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Gaining a Motherland

One of the most painful and traumatic experiences for a person is when he or she feels disgust and contempt for his or her own Motherland, the country where he/she was born and grew up.

I was born in the Soviet Union and grew up with the feeling of disgust and contempt for this country, which was dominated by pervasive lies and a lack of freedom. In addition to the ban on public expression of any critical opinions about the totalitarian communist regime and its victims, a ban on reading books, listening to music and watching movies that you wanted, this lack of freedom also had a purely spatial dimension: restricted freedom of movement, no opportunity to go abroad except for emigration which was highly unlikely, and which would then mean completely breaking ties with one's friends and relatives.

“ I remember how, at the age of 14, I approached a large mirror hanging in the hall of my parents' apartment, looked at my reflection, and said, 'You will never leave the confines of this prison'. ”

I obviously did not mean my parents' apartment, but the state in which I was born. When I later shared this experience with my wife, she said I managed to coin her own adolescent feelings very clearly. I guess that, from time to time, similar feelings came upon all my peers, who were looking at the world in the same way.

The understanding that we were living in a distorted world began developing in me at an early age. That world composed in the main of never-ending lies that surrounded us from all sides, penetrated into the most intimate relationships, poisoned our consciousness, making us used to being dishonorable from a very early age. The lie was so prevalent that the majority were not even able to realize they were constantly lied to, and that they were constantly replicating those lies in their own communication. I could say that a Soviet person had a schizoid dual mind. It seemed like we knew the truth but, at the same time, we accepted lies as something absolutely normal and justifiable.

A perfect example was my great-grandmother who taught me to read, write and count, and who I still remember with love and tenderness. Yet, I cannot but admit that her whole life experience was permeated with communist lies. From my childhood, she was trying to develop gratitude in me for the Soviet regime, saying that everything in our life was given to us by it. My great-grandmother would tell me persuasively that she was from a poor rural family, and that it was only thanks to the Soviet government that was she able to receive an education. I believed in this until, later in my life, I was able to compare the facts of her life with historical developments. She was really born to a rural Greek family in the south-east of Ukraine (now in Donetsk Region). However, she graduated from a grammar school in Mariupol before the Soviet era (she was born in 1900, so when our land was seized by the Bolsheviks, she was over 20 years old). So how could a child from a poor rural family make her way into a grammar school located in a big city? She could not answer this question. Not because she did not know the answer, but because she diligently forgot it.

In fact, in the 18th century, after the Greeks were forcibly displaced from Crimea, they received a lot of land from Russian Tsarina Catherine II. This was a dismissive pittance from the flatulent sovereign to colonized people who had lost their historical homeland. In the early part of the 20th century, the descendants of those displaced Greeks were wealthy peasants who would later be destroyed by Russian Bolsheviks under the pretext that they were *kurkuls* [i. e. rich peasants]. My great-grandmother was a communist and, therefore, she could not admit that Russian Bolsheviks had robbed her family of everything their ancestors received from the Russian Tsarina.

One of the methods the Bolsheviks used to destroy rich peasants living in eastern Ukraine was Holodomor [*artificial famines organized by the Communist regime in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s – Ed.*]. My Greek ancestors were also among them, but the majority of victims were Ukrainians. During the Soviet era, no-one in our family mentioned Holodomor. This topic was taboo even though I knew that my great-grandmother's father died from famine in the early 1920s, and that in the early 1930s her mother was brought, at the last moment, to Kharkiv where my great-grandmother lived at that time with her husband and her little 7-year old son. That boy is now my grandfather. Later, during the post-Soviet era, I heard a story from him about dialogue that he had had with his grandmother in the terrible year of 1933 [*the year of the most tragic Stalin-organized Holodomor of 1932-1933 – Ed.*] in Kharkiv:

- 🗨️ — **Don't go outside, boy!**
- **Why?**
- **Because they will eat you.**
- **No, they won't - I am skinny.** 🗨️

In Germany, Hitler had come to power just a short time before, and all the atrocities of Nazism were still ahead. Stalin had already ruled the Soviet Union for several years, and under his patronage

the communists were already committing terrible crimes against humanity.

The dialogue I mentioned earlier is part of my family's oral history. However, the story was never told during the Soviet period. Fear forced people to lie and distort their own historical memory. The fear was not so much for themselves, but fear for the younger generation. If I were growing with the knowledge of all the crimes committed by the Soviet regime, I would hardly be able to survive in the Soviet Union unless I were cynical scum. Only destruction of that geopolitical monster removed the seal of silence from the lips of my grandparents.

