



The Battle for History and Building of Identity: Fake News confronts Professional News

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Western expert community does not seem critical enough towards the phenomenon of Russian imperialism. Here, one should mention the strong traditions of Russo/Sovietophilia, which are often based on dirty Russian money, an interest in the Byzantine tradition, love of Russian ballet, in particular the music of Ukrainian Petro Tchaikovskyi, Russian literature, in particular the works of Ukrainian Mykola Gogol, and approval of Putinism as a special civilizational path.

The “battle for history” thesis (fundamental to the politics of memory) is unacceptable to professional historians because its subjective approach diverges from their prime task of searching for and understanding the truth. At the same time, one cannot deny that the historical agenda has become extremely media-oriented and even news-based. That is, from some point of view, interpretations of history can be seen as matters of concern to society on par with current domestic problems that directly affect quality of life.

The interpretation of history can be used as a justification for implementing a particular policy, or a justification for inactivity, which should also be considered a separate policy. Historical mythology is an important factor shaping the national identity of Ukrainians. And Russia, for its part, uses history to shape an opposing narrative of aggression and xenophobia against independent Ukraine, thus denying the sovereign right of Ukrainians to consolidate their own state.

In these settings, the popular-scientific dimension of national history in contemporary Ukraine – an independent state, whose society has been deprived of its own history for

centuries, mainly due to murderous Russian imperial interpretations – takes on particular importance. It was stressed by Wim Coudenys, a Belgian specialist in Russian history, in his lecture at Stanford University on November 3, 2017 [2].

Throughout its history, the Russian Empire denied the existence of a separate Ukrainian history, a separate Ukrainian nation, and forbade the Ukrainian language. The 54 acts banning the Ukrainian language from 1622 to 2012 included more than 40 acts of Russian chauvinist policy[3]. Researchers even see the Holodomor as an extension of policies aimed at destroying the Ukrainian language – in this case, through the physical elimination of its speakers.

Sources of the Russian imperial narrative today

In 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which over time had become a modernized Russian Empire modified by the Bolsheviks, a new non-Soviet Ukrainian historiography developed: source studies became possible and archives previously classified by Russian communists were opened. Simultaneously, a new stage of elaboration of the Russian propaganda machine started, the efficacy of which reached its peak in the Western world during the times of “late Putinism”, when the “irreplaceable” and “non-alternative” Russian political leader finally took on the features of a tsar, secretary general of the communist party, and president all in one.

Vladimir Putin improvises and introduces, “when necessary”, new historical concepts into the Russian imperial discourse. These include, for example, the thesis of the sacred significance of Crimea to Russian statehood. In fact, this thesis was created to replace the old occupier’s myth of Kyiv as the “mother of Russian cities.” Because Kyiv turned out to be a hard nut to crack by Putin’s Russia.

This phrase from the literature of Rus’ (Kievan Rus’), a state that emerged in the early Middle Ages on the territory of modern Ukraine is one of the most common statements of Russian chauvinist propaganda. The problem is that this Rus’ is nothing more than the older name of Ukraine that has a Scandinavian origin. It is not synonymous with “Russia”, which comes from the Byzantine Greek name of Rus’, and was introduced by decree of Peter the Great in the first half of the 18th century. Until 1721, his state had the same name as the capital – Moscow.

The efforts of Putin’s predecessors to trace the history of Muscovy in the early Middle Ages look like the inclusion in the Christian cultural context of Eastern Europe of wolves and bears that lived on the place of modern Moscow. The same applies to the not very adequate representation of the Vikings, who became the founders of the Rurik dynasty, as Russians.

Another example is the difference between concepts “Russkii” and “Rossiianie”. Both words are translated into English and Ukrainian as “Russians”, while the first word is about ethnic Russians, the second is about all Russian citizens who are on their way to national depersonalization. The concept “Rossiyanie” has replaced the concept of “Soviet people” – a failed in 1970s communist experiment.

Putin’s historical “discoveries” can list the claim that Islam is closer to Russian Orthodoxy than Catholicism. Indeed, the Western public does not often realize that Russia is, first of all, a Muslim country and that the Orthodox Church in Ukraine outnumbers the Orthodox

Church in Russia. To justify Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2014, the rusty concept of Novorossia, created by imperial ideologists in the 18th century, was reanimated.

To assess the importance of historical agenda for the political, including global, context, the following features of the political culture of contemporary Russian society should be noted.

Firstly, it loves Putin as a person and a metaphor. Secondly, it does not require freedom of speech and other political freedoms. Thirdly, it lacks the ability to think critically. Fourthly, it feels comfortable within the fake (totally mythologized) media reality created by the Russian propaganda machine. And finally, fifthly, it has always been what it is now.

