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More wrong than right: recent turns in Ukrainian politics of memory

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In the very center of the Austrian capital, not far from the Hundertwasser house, there is a writing on a wall: “When they announce the end of the world, I will go to Vienna: everything occurs twenty years later there”. To some extent these words could be used to characterize the current state of Ukrainian historical memory and politics of history. While what is called “memory industry” in the West is on decline, and historians are discussing only how it will come to an end – with a crash or with a soft landing; in Ukraine discussions about the past just came into fashion, they even dominate the public . Whereas some years ago, we, Ukrainian historians, used to complain about the lack of any serious historical discussion, we now complain about their overabundance.

Since I take part in these discussions, what I am going to present here are rather subjective and inevitably scattered notes and remarks from the trenches and dungeons. Before I proceed, I would like to make some preliminary remarks.

Some time ago when I discussed the evolution of historical memory in the Ukraine, I characterized it by three “A’s”: amnesia, activation and ambivalence. There is nothing specifically Ukrainian about these three “A’s” – I would claim that they are part of historical policy in every country - not only Ukraine, but also the US or Uganda, or any other country that starts with “U”. Or, if you wish, with any other letter. It is their balance in each particular case that matters. I would say that until recently, the Ukrainian peculiarity manifested itself especially in the first A – “amnesia”. National memory, as historians know well, is always about forgetting. Or, as Ernest Renan succinctly put it, “forgetting, and historical error is a part of being a nation”. The peculiarity of the Ukrainian case under the Soviets lay in an unprecedented high level of amnesia with respect to the Ukrainian national memory: it brought forgetting to an extreme. There was a large number of events and persons who were hushed up in the official Soviet canon, and mentioning them was considered an ideological crime. In the words of a prominent Ukrainian historian, the historical canon of the Soviet Ukraine reminded of a vast museum where most of the statues were removed and each corner was filled with ominous ghosts of the past.

This was not only the case with Ukrainian ethnic-historical symbols. Another telling case are the memories of Holocaust. A survey of Soviet literature on the topic reveals that, despite the general Soviet tendency to ignore or downplay the Holocaust, there seems to be no consistent Soviet “party line” on it. If in Estonia one could find a



rather sympathetic and undistorted account of the Jewish tragedy on the Estonian territory during World War II, then in the Lithuanian case there was already an attempt to blur this issue. But the Ukrainian Soviet Republic brought this to an extreme. Thus a voluminous official history of Ukraine, published in 1982, does not even mention the Jews once, an certainly not in connection with the Holocaust.

The aim of the Soviet amnesia was to eliminate all memories of the persons and events that could remind one of the crucial differences between Ukrainians and Russians, above all those differences that might have a political implication. Otherwise it was hard to explain why the Soviet Ukraine could not enjoy such a status as Communist Poland or Communist Romania. The historical destiny of the Ukraine – as it was presented in official narratives – was to keep the closest possible union with Russia. These were not so much politics of Russification, but rather Sovietization – since the Russians, together with the Belorussians and the Ukrainians, were the primary target of these politics.

Not surprisingly the proclamation of the Ukrainian independence led to *a revival of the Ukrainian national narrative* which, among other things, sought to establish a firm distance between Ukrainians and Russians. A telling example was the introduction of the Ukrainian national currency in 1992: a number of banknotes depicted Ukrainian heroes that were strictly forbidden under Soviet rule, like Ivan Mazepa and Mykhailo Hrushevskiy.

This activation of national memory has backfired. It alienated the Russian speaking Eastern and Southern part of the Ukraine, and caused among other reasons the downfall of the first Ukrainian president, Leonid Kravchuk. The new president, Leonid Kuchma won in 1994 due to the support of the East and South. But once he came to power he tried to keep a balance between all the major actors and regions. To achieve that, *he replaced activation with ambivalence*. Kuchma and his men skillfully mixed national and Soviet narratives of the Ukrainian history on the one hand, and downplayed their most antagonizing elements on the other hand. Such Kuchma added himself to a list of great Ukrainians, which included both the Ukrainian Cossack leader Mazepa, a figure that was silenced under the Soviet rule, and the Soviet generals of Ukrainian origin. The list, however, did not include the most controversial figures, like Stepan Bandera, leader of the militarist Ukrainian nationalism and Volodymyr Shcherbytskyi, the last leader of Ukrainian communist party who promoted the linguistic Russification of Ukraine. In the same manner, both the Holocaust and Ukrainian issues were marginalized. Surely, these were different forms of marginalization: the famine *was* marginalized *again*, while the Holocaust remained marginalized, since it never been brought forth. But the intention was the same: “let sleeping dogs lie”.

