

# Russia and Ukraine: Forever Apart?

The Two Countries at Loggerheads  
over “Common Past”

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## Abstract

The article provides an analysis of the use and misuse of history in Ukraine-Russia relations. Its main point is that Russia and Ukraine shared much of common history, but now they have very different approaches to it which are determined by both their past and contemporary agendas. The Russian elite seeks to reestablish Russia as a world player on the international arena. Ukraine is essential in this pursuit as an integral part of Russia's past, which, in turn, is used for justification of its present ambitions. Ukraine is mostly viewed by the Russian elite as part of Russia's history proper. The Ukrainian statehood is considered as an odd joke of history.

The Ukrainian elite has a very different vision and understanding of the past, which is projected to the present. The Ukrainian official historical narrative considers Ukraine as a separate entity with a millennial history. Russia is increasingly often presented in this narrative as an external oppressor, the evil Other obsessed with eternal imperial ambitions. Annexation of Crimea and hidden support of separatist movements in Donbass by Russia provide more strength to this perception.

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The historical arguments are heavily used by both countries in pursuing their political goals both at the national and international levels. The current state of relations between Ukraine and Russia predetermines further instrumental use and misuse of history for the purposes of propaganda and hybrid war.

**Keywords:** Ukraine, Russia, nation-building, common past, the Other, ethnic history vs. national history.

### **“NATIONALIZATION OF THE PAST”**

At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, Ukraine’s historians, politicians, and cultural elites created (or recreated) a rather stereotyped version of national history, which is common to any European identity project of the past two hundred years. Turning their nation into a sovereign agent of history was a super task, which, however, was quite easy to fulfill technically.

The major challenge was to separate “own” history from the previously common Soviet-era cultural and historical space, and then to make it legitimate. The territorial boundaries of that space were determined by the political boundaries drawn in 1991. In terms of time, the narrative went back to Kievan Rus (as the beginning of statehood), but earlier periods were not discounted as prehistory either. The Ukrainian nation became an independent actor of history. However, a separation from the common past also meant re-distribution of that past. “Nationalization” also meant “privatization” of the space and time in the now politically sovereign territory. Needless to say, the neighbors were doing pretty much the same.

The set task was fulfilled fairly quickly and easily. A new “biography of the nation” was written and legalized in history books, academic works, articles, and mass media. It claimed that the nation had existed continuously for at least a thousand years at times as a cultural phenomenon and at times as a state. Ukraine acquired its own millennium-long period of uninterrupted existence as a sovereign actor of European history.

The project received the approval of the state but caused a contentious reaction in society. The historical and civilizational experience varied from region to region in modern Ukraine, which became a whole only in 1954. Therefore, the idea of an indivisible uniting historical narrative imposed from the newly established center was not unanimously accepted in different parts of the country. In the early 1990s, some even suggested publishing different history books for different parts of Ukraine, an initiative, which was quite expectedly turned down by the political authorities of the country.

The problem was not so much in the pan-Ukrainian version of history as such as in how it was presented. A common consolidating history was wrapped into an ethnonational narrative which presented Ukraine's past predominantly as a history of ethnic Ukrainians. This community was perceived as a group glued together by a common language, culture and sometimes even blood kinship. As a result, about a quarter of the country's population were presented as guests who were encouraged to feel at home but at the same time urged to be aware of their alien roots.

By the end of the 1990s, a certain part of society, capable of self-reflection and analysis, had realized that the proposed historical narrative contained potentially dangerous elements. Firstly, some of the "guests" could claim the status of indigenous population, including Jews, Crimean Tatars, Poles, Russians, and Greeks. Moreover, some of them had their own elaborated vision of their role in the history of Ukraine, which often was at odds with the official narrative. Secondly, the proposed version of history contained elements of cultural and ethnic exclusiveness, xenophobia, and cultural intolerance. The presentation of the historical role of the Other (for example, Poles or Crimean Tatars) raised questions not only about political correctness or compliance with the "European standards" but also about prospects for integration. Thirdly, the area where some of the "guests" had lived for centuries coincided with the external political perimeter: Crimea (Crimean Tatars and Russians), South-East (Greeks, Russians, and Germans), Transcarpathia (Hungarians, Ruthenians), Bessarabia and Bukovina (Romanians). Furthermore, discrepancies between the re-

gional versions of the past and the proposed, and promoted, “nationwide” framework quickly became a subject of political instrumentalization and mobilization of regional elites.