Unfortunately, the Western expert community does not seem critical enough towards the phenomenon of Russian imperialism. Here, one should mention the strong traditions of Russo/Soviet-philias, which are often based on dirty Russian money, an interest in the Byzantine tradition, love of Russian ballet, in particular the music of Ukrainian Petro Tchaikovsky, Russian literature, in particular the works of Ukrainian Mykola Gogol, and approval of Putinism as a special civilizational path ("sovereign democracy", "Orthodox civilization", "Russian world", etc.) that is "alternative" to the Western civilization.

Relevant here also is a special category of Western political storytelling by commentators. They might even have been personally acquainted with some Russian dissidents once (who, in practice, turned out to be independent intellectuals of a different ethnicities, for example, Ukrainian or Jewish). These science-fiction political analysts are awaiting (just like in "Waiting for Godot" by Samuel Beckett) the victory of a democratic Russian government which would finally be ready to communicate about common values and integration of Russia into the global community.

The problem is that this will never happen as long as Russia remains, as Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko put it, a "prison of nations", and the majority (almost all) of independent Russian intellectuals remain de facto ordinary Russian chauvinists who view the world through the eyes of the "Russian world" and only softly condemn either Putin's methods or Putin himself, because, they say, the Russia's path is correct overall; merely "the tsar is not that right."

The above-stated was noticed by Yuri Afanasiev, a well-known Russian historian and politician, in his open lecture at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy on January 19, 2012. He stated that "all of Russian history is fully falsified", "traditional Russian consciousness is incomparable with the European consciousness", and that "to continue such a history means the death of Russia." Yuri Afanasiev criticized the participants of anti-Putin protests because "they do not understand what they are doing" as "what is necessary today is not to deny Putin, but to demand the demolition of <Russian> autocracy", that is, to change the political culture of Russian society.

Therefore, the main source of today's Russian imperial narrative consists of not only "gas money" invested by Putin's government into the propaganda machine of unprecedented power. It is much more important to understand that this narrative relies upon the corresponding demands of Russian society itself. Here we must mention Elihu Katz, a prominent researcher of media communications, who pointed out that we need to find

out not only what the media do to the audience, but also what the audience does to the media. This view of media impact is related to Uses and Gratifications theory.

Moreover, not only it is the Russian public that is ready to accept Russian fake news. Russian “fakes” adapt quite successfully to the social contexts of different states in order to divide, disintegrate, and destroy the unity of the Western world which has expressed its intention to defend shared democratic values. One of the sources of the post-truth phenomenon is public demand for untruthful, distorted, but comfortable (in different senses for different social groups) world picture that is eventually represented in fake news. Since technically these processes are correlated at a global level, Russian influence in the West is just growing[4].

Vladimir Putin’s article “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”[5] was interesting not for its imperial narrative, but as an example of how historical argumentation becomes the basis for political decisions. The current political context has been squeezed into the framework of well-known propaganda clichés. In this way, the media reality was distorted. Therefore, from a certain point of view, such messages can be interpreted as fake news.

Interestingly, in the struggle for Ukrainian identity, the Russian propaganda machine went against its own principles by publishing this article in Ukrainian on the official website of the Russian president. It tries to be extremely flexible in promoting semi-racist and pseudo-historical claims about the “one-blooded brotherhood” of Russians and Ukrainians, which becomes possible in the post-truth era.

For its domestic audience, the goal of the Russian imperial narrative is to provide “proof” that Russia is a “great power” again, just “as it once was.” Otherwise, Russian society will notice that they live in a beggarly country, will vote for the refrigerator instead of the fake ideology, forget about the TV, and find a new tsar.

Ignorance of history as a justification for politics

Germany has a special place in global politics as the main economic power of the European Union and a living example of successful post-war modernization, where restored democratic institutions became the basis for a new political culture and resultant economic growth. Much more disappointing for Ukraine is the historical ignorance of a part of German politicians.

Professor Timothy Snyder’s address to the Bundestag on June 20, 2017 “Germany’s historical responsibility to Ukraine” illustrates this point[6]. Contextually, the German parliament members looked like neophytes who had heard the historical facts concerning the history of World War II for the first time. Timothy Snyder linked the current triumph of populism, the rise of new challenges and problems in Europe, threats to the constitutional system, and the democracy crisis in the USA – all to a lack of historical responsibility.

He reminded German politicians of the fact that Hitler had planned to expand the living space for Germans, first of all, using the territory of Ukraine. “The point of the Second World War from Hitler’s point of view, the purpose of the Second World War from Hitler’s point of view was the conquest of Ukraine. It is therefore senseless to commemorate, to remember any part of the Second World War without beginning from Ukraine. Any

commemoration of the Second World War that involves the Nazi purposes, the ideological, economic, political purposes of the Nazi regime, must begin precisely from Ukraine.”

