Retelling Old Stories with New Media: National Identity and Transnationalism in the "Russian Spring" Popular Uprisings

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Abstract: The ongoing armed conflict in Ukraine was preceded by pro-Russian uprisings in major cities in the east and south of the country. These uprisings, sometimes referred to as the "Russian Spring," were a reaction to the success of the Euromaidan, which ousted President Viktor Ianukovych. The downfall of his pro-Russian regime, coupled with aggressive propaganda, created an outrage that culminated in thousands of protesters taking to the streets. Their demands were justified by distinct "imaginings" of Ukraine's and Russia's national identities. The Anti-Maidan—a pro-Russian movement—actively utilized social media in order to promote its vision of Ukraine's future, past, and present. This paper investigates articulations of national belonging by the Anti-Maidan. Its findings reveal that the Anti-Maidan's national "imagination" is represented by a bricolage of Soviet and Slavic symbols and advocates non-progressive changes.

Keywords: "Russian Spring" in Ukraine, social media, networked social movements, national identity, "cultural trauma."

Before the Ukraine crisis turned into an armed conflict in June 2014, mass pro-Russian demonstrations were taking place across eastern Ukrainian cities. These were dubbed the "Russian Spring" by the Russian media and Anti-Maidan sympathizers, and were thought, along with the annexation of Crimea, to flag the re-emergence of Russia as a global power. People took to the streets, outraged by the fact that pro-Russian President Viktor Ianukovych was ousted after three months of Euromaidan demonstrations. The demands of the pro-Russian protesters were largely based on the idea of the federalization of Ukraine. It was argued by newly emerged Anti-Maidan leaders, and by Russian officials, that this would allow for the protection of the Russian language and "Soviet heritage" from "Westerners" (both Western Ukrainians and the Global West) in south-eastern Ukraine. A swift and nearly bloodless annexation of Crimea by Russia created the perception that with enough popular support, eastern regions could be effortlessly reintegrated into Russia. While national belonging and the role of social media pertaining to the Euromaidan have captured significant scholarly attention (Bohdanova; Kulyk; Onuch), these aspects in the counter-movement of the Anti-Maidan remain generally

under-researched. This paper focuses on how national belonging was articulated by the Anti-Maidan on social media and by its supporters in the period up to the fall of the Ianukovych regime (February 2014) and until the active military conflict began in June 2014. It stems from theorizations on "imagined communities" and "networked social movements" (Anderson 1-7; Castells, *Networks* 2-10).

The articulation of national belonging by the Anti-Maidan and its supporters relies on a distinct set of myths, symbols, and narratives that represent the Anti-Maidan as an "imagined community." In order to study the main features of the latter, I analyzed and synthesized the data coming from the Anti-Maidan and related online groups on social media, and in semi-structured interviews with Anti-Maidan supporters and activists. This investigation also considers transnational online interactions of Anti-Maidan supporters, as people from Russia actively supported the Anti-Maidan protests in Ukraine and participated in online discussions.

I argue here that the articulation of national belonging by the Anti-Maidan movement is based on contradicting frames and driven, in Castells's language, by "outrage" rather than "hope" or a clearly articulated nation-building project (*Networks* 245). The Anti-Maidan represents a complicated convergence of various historical and political narratives. The overarching frame of revival of Russia as a super-power includes a number of inconsistent and contradicting narratives and symbols. Moreover, the Anti-Maidan fails to develop a clearly articulated "national" or "supra-national" project for Ukraine. While heavily relying on post-Soviet nostalgia, it rules out Communist ideology and instead appeals to Slavic and Russian Orthodox unity. These ideological paradigms overlap and converge within online communities and social networks. The Anti-Maidan has managed to create "horizontal networks of solidarity" online, but offline, these entities faced obstacles (Castells, *Networks* 225). The data coming from the interviews show that the Anti-Maidan suffered from an inability to develop social cohesion and evidenced a lack of trust, thus demonstrating the traits of "cultural trauma"—low trust in social institutions and community (Sztompka 459). This paper concludes that the Anti-Maidan has failed to undermine the sense of national belonging in Ukraine. Nonetheless, its national "imaginings" were instrumental in escalating the violence in eastern and southern Ukrainian cities and igniting the conflict in the Donbas region.