However, was it only fear that made people blind toward the crimes of communism, deaf toward the cries of its victims, and silent about this? Perhaps not. It was the state of some strange moral and psychological numbness that was caused by intoxication of consciousness by Soviet propaganda. Its creators were skilled in mixing intimidation and lies, and they were feeding this terrible cocktail to millions of deceived people not only in the Soviet Union but beyond it as well. The employees of contemporary Russian mass media outlets are, by the way, talented students of their Soviet predecessors.

The lies became more and more visible at the end of the 1980s. Gorbachev's attempt to reload the regime through *perestroika* only showed its rotten core instead of saving it. The intoxication of society with lies was just too strong. *Glasnost* was not able to save it from paralysis and collapse. Truth injections did not save the Soviet Leviathan, but merely accelerated its death.

The Soviet Union died abruptly in 1991. This happened so quickly that we did not even immediately understand that this had really happened. Yet, I remember that the moment when I realized this fact was one of the happiest moments of my life. We felt the head-spinning breath of freedom.

However, the first years of our lives in independent Ukraine were disappointing for many of us; our hopes for a genuinely free and successful society failed to come true. The young Ukrainian state inherited almost

all the shortcomings of the Soviet Union, and added its own deficiencies to it, which provoked nostalgia in many people for the Soviet past. This nostalgia, to a certain extent, still distorts the historical memory of Ukrainian citizens, dimming and erasing memories of communist crimes and painting a false picture of Soviet prosperity and security.

This nostalgic picture leaves no place for Stalin's concentration camps, where millions of people worked unpaid, in unbearable conditions, for the well-being of those who remained free. However, even those who "remained free" could barely be called free because of the constant risk of being sent to prison on an absurd charge, and having no opportunity to leave the Soviet Union.

Today's widespread recollections that there was no corruption during the Soviet era, lack the understanding that corruption was impossible in those days because the country was ruled by a gang of criminals called the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Corruption is possible when, on the one hand, there are authorities, and, on the other hand, criminal milieus that corrupt these authorities. But when a criminal organization has power and makes up the authorities themselves, there is no-one to corrupt them.

👉👉 The corruption that we see in Ukraine to this very day is not a phenomenon of the independence era, but rather a replication of the power hierarchy from the Soviet era. 🗨️

That is why we often call it systemic corruption since it does not corrode the state apparatus from outside but is a manifestation of the internal construction of the government structure inherited from the old system.

One of the main problems of the young Ukrainian state was that power was seized by the former communist bosses who brought the old principles of governance to the new political establishment. Ukraine, unlike, for instance, Germany that went through denazification, has not

yet gone through decommunization. Therefore, the belated decommunization introduced only recently in our country is so important for us. It should not just imply decommunization of the names of Ukrainian towns and streets; it should lead to much wider decommunization and desovietization of the minds of Ukrainian citizens, and lustration of those state officials who held executive positions in communist government agencies.

Intellectuals from other countries sometimes fail to understand the importance of this process. Indeed, in the 20th century atrocities against humanity committed in Western Europe by far-right forces – German Nazis, Italian fascists, etc. Instead, in our lands, equally terrible crimes were committed by far-left forces: Soviet communists.

Equivalence between the Soviet and Russian systems was another element of the old system. In the 20th century, there were two strategies in place aimed at destroying the Strangers. The approach taken by the Nazis to representatives of ethnic groups they considered inferior, envisaged physical extermination of some of them (Jews and Roma), and transformation of others, like Slavs, into slaves of the “real Aryans”, the Germanic people. The daring cynicism and inhuman cruelty of the Nazis was a factor that led to their downfall.

The strategy used by Soviet communists to destroy the Strangers was more subtle. A representative of any nationality could be successful in the Soviet Union, provided he or she gave up his or her own national and cultural identity. To this end, the linguistic mutant “Soviet people” were created.

🗨️ Yet, the Russian identity remained the core of Soviet identity. Sovietization was hidden Russification. 🗨️

Soviet communism was impregnated with Russian chauvinism. The consequences of this infusion can be seen to this very day both in our country and at international level. For instance, Russia inherited the role of victory over Nazism, although the victory was achieved

by all the peoples of the former Soviet Union, while a huge number of ethnic Russians fought on Hitler's side in Vlasov's Army and in other Russian Nazi groups. This, on the one hand, provides the possibility for pro-Russian forces to manipulate the minds of Ukrainian citizens. On the other hand, Russia took the place of the Soviet Union in the UN Security Council as the victor over Nazism, and used its position there against its former colonies, namely Ukraine and Georgia.

For me, post-Soviet Ukraine of the 1990s was an ugly continuation of the Soviet Union. It was my conscious choice not to participate in the political process. This was also a consequence of Soviet social and political trauma. For me, just as for many of my peers, politics was not a field of the common cause of free and responsible people, but rather a field where criminal groups fought between themselves for power. Perhaps this was why I did not take part in the mass resistance towards the Ukrainian Soviet government in the early 1990s, called the Revolution on Granite in history books. Today, looking back at those developments, I understand that at that time this revolution laid the historical and political foundation for two Maidans at the beginning of the 21st century. The principles of the fundamental difference between Ukrainian society and Russian society were laid back then too. Despite all the troubles of the post-Soviet period, we won the most important thing: our freedom.