These problems were addressed not only by political actors interested in utilitarian usage of the past, but also by that part of society which considered the common past as a basis for a common present on the grounds of dialogue and voluntary inclusion. For almost twenty years Ukraine has been discussing, with varying degrees of intensity, how to integrate the Other into the statewide national narrative. The focus is slowly shifting from understanding Ukrainian history as an exclusive cultural narrative of the titular nation towards viewing it as a space of cooperation and interaction between different cultures, which, however, does not belittle their contradictions and competition. But this view for the time being is functioning in a rather demonstration mode, as an addendum to the ethno-exclusive narrative which is not only dominating but acquiring radical forms due to territorial losses and the war in Donbass.

Until the middle of the first decade of the 2000s regional versions of history and memory had coexisted with the abovementioned “nationwide” framework narrative fairly well, with no major or minor conflicts occurring. Nostalgia for the Soviet past was cultivated in Donbass, Crimea and largely in the southeast of Ukraine; a nationalist pack of memory prevailed in Galicia; the dominant nationalized version and the nostalgic Soviet one comfortably coexisted in central Ukraine.

Since 2005 Ukraine has been witnessing an acceleration of the politics of memory to advance and radicalize the ethno-exclusive version of Ukrainian history. President Victor Yushchenko started a large-scale campaign, both inside and outside the country, to portray the Holodomor of 1932-1933 as an act of genocide against Ukrainians by the Moscow totalitarian regime. It was accompanied by attempts, albeit quite feeble, to “decommunize” the country by tearing down “communist regime” monuments under the pretext of cleansing the country of any memory about the organizers of the Holodomor.

These actions were also accompanied by energetic efforts to

promote historical episodes portraying the heroic struggle against external invaders. The official politics of memory presented a whole string of events which logically brought together the Battle of Konotop of 1659, the fall of the Hetman capital of Baturyn in 1708, Hetman Ivan Mazepa's desertion to King Charles XII of Sweden, the abolition of Cossack Hetmanate at the end of the 18th century, the Battle of Kruty on January 29, 1918, and the activities of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) in 1929-1954 and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) in 1942-1950. It is easy to notice that Russia and Poland were portrayed as external invaders in all these cases.

As a matter of fact, this approach had already been present in school and university curricula, but the focus on the nationalist side of history was the finishing touch. This was done through both the official politics of memory (various forms of public celebration) and public happenings. For example, since 2008 nationalist parties have been organizing torch marches in Kiev on Stepan Bandera's birthday on January 1. In 2005-2010, UPA commander Roman Shukhevich and OUN leader Stepan Bandera were awarded the title of Hero of Ukraine. Their images can be found on post stamps and memorial coins. Attempts have been made to hold nationwide celebrations marking the 65th anniversary of the UPA and give UPA veterans the same social benefits WWII veterans have.

But attempts to strengthen the nationalist aspect of the national historical narrative and its *Drang nach Osten* (Drive to the East) met with resistance from the advocates of the nostalgic Soviet narrative. The period of their relative peaceful coexistence had come to an end. The struggle for the past became an important part of the struggle for power and voters. Conflicting versions of the past, radicalized and used by politicians against opponents, dragged people into their fight and drew an increasingly clear line dividing society into irreconcilable camps, which matched regional political preference patterns. Any map of parliamentary or presidential elections in 2004-2014 reflected almost perfectly different understandings of Ukraine's past. Active and passive supporters of the "nationalized" history of Ukraine focused on western and central regions, their opponents, on eastern and

southeastern ones where history was managed by the Party of Regions and communists.

Under President Victor Yanukovich, who claimed no special say on issues of history, the conflict continued, sometimes acquiring violent forms (street scuffles in Lvov, Ternopol, Kiev, and Odessa, frequent acts of vandalism)). The authorities made some attempts, not quite convincing though, to neutralize the nationalist component of nationalized history when Shukhevich and Bandera were stripped of the title of Hero of Ukraine, and school textbooks were partly edited to remove “nationalistic extremes.”

