

# IMPERIAL OR COLONIAL: THE WAR IS FOUGHT OVER THE SOVIET PAST AND A BROKEN RELATIONSHIP

*Russia is trying, through its bombs, attacks, and brutality, to erase what Ukraine was. Therefore, it is a war effort to keep remembering how Ukraine in peace looked like, how it smelled, tasted, and felt. And to never forget that this is a war against Ukraine, in its own right. Not as a representative of the West, and not as a representative of democracy. But because Ukraine is of such importance to Russia, that a break between the two is unthinkable for Putin. That was what Leonid Kravchuk, the Ukrainian president, realized already in 1991. He, and Ukrainian leaders after him, tried to protect their territory while at the same time reassuring Russia that relations could still be friendly. But Russia has never changed in a similar way.*

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**I** landed at Boryspol Airport outside Kyiv for the very first time in early May 2005. Half a year before, in November 2004, Ukraine had been on the front pages of every newspaper in the West, when the Orange Revolution shook the country and ended the infamous Kuchma regime. Hundreds of thousands poured out into the streets with orange and blue flags, demanding a political leadership that respected its people, provided them with the means for a good life, and not only enriched itself and its allies. A new government, with the Orange Revolution key figures Yulia Tymoshenko as prime minister and Viktor Yushchenko as president, rose to power, promising to take the country out of the deadlock that the intimate interweaving of politics and economics had put it in. I spoke to young women and men who were eager to show that they knew some English and laughingly wanted to try it out, who welcomed foreigners arriving for the upcoming Eurovision that were to take place in the Ukrainian capital the same month. The warm spring air brimmed with fragile expectations, of a better political and economic elite, and a better life. The hope of finally being on the road to normalcy. The former president Leonid Kuchma had derailed Ukrainian developments in the mid-1990s by opening up for heavy influence and particular rules of the game applying to the Donetsk clans that supported him in the elections. A few years later, the rise of the Ukrainian oligarchs was a fact that proved to be very hard to reverse.<sup>1</sup> But then, the Orange Revolution, for some months, or a year or so, seemed to change it all.

### *Imperial or Colonial*

When Ukraine became independent in 1991, its first elected president was Leonid Kravchuk. Kravchuk was an experienced top Communist, with huge networks and a safe place in the Slavic community (even though he originated from western Ukraine). Together with Russia's Boris Yeltsin and Belarusian president Stanislav Shushkevich, he signed the Belovezha Accords, in December 1991, which marked the final dissolution of the Soviet Union. At the same time a new organization was founded, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), where all former republics except the Baltic States immediately became members. But parallelly, and despite being among Slavic friends, Kravchuk was well aware that the Russian benevolence towards accepting Ukrainian aspirations for more substantial autonomy and independence was likely just a passing phase. The Baltic States knew that too and therefore started negotiations for NATO membership. What Kravchuk and his government in Ukraine did, and NATO was not an option at that time, was to try to strengthen the country's capacity to protect its territory; precisely that, which Russia has deliberately since 2014 challenged in Eastern Ukraine and now on a country-wide scale.

<sup>1</sup> Rosario Puglisi, "The Rise of the Ukrainian Oligarchs," *Democratization*, Volume 10, Issue 3 (2003): p. 99-123.

Why was that awareness, to safeguard against Russian ambitions, already present early on? Because Ukraine's perspective on the Soviet past was overall that of being treated as a colony, not as an imperial province, which has been the Russian viewpoint (also shared by the third Slavic country, Belarus). Soviet rule, according to this "imperial" perspective, had brought modernization and industrialization to the populations in the periphery, and lifted them from poverty, illiteracy, and pre-modern agriculturalism.

