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Identity Factor in Terms of the Ukrainian Crisis : (The Example of the Donbas Region)

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Identity Factor in Terms of the Ukrainian Crisis (the Example of The Donbas Region)

The conflict in Donbas, which is the reason of current Ukrainian crisis, caused the most serious challenge for the Ukrainian state for all the years of its modern history. In this respect, the study of typology and mechanisms of the conflict is not only at teoretical, but also anessential practical task, the solution of which, at least at an expert level, should help to identify possible ways out of it. As an important practical task, considering significant share of the propaganda component in the conflict, it is also necessary to admit the disclosure of relevant propaganda methods used by the Russian side to create favorable public opinion (including the European one) on the events in Ukraine. An image of “ethnic conflict in the east of Ukraine” takes a significant place in these imposed representations. Recognizing obvious discrepancy of this image to the real situation, we consider the study of the roots of Donbas separatism and the role of the identity factor in it as a topical one.

This article is aimed to clarify the role of identity in the opposition of the internal Ukrainian subjects of the conflict in Donbas, namely, the Ukrainian side (Armed Forces of Ukraine, the National Guard and volunteer battalions) and so-called *militias*, i.e. local pro-Russian separatists.

Etymologically the term *identity* derives from Latin, from the verb *identificare* – to equate, to establish coincidences. Generally speaking, identity is a part of self-identity of an individual, a sense of belonging to or connection with one or another community (nation, country, team, nationality, race, language group, party, etc.) or culture, tradition, ideology (religion, location, social movement, etc.)¹.

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¹ V. Tishkov, *Staryie i novyie dentichnosti*, http://valerytishkov.ru/cntnt/nauchnaya/_obrazy_rossii/starie-i-novie-i.html.

By definition of L. Nagorna, socially, identity has the form of the most significant political, cultural, religious and other orientations, by which is determined a network of human connections with groups, institutions, ideas etc. Thus, the term *identity* covers a complex set of meanings, expectations, representations, political preferences, commitments to the particular system of values².

Identities are a sort of system of cultural and historical coordinates, which are designed by society and may change or be corrected depending on the policy and other factors. Such kinds of identity as national, ethnic, language, religious come from similar cultural classification criteria; they often overlap and reinforce one another. All or together, they can mobilize and sustain strong community³.

The most common conflicts in the world today are precisely connected with ethnic identity. Since the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, one may see purposeful efforts of the Russian side to interpret it, and first of all, the conflict in Donbas in ethnic categories. That is, Russian propaganda is to camouflage the participation of Russia in the conflict, it attempts to provide crisis with features of internal ethnic confrontation (between the Ukrainians and Russians of the Eastern Ukraine). This allows to argue their support to separatists (protection of ethnic Russians) and secession of South East territories (right of nations to self-determination).

The Russian propaganda machine works towards the popularization of the three main contents. First is alleged oppression of Russians and Russian-speaking by new Kyiv authorities. This issue with varying degree of intensity was always present in the rhetoric of Russian propagandists, but with particular strength it has begun to unwind since Euromaidan. As well as the mythologems about the right nationalists, *banderivtsi* and demonized *Right sector*, as if by their joint efforts the *revolution* was made which brought *junta* to power. A special role in whipping up hysterical fear about the fate of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in Ukraine was hasty abolition by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine the "Law on the Principles of State Language Policy". In the interpretation of Russian propagandists this was "the abolition and prohibition of Russian language in Ukraine". Protection of Russians was an argument in the annexation of the Crimea and a rationale of support of separatists in Donbas. And in the summer of 2014, the rhetoric of the Russian Federation officials included such serious accusations towards the Ukrainian government as "ethnic purges"⁴.

In promoting the idea about the oppression of the Russians, there was actively used the authority of the creative intelligentsia, whose representatives have repeatedly supported such reading of the situation in Ukraine, basing allegedly on their own experience⁵.

² L.P. Nagorna, *Regionalni Identichnosti: ukrayinskiy kontekst*, Kyiv: IPIEND im. I.F. Kurasa NAN Ukrayini, 2008, p. 34.

³ M. Panchuk, *Do pitannya pro identifikatsiyu gromadyan Ukrayini*, Naukovi Zapiski Institutu Politichnih i Etnonatsionalnih Doslidzhenim I.F. Kurasa NAN Ukrayini, 2013, No. 5 (67), veresen–zhovten, pp. 13–32.