The understanding came to me that the Soviet Union was, in fact, one of the reincarnations of the Russian Empire, and Putin's accession to power was not an unfortunate coincidence but a logical stage of the empire's development. That is why the first Maidan [2004-2005 - *Ed.*] and (even more so) the second Maidan [2013-2014 - *Ed.*] had such a manifest anti-Russian nature. This was influenced not so by Ukrainian nationalism but rather by post-colonial resistance to Russian imperialism, and an attempt to break free from the sphere of influence of the Russian Empire and join civilized European countries. Everything Ukrainian was growing to become a marker of our belonging to the civilized world and rejecting Russian imperial xenophobia.

This can better explain the emancipating role of the Ukrainian language in our society. To understand this role, it is important to deconstruct one persistent manipulative bias used by pro-Russian forces in Ukraine. One of the main components of their rhetoric is related to “protection of the rights of Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine”. But, in fact, we are all bilingual.

““ **All citizens of Ukraine speak at least two languages - Ukrainian and Russian.** ””

This does not mean that all of us are fluent in both languages, but we all, even those who speak Russian, understand Ukrainian very well. And this makes Russian-speaking Ukrainians different from Russian citizens. Making Ukrainian the official language, therefore, by no means abases the rights of those who speak Russian in everyday life. Their own bilingualism does not prevent them from understanding the Ukrainian mass media or from participating in legal proceedings held in the Ukrainian language.

Unfortunately, everyday communication in many Ukrainian regions marginalizes Ukrainian rather than Russian. It is especially noticeable in the service sector. For instance, in the Ukrainian-speaking cities of Lviv or Ivano-Frankivsk a Russian-speaking customer will have no problem using the Russian language. In the majority of cases he or she will not only be understood and served politely, but also answered in Russian as well. On the contrary, in some south-eastern towns of Ukraine, however paradoxically this may sound, Ukrainian will not always be so welcome. Ukrainian is understood very well there, the number of people speaking it is growing all the time, and people who do not speak it fluently are rather sympathetic to it. However, to this very day there are cases of a phobia towards the Ukrainian language and culture, and addressing someone in Ukrainian can be met with silence or a rude answer in Russian.

The language of the *russkiy mir* [“Russian world”, i.e. an idea that Russian sphere of influence goes beyond Russia’s political borders – Ed.] is often that of hate speech. The artificial Russification of south-eastern territories of Ukraine in the 20th century became one of the conditions that made Russian aggression against our country in the early 21st century possible. Russian propaganda justifies occupation of Crimea and seizure of south-eastern territories of Ukraine with the need to protect the Russian-speaking population, which is a lie for two reasons.

First, as I mentioned earlier, it was not Russian but Ukrainian that was attacked and marginalized in this part of Ukraine.

Second, a large number of Ukrainian soldiers protecting their native land from Russian invasion speak Russian in everyday life, although they understand that the fact that they speak the Russian language is, by and large, a result of artificial and coercive Russification of south-eastern territories of Ukraine.

One of the tools of that Russification was, by the way, the Holodomor, when the territories were purged of Ukrainian-speaking residents with artificial famine, and were populated afterwards with Russian-speaking people from the whole of the Soviet Union. The mine planted by Stalin in the early 20th century detonated during the Putin’s rule in the early 21st century. This makes it clear why the Ukrainian language is, for us, not only an irremovable element of culture but also a security factor. I can quote here a formula used by one of the founders of the post-colonial studies of the literature of empires, Edward Saïd, who said that “culture is a field of struggle”. And one of the main and indisputable elements of culture is language. The Ukrainian language in Ukraine becomes not only a means of cultural identification but also a tool of political emancipation and an important component of national security policy.

Atomization of society is another terrible legacy of the Russian Soviet Empire: totalitarianism was based on disintegration. It’s much easier to make slaves out of people who do not trust each other. Soviet



communists diligently implemented the old formula of divide and rule. Soviet society was a society of total distrust – and perhaps we needed the experience of two Maidans, especially the second one, to get rid of this distrust.

