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# **Russian Media and the War in Ukraine**

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# Historical Myths, Enemy Images, and Regional Identity in the Donbass Insurgency (Spring 2014)

Alexandr Osipian

**Abstract:** This article examines the use of the Soviet Great Patriotic War myth by Russian journalists in the news coverage of events in the Donbass in spring 2014. It begins by setting out the key aims pursued by Russian policy and propaganda in the course of the 2013-14 crisis in Ukraine. Next, it explores the ways in which the cultural memory of the Great Patriotic War has been instrumentalized in the Russian media portrayal of Ukraine, with a particular focus on its use in the construction of enemy images and on the specificities of the reception of these images in the Donbass region. Finally, it traces the genealogy of such imagery back further, to the Party of Regions' deliberate creation of the image of the "fascist/banderite" threat in the Donbass for the purposes of electoral mobilization and manipulation over the past decade.

## Introduction

With each new stage of the "Ukrainian crisis"—the mass anti-government protests in Kiev (the "Euromaidan" or the "Second Maidan"); the flight of President Yanukoyvch; annexation of the Crimea; the anti-Maidans in the South-East; and the separatist uprising in the Donbass—Russia's intervention in Ukraine's domestic affairs has increased. This process has been supported by Russian mass media, which, over the past decade, have been definitively transformed into a vehicle for Kremlin propaganda. The Russian mass media coverage of the events in Ukraine has been dominated by tropes and categories adapted from the Soviet

cultural memory of the “Great Patriotic War”. This article examines the use of the Soviet Great Patriotic War myth by Russian journalists in the Donbass in spring 2014. It also traces the genealogy of such imagery back further, to the Party of Regions’ instrumentalization of the war memory and creation of the image of the “fascist/banderite” threat in the Donbass over the past decade. In addition to examining online, TV and press materials and political speeches, the article also draws upon the author’s personal first-hand observations as a resident of Kramatorsk who has been studying the dissemination of rumor and hearsay in the Donbass region throughout the course of the crisis.

### The Aims of Russian Propaganda

Ukraine is an important factor shaping both foreign and domestic policy in Russia, as well as issues surrounding Russian identity. From 2004 onwards, events in Ukraine have played an especially crucial role in the evolution of contemporary Russian identity. Indeed, paradoxical as it may seem, the main aims of Russian policy and propaganda on Ukraine are geared towards manipulating the internal political situation within Russia itself.

The primary aim being pursued here is to discredit the idea of popular protest. The Russian leadership views the mass protests that took place in Moscow in December 2011–March 2012<sup>1</sup> as a Western attempt to overthrow the Russian government by organizing the latest in a series of “color” revolutions including the 2004 “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine and the so-called “Arab Spring” of 2011.<sup>2</sup> The

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1 On which see D. Volkov, “Protestnye mitingi v Rossii kontsa 2011–nachala 2012: zapros na modernizatsiiu politicheskikh institutov”, *Vestnik obshchestvennogo mneniia* 2 (2012): 73–86; and D. Volkov, “Protestnoe dvizhenie v Rossii glazami yego liderov i aktivistov”, *Vestnik obshchestvennogo mneniia* 3–3 (2012): 141–185.

2 In his Address on 18 March 2014, Putin stated that “There has also been a whole series of managed ‘color’ revolutions... As a result, instead of democracy and freedom, [these revolutions bring] chaos, explosions of violence, chains of coups. The ‘Arab spring’ was followed by the ‘Arab winter’”; “Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii”, 18 March 2014, *President of Russia official website*, <http://news.kremlin.ru/transcripts/20603>. See also an earlier speech:

Russian leadership perceives any large-scale liberal/democratic protest in Russia as sponsored from outside, primarily by the US, and this is also how such events are reported in Russian state-controlled mass media. The Euromaidan in Kiev, and the subsequent flight of President Yanukovych, are viewed by the Kremlin as indicating the likely scenario to be followed in the event of a future attempt to overthrow President Putin. Therefore, from the very beginning of the protests in Kiev, Russian propaganda undertook deliberate efforts aimed at discrediting the protesters with a view to convincing Russians that the protesters represented a pernicious alien force and that no Maidan must be permitted to occur in Russia.

The fact that the Kiev protests began after a sharp turning point in Yanukovych's foreign policy—his decision to refuse to sign the EU Association Agreement “in favor of moving closer” to Russia—made it easier for Russian mass media to present the Euromaidan as sponsored and orchestrated by the “devious” and inherently anti-Russian and Russophobic West. This task was made easier still after additional Maidans followed in L'viv and several other cities in West Ukraine. The protesters were depicted as “extremists”, “radical nationalists”, “banderites”, “neo-Nazis”, and “fascists”.<sup>3</sup> The fact that the Ukrainian Maidans have been condemned as anti-Russian and Russophobic effectively renders any

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“In recent years we have seen how attempts to impose on other countries an ostensibly progressive model of development have in fact ended in regression, barbarity and bloodshed. This is how it was in an entire range of countries in the Near East and North Africa. A dramatic situation of this kind also took shape around Syria”; “Poslanie Prezidenta Federal'nomu Sobraniuu”, 12 December 2013, *President of Russia official website*, <http://news.kremlin.ru/transcripts/19825>. All websites cited in this article were last accessed in March 2015.

3 See for example Putin's speech of 18 March 2014: “those who stood behind the .... events in Ukraine were pursuing different goals: they were preparing the latest in a series of state coups, they were planning to seize power, and would stop at nothing in doing so. They brought terror, and murder, and pogroms into play here. The main instigators of the coup were nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes, and anti-Semites. It is precisely these people who to a large degree continue to define life in Ukraine to this day”; “Obrashchenie Prezidenta”.

attempt to carry out similar protests in Russia unthinkable. Meanwhile, any Russians speaking out in support of the Ukrainian Maidan are automatically classed as Russophobes and traitors.

Russian mass media coverage further sought to delegitimize the Ukrainian protests by presenting the events that followed Yanukovych's flight from Kiev as the collapse of Ukrainian statehood.<sup>4</sup> Right up until Petro Poroshenko's election as the new president of Ukraine in early June 2014, Putin continued to declare repeatedly that Yanukovych remained the *de jure* legitimate president.<sup>5</sup> Hence, the government in Kiev was illegitimate.

Russian mass media constantly drove home the notion that anarchy and chaos now reigned in Ukraine, and that the Ukrainian state no longer existed.<sup>6</sup> This thesis was taken up enthusiastically by many Russian nationalists, both on the right and the left, to the point where some of them began to describe the country as "the former Ukraine".<sup>7</sup>

An additional aim pursued here was redirecting the attention of Russians (and pro-Russian Ukrainians) away from Yanukovych's corrupt regime and the social justice demands put forward by Maidan protesters, and towards an invented "geopolitical" conflict. The social component of the Ukrainian protest movement was not

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4 See for example Putin's statement that "It is also clear that a legitimate executive government has yet to be put in place in Ukraine, there is nobody to talk to [there]. Many state organs have been usurped by imposters [*samozvantsy*]; moreover they don't control anything in the country, and they themselves—I want to emphasize this—are often under the control of the radicals"; "Obrashchenie Prezidenta".

5 See for example Putin's comments, "Priamaia liniia s Vladimirom Putinyim", 17 April 2014, *President of Russia official website*, <http://news.kremlin.ru/transcripts/20796>.

6 This propaganda line was echoed by, for example, Russian film director Karen Shakhnazarov; see "Priamaia liniia".

7 See for example Eduard Popov, "Byvshaia Ukraina na poroge neonatsistkoi revoliutsii", *Geopolitika.ru*, 2 April 2014, <http://www.geopolitika.ru/article/byvshaya-ukraina-na-poroge-neonacistskoy-revoliucii#.VQOsbyRgtKp>; and Mikhail Deliagin, "Byvshaia Ukraina: klubok global'nykh initsiativ", *Tsentralfnoe informatsionnoe agentstvo Novorossii*, 23 June 2014, <http://novorus.info/news/economy/24064-byvshaya-ukraina-klubok-globalnyh-iniciativ.html>. The "Novorossia" Information Agency's website includes a section titled "The Former Ukraine"; <http://www.novorosinform.org/themes/id/17>.

reported by Russian mass media, presumably because of fears that this might prompt a sympathetic response from people dissatisfied with the corrupt authoritarian regime at home in Russia. The pro-European orientation of the Maidan and its categorical rejection of any rapprochement with Russia via the Customs Union or the Eurasian Economic Community made it possible for Russian propaganda to present the Euromaidan as a manifestation of “geopolitical” conflict involving the clash of Russian and Western interests, rather than as a social movement.