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According to the constitution of 1977, the Soviet Union: “shall be a single union, a multinational state formed on the basis of the principle of socialist federalism as a result of free self-determination of nations and the voluntary association of equal Soviet Socialist Republics”. This goes back to the original constitution of 1923 that guaranteed national equality of the republics and – used in 1990 by the Lithuanians - the right to leave the Union. The Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic was thus just one of the fifteen republics that all possessed equal legal status, and all republics were defined as sovereign, with their own Constitutions and the right of free withdrawal from the Union. The actual level of this sovereignty, however, was quite questionable. Internationally, the Soviet Union had been a technically leading state in its progressive life model. The imperial lens envisioned relations between the Soviet center and periphery as having been harmonic, the leading Russia looking out for and making its periphery prosperous. However, competing with that is another, a colonial interpretation, that instead sees the Soviet past as one of suppression of nationality, including a privileged position for the Russian core.

In the Ukrainian colonial interpretation, which also was shared with the Baltic States and partly Georgia, but differed from that predominating in Belarus, Russia was thus regarded as the “master” republic with the overall ambition to enslave and use the others to grow stronger and more empowered itself. The Soviet past had, according to the “colonial” perspective, turned Ukraine into a poor and inert colony, a stagnating territory held down by the center and the co-opted local elite. Assessing the past affects the vision of what the contemporary is: for Russia, it has meant

holding on to a Soviet identity, for Ukraine to distance itself as strongly as possible – but preserving good enough relations with Russia.

### ***Russia Rises from the Ashes***

*Perestroika* and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union in December of 1991 left Russia bereft of the centuries-long domination of the territories of the Baltics, the Slavic Belarus, South Caucasus - and Ukraine. This smaller Russia missed its periphery, its provinces. It could not cognitively acknowledge, that the provinces – at least some of them – have not missed Russia, that from their point of view, was interpreted within the frame of a colonial master. Whereas Russia under Boris Yeltsin during the early 1990s first embraced and even defended against Mikhail Gorbachev the nationalism and sovereignty of the new and re-born states, this position started to change already a few years after 1991.

However, as Russia during the 1990s went through a process of de-centralization, governors in the provinces challenged Moscow in ways that did not allow for much clout to be shown towards former Soviet republics such as Ukraine. It sufficed with North Caucasian Chechnya, and the bloody revolts and war that became the outcome there. But when Vladimir Putin from St. Petersburg was selected by an inner circle to be the new president and then elected in 2000, the first priority on his agenda was to once again strengthen central power within Russia. Thereby, a new era started. Because when central authority had safely resurfaced within Russia, by de-throne the regional governors, intimidating the economically super-wealthy, limiting the ownership of media houses, and persecuting oppositional persons, somewhere around 2007, Vladimir Putin turned to what followed next. Re-claiming the status of the Russian federation, re-claiming its imperial identity. In that pursuit, Ukraine has been central.

### ***Ukrainian Protests***

Less than ten years after my first visit to Ukraine, I stumbled upon big sacks of sand lumped together in the streets leading up to Independence Square, the Maidan. Men and women in military clothing were practicing self-defense and trained to handle machine guns on the streets around Khreshchatyk Boulevard. The air was filled with determination, no longer the fragile expectations I remembered from the spring after the Orange Revolution, but something much more concrete. A willingness to struggle, and a firm awareness of the forces that were being challenged by that.

In February 2014, when I again arrived in Kyiv, the Euromaidan, or in other words the Revolution of Dignity, was at its peak after months of protests. In the meantime,

between 2005 and 2014, I had visited Ukraine many times. My colleagues and I had arranged workshops, seminars, and conferences in various universities on how to proceed with internationalization and integrating Ukrainian higher education into the European Bologna system. Now, some of those who had participated accompanied me to the almost surreal place that central Kyiv had become. The Ukrainian civilians had constructed an entire small city in the city center that once had been the site of the Orange Revolution. It revealed a Ukrainian citizenry no longer willing to stay silent and immobile. Medical clinics, car repairs, libraries, food stalls, and temporary living quarters filled with persons from all over the country were in place.