After 2014, “the questions of history” turned into answers. Territorial losses, the war in the east of the country, and Russia’s role in these processes transformed it from the Other into the main enemy. In his annual speech on Holodomor Remembrance Day on the last Saturday of November 2015, President Pyotr Poroshenko described the famine of 1932-1933 as part of the “hybrid war which Russia has been waging against Ukraine for centuries” (Poroshenko, 2015). Speaking at a Rada meeting in March 2017, marking the centenary of the Ukrainian revolution of 1917-1921, Vladimir Vyatrovich, head of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, claimed that “our century-long war for freedom” with Russia was still going on (Vyatrovich, 2017).

These are just two examples that provide an insight into how Ukraine’s current group in power understands the history of Ukrainian-Russian relations. And this is not just an understanding but a well-considered discursive strategy: Russia is the evil historical Other, both figuratively and literally. It is a predatory, dangerous and insidious Alien with acid instead of blood and poisonous mucus oozing out of the fanged mouth, which is seeking to devour Ukraine. History is just the proof.

The process of “decommunization” launched by special laws in April and May 2015 had a strong anti-Russian slant in addition to its main purpose of obliterating the Soviet past from the symbolic space. The persistence with which the authorities pushed for changing the name of Kirovograd is a vivid example of that. A local referendum

showed that the overwhelming majority of residents wanted to restore its original name of Elizavetgrad, but this was absolutely unacceptable for the authorities in Kiev. Russian Empress Elisabeth (18th century) was “decommunized” and the city’s name was changed to Kropivnytsky in memory of a playwright born there in the 19th century.

“Decommunization” has been accompanied by energetic efforts to advance the nationalist narrative. Nationalist parties elected to local administrative bodies have been marking the symbolic space wherever possible with the names of their heroes. Streets have been named after Bandera in Belaya Tserkov, Kiev, Sumy, Brovary, Zhytomyr, Korosten, Khmelnytsky, Shepetovka, Poltava, Berdichev, Kremenchug, and Uman. Memorial plaques in his honor have been installed in Cherkassy and Khmelnytsky without the local administrations’ approval.

Attempts continue to turn the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, usually mentioned together with the OUN, into a national symbol. In October 2014, President Poroshenko proclaimed Defender of Ukraine Day on October 14, the day when the UPA had been created. State propaganda is cultivating a heroic myth about “the army of the undefeated” who were fighting with two totalitarian (Nazi and Soviet) regimes. Needless to say, it omits controversial episodes in the history of the UPA (such as the massacres of Poles in Volyn in 1943) or presents them as a “Polish-Ukrainian War.” Naturally, the main purpose of this myth is to legitimize the fight against Russian imperialism, which becomes particularly relevant amid the ongoing war in the east of Ukraine (in the fourth year of the war the Verkhovna Rada has finally managed to proclaim Russia an aggressor state and an invader).

The current politics of memory aimed at complete extinction of the Soviet nostalgic narrative (often perceived or deliberately presented by its enemies as pro-Russian) accompanied by intensive promotion of the nationalist heroic myth, which cherishes OUN and UPA as major uncompromised freedom fighters at the national level does not receive unanimous support.

While Central Ukraine became more positive about new heroes of the nation, the Southern and Eastern regions prove to be reluctant to

this idea. According to the most recent sociological survey in 2017, the total share of respondents who believed that OUN and UPA members should be officially recognized as “participants in the struggle for independence” (in fact they were recognized officially in April 2015 by the parliament) was 65.9% in Western Ukraine, 39% in Central Ukraine, 28.7% in the South, and 13.3% in the East (government-controlled territories). At the same time the share of those who expressed a negative attitude to this idea was 43.2% in the South and 50.3% in the East (KMIS, 2017).

Different attitudes towards the past have predominantly a nature of a dormant conflict. They do not appear at the surface of public life until they are utilized by the groups of interests, politicians, and media. Recent clashes (2018) between small groups of “defenders” of May 9 as Victory Day and those who oppose this name were broadcasted by the majority of national TV channels. Some presented these conflicts as the prove of existence and power of “zoological nationalists” attacking poor old veterans, others as evidence of the presence of the “fifth column,” naturally, formed in Russia.

