstable and the political loyalty of the population is rather focused on the region and the local elite.

Since 2004, various election campaigns have witnessed the unprecedented political mobilization of voters who are motivated by regional identity. Symbols and identities rather than policies have gained favor with voters and have played a decisive role in the process. Local elites use media outlets that are under their control to instill a sense of “Donbas patriotism” in minds of the regional residents. A milder variant of this mindset is substantiated in the continual emphasis of the uniqueness of the region, its economic power and its sports achievements. This is supplemented by continuous criticism of the attempts to extend the Ukrainian centered cultural matrix to the region. The vulgarization of the unique aspects of the Donbas region has resulted in an exaggerated sense of regional patriotism, and a belief that the region is somehow both superior, and indispensable to the rest of Ukraine. This is condensed in the idea “Donbas feeds the whole Ukraine” which assumes

¹⁴ **Rick, Ch.** 1996. The phenomenon of identity. – Education and social development of the region, № 3–4, p. 212.

the attitude that the region must sustain the underdeveloped “nationalistic” western part of the country.

As soon as the separatist territories of Donbas were no longer under the control of the Ukrainian government, the formation of altogether different, non-Ukrainian identity became greatly accelerated. Most importantly, the instigator of this process was the intensive propaganda.

In order to distract the populace from the economic crisis suffered by the “republics” the leaders must continually monitor and maintain the proper ideological atmosphere. This is achieved by synthesizing a blend of hyperbolic territorial patriotism, Russian policies, and a simulacrum of Soviet symbolism. The common denominator of this propaganda is its anti-Ukrainian stance.

According to D. Tymchuk, since July 1st, 2015 the “DPR” media broadcast 24,017 reports with “thematic” content. The themes of the reports are controlled by the relevant “DPR” agencies. Identity is the common thread of the reports, which encompass themes such as: “the removal of social tension” (5653), “Ukraine is to blame for the troubles in Donbas” (4423), “achievements and development prospects for the DPR” (3903), “the promotion of A. Zaharchenko” (2278), “the development of an image ‘junta’” (2033), “Russia’s support for the Republic” (1016) and the others¹⁵.

With these media reports the inhabitants of the occupied parts of Donbas, who live in very difficult circumstances, and actually struggle to survive, are instead directed towards thinking about their own identity and their deep connections to the region.

In his blog Philip Myzuka writes:

*The Soviet mentality, the myth of Donbas’ disobedience and lack of common ground with other residents of Ukraine has played a bad joke on these people..... And the residents do not understand who they are. Ukrainians? Russians? Novorossiyans? Are they solely to blame? And do the rest of the Ukrainian citizens want to maintain relations with the population of Donbas? Or, is it an abscess that needs to be removed?*¹⁶

This is a deft summarization of the issues that the residents of the region faced in the first year of the war and illustrates their uncertain identity.

¹⁵ **Media: “DPR” often blame Ukraine, and write about the “achievements of the republic”.** <http://zn.ua/UKRAINE/smi-dnr-chasche-vsego-vinyat-vo-vsem-ukrainu-i-pishut-ob-uspehah-respubliki-is-197447_.html> (accessed December 29, 2015).

¹⁶ **Myzuka, Ph.** I was born in Debaltseve. <<http://petrimazepa.com/greenlight/born.html>> (accessed December 17, 2015).

Conclusions

The conflict in the Donbas is part of the “hybrid warfare” strategy enacted by Russia against Ukraine, which has seen the deployment of an impressive array of informational and propaganda components. Propaganda assisted in inciting armed clashes between Ukrainian citizens, despite a lack of historical animosity, territorial claims, or ethnic resentment.

Identity is a crucial aspect of the information war, and can be manipulated by sustained propaganda. In order to camouflage their participation in the conflict, Russia has, from the beginning, sought to characterize the conflict in terms of language, culture, history, and thus confer upon it all the necessary features of an internal ethnic struggle between Russians (Russian-speakers) and Ukrainians. This depiction of events legitimizes their support of the separatists (the protection of ethnic Russian) and justifies the secession of the South-Eastern territories (the right of nations to self-determination). An equally important goal was to inculcate fear among the population of Donbas through the use of stereotypes, which are intrinsic to a regional society, and through the creation of artificial threats to the regional identity, together with the concomitant perception that the government in Kiev is the source of these threats.

With the onset of direct military clashes and the initiation of a massive propaganda campaign aimed at reinforcing the territorial identity of Donbas, the orientation of the populace quickly became aligned with the Russian perspective, and its attendant archaic, quasi-Soviet worldview. As this adjustment becomes more ossified, the separatist territories will have an altogether different spectrum of political, media and humanitarian organizations from the rest of Ukraine, and will define themselves accordingly.

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