

Narratives of the Ukrainian Crisis: The Power of Discourse and Media Wars

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This article focuses on the political narratives of the Ukrainian crisis. In Ukraine, the escalating media wars, harsh political rhetoric, and use of historically-powerful images and language to describe and prescribe courses of action need to be understood as fundamental elements in the management of the crisis and of our understanding of what is at stake. This is not to say that the presence of Russian troops on the Ukrainian border is not real, or that the violence on the streets of Ukraine is not important; rather it is to underline that a strict focus on the 'facts' of the crisis fails to address the deep connections between the emotional, discursive and ideological dimensions on the one hand and, on the other, the political, military and economic decisions, which they entail.

The Historical Narrative: Evoking World War II

One of the central features in the media and in the political discourse during this crisis is the comparison to World War II. Images of President Putin transfigured into Hitler circulated widely in social media, opinion pieces comparing Russia's imperialist ambitions to Hitler's appeared in important outlets, and even important politicians, such as the German Minister of Finances Wolfgang Schäuble and former U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton compared President Putin's annexation of Crimea to Hitler's 1938 annexation of the Sudetenland. In fact, there are remarkable similarities between President Pu-

tin's argument that ethnic Russians in Crimea required protection and Hitler's claims to protect ethnic Germans in Czechoslovakia. However, one must acknowledge that the choice to use comparisons with World War II and Hitler serve a more immediate purpose: to shock and mobilize Europeans against their worst fears, which remain, as Thomas Diez has argued, "in Europe's own past".¹

Also important are the reasons why this ethnic discourse has been activated in Moscow. This needs to be understood from the perspective of the changes ongoing in the Russian Federation since the end of the Soviet Union and especially since President Putin's second term. Igor Torbakov and Lilia Shevtsova both underline the consolidation of a new vision for the Russian regime, named Putinism. Power is personal and highly centralized around a small group of people near President Putin; political and economic power has been merged and protected by the absence of the rule of law; and the statist-militarist view of authority remains in place.² This process has been accompanied by revisionist state rhetoric, including neo-Stalinist trends (the rehabilitation of the Soviet

1 Thomas Diez, "Europe's Others and the Return of Geopolitics" (*Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 17, No. 2, July 2004), pp. 319-335.

2 Igor Torbakov, "Insecurity Drives Putin's Crimea Response" (EurasiaNet.org, 3 March 2014). Lilia Shevtsova, "Implosion, Atrophy, or Revolution?" (*Journal of Democracy*, No. 23, No. 3, July 2012), pp. 19-32.



leader),³ a reconstructed narrative around Russia's role in the Great Patriotic War (World War II), and the reintroduction of the Soviet national anthem and of the military parades in the Red Square, all coupled with President Putin's statement that the end of the Soviet Union was the greatest tragedy of the 20th century.

These trends are a fundamental element to understand the current crisis in Ukraine, since it sets the stage both domestically and abroad for a more relevant and powerful Russia. Domestically, this new discourse has been accompanied by more restrictive laws on demonstrations and protests and by a narrative of the "internal enemy" and "foreign agents", as the new restrictive laws on NGO funding illustrate. In the current Ukrainian crisis, the fear of the "fascists" in Kiev is also reminiscent of the Great Patriotic War. Although one can easily justify Russia's concern with subversive movements funded by external actors – just look at Ukraine and Georgia, for instances, or the Arab Spring – and with the nature of some members of the interim Ukrainian government, the choice to combat and denounce this by resorting to this type of speech further serves the purpose of rallying those longing for the glory days of imperial Russia behind a renovated image. A neo-Soviet identity has been gradually reestablished as an alternative to western promises of democracy and prosperity under liberal democracy, and it has ample appeal throughout the former-Soviet countries.

Thus, we see that both in Western media and in Russia, the evocation of World War II memories and language serves a manipulative purpose more than a guide for action. By demonizing President Putin, the possibilities of dialogue with the West have been severed. By appealing to an imperial image that is linked to an authoritarian past, Russia patches over its weak democratic credentials and proposes an alternative approach to the post-Soviet societies, amply frustrated with western policies.

The Cold War Rhetoric and Proxy Wars

One of the remarkable aspects of the Ukrainian crisis is that it quickly became a crisis of U.S.-Russia relations with increasing similarities to Cold War rhetoric.