⁴ *Lavrov: na Ukraine vyinashivayutsya stsenarii etnicheskoy chistki*, <http://ria.ru/world/20140617/1012419004.html>.

⁵ *V. Menshov: Ukraine dazhe povoda ne daem, a nas shpyinyayut*, http://tvrain.ru/teleshov/govori-te_s_yuliyev_taratutoy/vladimir_menshov_my_ukraine_dazhe_povoda_dlja_pret-385961.

The second issue on which is based the propagandistic *ethnization* of Donbas events is as if the South East regions of Ukraine or so-called *Novorossiya* ("New Russia") historically belong to Russia. The signal to the large-scale popularization of this idea was the press conference V. Putin where the president sounded that "...Kharkov, Lugansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Mykolaiv, Odesa were not parts of Ukraine in tsarist times. These territories were transferred in the twenties by the Soviet government, and why they did it, only God knows"⁶.

Soon, by the efforts of both regular Kremlin propagandists and representatives of the academic community, thesis about *Novorossiya* acquired specific territorial and qualitative characteristics, however, those that fit into the president's statements. Thus, M. Leontiev said that *Novorossiya* is 9 regions. Crimea, which is already Russia, is also a part of *Novorossiya*. *Novorossiya* is Russia, where we began is that Ukraine has never existed. These Leninist-Stalinist national simulacra were not aimed to increase growing of Ukrainian independent state, but to manipulate national movements, plus not their own, but foreign ones". And the deputy director of the Institute of Russian History RAS Victor Zakharov stressed that it was Russia, which began the process of colonization of the Black Sea lands⁷.

And finally, the third postulate, which completes the logic of the first two, is that the reation of new separatist formations united by title *Novorossiya* is the realization of self-determination of another, non-Ukrainian(that means, Russian) identity of these territories. The Chairman of the Supervisory Board of the Institute of Demography, Migration and Regional Development of the Russian Federation, Yuriy Krupnov calls this identity – "the people of *Novorossiya*". "According to the UN Charter, the people of *Novorossiya* have a right to self-determination. And they courageously exercise this right..."⁸.

M. Leontiev associates self-determination of *Novorossiya* with the formation of a new Ukrainian state. "This name (*Novorossiya*) is symbolic due to the struggle of *Novorossiya* for self-determination with in Ukrainian state, which establishes again and has nothing to do with the USSR, has no right to claim succession from it neither the loyalty of its former citizens. By the way, this self-determination of *Novorossiya* is a prerequisite to self-determination of Ukraine itself, if Ukraine wants to establish itself as a new state"⁹.

At the same time, the propagandistic performance, amorphous content and lack of ethnic identity marker of *Novorossiya* are obvious to any impartial observer in Ukraine. The usage of Russian language and non-Ukrainian ethnic origin of a considerable part of Ukrainian army and volunteer battalions prove the fact that there is no ethnic separation in the conflict of the sides. They are formed and replenished

⁶ *Vystuplenie Putina: Novorossiya I drugie yarkie tsitaty*, <http://news.bigmir.net/world/809994-Vystuplenie-Putina---Novorossija--i-drugie-jarkie-citaty>.

⁷ M. Sokolova, *Eksperty: „Novorossiya imeet pravo na samoopredelenie”*, <http://www.pnp.ru/news/detail/64849>.

⁸ *Yuriy Krupnov: Kreml dolzhen zaschitit Ustav OON I dat narodu Novorossii realizovat pravo na samoopredelenie*, <http://istina.com.ua/news/yuriy-krupnov-kreml-dolzhen-zashchitit-ustav-oon-i-dat-narodu-novorossii-vozmozhnost-realizovat-pravo-na-samoopredelenie>.

⁹ *Mihail Leontev o Novorossii: Vossoedinenie istoricheskoy Rossii neizbezhno*, <http://expert.ru/2014/07/18/mihail-leontev-o-novorossii-vossoedinenie-istoricheskoy-rossii-neizbezhno>.

by natives from Mykolaiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Odessa, Kharkiv regions— those regions which were easily “included” to the *Novorossiya* by Russian propaganda. Properly speaking, these facts refute statements about oppression of Russian-speaking in Ukraine, because if it were true, they would unlikely to fight on the Ukrainian side. Generally, is it possible the mere presence of Russian-speaking Ukrainian patriot or even nationalist if his national and cultural or language rights were oppressed?