The line of argument used here in Russian mass media ran as follows: since “neo-Nazis” and “Russophobes” had seized power in Kiev, the rights and indeed the lives of Russians in Ukraine were now under threat, and since Ukrainian statehood had ceased to exist, the Russian state and Russian people (both individually and collectively) must do everything possible to defend ethnic Russians, Russian-speakers and “compatriots”, defined in the broadest possible terms, from Ukrainian “neo-Nazis” (“banderites”, “Right Sector”). As a result, the potential for protest subsided in Russia and there was a boost in loyalty for the ruling regime, which shared the goals of protecting Russians in Ukraine and preventing the manufacturing of externally sponsored chaos in Russia. As a result, both the liberal/democratic and the nationalist wings of the domestic Russian opposition to the Putin regime were successfully split and definitively marginalized.

Russian propaganda has also sought to legitimize the Russian-sponsored separatist cause. This aim has been pursued via the creation of the “Novorossia” myth which in turn, as we shall see below, is also entwined with and dependent on the cultural memory of the Great Patriotic War. Various Russian leading officials have declared in one way or another that Ukraine’s attempt to move closer to the West would end in the inevitable break-up of the country, and this line has also been promoted heavily in Russian mass media. As early as on 13 December 2013, for example, Prime Minister Medvedev predicted an impending “tectonic crack” in

Ukraine.<sup>8</sup> Later, after the regime change in Kiev and the annexation of Crimea, the Kremlin launched the “Novorossiiia” propaganda myth. As early as on 17 April 2014, Putin, speaking live on TV and radio, referred to South-East Ukraine as “Novorossiiia”.<sup>9</sup> The timing of the introduction of this new term was surely intentional and tactical, coinciding as it did with the Geneva talks between the US, Russian, Ukrainian and EU foreign ministers, and coming only a few days after Russian fighters led by Igor’ Girkin (“Strelkov”) seized Slaviansk/Sloviansk and Kramatorsk, on 12 April.

The campaign to “rescue Russians” in Ukraine and to “return the ancient Russian lands” via the efforts of the Russian state and the Russian people (nationalist parties, humanitarian aid organizations, the so-called “self-defense” and “militia” organizations, and so on), was conducted within the framework of the “Russian Spring” propaganda campaign.<sup>10</sup> It would appear that

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8 “Ukrainian society is facing, it seems to me, the challenge of dealing with the tectonic crack that has formed within it. A crack that threatens the stability of the state and the very existence of the state. We are watching with great alarm, of course, the emotions being demonstrated by civil society in Ukraine”; “Medvedev prorochit Ukraine ‘tektonicheskii razlom’”, *Prestupnosti.NET*, 13 December 2013, <https://news.pn/ru/politics/93319>.

9 Putin said “this is an issue of guaranteeing the lawful rights and interests of Russians and Russian-speaking citizens in south-east Ukraine—let me remind you that if we use the terminology dating to tsarist times, this is Novorossiiia: Khar’kov, Lugansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Nikolaev, and Odessa were not part of Ukraine in tsarist times, these are all territories that were transferred to Ukraine by the Soviet government in the ‘20s. God only knows why they did this. All this happened after the relevant victories of Potemkin and Catherine the Great in the famous wars centered on Novorossiisk. And hence the term Novorossiiia”; “Priamaia liniia”. Previously, in his speech of 18 March 2014 on the Russian annexation of Crimea, Putin called south-east Ukraine “the south of Russia” (the term used in the late imperial period): “After the revolution, the Bolsheviks, for various reasons, let God be their judge, incorporated significant territories from the historical south of Russia into the Ukrainian Union Republic. This was done without taking into account the national composition of the residents, and today this is the contemporary south-east of Ukraine”; “Obrashchenie Prezidenta”.

10 Despite the fact that the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (henceforth DNR and LNR respectively) had declared themselves to be “independent states” with their own governments and armed forces, they did not have their own websites. Information support for the DNR and LNR was provided by a specially created “Russian Spring” website (<http://rusvesna.su>), and also by the following

initially the intention was to transform Ukraine into a non-viable federation similar to Bosnia and Herzegovina, comprising two completely autonomous subjects. According to the Kremlin's "federalisation" proposal, Ukraine was to consist of two equal parts: "Ukraine" proper (West and Central Ukraine) and "Novorossiiia" (South-East Ukraine), with the Russian annexation of Crimea accepted as a *fait accompli*.<sup>11</sup>

When it became clear, following Poroshenko's victory in the presidential elections on 25 May 2014, that this plan was not feasible, the pro-Russian separatists' propaganda changed tack and began instead to call for the South-East to break away from Ukraine entirely and for "Novorossiiia" to be created as a satellite of Russia. Propaganda materials began to be issued which claimed that "Novorossiiia" had never had anything to do with Ukraine and that Lenin/the Bolsheviks had incorporated the region into the Ukrainian SSR as an arbitrary and malicious act. Accordingly, it was claimed that "returning" the region to Russia in one form or another would be, as in the case of Crimea, an act of restorative historical justice.

The Russian Federation is a country that is plagued by a whole series of separatist threats. But at the same time, the Russian leadership openly encourages separatism at its own borders—in Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Crimea, and "Novorossiiia". How might such a paradox be resolved without harming Russian interests? In each of these instances, the separatist movements that Russia supports have been presented as essential for defending against a Western-sponsored nationalist/Nazi regime,<sup>12</sup> and in this

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Russian far-right nationalist sites: "Third Rome", <http://3rm.info>; "Novorossiiia", <http://novorus.info>; and "Malorossiiia", <http://malaya-russia.blogspot.com>.

11 "Lavrov: Rossiia budet nastaiivat' na federalizatsii Ukrainy", *RBK.ru*, 29 March 2014, <http://top.rbc.ru/politics/29/03/2014/914346.shtml>. See also Alina Polyakova, "Ukrainian Long Division. Three Ways to Split It, and Which Russia Prefers", *Foreign Affairs*, 20 April 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141311/alina-polyakova/ukrainian-long-division>.

12 Charles King, "Ukraine's Breakaway Region is Becoming a De Facto Country", *Washington Post*, 16 September 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/09/16/ukraines-breakaway-region-is-becoming-a-de-facto-country/>.

connection the Soviet-era cultural memory of the Great Patriotic War has proved to be an extremely useful propaganda and policy instrument.

### Instrumentalizing the Cultural Memory of the “Great Patriotic War”<sup>13</sup>

In the Kremlin’s information warfare, “Novorossia” is counterposed to the “fascist junta” in Kiev, which is sending “*karateli*”, roughly translatable as “members of death squads”, against “Novorossia”. For many Russian and Ukrainians, especially the older and middle generations, the term *karateli* is associated with events from World War II, and specifically with the actions carried out by the Gestapo and SS subdivisions against partisans and civilians in the occupied territories. *Karateli* was the conventional term used in Soviet war literature, memoirs and films for Gestapo and SS troops, who played an especially prominent role in the Soviet enemy image of the “German-fascist occupiers”. Thus, in using the term *karateli*, both pro-Russian separatists and fighters, and the Russian journalists who echo them from time to time, have sought to insert the current events into the framework of the Soviet myth of the Great Patriotic War, in which *absolute good* (the USSR) is pitted against *absolute*

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13 Key works on cultural memory include: J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); and A. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). On the instrumentalization of the cultural memory of the Great Patriotic War in Ukrainian politics, see W. Jilge, “The Politics of History and the Second World War in Post-Communist Ukraine (1986/1991-2004/2005)”, *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 54 (2006): 50-81; D. Marples, “Anti-Soviet Partisans and Ukrainian Memory”, *East European Politics & Societies* 24, no. 1 (2010): 26-43; A. Osipian, “Ethnic Cleansings and Memory Purges: The Ukrainian-Polish Borderland in 1939-1947 in Modern Politics and Historiography”, *Ab Imperio: Studies of New Imperial History and Nationalism in the Post-Soviet Space* 2 (2004): 297-328 (in Russian); A. Portnov, “The ‘Great Patriotic War’ in the Politics of Memory in Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine: Some Comparative Observations”, *Ukraina moderna* 15 (2009): 206-18 (in Ukrainian).



*evil* (Nazi Germany and its allies). This is done with the aim of relieving the television viewer of the burden of thinking for himself when it comes to making sense of the events in Ukraine. Instead, value-judgments about these events are built into the very form in which the information is packaged. The Ukrainian crisis is presented to the viewer using historical categories. *Karateli* are enemies, carrying out brutal and unlawful acts on foreign soil.