The U.S. Propaganda

From Washington, the message to Russia has been a denunciation of the illegal military incursion into a sovereign country and annexation of its territory, against all the principles founding the European security order, including the Helsinki Final Act. President Obama has underlined this, as has Secretary of State John Kerry and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations (UN) Samantha Power. Based on this logic, the Obama administration has pursued a strategy of international isolation of Russia in the UN. On March 27, 2014, a resolution was ap-

proved at the UN General Assembly supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity, with 11 votes against and 58 abstentions out of 168 votes, after a similar resolution was vetoed by Russia on the UN Security Council. Also, the G7 leaders together with the European leaders approved a statement condemning the Crimean referendum and suspending their participation in G8 meetings. The imposition of economic sanctions, in which the United States has closely coordinated with European partners, is a further step in this isolation strategy.

However, the choice of economic instruments is contested inside the U.S. political establishment, and more extreme voices have used this crisis to play domestic politics. Senator John McCain calls President Obama's policy "feckless", and says it fails to demonstrate American strength in the face of adversaries.⁴ Senator McCain and U.S. Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland were in Kiev during demonstrations, and showed their support for the opposition forces, including the Nationalist *Svoboda* Party. This position seeks to pressure President Obama to act tough and portrays Russia not as a valuable partner to the U.S. – as it was for most of the last 13 years of the War on Terror – but as an adversary, the new enemy. By doing this, the hardline strategy delegitimizes President Obama's attempts to establish dialogue with Russian authorities, and it facilitates a military escalation to the crisis, especially within the NATO framework.

In a recent op-ed published in the *Washington Post*, several U.S. Senators further reinforced the idea that European partners are weary of U.S. reluctance to reinforce NATO members' security. They argue for repositioning the West *vis-à-vis* this new Russia, which "has taken a dark turn [and with which] there is no resetting [and no] business as usual".⁵ These steps include: the expansion of sanctions to "where it hurts"; the development of a "strategic response" to Russia, which would include a refocusing of NATO on "its core missions of deterrence and collective defense"; increasing military investment and repositioning of more NATO troops along Russia's border; the development of a new transatlantic energy partnership to reduce Europe's energy dependence on Russia; and new efforts to win the war of ideas among Russian speaking populations of Europe, namely through the "private sector". These steps spell out where U.S. interests lay in this crisis, in a changing international context. It also reinforces divisions inside Europe, between those defending a more visible U.S. presence in the continent due to perceptions of Russia as an imperialist state with expansionist policies and those willing to develop a more autonomous path for

3 Emily Whitaker, "Stalin's Resurrection" (*History Today*, Vol. 62, No. 9, 2012).

4 Jake Miller, "John McCain blames Obama's 'feckless' foreign policy for Ukraine crisis" (*CBS News*, 3 March 2014).

5 John McCain, John Barrasso, John Hoeven and Ron Johnson, "It is time for the West to move ahead without Russia" (*Washington Post*, 26 April 2014).



Europe's security, which requires more constructive and less antagonistic policies towards Russia.

Various media outlets, think tanks and academics have replicated these divisions. Public opinion on the crisis has changed as a result, only adding to pressure on decision-makers. In democratic context, public opinion is fundamental to justify actions, but regrettably it leaves unanswered many of the questions regarding the role of the United States and European countries in the crisis, and it fails to address Russian foreign policy as legitimate, if illegal. Ultimately, official rhetoric serves the purpose of justifying a specific set of actions, rather than shedding light on ongoing dynamics.

The Russian Propaganda

Russia's rhetoric serves similar objectives. Foremost, the domestic and Russian-speaking populations are the main target of Russian propaganda. The focus on the legality of Russian action in Ukraine is presented side-by-side with the narrative of the threat and illegality of the government in Kiev. This message is declared by all elements of the Russian political establishment, starting with President Putin in several of his speeches and press conferences.⁶ This approach serves two main goals. The first is the actual contestation of facts and their meaning, namely regarding the agreement reached on February 21, between the Polish, French and German Foreign Ministers, on the one hand and the Ukrainian President and opposition forces, on the other. According to Russian authorities, the Ukrainian opposition breached the agreement when they occupied government buildings and passed illegal laws ousting President Yanukovich. By this logic the current government is illegal because the ouster constitutes a *coup d'état*. Remarkably, in his March 4 press conference, President Putin suggested that the opposition had used the fact that President Yanukovich left Kiev to attend a conference in Kharkiv (according to *Russia Today's* translation) to take over power.⁷ That the Ukrainian President would leave Kiev at the height of tensions to attend a conference (or even a meeting) is highly unlikely and even disingenuous. The European and U.S. version of events is that the President Yanukovich refused to sign the agreement reestablishing the 2004 constitution and had fled the country to Russia during the night, leaving power.⁸

Another example of the contestation of crucial facts of this crisis is the situation of the Russian minorities in Ukraine, especially in Crimea, and the threats to their security, following the seizure of power by opposition forces in Kiev. The official discourse in Russia states clearly that an imminent threat was upon these minori-

ties and that an official letter by the legitimate President Yanukovich, requested that Russian troops be deployed to Crimea, "to establish legitimacy, peace, law and order".⁹ Not only the work of the OSCE observers was not facilitated, which could serve to prove these charges, it is not clear which Russian minorities Russia will protect. There is a great deal of confusion over whether Russia is looking to protect Russian citizens (those holding Russian passports), ethnic Russians or Russian-speaking minorities.