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From Galicia in western Ukraine to Donetsk in the East, people had arrived to support the protests against the Viktor Yanukovich presidency and the vertical power structures that sucked money and well-being out of the country. Protesting was the primary political language that Ukrainians spoke; still, the political parties were mostly top-down hierarchies, and most organizations were professionally run rather than based on initiatives from the grassroots. Even so, there was not really a conflict over Russian and Ukrainian identity, or over language. The peaceful coexistence between both factions was however already in the past when I departed for Sweden the day before the rounds fell that killed over a hundred. This is because Ukraine was about to undergo a period of profound upheaval during the next several months and the subsequent seven years.

### ***Citizens – not Subjects***

Where did the firmness of Ukrainians to protest a social contract that they believed had been broken come from? Here, I turn to a study on textbooks in history for high

schools and universities covering four countries, Russia, Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine, that I, together with colleagues in the four countries, published in 2019. The study aimed to capture how perestroika, the collapse of the Soviet Union and independence were officially narrated and thus taught in schools and universities.

It also brought forward aspects of political culture that told us something about the above question.<sup>2</sup> We found profound differences, ranging from an elite and top-down perspective dominating in Russia, Belarus and Moldova, whereas in Ukraine, from the first textbooks appearing after 1991, there was a completely different emphasis on the initiative of the people, and of the citizens, who could empower themselves and make demands. The Ukrainian history textbooks distinctly stand out in how they ascribe agency and importance to ordinary people who are described as carrying perestroika – that started as a top-down initiative – forward, transforming it into a grass-root, “from below”, movement. The elites are thus far from the only actors on the historical scene. The people have ambitions, and are equipped with will, and a strong desire to gain freedom and independence. Because of their resources, changes have taken place.

Hence, civil society – also in terms of formal organizations and societies – was an integral and decisive part of perestroika and the dissolution of a destructive state. *Rukh*, the popular front in Ukraine that later split up in several political parties plays, for example, a significant role. Ukrainian textbooks provide an impression that historical developments are possible to affect, and that is coming together as people can make a difference; that is an implicit line of thought. Large grass-root mobilizations have also de facto taken place since, not once but twice, changing the political landscape; the Orange Revolution in 2004, and the Euromaidan in 2014 as briefly described above.<sup>3</sup> This indicates a participatory creed in Ukraine, echoing in the historiography of contemporary times. The importance given to the growing possibilities of popular mobilization and organization reveals Ukraine’s pluralist outlook; evaluating openness as a crucial resource in society. In Ukraine, democratic politics seems to be embraced as a real possibility.

In contrast, the Russian, Belarusian, and Moldovan history textbooks – like those in Chechnya– provided a narrative on perestroika and the transformation into independent states as a combination of structural developments, and the political elite’s actions. They bear a resemblance to the popular concept in the USSR in

<sup>2</sup> Li Bennich-Björkman and Sergiy Kurbatov, (eds.) “When the Future Came,” in *The Collapse of the USSR and the Emergence of National Memory in Post-Soviet History Textbooks* (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Paul D’Anieri, “Establishing Ukraine’s Fourth republic: Reform after Revolution,” in *Beyond the Euromaidan: Comparative Perspectives on Advancing Reform in Ukraine*, edited by Henry E. Hale and Robert W. Ortung (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016): p. 3-20, Kostyantyn Fedorenko, Olena Rybiy, and Andreas Umland, “The Ukrainian Party System before and after the 2013–2014 Euromaidan.” *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 68, No. 4 (2016): p. 609-630.

the late 1980s of perestroika as a “revolution from above”. Belarusian textbooks, demonstrate a depersonalized way of presenting historical processes, pointing out structures rather than an agency, which coincides with the element of historical determinism noted earlier. What happens becomes inevitable, not associated with anybody’s real will or ambition.

### *A War about – the Past*

It is often claimed now that the war against Ukraine is a war waged by Russia against the west. Partly, that is what it has become, since western powers and NATO have proved to be surprisingly united in standing by Ukraine despite oil and gas shortages, and economic costs have grown to be considerable. But, to regard the war as not about Ukraine itself but “the west” is, and I seldom use that word, overall, both Eurocentric and self-absorbed.