Here the new “Novorossia” myth is merged together with the tried and tested myth of the Great Patriotic War, previously the cornerstone of late Soviet historical mythology, and subsequently a quasi-ideology that has been built into the Putin regime’s foreign and domestic policy doctrine.<sup>14</sup> As a result of this symbiosis, the Ukrainian authorities—the current “fascist junta” in Kiev and its “*karateli*”—are depicted as the direct successors of the “banderites” and “fascist accomplices” of World War II, against whom a “holy war” is being waged by the “militia of Novorossia”—heroic successors of the “Soviet liberator-soldier”. The St George’s ribbon which is worn by the “militia” as a marker of their identity has, as a result of commemorative practices in Russia in recent years, been transformed into the main symbol of the memory of the Great Patriotic War. The DNR/LNR fighters also use the “Victory Banner”, alongside the flags of the DNR and LNR, the Russian Federation, the Russian Empire, “Novorossia”, and the USSR. Naturally, Russian officials commenting on these events use more neutral and circumspect terminology; instead of using the term “*karateli*”, they talk of “*siloviki*” (security operatives or officials), “Kiev-controlled troops”, or the “Ukrainian National Guard”, for example. Meanwhile, however, all manner of “geopolitical experts”, “political scientists”, “people’s mayors”, “people’s governors”, and “field commanders” use language that is actively and openly aimed at creating an enemy image.<sup>15</sup> In the formation of this enemy image, a

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14 On the non-ideological nature of post-Soviet authoritarian regimes, see I. Krastev, “Paradoxes of the New Authoritarianism”, *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 2 (2011): 5–16.

15 See for example the first press interview given by Girkin/“Strelkov”, which he said: “we don’t want to stop at what has been achieved so far, we want to go further and to liberate Ukraine from the fascists”; and “nobody’s going to

special role has been assigned by Russian mass media to *Pravyi sektor* and its leader, Dmytro Yarosh.

### ***Pravoseki: Constructing the Enemy Image***

*Pravyi sektor* appeared during the Euromaidan in Kiev as an association of marginal Ukrainian nationalist organizations.<sup>16</sup> *Pravyi sektor* activists were distinguished by their radicalism and played the most active part in the clashes with the “Berkut” Interior Ministry special police force in January-February 2014. But the majority of the protesters in Kiev did not support *Pravyi sektor*’s radical platform. Thus, for example, of the 42 “Maidan self-defense” companies, only one (the 23<sup>rd</sup>) was formed by *Pravyi sektor*.

Nevertheless, from the beginning of the mass protests in Kiev, Russian mass media worked to create the impression that it was precisely *Pravyi sektor* that was the leading nucleus of the Maidan, and that all the protesters shared its radical-nationalist program. By equating the Euromaidan with *Pravyi sektor*, Russian mass media demonized the Maidan in the eyes of TV audiences in Russia and also in the south-east regions of Ukraine.<sup>17</sup>

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unleash war over Ukraine, because this is a failed state engaged in brainwashing its own citizens”; cited Aleksandr Kots and Dmitrii Steshin, “Komanduiushchii samooboronoï Slavianska Igor’ Strelkov: Zaderzhannye nabliudateli—kadrovye razvedchiki”, *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, 26 April 2014, <http://www.kp.ru/daily/26225.7/3107725/>.

16 The following organizations joined together to form *Pravyi sektor*: “Stepan Bandera’s Trident”; the “Ukrainian National Assembly—Ukrainian National Self-Defense” (UNA-UNSO); the “Social-National Assembly”; “Patriot of Ukraine”; and “Liberty” (*Volia*).

17 People in South-East Ukraine are almost three times more likely to watch Russian television news than people in the West and central regions. According to a public opinion survey conducted in March 2014, Russian TV serves as a source of information about Ukrainian events for 14% of respondents in West Ukraine; 16% in Central Ukraine; 47% in South Ukraine (including Crimea); and 44% in East Ukraine; “Public Opinion Survey Residents of Ukraine”, International Republican Institute, 14-26 March 2014, <http://ratinggroup.com.ua/ru/products/politic/data/entry/14086/>. We can compare these statistics to regional perceptions of the Maidan protests. The proportion of respondents describing the protests as “chaos” was 30% (South Ukraine) and

In this media coverage, the Maidan was represented as a mob of extremists, paid by the “perfidious West”, which was bent on “tearing Ukraine away from Russia”. Since *Pravyi sektor* members glorified the OUN-UPA and Stepan Bandera,<sup>18</sup> they were labeled “banderites”, “neo-Nazis”, and even “fascists” by Russian media. As the Maidan was radicalized and during the clashes with the “Berkut” in late January–February 2014, *Pravyi sektor* came to be represented in Russian mass media as an organization made up of brutal Russophobic thugs who would stop at nothing in pursuit of their aim of overthrowing the lawful Ukrainian government. President Yanukovych’s flight from Kiev, and then from Ukraine to Russia, was presented in Russian mass media as the result of a coup in which *Pravyi sektor* had seized power in Kiev.<sup>19</sup>

Subsequently a campaign was waged in Russian mass media and in pro-Russian social media groups aimed at whipping up fear and panic around claims that “cut-throats” and “neo-Nazis” from *Pravyi sektor* were planning to travel out to the south-eastern

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19% (West Ukraine); and as a “state coup”: 27% (South Ukraine) and 26% (West Ukraine). That is, 57% of residents of South Ukraine (including Crimea) and 45% in the East adhere to the evaluation of these events offered up by Russian television.

- 18 On the OUN-UPA and Stepan Bandera, see S. Kudelia, “Choosing Violence in Irregular Wars: The Case of Anti-Soviet Insurgency in Western Ukraine”, *East European Politics and Societies* 27, no. 1 (2013): 149–181. On the historical memory of the OUN-UPA and political debates on the status of OUN-UPA veterans in Ukraine, see D. Marples, *Heroes and Villains: Constructing National History in Contemporary Ukraine* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007); D. Marples, “Anti-Soviet Partisans and Ukrainian Memory”, *East European Politics and Societies* 24, no. 1 (2010): 26–43; O. Shevel, “The Politics of Memory in a Divided Society: A Comparison of Post-Franco and Post-Soviet Ukraine”, *Slavic Review* 70, no. 1 (2011): 137–64; and E. Narvselius, “The ‘Bandera Debate’: The Contentious Legacy of World War II and Liberalization of Collective Memory in Western Ukraine”, *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 54, no. 3–4 (2012): 469–90.
- 19 As demonstrated by the presidential elections of 25 May 2014, *Pravyi sektor* did not acquire broad popularity amongst Ukrainian voters even after the Euromaidan’s victory. Dmytro Yarosh, the unofficial leader of *Pravyi sektor*, won only 0.7% of the vote (127 772 votes); see *Ukrainian Central Electoral Commission official website*, <http://www.cvk.gov.ua/>.

regions and Crimea,<sup>20</sup> to carry out reprisals against the Russian-speaking population. This media campaign was assisted by the spate of topplings of Lenin monuments in late February (on 22 February in the cities of Kherson and Nikolaev neighboring Crimea, and on 24 February in the small Crimea town of Zuia). Since a significant number of residents of the south-eastern regions of Ukraine, especially amongst the elderly, feel nostalgic for the Soviet period, many of them experienced the toppling of the Lenin monuments in highly personal terms and felt distressed and threatened by these events.

The demonized images of *Pravyi sektor* and the Euromaidan and the panic that had been spread by Russian mass media were used by the Russian leadership as a pretext for intervening in Ukraine's domestic affairs in order to "defend" "compatriots" or "people of Russian culture", as justification for the annexation of Crimea and for supporting those fomenting unrest in East Ukraine.<sup>21</sup> On 5 March 2014 the Russian Federation's Investigative Committee launched a criminal case against *Pravyi sektor* leader Dmytro Yarosh.<sup>22</sup> *Pravyi sektor* was now marked out by the Russian mass media as Russia's chief enemy in Ukraine and as posing the chief threat to Russian speakers in Ukraine. This is an aspect of the Russian propaganda campaign that appears to have been broadly

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20 See for example, "‘Pravoseki’ edut ustraivat’ krovavuiu provokatsiiu na Yugo-Vostoke", *Novoross.info*, 17 April 2014, <http://www.novoross.info/happens/25188-pravoseki-edut-ustraivat-krovavuyu-provokaciyu-na-yugo-vostoke.html>; and "‘Pravoseki pereodenutsia v armeiskuii formu RF'", *Tretii Rim*, 6 May 2014, <http://3rm.info/main/46605-provokacii-pravoseki-pereodenutsya-v-armeyskuyu-formu-rf.html>.

21 In his address on 18 March 2014, Putin referred in somewhat veiled terms to these invented threats as one of the motivations for the annexation of Crimea: "Those who had resisted the putsch immediately began to be threatened with repressions and punitive operations. And first in line here was, of course, Crimea, Russian-speaking Crimea. In this connection the residents of Crimea and Sevastopol' appealed to Russia to defend their rights and their very lives, not to allow what was happening, and what is indeed still happening now in Kiev, Donetsk, Khar'kov, and several other cities in Ukraine"; "Obrashchenie Prezidenta".