Strikingly, these manipulations coincided with arising patterns of the collective memory in the Ukraine. Surveys conducted at that time revealed that most of Ukrainians tended to combine in their memory historical figures that otherwise would have been mutually exclusive, like Ukrainian Cossack leader Khmelnytsky and the Russian Emperor Peter the First, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev and the architect of Ukrainian modern historiography Mykhailo Hrushevskiy, Ukrainian dissident Vyacheslav Chornovil and Nikita Khrushchev. One might expect that the combination



of these figures is the effect of the regional divide between the Ukrainian speaking West and the Russian speaking East of Ukraine, and the balance comes as a combination of two rival narratives. But this seems not to be the case. In the same survey, people were asked about their international orientation: at least some 19% wanted Ukraine to be both, a part of the so called East Slavic Union and the European Union.

The fabric of society changed dramatically with the Orange Revolution: it had antagonized and accentuated the difference between West and East of Ukraine. Very often responsibility for this change has been put misleadingly on Yushchenko, but mainly his rivals, Kuchma and Yanukovych were to blame. They applied what is called “extreme rhetoric” – it was aimed at reducing ambivalence for the sake of political mobilization. They hoped very much to repeat the 1994 campaign’s scenario with its ethnification of electoral issues. More specifically they presented Yushchenko as “nashist”.

Again, these politics backfired: they proved to be wrong, since they activated a chain of events that resulted in the Orange Revolution – and the rest is history. Very much like Kuchma, Yushchenko won the presidential elections as a candidate of a part of the Ukraine, but promised to become a president for the whole country. Unlike Kuchma, however, his ambition was a cultural homogenization of Ukraine, with one church, one language, one history. Yushchenko was the first – and I hope the last - president so obsessed with history. Some say that he sacrificed the Ukrainian future to the Ukrainian past. In any case, his politics of history proved to have disastrous effects. Most importantly, by commemorating Ukrainian nationalist leaders like Roman Shukhevych and Bandera, Ukraine undermined any chances for a reconciliation over historical memory. There was, however, one significant exception – and this was revitalizing the memory of the famine. Due to Yushchenko’s insistence the Ukrainian parliament in late 2006 recognized the famine as an act of genocide. A survey a year later revealed a dramatic shift: the number of Ukrainians who believed that the famine was a genocide increased from a minority (39%) to a majority (63%), including the Russian speaking South (55%) but not the East (35%). Another survey by the end of Yushchenko’s term showed that even the East had finally accepted the national paradigm of the Ukrainian famine.

The victory of Victor Yanukovych in the last presidential elections at the beginning of this year brought about, as it might be expected, a radical revision of historical memory politics. It suffices to say that a few days after his coming to power, Yanukovych erased all the information on the famine from the presidential website. On April 26, 2010, during the meeting of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in Brussels, Yanukovych stated that “it would be wrong and unfair to recognize the Holodomor [=Ukrainian famine] as an act of genocide against one nation”. During his presidential campaign he had also promised that he would cancel title “Hero of Ukraine” that was awarded posthumously to Bandera and Shukhevych by Yushchenko.

The Yanukovych politics of amnesia explicitly revealed themselves in a new school textbook on Ukrainian history that was promptly prepared and launched at the



beginning of the new academic year. In contrast to its predecessor, this textbook contains no information on the subjugated status of Ukraine under the Russian empire; in the same way, it hushes up Soviet repressions committed against Ukrainian nationalists; a story of the anti-Soviet nationalist Ukrainian Insurgent Army was relegated to a footnote; and – last but not least - it doesn't mention Yushchenko and the Orange Revolution.

In many ways, Yanukovych's politics of memory seem to resemble to Soviet politics of amnesia, if not in their scope then definitely in their intention to reduce the distance between Ukrainians and Russians to a minimum. To a large extent it reflects what a political analyst called "Ukraine's seismic shift toward Russia"¹. This shift was symbolized and sealed by the so called Kharkiv agreement which extended the period of the Russian lease on naval facilities in Crimea until 2042 in an exchange for a contract to provide Ukraine with Russian natural gas. But were the new politics of history just a pragmatic move toward Russia, or did they, rather, reflect some deeper, ideological undercurrents?