Back in 2013 only 6.3% of the Donbas residents named language issue among the most acute ones¹⁰. Even in Crimea, during the presidency of Viktor Yushchenko, who in Russia is considered as a “nationalistic” President, and in the times of his presidency, the attack on the rights of Russians has allegedly intensified, inability to learn their mother tongue was relevant only for 16.6% of Russians, and the lack of opportunities for the development of national culture for 6.9%¹¹.

In general, all the previous years in Ukraine, and particularly in the Donbas, there was no any significant and politically issued pro-Russian movement, and pro-Russian organizations were more than marginal. During the parliamentary elections in 2012 the party *Rus'kiy blok* won up 0.4% in Donetsk region and 0.47% in Lugansk region¹². On the one hand, it clearly shows the level of public support and on the other— their legal existence and activity do not allow telling about any harassment by state authorities.

The position of national minorities also does not allow stating ethnicity in the conflict, in particular Greeks, who compactly reside in the Donetsk region. The official position of the Greek community, whose center is located in Mariupol, is pro-Ukrainian. The choice of the conflict side by wide sections of the Greek population is largely determined by the territory where one or another Greek village is placed— at the controlled by Ukrainian authorities or the occupied one. There are instances when Greek ethnic leaders deliberately and initially stood on opposite sides of the conflict. Thus, A. Afendikov was appointed the Mayor at the separatists captured Debaltseve and Village Head of Yalta (near Mariupol) D. Chornytsya actively assists Ukrainian army, and having become the Head of Pervomayskaya district administration initiated at the level of the district council the decision to recognize Russia as an *aggressor country*¹³.

Absence of ethnic back ground in the conflict is emphasized in the information memorandum of the Rapporteur of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on the political consequences of the conflict in Ukraine, Christina Zelenkova: “It is clear, that there is no civil war in the eastern regions of Ukraine. There are no religious or ethnic identification reasons for the conflict, as it was in the other parts

¹⁰ *Naibolee aktualnyimi dlya zhyteley Donbassa yavlyayutsya problemi sotsialno-ekonomicheskogo haraktera*, <http://press.unian.net/pressnews/976722-naibolee-aktualnyimi-dlya-jiteley-donbassa-yavlyayutsya-problemyi-sotsialno-ekonomicheskogo-harakter-a-issledovanie.html>.

¹¹ *Osobennosti yazykovoy situatsii v Ukraine*, http://inlang.linguanet.ru/Cis/CisLanguageConditions/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=2560&SHOWALL_1=1.

¹² *Ruskiy blok*, http://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A0%D1%83%D1%81%D1%8C%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%B9_%D0%B1%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%BA.

¹³ *Pershotravnava rayonna rada na Donechchini viznala Rosiyu krayinoyu – agresorom*, <http://www.newsru.ua/ukraine/05apr2015/1tr.html>.

of the world”¹⁴. At the same time, Ch. Zelenkova directly stated that Russia’s participation in the conflict is not limited by supply of heavy weapons and fighters, it is also represented in a command staff and a political decision-making process.

A certain factor, which indicates the identity of the sides of the conflict may be their self-designation. In the official names of Donbas militias there never appears ethnonym *Russians*, at best they are called *pro-Russians*. The same applies to the slang names of opposing sides – *ukry*, *ukropy* (both supporters of Ukrainian side), *separiy* (*separatists*), *denerovtisi* (*supporters of the DPR*), *lenerovtisi* (*supporters of the LPR*), *opolchentsi* (*militias*), *povstantsi* (*rebels*). Only in some cases, they (*ukry*, *ukropy*) send us to ethnonym *Ukrainian* which means not so much the ethnicity as nationality. There also was no popularization of the linguistic structure of *Novorossiia*, which could denote ethnic identity of Southern East. This name identifies the population of these territories, even in the nineteenth century during the period of the homonymous administrative unit of the Russian Empire. The names of territorial self-proclaimed republics contain territorial content – the Donetsk People’s Republic, the Lugansk People’s Republic – derivatives from toponyms, but not ethnonyms. At the same time the designation “people” itself refers to a certain part of the social (not ethnic) populism of the irideologies.