### **“UKRAINE IS NOT RUSSIA,” RUSSIA IS NOT UKRAINE**

The substance and vector of the abovementioned processes are not determined entirely by the logic of the national narrative or the interests of different segments of Ukraine’s political class and society. Russia played a major role in them too.

Both countries experienced similar problems in developing and implementing their internal politics of memory. In the case of Russia, three major challenges can be observed. The first one was the need to create a common and framework uniting narrative that would create a political nation, an imagined community based on the principle of citizenship and common historical fate. Boris Yeltsin preferred to call it *Rossiyane* (the people of Russia) and Vladimir Putin calls this community “the Russian nation.” The second one was the need to decide what to do with the Soviet legacy and the “totalitarian past.” The third was the need to address the issue of regional or ethnonational narratives of the past that emerged or resurfaced in the 1990s.

The Russian ruling class opted for an inclusive model of history and collective memory, with the “history of the Russian state” expectedly chosen as a uniting framework. The Soviet period was integrated into the consolidating narrative with a central myth of the “Great Victory” in the 1941-1945 Great Patriotic War as a common cause for all people living in Russia. As for statehood, the Soviet period smoothly blended with the imperial one. Regional narratives remained but became overpowered by the federal standard which promotes “a common history” with the hidden agenda of the prevailing role of ethnic Russians in the past and present of the country.

While in the domestic politics of memory the inclusive model downplays the ethnonational component, the external one reveals a completely different picture. Since the middle of the 2000s ethno-cultural and confessional irredentism has been gradually gaining more and more importance. The “common” history of Russians both in Russia and outside it became one of the components of the “Russian world” concept. Due to the historical, intellectual, and cultural tradition, the common history includes not only ethnic Russians but also Ukrainians who by many are believed to be part of a big Russian nation.

For the major part of the Russian ruling class, cultural elites and people capable of reflection, Ukrainians are not the completely alien Other. Ukrainians are not different from Russians, it is just that they have decided to break away either due to a whim of fate or because of tricks or deception by external forces (Germans and Poles in the 19th-20th centuries, the West in the 21st century). The fact of the Ukrainian statehood is generally viewed as a cruel joke of history, as a hiccup, especially in the context of “common history” where Ukrainians have always been part of the common cultural, political, and governmental space, except maybe for Western Ukraine (Russians are generally ready to recognize Ukraine’s Galicians as the collective Other).

It is these “particularities of understanding,” which can easily be translated into concrete actions, that irritated, irritate and will irritate and antagonize the ruling class and a considerable part of Ukraine’s political and cultural elites and now also a significant part of its population. Attempts at consolidation within the framework of “common”

history, which usually accompany other integration projects (common customs or economic space, Orthodoxy, etc.) will always meet with counteraction. This counteraction will involve not only ethnic Ukrainians but also a considerable part of ethnic Russians in Ukraine, including those who may disagree with Ukraine's "domestic" politics of memory.

Since the middle of the 2000s, the Russian political leadership had been carrying out its integration aspirations with the help of "soft power" through cultural projects, humanitarian cooperation, and broader contacts. But this policy did not look like a well-thought-out strategy.

It was largely addressed to those who were already loyal to Russia and Russian culture. This approach, especially when it acquired a regional dimension and was used in Russian-speaking regions, raised suspicions about attempts to create "a fifth column" and was often carried out quite clumsily, showing disrespect for the feelings of those who supported the nationalized narrative in Ukrainian history. It also conspicuously demonstrated support for certain political forces in Ukraine (Party of Regions, communists), thus increasing political polarization in the country, and served as an example of interference.

Speaking of other segments, the advocates of Ukraine's cultural and political sovereignty viewed this as interference in the country's internal affairs and expansion, a sort of cultural "neo-imperialism." A "common history" as a proposal too good to decline caused a particularly painful reaction because Ukraine's own history and language were regarded as the foundation of its own identity. Suffice it to recall several abortive attempts to write a common history book or study guides on history for teachers. Even purely academic projects deeply antagonized the politically active part of society which viewed them as an encroachment on the sovereignty of identity.

Disagreements were also intensified by Russia's domestic policy, especially in mass media which portrayed Ukraine's historical narrative and its public presentations as a show of monstrous nationalists.