“ The Maidan space was the space of trust. ”

In order to survive and to defeat the criminal government of Yanukovich, which was supported by Putin’s gang in Kremlin, we needed trust like we need fresh air. Maidan was breathing with trust. Without trust it would have failed immediately. A huge number of people learnt to trust each other, give money for the needs of Maidan, unite quickly with absolutely unknown people to solve problems that emerged every day, every hour, every moment. Maidan covered the entire city with a network of trust: underground hospitals where wounded protesters were treated; shelters at every place where exhausted Maidan protesters could wash themselves and have some rest; self-defense squads in all districts of Kyiv who, though without weapons, protected the citizens of Kyiv from mobs of criminals paid by the criminal authorities to destabilize the situation; young people who guarded local hospitals so that officers of the special services controlled by the regime and guided by their Russian puppet masters could not abduct wounded protesters to torture and kill them. The same was happening in other towns around the whole country. We learnt how to trust each other. We began to understand that real political power grows from this trust, and that this political power is the common cause of free and responsible people.

The growth of the level of trust and integration in our society is commensurate with the decrease in xenophobia. Many Ukrainians understood that our identity has to be built not around the ethnic nucleus but around the values of the free world. After Maidan, the level of anti-Semitism in Ukraine fell dramatically. The most recent research demonstrates that no instances of anti-Semitic-based

violence have been reported in our country since 2014. One of the explanations is that many Ukrainian Jews were active participants in Maidan and took the pro-Ukrainian side in the fight against Russian aggression. The first people who sacrificed their lives in Maidan's fight for Ukraine's freedom were an Armenian, Serhiy Nigoyan, and a Belarusian, Mykhailo Zhyznevskiy. Crimean Tatars were also actively involved in the fight against the Russian Empire that occupied their historical homeland. They understand very well that free life in Crimea is only possible if Crimea is part of independent Ukraine.

 **Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine defend their motherland from Russian aggression in Donbas shoulder to shoulder with Ukrainian speakers.** 

And neither are we divided either by ethnic origin, religion or language. We begin to gradually understand that people can be united not so much by common interests and memories of the past, but rather by universal human values and a common vision of the future.

As a result of all these developments, I have finally gained my Motherland. Now, when I am asked “Where are you from?” – I can answer proudly “I am from Ukraine”. Those who did not grow up with a permanent feeling of shame for their Motherland will hardly understand this sentiment.

I know that this feeling of pride in one's country is fragile and endangered. Our independence is threatened by a terrible external enemy: Russia, which is trying to draw us into the ugly “Russian world”. Its attempts inside Ukraine get the support of hostile sympathizers of Russian imperialism, and of short-sighted or corrupt acolytes of the Kremlin in European countries. There are also many internal economic, legal and cultural problems that prevent Ukraine from becoming a really free and successful country. It is true that our country still has lots of problems. It is very difficult for us to reform the corrupt state system that we inherited from the Soviet Union. However, during

the years since the last Maidan, systemic corruption has decreased. In order to eliminate corruption for good, we need radical changes in the structure of the public authorities and in the minds of ordinary citizens. This is a long and painful process.

As of today, we have not yet reformed our education system. This reform is, by the way, impeded by another myth widespread in our society. It says that in Soviet Union we had good education, which we lost during the years of independence. To destroy this myth, it is important for Ukrainian citizens to understand the difference between education and learning. Good education is, of course, not possible without diligent study of professional skills, which leads to the necessary level of professional knowledge. Yet, real education is not just this, but more. The education process includes access to cultural achievements of the whole world, and getting an ability to critically rethink historical developments and contemporary problems. Therefore, education implies freedom. In a closed totalitarian society, education – first and foremost, in humanities – is not possible: it offers almost no access to the cultural achievements of other countries, and critical thinking is not only unsupported but prohibited. The Soviet Union had, therefore, good learning that was generally related to professions in the field of defense and strategic branches of industry and agriculture. However, real education did not exist in the Soviet Union – just because the Soviet Union was totally lacking in freedom. That is why our task is not to revive the old education system but to create a new one. This new system should also include definitive decommunization and desovietization of Ukrainian education.

Reform of the state apparatus and development of a modern education system was, just like many other reforms, launched in our country after the second Maidan, and has to rescue Ukraine from the imperial influence of Russia and to result in Ukraine's natural integration into European civilization. However, I have recently been hearing on a frequent basis from Western European colleagues that for us, citizens of Ukraine, Europe still looks like the Europe of the late 20th

century, while it has become absolutely different today. I understand this, of course, and it hurts when I see the actions of Putin's European right-wing and left-wing friends. I certainly do not like this Europe. At the same time, I know that my country can have a better destiny only in the community of European states where unity does not kill diversity, and where freedom does not destroy solidarity. I can also suggest that Europeans could look at themselves through the eyes of those citizens of Ukraine who came to Maidan for the sake of the European future of their country, those who are dying in the East of our country while protecting it from Russian invasion, and those who are slowly dying in Russian prisons sent there on trumped up charges. Will you then perhaps like yourselves? Or will you see a way to overcome something that you do not like? If you're not happy with life in your own country, you might try listening to our voice – the voice of those who have finally gained their Motherland, or, more precisely, won back their Motherland.