One way to answer this question is to look closely at the forms of historical memory that were activated as a result of the recent Ukrainian-Russian *rapprochement*. What strikes on when listening to recent statements of Russian representatives is that they do not really believe that Ukraine and Russia are really two different nations. In their opinion, they are one. These words were uttered by the Russian ambassador in Ukraine Mikhail Zurabov and Patriarch of Russian Orthodox Church Kiril during his recent visit to Ukraine. What underlies these statements is the concept of the so called "Russkiy mir" – a concept that is wider than Russia per se, since it comprises Belarus and Ukraine as well, but which underlines a leading role of Russia within Eastern Europe. *Russkiy mir* can be read in many ways: as a national, religious, or even civilizational project bound to save all the world. The beauty of all this lies exactly in its ambivalence. Therefore it can embrace otherwise so seemingly uncompromising rivals as post-Soviet oligarchs and post-Soviet communists so neatly. Despite its ambivalence, the concept of *Russkiy mir* has three undeniable strictly defined features: first, the *Russkiy mir* is consistent with a Russian speaking world – it extends everywhere where the Russian language is spoken. Secondly, it is opposed to the West as a symbol of corruption, consumerism and military threat. Thirdly, and probably, most importantly, it has a strong missionary dimension: the Russian world, due to its spiritual character, has to save the whole world. Therefore Russians have a historical right to a *Sonderweg*, which among other things, is embodied in so called governed democracy.

Needless to say, a concept of such size and ambition requires historical legitimacy – since without it, as a Kremlin ideologist put it, Russia seizes to look like a powerful state and it turns out to be a country of a destitute and dying out population.² The

¹Aleksander J. Motyl, "Monsieur Yanukovich Goes to Paris", World Affairs, A Journal of Ideas and Debates, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/new/blogs/motyl>.

² Эхо Москвы. Особое мнение. Александр Проханов, Среда, 17.09.2008, <http://www.echo.msk.ru/programs/personalno/540936-echo/> («Как только Россия перестает быть сильным, мощным государством, она превращается в страну обездоленных, рабов и вымирающего населения»).



historical legitimacy of the *Ruskiy mir* is sought above all in World War II, or as it is called here, the Great Patriotic War, in which Russia, together with other Soviet people saved the worlds from the Nazis, or, to put it in a more elevated language, from the “brown plague”.

Ukraine both fits and does not fit in this concept. It does, since it has a large Russian speaking population, which makes it an electorate base for Yanukovich and his people. A majority of Ukrainians prefer to call the last war the Great Patriotic War and not the World War II. They also believe that they share a common history with Russians and Belorussians. But Ukraine also does not fit neatly into the Russian world since it has the Western Ukraine, which is “Ukrainian” West – non-orthodox and “corrupted” by strong Ukrainian nationalism – here the record of the Russian and the Soviet rule was very short. Therefore, with the new rulers, the image of Western Ukraine, and above all of Galicia has been increasingly demonized: Galicians are nothing else but former Habsburg lackeys, Nazi collaborators and blood-thirsty nationalists who have nothing whatsoever in common with ‘true’ (read: Eastern) Ukrainians. Some of Yanukovich’s spin doctors went so far as to claim that Western and Eastern Ukrainians make not one, but two separate nations.

But even if Ukraine could get rid of its Western part, it still would not fit nicely in the *Ruskiy mir*, since there are political strings attached to this concept. If Yanukovich would accept it wholeheartedly, what legitimacy would he have to be the president of a separate country called Ukraine?

Therefore the ambivalence persists. Even though the majority of Ukrainians agree that they have a common history with Russia, they want to see their country as an independent one. Under these circumstances, Yanukovich is not to be envied: on the one hand, he has – and most probably wants – to stick as closely as possible to Russia; on the other hand, he has to preserve a distance. Moreover, it is hard to deal with a country like Russia. An example shows: Even though Yanukovich promised to cancel the title of “Ukrainian Hero” for Bandera and Shukhevych, he never did it. Information from rather reliable sources explains that the major reason why he fails to do so, is that he feels being cheated by the Kremlin: he extended Russian lease on naval facilities in Crimea, but he never got the cheap Russian natural gas, as he expected. According to another version, Hanna Herman plays a decisive role. She is a former director of Radio Liberty in Ukraine, who in 2004 shifted to the Yanukovich’s camp. She reportedly exercises great influence on the current president. And since she is a Galician Ukrainian herself, she explicitly stands for a “national” version of Ukrainian past: it was her who persuaded Yanukovich not to strip Bandera of his title.

Which of these two versions is right is hard to tell: Ukrainian politics of memory are becoming increasingly closed and non-transparent, just like the whole current Ukrainian politics. One can only guess about its driving forces and its major actors - but one can hardly make any definite conclusions. There is one thing, however, that is beyond any doubt: the new Ukrainian party of power does not reject ambivalence as a major instrument of politics. Even though Yanukovich moves closer to Russia,



he still insists that his strategic aim is the European integration of the Ukraine. In a striking contrast to Putin and Lukashenko, he does his best to make himself presentable in the West. On the eve of his recent visit to the US, materials on the Ukrainian famine reemerged on his presidential website again.