Either way, there is large scope for intervention throughout the post-Soviet space, which naturally creates anxiety. This links to the construction of an area of legitimate intervention for Russia, which is designed based on what Gearóid Ó Tuathail calls the "eternal national geo-imaginary". This is a political and territorial space of the Russian nation that is bound not by legal borders, but by "imaginary affective ones".¹⁰ This includes the territories with historical links to Russia, the places where Russian soldiers have been buried, and where historical injustices have been committed, such as the decision by the Bolsheviks to award Crimea to Ukraine.

The second goal of Russian propaganda, which was particularly strong from February 21 to March 16, day of the referendum in Crimea, is to construct a reality that justifies future Russian action. What this means is that rather than discourse reflecting the reality in Ukraine, discourse is part of the process of constructing a new reality, which will create the conditions for intervention. Timothy Snyder makes this argument brilliantly:

"Propaganda is thus not a flawed description, but a script for action. If we consider Putin's propaganda in [...] Soviet terms, we see that the invasion of Crimea was not a reaction to an actual threat, but rather an attempt to activate a threat so that violence would erupt that would change the world. Propaganda is part of the action it is meant to justify. From this standpoint, an invasion from Russia would lead to a Ukrainian nationalist backlash that would make the Russian story about fascists, so to speak, retrospectively true. If Ukraine is unable to hold elections, it looks less like a democracy. Elections are scheduled, but cannot be held in regions occupied by a foreign power. In this way, military action can make propaganda seem true".¹¹

Both goals are equally dangerous. On the one hand, the situation in Ukraine will continue to be destabilized and hard to manage, especially if the May 25 elections fail to provide a legitimate government capable of reposition-

6 See the press conference on 4 March 2014, and the speech on 18 March 2014.

7 Video available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hg_4D_qR18s.

8 See "President Putin's Fiction: 10 False Claims about Ukraine" (U.S. Department of State, 5 March 2014).

9 On 3 March, the Russian ambassador to the UN, Vitaly Churkin, presented to the UN Security Council a letter by President Yanukovich with these requests.

10 Gearóid Ó Tuathail, "Putin's Annexation of Crimea Speech Annotated" (*Critical Geopolitics*, 18 March 2014).

11 Timothy Snyder, "Crimea: Putin vs. Reality" (*The New York Review of Books Blog*, 7 March 2014).



ing the country and managing the challenges it faces. On the other hand, the focus on the Russian intervention and its justification through propaganda also fails to address the shortcomings in EU and U.S. foreign policy towards Ukraine and Russia, prior to the crisis, preventing the West from a self-reflective critical analysis.

Conclusion

The current crisis in Ukraine represents simultaneously a continuation of U.S. and EU irresponsible and highly destabilizing policies of regime change and the violation of basic principles of international law by Russia. Both approaches represent a potentially fatal blow to the European security order constructed since the 1970s and a dangerous new contention for influence in the European continent. Understanding the crisis therefore demands clarifying facts, and critical analysis, in order to gain a better grasp of the actors' underlying motivations and the role of propaganda in the construction of more permissive contexts. It is not clear who stands to benefit in the current context, considering the heavy sanctions that are being imposed on Russia, the remilitarization of Europe and the breakdown of years of mutual accommodation between the European nations and Russia.

The coming years will see important changes in the current *statu quo* both in Europe and globally. The financial crisis has underlined the shortcomings of the European integration process and has repositioned the EU globally *vis-à-vis* other emerging powers. The withdrawal of NATO troops from Iraq and Afghanistan will also demand a new purpose for the Alliance. Russia's authoritarian turn and the inability to modernize have reduced its interest in closer cooperation with the West. Changes in energy markets will also demand a restructuring of Russia's economy,

which will most likely focus increasingly on Asian markets, whereas Europe might look at the U.S. and new energy sources to limit its dependence on Russia. In these scenarios, the future of Ukraine is but one part of the bigger problem facing decision-makers. What is clear in this crisis, are the fragile foundations of international cooperation, the failures of diplomacy, and the importance of deconstructing propaganda efforts conveyed through mass media, in order to take sound decisions.

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