According to Professor Snyder, it is very important not to forget that “it is Russian foreign policy to divide the history of Soviet Union into two parts. There is the good part which is the Russian part. And there is the bad part which is the Ukrainian part. I can sum this up: liberation – Russian, collaboration – Ukrainian. That is the line that they follow very consistently and in this country [Germany – note, editor] to create a fact. Because Russian foreign policy regards the German sense of responsibility as a resource, precisely as a resource to be manipulated.”

A loud scandal was provoked by the statement of German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier that Germans were obliged to complete the construction of Nord Stream-2 as part of their liability to Russia for the crimes of World War II[7]. Not only Ukrainians, but also the former US Ambassador to Ukraine Steven Pifer, former US Ambassador to Poland Daniel Fried, German international security and foreign policy expert Marcel Dirsus, Russian politician Garry Kasparov, and journalists from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and Die Welt reacted negatively[8].

Since all the above-mentioned politicians are not professional historians, it is clear that in this case historical agenda disguises the very specific intention of the German leader to expand cooperation with Putin’s regime. President Steinmeier equates the Soviet Union with Russia, perhaps also Soviet citizens with Russians (or it may be not so important to him), does not know which territories actually suffered most from Nazi occupation and who most of the victims were.

Quoting Professor Snyder again, “In absolute numbers, more inhabitants of Soviet Ukraine died in the Second World War than inhabitants of Soviet Russia – in absolute terms – and these are calculations of Russian historians – in absolute terms. Which means in relative terms, in proportional terms Ukraine was far, far, far more risked than Soviet Russia during the war.”

Interestingly, in his interview Mr. Steinmeier tries to separate domestic Russian and international issues. He argues that Navalnyi must be released immediately and urges, among other things, “to look for common ground in foreign policy to turn the bad today into a better future” in EU-Russia relations.

It is difficult to understand how a demonstrable public cooperation with Putin’s regime at the international level (which is exactly what Vladimir Putin needs, as he enjoys the support and even love of Russian society in the domestic arena) can lead to an expected “better future.”

Such an approach may be rational and justified in light of protecting national interests. At the same time, it may lead to the expansion of authoritarian trends currently observable in many Western countries. The idealistically perceived image of the West, as a formation adhering to the principles of human rights and the rule of law with no place for corruption, has seriously tottered over the past two decades.

Frank-Walter Steinmeier has also authored his famous “Steinmeier’s formula”, which proposes that elections “under Ukrainian legislation” should be arranged in the so-called

“Luhansk People’s Republic” and “Donetsk People’s Republic” – both concocted by Putin’s regime. These Eastern Ukrainian territories have been occupied and looted by Russia, filled with Russian military personnel and destroyed by war; their threatened populations which has been effectively brainwashed by Putin’s pseudo-media for seven years, and from where over two million internally displaced persons (IDPs) have fled to the territory controlled by the Ukrainian government, according to Steinmeier, are to arrange “free elections” while still under occupation.

Such paradoxical judgments deserve inclusion in postmodern literary fiction. However, they are seriously circulating in the international political discourse. Only a lack of basic historical knowledge prevented Mr. Steinmeier from making quite a simple analogy with postwar Germany which needed more than four years, from May 1945 to August 1949, to hold its first democratic elections to the Bundestag.

Although the above examples of historical ignorance indicate that this phenomenon has a very real impact on the shaping of modern international politics, many examples of critical considerations, including media representations of history, exist, too. In the German context, I would firstly like to mention Professor Karl Schlögel and his book “Ukrainian Challenge. The Discovery of a European Country” (Ukrainian version of the title translation), which was first published in Munich in 2015 and then published by Spirit and Letter Publishing House in Kyiv in 2017^[9].

Prior to 2014, Karl Schlögel had been immersed in a Russian cultural context. However, this responsible intellectual refused to accept the Pushkin Medal from Russian officials and thus protested against the annexation of Crimea. Having witnessed the events during the Revolution of Dignity in Kyiv and Donetsk, he properly presented them as a historian and sociologist. The question is why is Mr. Steinmeier employing a Russian imperial narrative, not the highest-quality intellectual conclusions offered by Professor Schlögel? Apparently, this is a rhetorical question.

Manipulating values

“Where did this Ukraine come from, preventing us from normal cooperation with Putin’s Russia? It was not there before. And it would be better if it disappeared again. It is much easier to equate the USSR with Russia, as it was during the Cold War. So, let’s look for reasons why Ukraine does not deserve to be treated as a sovereign European state that has suffered Russian aggression and lost parts of its territory.” The historical component of such rhetoric, quite common in the West, is becoming particularly significant, as it seems to be affecting political decision-making.