It is likewise being claimed that it is a war between autocracy and democracy. Partly, since the patrimonial model of politics, as political scientist Henry Hale (2014)<sup>4</sup> has labeled it, that is the Eurasian way of conducting also democratic politics, is slowly withering away in Ukraine. Together with a growingly empowered and confident civil society, that certainly threatens Vladimir Putin and the Russian leaders, who want to deal and negotiate with persons and vertical structures that they could easily read and recognize. But to interpret the war as a war fought about regime models and principles is to make the mistake of reading too much vision and ideology into the Russian position.

The ongoing war is a war that is fought over Ukraine’s continuous road since 1991 of ceasing to be a Russian subject, and Russia’s firm stand to never accept that. It is thereby a war of decolonization, where Russia’s view of itself as a beneficial imperialist power during the Soviet decades meets Ukraine’s which is that of – as I discussed above - a colonial master that used force and violence to instill loyalty. In Yegor Ligachev’s memoirs, Ligachev was one of the top men in the Kremlin during *perestroika* and started as a supporter of Gorbachev but ended up a fierce adversary – the developments during the 1988 and 1989 perestroika in rebellious Lithuania is touched upon. Interestingly, since Ligachev is a reflecting person, there is no understanding in his mind that Lithuania could resent being in the Soviet Union. Such a position is solely the making of a small number of “terrorists” and “bourgeois nationalists”. In his view overall perception in Lithuania is that of rational gratitude, valuing the progress made during the Soviet decades.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Henry Hale, *Patronal Politics. Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Yegor Ligachev, *Inside Gorbachev’s Kreml: Memoir of Yegor Ligachev* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991).

Industrialization, urbanization, and a drastically increased level of education are what the Russian leadership sees when they look back on the Soviet era. Moreover, they attribute these achievements to the Soviet Union. Thus, the “provinces, or the “colonies”, should naturally be grateful. The lack of gratitude that Russia reads into Ukraine’s unwillingness to today accept the Russian lead, is, therefore also part of the war. It makes the Russian leaders, who clearly identify as representatives of a great nation and a higher culture, simply furious.

Then there is punishment. Ukraine must be punished for her lack of loyalty, for her lack of respect, for not being close anymore. This eternal logic of honor dominates many patriarchal societies, including Russia, often on an individual level, but here taken to the international one. Through such punishment, aside from putting the country in a constant condition of suffering, Ukraine is becoming “damaged goods”, not attractive to anyone else – regardless if they are investors, entrepreneurs, George Soros, or young people from the West.

### ***Resisting the Image of Damaged Goods and Victimhood***

I miss Ukraine. I often visualize how Kyiv’s glimmering lights by the Dnipro looked when I arrived by car into the huge city. The calm streets of the bohemian quarters of Podil that over the years for every visit became more and more creative, and the hills surrounding the city of Lviv. The war-zone pictures that now flood the newspapers and television hide what Ukraine also is. Because what they result in, in all its humanitarian credo to show the ugly face of war to arouse sympathy and support, is, despite the intentions a de-humanization of the universe that once was Ukraine. Where good, evil and everything in between is part of everyday life, courage and cowardness, corruption, and civil society initiatives exist side by side, in a complex context, not one-dimensional as the war turns it into. Ukraine, and the Ukrainian people, are certainly victims today, but they are so much more than that. Funny, creative, machos, hipsters, pundits, and idealists.

That is also what Russia’s war does, is what I am thinking when I try to force my own thoughts beyond the pictures of shelled houses, destroyed roads, and people hiding in the Kyiv subway. Russia’s war wipes away the uniqueness of Ukraine and what it had achieved since its independence in 1991, and before that in the 20th century, and in the 19th. Instead appears a “Ukraine at War”, which could be anywhere. It could be Lebanon, Bosnia, and Hercegovina, Somalia, Syria, Afghanistan, or the Middle East. Russia is trying, through its bombs, attacks, and brutality, to erase the memory of independent Ukraine. Therefore, it is also a war effort to remember how Ukraine in peace looked like and how it smelled, tasted, and felt. And to never forget that this



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