22 A. Levkin, "Stsenarii: SK protiv Yarosha", *polit.ru*, 12 March 2014, <http://polit.ru/article/2014/03/12/al12314/>.

successful in the Donbass region in particular. When asked the question “Do you agree that *Pravyi sektor* is... a major military formation exerting influence over the government and representing a threat to citizens and to the country’s integrity?” during an opinion poll conducted in April 2014, 73% of respondents in the Donetsk region and 63% in the Luhansk region answered in the affirmative.<sup>23</sup>

Two months passed, however, and still the “cut-throats” from *Pravyi sektor* failed to materialize in the Donbass. Most *Pravyi sektor* activists remained in Kiev on the Maidan where they were in fact by this stage demanding the resignation of Defense Minister Igor’ Teniukh and Interior Minister Arsen Avakov for their inaction in response to the Russian annexation of Crimea.

Around this period rumors began to circulate in Sloviansk and neighboring towns about alleged sightings of “*Pravyi sektor* fighters” in local forests.<sup>24</sup> These rumors were enthusiastically picked up and disseminated by many locals, evidently in the hope that President Putin would soon send Russian troops to Donbass to “defend” civilians from the “*pravoseki*”, as he had only just done in Crimea.<sup>25</sup> It was precisely the alleged presence of “*pravoseki*” in neighboring forests that was cited by the separatists to justify their seizure of local militia stations and arms and the erection of road-blocks on the outskirts of cities in the north of the Donetsk region. The group of Russian fighters under the command of Girkin/“Strelkov” likewise positioned themselves as defenders from this supposed threat. This strategy could not be sustained indefinitely, however; sooner or later, the specter of the *pravoseki* presence in the Donbass would have to be given substance. Over time, there was an increasingly urgent need to back up and lend credibility to these claims by

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23 The poll was conducted by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology (KMIS), 10-15 April 2014. It was commissioned by the weekly *Zerkalo nedeli*; “Mneniia i vzgliady zhiteliei Yugo-vostoka Ukrainy: aprel’ 2014”, *Zerkalo nedeli*, 18 April 2014, [http://zn.ua/UKRAINE/mneniya-i-vzglyady-zhitelley-yugo-vostoka-ukrainy-aprel-2014-143598\\_.html](http://zn.ua/UKRAINE/mneniya-i-vzglyady-zhitelley-yugo-vostoka-ukrainy-aprel-2014-143598_.html).

24 Similar rumors were also circulating elsewhere in towns across South-east Ukraine at the time.

25 This statement is based on my own personal observations and conversations with residents of Kramatorsk, Sloviansk, and several other towns in the region.

reporting on some concrete manifestations of the “neo-Nazi” threat to the Donbass.

This is the context in which the alleged *Pravyi sektor* attack on a checkpoint near Sloviansk took place on the night of 19–20 April 2014—a incident that has become notorious for the widely ridiculed Russian media claims that “Yarosh’s business card” had been found miraculously intact amongst the burnt remains of one of the jeeps destroyed in this incident.<sup>26</sup> Among the other items supposedly retrieved from the wreckage following the checkpoint attack and displayed on Russian television as proof of *Pravyi sektor*’s involvement were a German World War II-era MG42 machinegun. The self-proclaimed “People’s Mayor” of Sloviansk Viacheslav Ponomarev commented in this connection in a press-conference devoted to the incident, “Our opponents continue to wage their fascist ideology, and not only by using the weapons of their teachers”.<sup>27</sup> Ponomarev now called upon Putin to send Russian troops to Ukraine. In his video-appeal, which was broadcast on *LifeNews*,<sup>28</sup> Ponomarev declared that “the [Ukrainian] national guard wants to turn us into slaves” and that the Kievan authorities were sending “fascists” against the small town, as well as “imperialists” from across the globe, armed with “NATO weapons”.<sup>29</sup>

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26 The BBC Russian Service has conducted a detailed independent investigation of the incident and its media coverage. The BBC report identifies five “classic” propaganda techniques used in the *LifeNews* coverage: identifying a scapegoat for the unrest in Ukraine (*Pravyi sektor*); suggesting foreign sponsorship of the opposing side; labeling the opposing side as “fascists”; accusing the opposing side of acts of “sacrilege”; and using the incident to legitimize calls for (Russian) military intervention; see “Vizitka Yarosha, ili Piat’ punktov TV-propagandy”, *BBC Russkaia sluzhba*, 22 April 2014, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/international/2014/04/140422\\_russia\\_ukraine\\_propaganda\\_5points](http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/international/2014/04/140422_russia_ukraine_propaganda_5points). See also on this incident Maksym Yakovlyev, “Antimaidan’ posle Yevromaidana v sotsial’nykh setiakh: obraz vraga i opaseniia zhitelei vostoka Ukrainy”, *Forum noveishei vostochnoevropeiskoi istorii i kul’tury* 1 (2014): 78–93.

27 Cited “Vizitka Yarosha”.

28 *LifeNews* is a Russian TV channel that was founded on 2 September 2013; <http://lifenews.ru>.

29 In support of these claims, a bundle of crisp hundred-dollar bills allegedly found at the scene was also displayed on Russian TV.

Ponomarev appealed to Putin to send “peace-keeping troops to defend the civilian population from *Pravyi sektor* attacks”.

The Russian *LifeNews* reports on the night battle near Sloviansk, which seems most likely to have a primitive provocation,<sup>30</sup> pursued several goals. These include convincing the residents of Sloviansk and other Donbass cities that the threat to their lives was genuine, since *Pravyi sektor* fighters were now at large in the Donbass. The incident also served to justify the actions of the separatists who had seized power, and of Girkin’s Russian fighters, who must now defend the city’s residents from armed “Nazis”. By the same token, the incident discredited the new government in Kiev by showing it to be unable and/or unwilling to “restore order” and disarm the “Nazis” from the Maidan. The incident gave the Russian Foreign Ministry grounds for accusing the Ukrainian government of having broken the Geneva agreements, and it provided the separatist leaders with a pretext for appealing to Putin to send Russian troops to Ukraine. Finally, the incident served to demonstrate to TV audiences in Russia and Ukraine that the Ukrainian civil war, discussions of which had dominated Russian airtime for so long, had finally begun in earnest.

### **The Ukrainian “National Guard”: “Nationalist Reptiles” and “Men in Black”**

As the prospect of genuine *Pravyi sektor* attacks on the Donbass faded, the focus of the Russian media propaganda and of the rumors disseminated by the separatists shifted to the Ukrainian National Guard (*Natsional'naia gvardiia* or *Natsgvardiia*), the Interior Ministry forces that were reconstituted in March 2014. From May 2014, the National Guard became the main object of demonisation,

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30 See further the Ukrainian Security Service’s statement describing the attack on the checkpoint as a “cynical provocation” by “armed delinquents and saboteurs [*diversanty*]” that had been “stage-managed” so as to look like an “external attack”; “Perestrelku v Slovianske SBU i ‘Pravyi sektor’ nazyvaiut provokatsiei”, *Ukrains’ka sluzhba Bi-Bi-Si*, 20 April 2014, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/ukrainian/ukraine\\_in\\_russian/2014/04/140420\\_ru\\_s\\_sloviansk\\_shooting.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/ukrainian/ukraine_in_russian/2014/04/140420_ru_s_sloviansk_shooting.shtml).

as the Ukrainian “anti-terrorist operation” (ATO) moved to launch combat actions in the north of the Donetsk region. The pro-Russian fighters and their supporters quickly dubbed the new forces the *natsgady* or “nationalist reptiles”,<sup>31</sup> a label with an obvious strong negative connotation aimed at dehumanizing the adversary.