Yevhen Fedchenko, director of Kyiv-Mohyla School of Journalism and editor-in-chief of StopFake, in his Facebook post dated September 4, 2021 draws attention to those “who tried to torpedo the visit of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to the United States. Freedom House was one of them.”

According to Michael Abramowitz, the president of this respected international organization, “Online propaganda and malign disinformation campaigns spread false narratives to provoke conflict within society, all of which undermine trust in democratic institutions. As Russia’s neighbor, Ukraine is the testing site for Russian disinformation tactics that are then applied elsewhere, including in the United States.”^[10]

At the same time, Freedom House condemned the closure of pro-Russian TV channels which had been the mouthpiece of Russian propaganda and controlled by Viktor Medvedchuk, a pro-Russian oligarch and Putin's close friend, simply referring to them as "three popular Ukrainian TV channels", and recommended that US President Joe Biden demand that the fight against misinformation be exclusively rights-based.

"So," Yevhen Fedchenko continues, "according to their logic, to have hostile destabilizing broadcasters pursuing an informational war inside a country struggling at war is someone's inalienable right? Most interestingly, you can ask: did Freedom House send a similar letter just before Biden-Putin summit in Geneva, given that the last independent media are really being crushed in Russia? You can guess the answer yourself."

As we can see, according to Freedom House, it is necessary to press the victim, not the criminal. Ukraine, which is fighting for its independence, territorial integrity, and democratic values should be ignored. And we know Russia, they say, we know that it will not change; it is a large state with nuclear weapons that we can do profitable business with. That is why we need Russia, not Ukraine. This is just a repetition of the old known truth that the one who is stronger is right.

The examples provided, of values manipulation and misinterpretation of historical issues, are related to an inability to defend one's civilizational choice. A historical analogy to the helpless behavior of Western democracies endangered by German Nazism and Russian Communism just before World War II can be made. Today, Ukraine seems to be "standing in the way" for many Western politicians who do not know what they should be afraid of more: Russia, China, or internal disintegration. As for the latter, it is also history, including the colonialism and slavery inheritance, that is running after them.

Modern Ukrainian identity

The 2013-2014 Revolution of Dignity confirmed that a strong and demanding civil society exists in Ukraine. A modern Ukrainian identity is shaping in the framework of growing public trust and striving for mutual understanding. This identity includes first of all, a very real Ukrainian component that is grounded in collective memory, the Ukrainian language, tradition of struggle for independence, and a state policy of memory that supports openness and accessibility to all archival documents^[11].

Secondly, the Ukrainian identity includes the identities of national minorities and indigenous peoples that have no other native territory than that of Ukraine. First of all I am referring to the Crimean Tatars who have their own unique national traditions. Crimea, occupied by Russia, is extremely important to them, and they are also part of the Ukrainian political nation. During the Revolution of Dignity, Mustafa Dzhemilev, the leader of the Crimean Tatars, stated that he is proud to be a Ukrainian.

Thirdly, modern Ukrainian political culture, with its ideals of freedom and justice in their broad sense, performs an extremely important integrative function for all citizens of Ukraine. Josef Zissels, one of the leaders of Ukraine's Jewish community, emphasizes the democratic European roots of this culture and sees the main challenge of Ukrainian society as the avoidance of authoritarian recurrences of Eurasian (Russian) origin.

Josef Zissels, as one of the leading representatives of Ukrainian civil society, also opposes attempts by Russian oligarchs Mikhail Fridman and German Khan from the

“Putin list”[12] to privatize the Ukrainian historical memory of the Babyn Yar tragedy [13]. Press outlets, such as the New York Times, is paying increasing attention to this problem [14].

In the context of the war for independence, Ukrainian society may agree with some restrictions on political freedoms, as was the case with banning the right to broadcast for the three above-mentioned TV channels representing the interests of the aggressor country in Ukraine. For Ukrainians, their own state is not an abstraction, but the collective value that must now be protected against the aggression of the “Russian world” since the latter deliberately destroys any sprouts of democratic political culture. The Ukrainian state, with all its legal systems and institutions, should be allowed and empowered to protect the previously mentioned ideals of freedom and justice.

With these considerations in mind, it is important for Ukrainian society not to perceive the behavior of Ukraine’s international allies, aimed at protecting their own national interests, as a kind of “hybrid partnership” where actors are careless about their own declared values and principles. On the other hand, for Ukraine itself, while the situation of undeclared war with Russia persists, it is important to act in accordance with its instincts for self-preservation and survival, relying, first and foremost, on its own forces, army, economy, and robust society.

Even before the need to fight corruption and ensure economic growth, the very first question that Ukrainians must answer is the question: who are we? And this question is directly related to collective dignity and national identity.

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