A Short History of the "Russian Spring"

The Anti-Maidan emerged as a counter-movement to the pro-European protests in Kyiv and across Ukraine known as the Euromaidan. Since the Euromaidan began in November 2013, the Anti-Maidan has been an

initiative by the ruling Party of Regions and its political allies. Through abuse of office (an extensive and blatant practice commonly referred to as *adminresurs*), they brought thousands of people, mainly workers from the heavy industries in Eastern Ukraine, to Kyiv in order to display their support for President Ianukovych. Initially, the majority of these meetings were peaceful, but with tensions escalating during the winter of 2013–14, the authorities relied more on *titushky*—paid thugs who became notorious for their attacks on Euromaidan activists. At this stage, the Anti-Maidan could hardly have been defined as a grassroots initiative, but the fall of the Ianukovych regime was a game-changer. Uncertainty and fears (fuelled by the Russian media) that the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine would face genocide by "far-right extremists" led hundreds of thousands of people to the streets of cities in the east and south of the country. The swift and generally non-violent occupation and subsequent annexation of Crimea inspired Anti-Maidan supporters to demand the federalization of Ukraine, with eastern and southern regions to be provided with a broad autonomy. However, the protesters' demands soon developed into separatist claims advocating the idea that the regions of Ukraine with a "Russian-speaking"[1] majority should join Russia as *Novorossiia* (New Russia). In March 2014, violent clashes between Anti-Maidan and Euromaidan supporters left three people dead in Donetsk and Kharkiv.

On 6 and 7 April 2014, multiple administrative buildings were seized in Kharkiv, Luhansk, and Donetsk. In Kharkiv, police managed to recapture the building of the oblast administration and arrest the leaders of the Anti-Maidan; however, protesters in Luhansk and Donetsk declared the creation of "people's republics" that would not submit to the new pro-European government in Kyiv. Days after, on 12 April, an armed group led by the Russian former intelligence officer Igor' Strelkov-Girkin captured the police station in the town of Sloviansk. Subsequently, the Ukrainian government started an anti-terrorist operation (ATO) in Eastern Ukraine.

While an armed struggle was taking place near Sloviansk, pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian protests continued in several major cities in south-eastern Ukraine. These were marred by rapidly escalating violence. On 2 May 2014, violent clashes between football fans and Anti-Maidan militias took place in the city of Odesa. These clashes took the lives of 48 people, the majority of them Anti-Maidan supporters who had taken shelter in the Trade Union building, which was then set on fire. After this tragic event, the self-proclaimed republics of Luhansk and Donetsk (LNR and DNR, respectively)

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[1] A duplicitous label, as (i) many ethnic Ukrainians are Russian speakers (particularly due to the colonial imposition of Russian as the dominant language of the USSR, and of Russian Empire before that); and (ii) by no means did all of the Russians in Ukraine feel persecuted or as though their rights needed to be defended.

declared that no further dialogue with Kyiv was possible and organized a referendum on independence on 11 May. Meanwhile, a short presidential election campaign took place, and Petro Poroshenko was elected as the fifth President of Ukraine on 25 May. Days after his inauguration on 7 June, an armed struggle between the Ukrainian military and Russian-backed separatists flared all across the Donbas region, with multiple rocket launchers used by the opposing sides. Despite the fact that several ceasefire agreements were signed, the conflict continues today and its outcome remains unclear. This study focuses on the period that preceded the full-scale military phase of the conflict. Arguably, in order to understand the nature of the crisis it is necessary to highlight the nation-building policies and narratives from which the Euromaidan and Anti-Maidan movements emerged.

HISTORY AS A BATTLEGROUND: NATIONALIZING POLICIES IN UKRAINE

After independence in 1991, Ukrainian nation-building was shaped by several competing discourses, resulting in what could be described as regional ideological eclecticism. The idea of a Ukrainian "ethnic nation" was advocated by the central authorities, a course pursued by the first two presidents, Leonid Kravchuk and Leonid Kuchma. According to it, Ukraine is portrayed as a peaceful "European" country, distinct from Russia given its long tradition of democratic institutions and, as such, "imagined" as more democratic. This discourse can be characterized as "national," focusing on Ukrainian language, traditions, and recognition of a specific historical narrative that emphasizes "otherness" from Russia. However, since independence "national" discourses were challenged by "supra-national" ones propagated by the Communist and various pro-Russian political parties. The Orange Revolution, which took place in 2004-05, was a nationwide protest against the results of the second round of presidential elections, eventually making Viktor Iushchenko the third president of Ukraine. During his presidency, the idea of Ukraine as a largely unitary "ethnic nation" was promoted even more. At that time, national narrative and commemorative policies centred around two historical events: the Holodomor and the struggle for independence waged by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). The Holodomor ("death by hunger") resulted from the mass confiscation of grain in Soviet Ukraine in 1932-33. The estimated number of its victims is more than four million people (Werth 35). A decade later, in 1942, nationalistic organizations consolidated their armed forces in the UPA, which in 1943 began military actions against both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Red Army and partisan guerrilla groups. The historical heritage of the UPA remains controversial, due to a debatable degree of

collaboration with Nazi Germany and accusations of ethnic cleansing of Poles in Western Ukraine.

The presidency and policies of Iushchenko seemed largely unpopular, leading to only 5 per cent support during the first round of presidential elections in January 2010. The next month, his pro-Russian competitor, Viktor Ianukovych, was elected as the fourth president of Ukraine. The nation-building policies implemented by Ianukovych were generally based on non-ethnic "supra-national" and "civic" myths and narratives.