Here once again references to the Soviet and post-Soviet imagery associated with the Great Patriotic War played a prominent role, and the specter of *karateli*, recalling the SS troops who conducted brutal punitive (*karatel'nye*) operations against the civilian population on the Nazi-occupied territories while Wehrmacht troops fought at the front, came to the fore-front once again. This connection was frequently suggested via media references to “black uniforms”, an image which, for Soviet and post-Soviet populations raised on the Great Patriotic War myth, immediately evokes the black uniforms worn by SS troops. Russian mass media reports on events in the Donbass, as well as rumors circulating by word of mouth in the region, often placed an emphasis on sightings of “men in black uniform”. As a rule, these reports and rumors also featured references to the *Natsgvardiia* or *Pravyi sektor*, with a tendency towards the gradual substitution of *natsgady* for *pravoseki* from May onwards. Thus, for example, on 18 May 2014, when the Ukrainian military passed through Kramatorsk via the military aerodrome located on the outskirts of the city, the Russian TV channel *Zvezda* embroidered the story with new (and entirely unsubstantiated) details:

A column of armored vehicles is moving towards Kramatorsk comprising six APCs which are attempting to break through to the city council building. The militia are holding back the onslaught of military vehicles and are not permitting the armored vehicles to enter the city center. According to a representative of the people's militia, each military vehicle is carrying around 10 fighters **in black uniform** without insignia, as well as several security operatives wearing camouflage. These are assumed to be members

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31 The prefix *nats* (short for *natsional'nyi*) has been translated here as “nationalist” rather than the literal “national” in an attempt to come closer to capturing the negative associations carried by this prefix, and which again reinforce the link to “fascism”. The term *natsgady* also obviously plays on the similarity of *gady/gvardiia*.



of the **national guard** or radicals from the extremist group “**Pravyi sektor**” [my emphasis—AO].<sup>32</sup>

On the same day, Russian and separatist-controlled mass media also broadcast several fake reports of “battles” in Kramatorsk. For example, it was falsely reported that:

Troops from the Ukrainian National Guard have begun moving from the aerodrome in Kramatorsk towards the city administration building, and armed clashes are taking place. The coordinator of the Kramatorsk militia has informed RIA Novosti of this by telephone.<sup>33</sup>

This appears to have been an intentional fabrication, since no such armed clashes in fact took place in the area at this time.

Separatist and Russian mass media propaganda made various attempts to draw a distinction between the “brutal” *Natsgvardiia* and the “good-natured” Ukrainian Armed Forces (*Vooruzhennyye sily Ukrainy*, or *VSU*). Thus, while the former were “*karateli*”, the latter comprised “conscript soldiers” who were being forced to fight against their will.<sup>34</sup> The aim here was evidently to sow mistrust and discord between the *Natsgvardiia* and the *VSU*, and also to stimulate protests by the families of conscripts and reservists demanding that their sons not be called up into the *VSU* and sent to the ATO zone.

False rumors that conscripts had been executed by *Natsgvardiia* fighters for refusing to fight against the DNR and LNR (or to “shoot at their own people”) were actively disseminated by word of mouth<sup>35</sup> and in media reports such as this example from the pro-separatist website *Antifashist.com*:

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32 “V Kramatorske obstreliali zavod i vzorvali avtobusnuu ostanovku”, *Teleradiokompaniia Zvezda*, 18 May 2014, [http://tvzvezda.ru/news/vstrane\\_i\\_mire/content/201405182007-iga5.htm](http://tvzvezda.ru/news/vstrane_i_mire/content/201405182007-iga5.htm).

33 “18 maia. Khronika sobytii”, *Antifashist*, 18 May 2014, <http://antifashist.com/item/hronika-sobytij-18-maya.html#ixzz3A4MplKuC>.

34 In actual fact, in spring 2014 the greater part of the soldiers fighting in the *VSU* were contract soldiers.

35 Based on the author’s personal observations and conversations with local residents.

The bodies of ten Ukrainian soldiers, shot by their fellow servicemen for going over to the side of the militia, are being buried on the outskirts of Kramatorsk. A representative of the self-defense staff headquarters provided this information to “Interfax”. According to his account, the executions of the conscript-soldiers were carried out on the territory of the military unit. According to the agency’s source, “the boys were put up against the wall right there on the territory of the unit and then they opened fire on them”. Previously it was reported that ten Ukrainian military servicemen wished to go over to the side of the militia, but were executed by the *Natsgvardiia*.<sup>36</sup>

No reliable evidence of these claims based on anything other than unsubstantiated anonymous hearsay has ever been provided.

### **The Party of Regions and the Formation of the Myth of “Ukrainian Fascism”**

It is generally acknowledged that propaganda is most effective when it confirms existing opinions and beliefs.<sup>37</sup> In the case of Russian propaganda on “Ukrainian fascism”, one reason why this propaganda appears to have been particularly successful in the Donbass region is because fertile ground had been long prepared here by the rhetoric employed in regional political struggles which, in turn, drew upon beliefs, prejudices and fears linked to the highly distinctive regional Donbass identity.<sup>38</sup> The pre-history of the “Ukrainian fascist” enemy images as used in Russian mass media over the past year can help to explain why so many residents of the Donbass were apparently willing to accept the Russian mass media

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36 “18 maia. Khronika sobytii”.

37 David Welch, “‘Opening Pandora’s Box’: Propaganda, Power and Persuasion”, in *Propaganda, Power and Persuasion from World War I to Wikileaks*, ed. David Welch (London & New York: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 11.

38 Additional (and inter-related) regionally specific factors at work here include: the regional preference for Russian rather than Ukrainian television; a strong sense of disillusionment with Ukrainian politics in the context of deep economic decline and falling living standards; and mistrust in Ukrainian mass media, especially as a consequence of the Kuchma regime’s harsh control over TV news.

image of the Euromaidan as a “mob of radicals and neo-Nazis”, and the new Turchynov-Yatseniuk government as a “fascist junta”.

Demonization of political rivals has a long tradition in Ukraine. There are substantial regional differences linked primarily to different views on recent history, and these differences are deliberately used by Ukrainian politicians during elections in order to mobilize the electorate and guarantee victory.<sup>39</sup> The differences are especially marked amongst the residents of two regions in particular, Galicia/Galychyna and the Donbass, where regional identity is especially strong.

The Galician regional identity has its roots in the late-nineteenth-century myth of Galicia as the “Ukrainian Piedmont” in the avant-garde of the struggle to create a Ukrainian state. It is this Galician model of Ukrainian identity (culture, views on history, and so on) that has predominantly been held up as the standard for the entire country. Galicians are especially proud of their ancestors’ struggle for independence, and particularly that of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (the OUN, created 1929) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (the UPA, created 1942). When the Soviet Army entered Galicia in summer 1944, the OUN-UPA responded by launching an armed struggle which continued until the early 1950s. In Soviet historiography and propaganda, the OUN and its leader Stepan Bandera were declared the accomplices of the German occupiers. Bandera’s followers were known as “banderites”.<sup>40</sup> In Soviet historiography the term “banderites” became a heavily loaded term carrying strong negative associations, and was equivalent to such labels as “Ukrainian bourgeois nationalists”, “collaborators”,

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39 See T. J. Colton, “An Aligning Election and the Ukrainian Political Community”, *East European Politics and Societies* 24, no. 1 (2011): 4-27; Alexandr Osipian and Ararat Osipian, “Regional Diversity and Divided Memories in Ukraine: Contested Past as Electoral Resource, 2004-2010”, *East European Politics and Societies* 26, no. 3 (2012): 616-42; and Alexandr Osipian, “The Overlapping Realms of Memory and Politics in Ukraine, 2004-2012”, *Interstitio. East European Review of Historical and Cultural Anthropology* (special issue on “Politics and Practices of Memory in Eastern Europe”) 4, no. 1-2 (7-8) (2012): 39-60.

40 As distinct from the “Mel’nykovites” who supported Andrii Mel’nyk following the 1940 split in the organization.

and “accomplices of the Nazi occupiers”. Over time the term *banderovtsy* (and its variants *benderovtsy* and *bandery*) came to be used more broadly. Many residents of the Donbass used these terms to refer to people from West Ukraine; moreover, their use of the term was not necessarily pejorative, and often merely referred neutrally to cultural differences.

The regional identity in the Donbass is also strongly developed and distinctive. Unlike the Galician regional identity, however, the Donbass regional identity is based not on ethnic or confessional factors or on the idealization of traditional culture, but on a sense of belonging to a community forged through the industrialization and urbanization of the Donets coal basin from the 1860s onwards. The formation of a distinct Donbass identity was completed during the “socialist industrialization” of the 1930s, when the official propaganda created the image of the Donbass as a leading industrial/proletarian region. The Donbass identity is based on the myth of the Donbass as the most developed region of Ukraine, and the associated notion that Ukraine’s entire economy rests on Donbass industry. Within the framework of this myth, West Ukraine, which was incorporated into the USSR in 1939-45, is viewed as a backwards agrarian region and a hotbed of aggressive Ukrainian nationalism. As early as during the 1970s, however, the first signs began to appear pointing to the decline of the economic model put in place in the Donbass in the first half of the twentieth century. The collapse of the USSR and new global economic trends only served to further exacerbate the region’s economic decline. Nevertheless, the myth that “the Donbass feeds the whole country” remains very much in place in the consciousness of the local population.<sup>41</sup>

Sociological polls conducted every five years in L’viv and Donetsk, the two poles of the Ukrainian electoral map, show that in Donetsk (more broadly, in the Donbass) in 2004, on the eve of the Orange Revolution, 47.8% of respondents agreed with the statement that “My region’s development would improve if it separated from

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41 Based on the author’s personal observations and conversations with local residents.