Another telling example is the case of Dmytro Tabachnyk, the current Ukrainian minister of education. A historian by education, he served as a spin doctor of Kuchma – consequently he was promoted to several important positions, among them head of presidential administration and vice-premier minister in charge of humanities. Among other things he became notorious for an abuse of power in his personal interests, overt falsifications, and his intense dislike of Western Ukrainians, which he voiced publicly in a TV documentary. He stated that Western Ukrainians have nothing to do with Eastern Ukrainians, since they are not Ukrainians at all. During the Yushchenko years, he was the most ardent critic of Yushchenko's politics of memory. Still, he did not enjoy the sympathy of Yanukovych and his team. One of the closest followers of Yanukovych, Kolesnikov, called Tabachnyk “a cheap clown and embezzler of state funds”. Still, under Yanukovych, Tabachnyk was appointed Ukrainian minister of education, reportedly under a strong pressure from Moscow, including patriarch Kiril himself. Oksana Zabuzhko, a leading Ukrainian writer, compared this appointment to the appointment of an anti-Semite to the position of minister of education in Israel. Tabachnyk is reportedly at the bottom of all the new changes in the Ukrainian school textbook. However, in a recent interview, Tabachnyk confesses that he is an Ukrainophile and that he shares an European attitude to the Ukrainian history.³

A current general balance between amnesia, activation and ambivalence is hard to draw. According to some versions, Yanukovych and his men intend to move the pendulum of Ukrainian politics in a direction contrary to the “nationalizing politics” of Yushchenko to restore a status quo. This version is, however, very unlikely: it implies that the current party of power has a clearly defined strategical plan – and this seems not to be the case. A more realistic guess is that politics of memory are not among the top priorities of the current political regime. Most of the Ukrainian politicians who are currently in power do not care about history and do not care to know it. There is, however, a smaller but very motivated group with Tabachnyk as its leader, that is interested in promoting partisan politics of memory in terms of *Ruskiy mir* and since the majority keeps silent, there emerges an overall impression that this is a strictly new party line.

And finally, there is a third version that combines the previous two: there is a strategic plan, and Tabachnyk is a part of it – but not necessarily in an explicit way. The aim of this plan is to keep Yanukovych in power at least for the two presidential terms. To achieve this, in the next presidential election (2014) he must be challenged by Oleh Tiahnybok. Tiahnybok is the leader of an extremist Ukrainian nationalistic party that enjoys an increasing popularity in the Western Ukraine since Yanukovych came to power – but it could never win throughout the whole Ukraine. Therefore,

³ <http://wz.lviv.ua/pages.php?ac=arch&atit=86767>



Yanukovych and his men seek to bring the Orange electorate to extremes by teasing its with new politics of memory – and Tabachnyk comes in here very handy.

My previous research experience tells me, that despite deep cleavages and stark regional differences, a new Ukrainian historical memory emerged that is a relative stable system of checks and balances. In other words: historical memory of Ukraine could not and should not be characterized in terms only: “either/or” – it also requires “both” and “neither”. Every politician who tries to break this balance, sooner or later is punished by relegating him or her to a very marginalized position. This was the fate of Yushchenko. And it remains to be seen whether Yanukovych will follow his example.

A bad news is that a chance to reach a certain strategic compromise over Ukrainian past becomes increasingly smaller. A good news is that the chance is still very much there.

Let me conclude with a broader context. We are all aware of the importance of the French-German historical reconciliation in the 1950s. To a large extent, it served as a symbolical corner stone of the future United Europe. During the last two decades, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, something similar has occurred in Eastern Europe. And that was the Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation. To the extent the French-German reconciliation has been creating chances for the United Europe, the Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation has created a chance to extend this United Europe further to the East. For a stable and democratic Eastern Europe we badly need Russia to reconcile with its neighbors, and with Ukraine in the first turn. Giving the current conditions, such a reconciliation looks hardly feasible. The Russian-Ukrainian dialogue either leads to an increase of animosities, as it was under Yushchenko, or to a threat of absorbing one national history by the other, as it looks like under Yanukovych. Still, before – if ever – the Russian-Ukrainian reconciliation can be reached, we badly need a Ukrainian-Ukrainian reconciliation. To that effect, we need historians who dare to problematize and to oppose two rival extreme narratives.

Given the size and geopolitical status of Ukraine, the stake in controversies and discussions over Ukrainian past is larger than Ukraine. It is a matter of concern for all Eastern Europe, and, most probably, Europe at large. Therefore, Europeans should not stand aloof. Ukraine badly needs you, as partners in this dialogue. So let me accept this Anton Gindely Award as a token of hope for our future and a productive cooperation.