The wars of memory between Russia and Ukraine in 2007-2010, initiated by the former, boosted and radicalized the latter's national historical narrative and increased its "ontological anxiety" (the term

coined by Alexander Astrov for the Baltic States) (Astrov, 2012: 117-140). In Russia this form of anxiety amounts to the fear of “losing” Ukraine forever, which was based on a myth that Russia could be a world power or an empire only if Ukraine remains its integral part (I do not take into consideration geopolitical reasons, NATO’s enlargement, and other factors). In Ukraine, this concern appears as a fear of losing its identity under the pressure from the “big brother” whose embrace could be so strong that it could simply be asphyxiating. This concern grew deeper when the top leadership of the country dug into history. The first alarmist expectations appeared after Vladimir Putin’s remarks at the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008 where he spoke about the history of Ukraine’s statehood and territory, claiming that Ukraine was a somewhat unnatural creation whose territory had been formed by other states by sharing their lands (Putin, 2008). These expectations came true in 2014 when it became clear that the Russian ruling class’ excursion into the history of Ukraine pursued purely utilitarian purposes: to substantiate the creation of a new federal district in Crimea with the help of the Russian Black Sea Fleet and “polite men in military uniform,” the “Novorossiia project” (Putin, 2014), and Russia’s “informal” presence in the unrecognized Donetsk and Lugansk people’s republics. History became part of the information war, which further radicalized the national and nationalist narrative of history and memory in Ukraine. The loss of Crimea and the war in the east of the country provide convincing evidence for the part of the narrative that portrays Russia as an eternal enemy, invader and exploiter of Ukrainians.

### **WHAT’S NEXT?**

The current state of Ukrainian-Russian relations (if they can be called relations at all) gives no reason to expect any changes in either country’s politics of memory. History is at war, probably more so in Ukraine than in Russia where the history of Ukraine as a phenomenon in its own right is recognized only in academic works. Ukraine as a subject is virtually nonexistent in school textbooks which shape up young people’s historical conscience.

Ukraine must now use historical arguments in order not only to prove its right to independent existence but also to enlighten and guide its Russian-speaking citizens onto the right path through the popular “*LikBez* Historical Front” project (Likbez, 2018).

The segment of the ruling class that currently holds the reins of power will undoubtedly use “the issues of history” for political and military mobilization as borne out by the direct and tacit support for the heroic cult of the UPA/OUN fighters and the propaganda of those episodes of Ukrainian history that describe “Ukraine’s fight against Russia” all the way back to the times when no such countries existed yet.

Could Ukraine’s politics of memory change if new people come to power in the country? The latter is more of a metaphor than a real phenomenon reflecting real changes. The ruling class in Ukraine has turned into a sham of the Soviet *nomenklatura*: the top official who regularly holds high government offices, then locked up in prison and then appointed to new public positions, might be seen as a routine story. The incumbent president started his political career as one of the founders of the opposition Party of Regions. The most likely candidate for the post of chief executive, Yulia Tymoshenko, began her dramatic political journey almost twenty years ago.

Even the two biggest revolts called revolutions could not shake the system: persons may change (and gain more political and physical weight), their names may be changed and their wealth may grow, they may wear new suits, their language proficiency may improve, but the stock of rulers, their habits, instincts, and outlook remain the same.

The existence of the state of Ukraine is an inevitable part of their outlook. It predetermines the way of substantiating and justifying any regime in Ukraine. The president who skillfully managed problems in Russian-Ukrainian relations wrote the book “Ukraine Is Not Russia.” The most “pro-Russian” president, who has found asylum in Russia, dared not go against the classic national narrative and his only deviation was not to recognize the Holodomor as genocide while the event itself was duly commemorated at the highest level.

Ukraine can be sovereign (at least in legal terms) only if it has its own biography which must include the Other as its antagonist. This

role has always been given to Poland and Russia. However, the “future of the past” in relationship with these Others might be very different. It is very likely that Ukraine will be able to come to an agreement with Poland sooner or later despite current controversies over the Volyn massacre of 1943 and the role of OUN and UPA. There are two reasons for that. Firstly, the current memory conflict is a clash between two mutually exclusive nationalist narratives which both parties, but especially Ukraine, are trying to portray as an interstate and even inter-ethnic conflict. Secondly, unlike Russia, Polish elites have no difficulty recognizing Ukraine’s right to independent existence. For Poland Ukraine is the Other, albeit a close one. And this is not so much a confrontation as comparison on both sides.