Ukraine”. In L’viv (more broadly, in West Ukraine), by contrast, only 6.6% of respondents shared this view.<sup>42</sup>

The received view on Ukraine as divided into “two Ukraines” overlooks the specificity of the Donbass region in particular, but a strong case can be made for the need to view the Donbass region as a separate category. It was only in the Donbass (the Donetsk and Luhansk regions) that pro-Russian campaigns and actions resulted in armed rebellion. This is the case despite the fact that similar actions were attempted in Kharkiv and Odessa, for example. Consequently, we can assume that the Donbass also differed in terms of the motivations driving the actions of pro-Russian separatists, as well as the greater degree of support offered to the separatists by the population.

Prior to the 2014 crisis, Ukrainian and foreign researchers alike paid little attention to the issue of the specificity of the Donbass region, and in particular, to the mutual interaction of its socio-economic structure, regional identity and political culture.<sup>43</sup>

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42 Tablytsi odnovimirnykh rozpodiliv trendovoho sotsiologichnoho doslidzhennia, “L’viv-Donets’k: sotsiologichnii analiz hrupovykh identychnosti ta ierarkhii suspil’nykh loial’nostei—1994, 1999, 2004 rr.” (Uporiadkuvav Viktor Susak), in “L’viv-Donets’k: sotsial’ni identychnosti v suchasni Ukraini”, Spetsial’nyi vypusk chasopysu *Ukraina moderna* (Kyiv-L’viv: Kritika, 2007).

43 Amongst the few studies devoted specifically to the Donbass to date, the contribution of German sociologist Kerstin Zimmer is especially noteworthy. Zimmer has examined the socio-economic specifics of the Donbass; formation of the regional elite; and cultural stereotypes and regional identity; K. Zimmer, “Das ukrainische Donbass in den stählernen Fesseln der Schwerindustrie”, in *Kultur als Bestimmungsfaktor der Transformation im Osten Europas. Konzeptionelle Entwicklungen – empirische Befunde*, Höhmann, Hans-Hermann (Hg.) (Bremen: Edition Temmen, 2001), 236-251; K. Zimmer, “Die Bergarbeitergewerkschaften im Donbass zwischen ukrainischer Unabhängigkeit, Regionalismus und sowjetischem Erbe”, *Mitteilungsblätter des Instituts für soziale Bewegungen* 37 (2007): 149-175; K. Zimmer, “The Donetsk Factor”, *Transitions Online*, 17 December 2004, <http://www.tol.org/client/article/13186-the-donetsk-factor.html>; K. Zimmer, “Die Kohle, der Clan und die Macht. Zur politischen Anatomie des Gebiets Donec’k”, *Osteuropa* 55, no. 1 (2005): 34-49; K. Zimmer, “Eine Region und ihre Partei. Die Partei der Regionen als Donezker Elitenprojekt”, *Ukraine-Analysen* 3 (2006): 11-13; K. Zimmer, *Machteliten im ukrainischen Donbass - Bedingungen und Konsequenzen der Transformation einer alten Industrieregion* (Münster: LIT, 2006); and K. Zimmer, “Trapped in Past Glory: Self-Identification and Self-Symbolisation in

As a rule, scholars (mostly political scientists and sociologists) have tended to discuss Ukraine's regions using the basic categories east/west, or west/center/south/east, and hence the specifics of the Donbass region and the Crimea have been dissolved into (actually far from homogeneous) "east" and "south" respectively. The events of 2014 have demonstrated that it would be more accurate to divide Ukraine into the following six regions: west; center; south; east (Zaporizhia, Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv); the Donbass; and Crimea.

Many residents of the Donbass view their region not as an ordinary part of Ukraine, but as a unit equal to Ukraine. This is one of the reasons why it was precisely among residents of the Donbass that the sense of the differences between "west" and "east" Ukraine proved powerful enough to lead to a splitting of the country as a result of the Maidan and the change of government in Kiev. Thus, according to the results of a poll conducted in March 2014, 57.7% of respondents from the Donbass agreed that there were deep contradictions between the western and eastern regions of Ukraine, capable of leading to the breaking up of the country. This indicator is substantially lower even in the eastern regions neighboring the Donbass—Zaporizhia, Dnipropetrovsk and Kharkiv—where 35.9% felt this way, and in the "south" (including Crimea, essentially no longer part of Ukraine by this point), where the figure was 48%, compared to only 19.8% in the "west", and 15.4% in the "center".<sup>44</sup>

The Donbass regional identity has frequently been used by the Party of Regions in order to gain and retain voter support. During election campaigns, the Party of Regions has often used the

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the Donbass", in *Re-Constructing the Post-Soviet Industrial Region: The Donbas in Transition*, ed. Adam Swain (London: Routledge, 2007), 97-121. For studies examining issues surrounding the Donbass regional identity and its utilization for political purposes, see also A. Wilson, "The Donbass Between Ukraine and Russia: The Use of History in Political Disputes", *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 2 (1995): 265-89; and Alexandr Osipian and Ararat Osipian, "Why Donbass Votes for Yanukovich: Confronting the Ukrainian Orange Revolution", *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 14, no. 4 (2006): 495-517.

44 "Chy vlastyvi ukrainsiam nastroi separatyizmu—zagal'nonatsional'ne opytuvannia", *Fond demokratychni initsiatyvy imeni Il'ka Kucheriva*, [http://dif.org.ua/ua/polls/2014\\_polls/chi-vlastyvi-ukrainciam-nastroi-separatizmu\\_.htm](http://dif.org.ua/ua/polls/2014_polls/chi-vlastyvi-ukrainciam-nastroi-separatizmu_.htm).

Donbass identity to set up an opposition between the Donbass and Ukraine,<sup>45</sup> using slogans such as “we work, while they go to protest marches”, or “Donbass plows, while they wave their fists around” (*Donbass pashet, a oni kulakami mashut*).<sup>46</sup>

In the 2000s, the Party of Regions consolidated voter support in the Donbass by presenting itself as the only defender of the interests of the population of this industrial region, since most of the Party’s deputies were owners of the region’s major enterprises. But the Party of Regions’ success in gaining full control over the central government structures in 2010 did not bring the promised benefits for the Donbass population. On the contrary, economic decline and deteriorating living standards meant that Donbass voters became increasingly disillusioned with the Party of Regions and with Yanukovych. In order to win the 2012 parliamentary elections and, in particular, the 2015 presidential elections, stronger medicine was required to stimulate the Party of Regions’ traditional electorate to remain loyal to the party in spite of this disillusionment. The remedy ultimately chosen here was the creation of a phantom existential threat in the shape of “Ukrainian fascists”.

The Party of Regions never had its own ideology; instead, it adopted the historical mythology that had been put in place in neighboring Russia. During Putin’s presidency the “Great Patriotic War of 1941-45” had been transformed into the founding myth of the new Russian identity and political mythology. Russian leaders and foreign policy officials had also transformed this myth into an important foreign policy instrument in their dealing with western neighbors, that is, with the countries of the former socialist camp, and especially with the Baltic states and Ukraine.<sup>47</sup> This myth was

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45 Based on the author’s personal observations and conversations with local residents.

46 “Donetskie regionaly mitinguiut protiv fashizma pod portretom Tiagniboka”, *Kommentarii: Donbass*, 17 May 2013, <http://donbass.comments.ua/news/79252-donetskie-regionali-mitinguyut-protiv.html>.

47 On the transformation of the “Great Patriotic War” myth into a Russian foreign policy instrument see E. Levintova and J. Butterfield, “History Education and Historical Remembrance in Contemporary Russia: Sources of Political Attitudes of Pro-Kremlin Youth”, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 43, no. 2

also the primary material used by the Party of Regions in its struggle against its political opponents.

The Party of Regions made its first moves towards constructing the mythical existential threat of “Ukrainian fascism” in late 2004, during the Orange Revolution. After the second round of voting results in the presidential elections were falsified in favor of Viktor Yanukovych, mass protests known as the “Maidan” began in Kiev and in many cities of West Ukraine. A repeat vote was scheduled for 26 December as a compromise option. Yanukovych and the Party of Regions had never enjoyed serious support in Kiev, and therefore Yanukovych and his team now traveled to the Donbass so as to offer their electorate there an explanation as to why the “new president” Yanukovych had not been recognized in Kiev and to set a course for future action. In December, the Party of Regions organized a series of rallies at which its leaders, predominantly the owners and directors of large enterprises, told the Donbass population that a coup had taken place in Kiev and that the “orange plague” was now heading for the Donbass.<sup>48</sup> The phrase “orange plague” was a borrowing adapted from the “brown plague”, a Soviet propaganda label used to designate fascism and Nazism. The notion of an “orange plague” coming from the west was intended to engender a sense of mortal danger—invisible, incomprehensible and thus all the more terrifying. (In fact, those few groups of activists from the Kiev Maidan who were brave enough to travel to the Donbass to agitate ended up being brutally beaten by thugs linked to the Party of Regions).