Finally, the chosen symbol (flag) of *Novorossiia* does not have any sort of historical and ethnic roots, and is associated with the Southern States of the Confederation flag (the war of the North and South in the USA) that the possibly underlines subconscious attraction of its creators to the most appropriate historical counterparts – namely, to separatist rebellion of separate territories.

Denial to classify the conflict in ethnic categories does not mean that the identity plays no role in it. In general, identity is a marker of opposing sides in any conflict, not necessarily in ethnic one. In the context of war, confrontation of identities is inevitable because one must somehow mark the enemy and its fundamental difference from “our” a long with the inevitable demonization of the enemy’s image. That is, mass consciousness itself in accordance with its stereotypes, on which propaganda effectively plays, constructs a reality by traditional patterns– “us/them” that during the war is transformed into “friend/foe”. *Reds – Whites, Republicans – Francoists, Germans (fascists) – Russians, Serbs – Albanians* are examples of confrontation of identities in different historical period sand in different struggles, which are typologically considered as civil wars and international conflicts, and ethnic conflicts.

In our case identical separation is observed not BEFORE the opposition, but DURING it, while the formation of the DPR and the LPD. It is indicated *post factum* and is acquitted response of individual sand the community to the new political, and in general, life realities. An extremely subjective and emotional text of one of the Donetsk bloggers, never the less, high lights the absence of the ground for conflicts before the war. “It’s hard to believe, but two years ago a lot Donetsk residents walked with Ukrainian flags and sang the anthem. I was among them. There were football matches of Euro-2012 and incredible emotional lift, we communicated perfectly with the guys from Franika (*Ivano-Frankivsk – S.P.*), Poltava and Kyiv. For my separatism,

¹⁴ PARE znayde viznachennya konfliktu na Donbasi, <http://fakty.ictv.ua/ua/index/read-news/id/1545550>.

I first of all want to thank the Ukrainian television, online media and, of course, valiant Ukrainian army in all its manifestations. These were you who made us enemies, you played off Ukrainians against one another, you forced them to kill each other, and you keep doing it. You killed the Ukrainian in me, bastards¹⁵.

But it would be a mistake to consider the trend of the formation of the other non-Ukrainian identity shared by the residents of Donbas to be caused exclusively by the military operations. It may be no accident that the abovementioned trend is manifested in the socio-cultural area of Donbas, inhabited by many so-called biethnors, the people have mixed Ukrainian-Russian ethnic roots and who is characterized not only by the situational change of the ethnic identity, but also by a very small importance of the ethnicity in the hierarchy of the identities.

This process is based on a special territorial patriotism or the regional identity formed before the war. It is further defined in the course of the conflict, gaining an antagonistic contradiction towards Ukraine. In the current studies, along with the ethnic and national forms of the identity, the matter in hand is a "territorial patriotism". According to the opinion of Charles Ric "a factor of the regional identity is *nationalitarian* (i.e. similar to the national, the phenomenon that simulates a national one) approval of the regional team, "a voice" of the regional group¹⁶.

The components of regional identity of Donbas are: Ukrainian-Russian biethnicity (double identification, blurred and fuzzy line between Ukrainian and Russian identities), the dominance of the Russian language, and the industrial type of culture, sincere worship of the Soviet past and its symbols as well as its complimentary to the Russian state. However, the linguistic-cultural and ethnic factors in the region have no any direct connection with the political loyalty shared the population towards other states. Such loyalty is not stable, but it is rather than very variable. Instead, a more effective feature of the regional identity on the political plane is a high degree of loyalty towards the local elite and their homeland. For two centuries Donbas used to be the «melting pot» in which linguistic, religious and cultural phenomenon were being mixed. Historically the region has been under the influence of different cultures, giving refuge to the settlers from the whole territory of the former Russian Empire. The people were forced to hive off looking for a living and they were liable to make their bread doing a laboring job. More often than not people emerged from the jail were settling here. They used to have a criminal and semi-criminal psychology. Russian language, criminal and authoritarian mentality type were the factors of the adaptation in this region. The large-scale process of industrialization, that had already been taking place during the Soviet period in the 1930s of the XX century, left a mark on the inhabitants of the land, leveling the ethnic identity. «Heavy industry» cult shaded all other values. A microcosm of a mine or a factory producing material values «milled» religious myths, folk legends and ideals¹⁷.