In the case of Russia, the situation appears to be much more complex. The main problem is rather conceptual in nature, namely acknowledging the right of Ukraine and Ukrainians to historical and political identity recognized through their own independent history and statehood.

Another problem, less visible but no less important, is how Ukraine and Ukrainians are presented in Russia’s mass media and public space. Portraying them as historically kindred brothers misled or deceived by the West, or as incorrigible xenophobes jumping up and down to a popular chant and worshipping the national embroidered shirt and Bandera, or as idiots sincerely believing that their ancestors dug the Black Sea can hardly help promote “historical understanding” between the two countries. In point of fact, the share of Russians speaking negatively of Ukraine (55% of respondents) and Ukrainians by far exceeds the share of Ukrainians (38% of respondents) feeling similarly about Russia (Levada Center, 2018).

The image of Russia as an invader and aggressor has been given practical substantiation in Ukraine after the events which began with the “Russian Spring” in 2014 and are still going on. Even if new people come to power in Ukraine, one can hardly expect any radical change in its politics of memory. The nationalistic narrative of history and memory may be advanced less aggressively and the Soviet experience may be “reevaluated” less prejudicially, but a dialogue with Russia on

the past may only be possible at the level of academic history, that is, on neutral grounds, but hardly in Minsk.

While pushing away from the Russian shore, the Ukrainian ruling class, part of the elites and supporting citizens would logically be expected to move towards the opposite Other, that is, towards the West, or rather towards imagined Europe. But things are more complicated than that. There is a clearly noticeable dual attitude towards the imaginary “West,” which stems not only from the pro-Russian part of society or the supporters of “Slavic unity.” It also stems from the perception, explicit or concealed, of the “West” and Europe as some ultimate instance and substance, to which they want to be closer but at the same time do not want to feel inferior.

“Nativists” are trying to dig up historical arguments proving that Ukraine is part of “European history.” These may include Kievan Rus as the biggest Eastern European state, Anna Regina, the queen of France, Cossacks’ participation in European wars in the middle of the 17th century, Pilip Orlik’s “Europe’s first ever constitution,” Mazepa who sided with a European king, not with the Russian tsar, and many other events.

On the other hand, Europe is often viewed as an unreliable ally who is infected with the virus of Russophilia and is likely to betray Ukraine’s interests. This Ukrainian version fits quite easily into the well-known Eastern European scenario that has evolved from the criticism of Kundera’s “Stolen West or the Tragedy of Central Europe” (Kundera, 1984) to the rise of ethnonationalism and populism in the 2000s which coincided perfectly with the admission to the European Union. In its politics of memory Ukraine is moving in the footsteps of its Western neighbors who recently were “Eastern Europeans:” as the country gets closer to the “West/Europe,” the ethnonational narrative becomes stronger, giving center stage to figures and organizations that clearly defy the values of “united Europe.”

Like its immediate Western neighbors, Ukraine’s ruling class has to reconcile the recognition of the Holocaust as a measure of “Europeanness” and part of the common memory and responsibility with the public glorification of persons and organizations whose political pro-

grams and actions were clearly anti-Semitic in nature. Moreover, these organizations were involved in crimes against humanity. And this is where “Europe” becomes an irritating and annoying mentor who may as well be ignored simply because the entrance ticket to the European Union has not even been offered yet. In the meantime, the mentor has more urgent matters to deal with apart from rampant corruption, imitation of reforms financed by the EU, resistance from bureaucracy, anarchy, growing crime rates, agonizing economy, mass impoverishment, and the like. It can only shrug its shoulders at best. But it is too tired, or maybe disinclined, to do even that.

Cicero considered history the teacher of life (*magistra vitae*). Hegel claimed that the lessons of history teach us nothing. Maybe the Roman will win this dispute one day, but today the German is right, at least in the Russian-Ukrainian story about history which seems to be unfolding somewhere in Europe now.

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