After the Orange Revolution and the coming to power of Viktor Yushchenko, the situation did not change—as the result of a deal struck between the political elites, the Party of Regions retained the Donbass as its fiefdom. Politically and culturally, the Donbass

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(2010): 139-66; M. V. Liñan, “History as a Propaganda Tool in Putin’s Russia”, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 43, no. 2 (2010): 167-78; E.-C. Onken, “The Baltic States and Moscow’s 9 May Commemoration: Analysing Memory Politics in Europe”, *Europe-Asia Studies* 59, no. 1 (2007): 23-46; and T. Saarts, “The Bronze Nights: The Failure of Forced Europeanization and the Birth of Nationalist Defensive Democracy in Estonia”, *Eurozine* 10, no. 10 (2008).

48 Based on author’s personal observations.



was isolated from the rest of Ukraine, and a single-party system essentially continued to operate here, with the Party of Regions effectively replacing the communists. Meanwhile, the capital city Kiev failed to fulfill its function of integrating the different regions of the country. The politicians speaking on behalf of Ukraine's western regions, and the provocative statements made by "Svoboda" politicians in particular, only served to encourage greater self-isolation on the part of the majority of the Donbass population.

The construction of the enemy image of the "Ukrainian fascist" developed further in the spring of 2011, when competing historical myths clashed in the course of the preparations for the "Victory Day" (9 May) celebrations, sparking hysterical responses in the government- and oligarch-controlled mass media. Victory Day had been an important day in the official commemorative calendar since 1965. The 2011 controversy was sparked by the official introduction of a new commemorative symbol that year: the "Victory Banner", that is, the red banner of the 150<sup>th</sup> Rifle "Idritskaia" division (Order of Kutuzov 2<sup>nd</sup> class), that was raised over the Reichstag in Berlin on 1 May 1945. On 7 May 2007 a law had been passed in Russia making it legal to display copies of the Victory Banner on buildings on Victory Day alongside the Russian state flag. The Party of Regions and the Communist Party of Ukraine now launched a initiative to adopt the same practice in Ukraine, and subsequently, in the wake of heated debate, a similar law was passed in Ukraine. In Galicia, however, regional and city councils refused to obey the law, since this would have meant using Soviet symbols that had been decisively rejected by the majority of residents of West Ukraine.

Both the passage of the law itself and the subsequent even more furious political debates in April-May 2011 were elements of the Party of Regions strategy aimed at artificially escalating conflict and increasing hostility towards the rest of the country on the part of the population of the south-east regions of Ukraine, where the Party of Regions was the dominant political force. In the Donbass region, this conflict over the memory of the war was viewed by many as yet another manifestation of West Ukrainian "fascist" tendencies. During the war years, the population of West Ukraine had been the

“accomplices of the German fascists”, and it was for this reason that their descendants did not wish to celebrate Victory Day and chose to honor the “OUN-UPA Nazi accomplices” instead.

Provocations were now organized using the marginal pro-Russian national organizations “Russian Unity” (*Russkoe yedinstvo*) (Crimea) and “Motherland” (*Rodina*) (Odessa). Activists from these organizations were bused into L’viv on 9 May 2011 with the aim of provoking clashes with local Ukrainian nationalists. A strong police presence guarding the pro-Russian activists meant that serious violence was avoided, but journalists (both Ukrainian and Russian) nevertheless gathered sufficient visual material to put together a vivid picture of “clashes between Ukrainian Nazis and anti-fascists” that was well-suited to the TV news format. This was followed up by the creation of the “International Anti-Fascist Front” shortly thereafter.<sup>49</sup> All these organizations aimed to equate contemporary Ukrainian nationalism to neo-Nazism and to link it also to the “fascism” of the World War II era.

The Party of Regions seemingly decided to avoid provoking fresh conflicts around Victory Day in 2012, perhaps out of a desire to avoid damaging the country’s image ahead of Ukraine’s co-hosting of the European Championship football tournament in June 2012, especially at a time when the Ukrainian population was being accused by some Western (especially British) media of high levels of xenophobia and neo-Nazism. But after this brief pause, and as the 2015 presidential elections drew closer, the construction of the image of “Ukrainian fascists” reached a new level. The logic behind these political technologies was simple: the aim was to convince Yanukovich’s disillusioned electorate that fascism was gaining strength in Ukraine, that only Yanukovich was capable of protecting ordinary people from this threat, and that therefore it

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49 The International Anti-Fascist Front was created in Kiev on 9 September 2011. According to Wikipedia this was the initiative of more than thirty different NGOs, including veterans’ groups, military groups and peacekeeping groups from Ukraine and abroad, and the Ukraine-wide NGO “Human Rights’ Public Movement ‘Russophone Ukraine’”. The URL for the group in the Russian segment of Wikipedia ([www.antifashyst.org](http://www.antifashyst.org)) does not appear to be operational.

would be best to vote for Yanukovych rather than for his likely main rival, “Svoboda” leader Oleh Tyahnybok.

In the lead-up to Victory Day 2013, the Party of Regions organized a Ukraine-wide Memory Watch campaign entitled “We’re Proud of the Great Victory”.<sup>50</sup> Later, the Party also initiated a series of rallies under the slogan “Into Europe—Without Fascists” (*V Yevropu—bez fashistov*). The rallies started off in various regions of the country on 14 May and culminated in a final march accompanied by mass brawls on Sophia Square in Kiev on 18 May.<sup>51</sup> On 17 May, around 20 thousand people gathered for a rally in Donetsk under the slogan “Donbass against Neo-Fascism”.<sup>52</sup> When speaking in other regions of Ukraine, Party of Regions politicians tended to be quite circumspect and limited themselves to vague hints, but at a rally in Donetsk the party leaders stated explicitly that there were “fascists” in Ukraine. Deputy chair of the Party of Regions’ Donetsk Regional Organization Nikolai Levchenko announced in his speech:

We have gathered here to make sure that all of our country, that all of Europe knows that Ukraine is a society in which manifestations of xenophobia, racial intolerance and nationalism cannot remain unpunished. We call all this **neofascism**. **Fascism** was taken care of by our grandpas in faraway ’45, but today we face a new threat, no less terrible. This is the threat of **neofascism**. The Supreme Council [the Ukrainian parliament] has been penetrated by a **neofascist** gang—the Ukraine-wide organization “Svoboda”. But even back in 2004 Tiagnibok, Farion and their comrades had joined together in the Social-National Party of Ukraine. Hitler headed up the National-Socialist Workers’ Party of Germany. The names are similar, don’t you find? Their symbol was the “wolf-hook”, borrowed from the SS “Das Reich” tank division. When this band adopted these symbols, it also adopted all the anti-values linked to these symbols. The Nazis burned books and destroyed monuments. But who’s destroying monuments in our country today? Did you all see it on television? Illegally, without agreeing this with

50 “V Zaporozh’e sostoialas’ samaia masshtabnaia v Ukraine voenno-istoricheskaiia rekonstruktsiia vremen Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny”, *Party of Regions official website*, 14 October 2013, <http://partyofregions.ua/project/51cfaaa3fcdabb730000d3/news/525be701c4ca423d6f0000a6>.

51 “Draka v tsentre Kieva glazami ochevidtsev”, *Korrespondent.net*, 20 May 2013, <http://korrespondent.net/ukraine/1560673-draka-v-centre-kieva-glazami-ocheidtcev>.

52 “Donbass protiv neofashizma!”, *Party of Regions official website*, 18 May 2013, <http://partyofregions.ua/news/51975c4fc4ca42047c000320>.

the local authorities, without the agreement of the people living in those cities, they are destroying monuments...<sup>53</sup>

Likewise, in his concluding address, the deputy chair of the Party of Regions Donetsk Regional Organization and chair of the Donetsk Regional State Administration Andrei Shishatskii declared,

The parade salutes have rung out, but the politicoes who are trying to change history force us to sound the alarm and to say a decisive “NO” to **neofascism**. What, would we betray our memory, our glory and our victory?! Long live our native Donbass—**fascism** will not pass! [my emphasis—AO]<sup>54</sup>

As these examples show, high-ranking politicians from the Party of Regions frequently referred to their political opponents from “Svoboda” openly as “fascists” and “neo-fascists”.

The aim being pursued through this rhetoric and the celebration of the 1945 victory is obvious. Voters were being told “we beat [the fascists] then, we’ll beat [the neo-fascists] now”, with a view to preparing for the next presidential elections and the likely face-off between Yanukovych and Tyahnybok. Thus, long before the tragic events of 2014, the Party of Regions was impressing upon its Donbass electorate the notion that the party’s opponents were “Ukrainian neo-fascists”.