¹⁵ Ya teper separatist. *Utrites (iz pochtyi. Do drozhi!)*, Zhivoy zhurnal „Logovo netolerantnogo sredne-vekovogo mrakobesa“, <http://shrek1.livejournal.com/971999.html>.

¹⁶ Sh. Rik, *Fenomen identichnosti*, Obrazovanie i sotsialnoe razvitie regiona, Moscow 1996, No. 3–4, p. 212.

¹⁷ G. Korzhov, *Regionalnaya identichnost Donbassa: genezis i tendentsii razvitiya v usloviyah obschestvennoy transformatsii*, Sotsiologiya: teoriya, metody, marketing, 2006, No. 4, pp. 38–51.

Under the condition of the independent Ukrainian state the rise of the Donbas regional identity was taking place gradually according to the strengthening of the oligarchic form of government as well as the strengthening of authoritarian and patron tendencies in the social life of the region.

It was here where the patron-client forms of the social interaction, built on the unequal relationship and dependence shared by most of the population under the conditions of the narrow stratum of the ruling elite concentrating the unprecedented resources in their hands.

According to M. Panchuk, it is identity of the elite that plays mobilizing and manipulative role, namely conjunctural identity, which, in the past and today, was often demonstrated and it is still demonstrated by true or alleged leaders of one or another community to occupy a prestigious niche among the Ukrainian elite or to win the sympathy of or any dividends in other countries as well¹⁸.

Since 2004 in the course of election campaigns there has been an unprecedented political mobilization of voters of the land on the basis of regional identity actualization. Decisive role in this process was played by symbols and identities rather than interests. Local elites and the media under their control formed in the minds of the regional residents a sense of “Donbas patriotism”. A soft variant of its implementation is in emphasizing the uniqueness of the region, its economic power and sports achievements, criticism of attempts to extend the Ukrainian centered cultural matrix here. The vulgarization of the specifics of Donbas led to consolidation in the regional consciousness the exaggerated sense of regional patriotism, belief in their superiority, indispensability, that “Donbas feeds whole Ukraine”, and especially underdeveloped “nationalistic” west of the country.

“Soviet mentality, the myth of Donbas disobedience and lack of common links with other residents of Ukraine played a bad joke with these people. Now Obama pronounces the word Debal'tseve. In the city, there is noun damaged building. The Station and the Palace (of culture) are partially destroyed. And the residents do not understand who they are. Ukrainians? Russians? Novorossiyan? Is this only their fault? And do the rest of Ukrainian citizens have something to do with the population of Donbas? Or, is this an abscess to be removed?” – Philip Muzika wrote in his blog, summarizing the past year after the war began and pointing to uncertainty in the identity of the residents of the region¹⁹.

Thus, for many years the local regional elites have stimulated regional identity in their own political interests, using it as an argument in the election campaign, but prevent in go pen separatism. Only participation of the Russian Federation in organizing and coordinating the massive separatist protests in spring 2014, and then Russian military intervention in opposition to the separatist movement provided the impact and duration of military conflict. Skeptically treating the factor of *Donetsk identity* in conflict, as its primary factors A. Portnov considers the length of the border with Russia, local elite neutrality towards the destabilization of the region and failure of the Ukrainian authorities to quickly and adequately confront the escalation of the conflict²⁰.

¹⁸ M. Panchuk, *Do pitannya pro identyfikatsiyu...*, pp. 13–32.

¹⁹ F. Muzika, *Ya rodilsya v Debal'tsevo*, petrimazepa.com/greenlight/born.html.

²⁰ A. Portnov, *Uroki Donbasa*, <http://urokiistorii.ru/node/52573>.

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Thus, in this conflict, identity, opposes the Ukrainian state, can be described primarily as territorial with some ideological, "Russian space" civilization and beliefs markers, stimulated by propaganda efforts. In case of prolongation of the conflict, its freezing and existence of separatist territories in alternative (not Ukrainian) political media and humanitarian reality, process of new identity formation could be not so long.