The Donbass population’s readiness to believe in the reality of the “Ukrainian neo-fascist” threat in the spring of 2014 might also be linked to (partly unconscious) fears that Ukrainians elsewhere in the country might now move to “take revenge” on the Donbass. For ten years the Donbass had voted for Yanukovych and the Party of Regions who, once in power, robbed the country, lived in luxury, used the militia and criminal elements to suppress protest, and were even prepared to shoot dead several dozen Euromaidan activists in February 2014. In the circumstances it is unsurprising that many people in the Donbass feared reprisals. When Russia annexed the

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53 “Donbass protiv neofashizma!”

54 Ibid.

Crimea in March 2014, several military units from other regions and a supplementary contingent of borderguards (mostly from West Ukraine) were sent to East Ukraine to defend the border against potential military invasion. Even at that point, thanks to the rumors being spread by the Party of Regions, many Donbass residents feared that these actions marked the beginning of a “punitive operation” to be carried out against the Donbass population with the complicity of local authorities and law-enforcement agencies, and undertook attempts to block the troop movements and the unloading of military hardware with a view to preventing this.

### **The “Crimean Factor” and Pro-Russian Moods in the Donbass in the Spring of 2014**

For the course of a month—from late February through to 21 March 2014—TV viewers in Russia and Ukraine were able to watch the great epic of “the return of Crimea” on Russian TV channels. For many residents of the Donbass, the example of Crimea’s rapid and bloodless departure from Russia proved highly appealing. Sixty-eight percent of residents of “the east” did not support the Maidan in Kiev. They did not trust the new government, because they believed that a coup had taken place in Kiev, bringing chaos and the impending collapse of the country. The annexation of Crimea convinced many of them that the Russian propaganda thesis positing that Ukraine no longer existed as a state was correct. Sociological polls from 14-26 March 2014 indicate that 73% of residents of “the east” were expecting Ukraine’s economic situation to worsen in 2014.<sup>55</sup> Therefore the Crimean population’s choice at the referendum on 16 March in favor of joining with Russia (as this event was depicted by Russian mass media) seemed entirely logical to many people in the Donbass—from their point of view, Crimea was fleeing Ukraine’s political chaos and economic decline and joining a stable, strong and prosperous Russia. Only 25.7% of residents of Donetsk region and 26.8% in Luhansk region (surveyed

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55 “Public Opinion Survey”.

on 10-15 April 2014) agreed with the statement that the Crimean events represented “unlawful annexation”. On the contrary, 62.9% and 58.1% in Donetsk and Luhansk regions respectively considered this to be “the result of the free expression of the will of the residents of Crimea”.<sup>56</sup>

Consequently, many of them viewed the Crimean events as a kind of blueprint for the future development of the situation in the Donbass in the framework of the “Russian Spring” campaign. According to a survey conducted on 10-15 April 2014, 27.5% and 30.3% of residents of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions respectively held the opinion that their “regions should separate from Ukraine and join Russia”. Moreover they would prefer this to happen in a peaceful manner, since only 19.3% of those surveyed in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions supported the idea of deploying Russian troops in Ukraine. Even fewer viewed this as a realistic option: only 12.6% and 11.7% in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions respectively were planning “to welcome the entry of Russian troops” in the event of their “invasion [vtorzhenie] of South-East Ukraine”. And only 3.5% and 2.5% of respondents in the two regions declared an intention to “join the RF army”.<sup>57</sup> Thus one can conclude that the Russian mass media succeeded in convincing this section of the Donbass population that the process of separating their region from Ukraine would be easy and rapid, as in the Crimean case.

The results of a survey conducted on 14-26 March 2014 show the confusion of the Party of Regions’ traditional electorate regarding participation in the presidential elections scheduled for 25 May 2014. Twenty-two percent of those polled in East Ukraine were unable to say how they were planning to cast their vote. Fourteen percent stated that they were not going to vote. Another 13% said that they would vote “against all”. Taken together, these three categories comprise almost half (49%) of those surveyed. Only 20% intended to vote for a candidate from the Party of Regions—for Tigipko (11%), Dobkin (8%) or Korolevs’ka (1%).<sup>58</sup> Notably, Tigipko is a representative of the “Dnipropetrovsk” clan, while Dobkin is a

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<sup>56</sup> “Mneniia i vzgliady”.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> “Public Opinion Survey”.

member of the “Kharkiv” clan. The “Donetsk” clan, which comprised the nucleus of the Party of Regions, failed to put forward a candidate. Thus, after Yanukovych’s unexpected flight and the split of the Party of Regions, a political vacuum formed within the party’s long-time fiefdom, the Donbass. This vacuum now began to be filled by representatives of marginal pro-Russian groups—by all imaginable kinds of self-proclaimed “people’s mayors” and “people’s governors”<sup>59</sup>—and also by figures arriving from Russia,<sup>60</sup> who now tried to incite “civil war against the Kiev junta” in the Donbass.

On the other hand, it is important to note that these expectations of a repeat of the “Crimean scenario” in the Donbass were overwhelmingly passive in form. Many people would not have been opposed to joining Russia, but only provided that they need not make any effort to bring this about; they would welcome Russian troops, but they were not willing to fight themselves. And even those 2-3% of respondents who did express a willingness to fight couched this in terms of readiness “to join” the Russian army, but not to fight independently against the “junta” and the “*karateli*”. This aspect of the local situation was quickly grasped by the self-proclaimed “DNR Defense Minister”, Russian FSB Colonel Igor’ Girkin, who seized the city militia departments in Sloviansk and Kramatorsk on 12 April. In his video-address to Donbass residents on 17 May 2014, Girkin reproached them for having failed to join his army despite the fact that he had sufficient weapons to arm them.<sup>61</sup> It was partly with a view to mobilizing the Donbass population for

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59 These included Valerii Bolotov—self-proclaimed governor of Luhansk; Pavel Gubarev—self-proclaimed governor of Donetsk; Viacheslav Ponomarev—self-proclaimed mayor of Sloviansk; Andrei Purgin—a founder of the “Donetsk Republic” group, who later became chairman of the so-called “People’s Council of the DNR”; and Denis Pushilin—deputy chairman of the so-called “People’s Council of the DNR”.

60 Such as Igor’ Girkin/“Strelkov”—Russian FSB colonel and self-proclaimed DNR Defense Minister; Aleksandr Borodai—a Russian journalist connected to the FSB, active participant of the Crimean annexation, and self-proclaimed DNR Prime Minister; and Nikolai Kozitsyn—leader of the Russian Don Cossack host, whose armed Cossacks invaded Ukraine on 3 May 2014 and took under their control Krasnyi Luch, Sverdlovsk, Alchevsk and several other towns in the Luhansk region.

61 “Strelkov: muzhchiny Donbassa ne khotiat srazhat’sia za DNR”, *pressorg24.com*, 17 May 2014, <http://pressorg24.com/video/4223>.

this recruitment drive that the Russian mass media made every possible effort during this period to create the false impression that large-scale military actions had already begun. References to the Great Patriotic War were aimed at winning over TV viewers, both in Russia and in the Donbass, by lending the rebellion the image of a “just” and “defensive” war.

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Thus, in the information war of spring 2014, active use was made of both the cultural memory of the Great Patriotic War constructed in the Soviet period, and the established “anti-fascist” rhetoric of the Party of Regions, which in turn drew upon specificities of the Donbass regional identity and socio-economic situation. In May 2014 DNR/LNR fighters succeeded in almost completely removing any alternative to Russian mass media in the region now under their control. They used methods of intimidation and coercion in order to achieve this, including taking Ukrainian journalists captive and seizing TV broadcasting facilities.

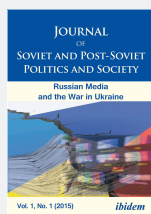
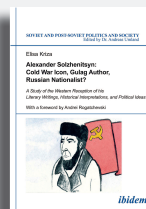
On the whole, Kremlin-controlled Russian mass media succeeded in achieving their goals. They made skillful use of the Donbass population’s phobias and fears of “Kiev” and “Ukraine”; they created panic in the region; they convinced local residents that “civil war” was inevitable; and they even screened episodes from this “war” on their TV screens, long before the real war actually began. This false understanding that “war had already begun” in turn shaped the actions of people in the Donbass, thus effectively serving to help drag the region into large-scale military conflict. The “civil war” frame used by Russian mass media from the outset enabled Putin to constantly increase the scale of the military confrontation as required, sending over the border fresh detachments of Russian nationalists and Cossacks, increasing volumes of military hardware and, finally, in late August, regular units of the Russian army.



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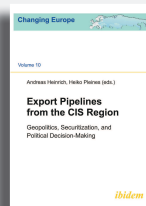
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