The "supra-national" narratives have their foundations in two types of historiographies: Russophile and "Sovietophile" (Kuzio, "Historiography"). Russophile historiography emerged in Tsarist Russia and was partly reproduced in the USSR in the form of a secular "Sovietophile" variant. Both traditions are based on the idea of Russia as the dominant Eastern Slavic nation, which inherited the power and culture of the ancient state of Kyivan Rus'. Independent Ukraine is portrayed as something "unnatural," while union with Russia is defined as "natural" and "logical" (Kuzio, "Historiography" 110). Moreover, in the Russophile tradition, the very existence of Ukrainians is denied; rather, they are "imagined" as a variety of the Russian people. In contrast to the Russophile tradition, the "Sovietophile" approach partly recognizes Ukrainians as a distinct ethnic group, but also supports the idea that Eastern Slavic nations have to be united, in a similar way to the Soviet times.

What lies between the "national" and "supra-national" Ukrainian identities can be called a "civic" one. While stressing the limitations of "civic" and "ethnic" nationalism differentiation as ideal types, Steven Shulman underlines that the "civic" one is usually understood as referring to a common territory, subjected to a common set of political institutions, laws, and principles with a developed consensus on being a part of the nation (3). Referring to these principles, the Party of Regions advocated the Ukrainian "civic" identity as encompassing not only a Ukrainian ethno-cultural core but also the Soviet past, elevation of Russian to the status of second official language, and vaguely defined "closer ties with Russia" with declared protection of Ukrainian statehood. However, after the rise of Ianukovych to power, the articulation of the "civic" identity coincided with endemic corruption, a crackdown on democratic institutions, and exposure to Russian influence, significantly weakening these discourses. On the other hand, the Euromaidan arguably brought a significant change in that Ukrainian identities became less ambivalent. Taras Kuzio observes that as a result of the Russian aggression in 2014, national belonging has crystallized, with the majority of people choosing Ukraine over a neo-imperial Russian project ("Competing" 164).

This paper is concerned with the processes of such "crystallization" of identities and will rely on the following conceptualizations. First, "national"

identity is manifested by the vision of Ukraine as an "ethnic" nation, with the recognition of the crucial role of the Ukrainian language, national historical narrative, and Ukrainian struggle for independence. Second, it is possible to argue that "supra-national" belonging is based on perceptions of Russia as an "imperial centre" that should unite not only Ukraine but other territories of the former Soviet Union as well. It is understood as an irredentist narrative and mythology that encompasses not only Russia but other nations of the post-Soviet space. Moreover, it is possible to say that symbols of the Tsarist and Soviet epochs, including ideas of Eastern Slavs as "triune" and "fraternal" nations, can be defined as indicators of "supra-national" identities. Importantly, the Russian Orthodox Church also contributes to "supra-national" identifications, as it produces discourses on the *Russkii Mir* (Russian World). Therefore, association with the Russian Orthodox Church also serves as an indicator of the "supra-national" belonging. And third, "civic" identity can be seen as somewhat stretched between the "national" and "supra-national" discourses. Acknowledging the argument by Kuzio, who describes the "civic" Ukrainian identity as a territorial patriotism that dominates in Eastern Ukraine, it is possible to see the recognition of Ukrainian statehood as its key indicator ("Competing" 158). But, turning now to practical matters, how can all these above-described indicators of national belonging be traced on social media? This matter is crucial, and thus requires additional clarification.

NATIONAL IDENTITY AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Most of the contemporary studies on national identities are related to the concept of "imagined community" proposed by Anderson, who argues that every nation is an "imagined community," "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). Nations can be differentiated from other forms of "imagined community" first of all by their size, which is large but always limited, because even the biggest ones have borders that shape them, and "beyond those other nations exist" (7). And second, a nation is necessarily "imagined" as sovereign. Anderson underlines that "imagined communities" are differentiated by various forms of narratives, myths, and stories (6). These are important in their power to explain the relationship between "imagined community" and the personal sense of belonging (Anderson 9-10).
      While discussing the ideas of Anderson, Anthony Smith underlines the importance of "narrators" (politicians and intellectuals) in nation-building processes (353). For the "invention" of a nation, the primary roles are played

by "invented traditions" that are defined by Smith as communitarian, and serve as symbolic markers of the social cohesion of a nation (354-355). He argues that the "narration" of nation involves the construction of associated phenomena such as national symbols, myths, and histories (Smith 357).

These ideas can be summarized by the following points: (1) the nation provides and serves the interests of a given polity and constitutes the sense of belonging and attachment to community through shared consciousness; (2) the sense of national community draws heavily on national symbols and myths as parts of its "narration," where the central role in the creation of a sense of community is played by power elites and intellectuals (Smith 363). Evidently, the myths, symbols, and narratives that shape an "imagined community" can be traced online.

It is acknowledged by Khondker that besides a straightforward facilitation of "networking" processes, new digital media also contribute to maintaining of the sense of belonging, and reinforces national and ethnic identities that are understood as Andersonian "imagined communities" (678). Fox argues that the concept of "imagined community" refers to the attitudes and feelings of attachment to both physical and online community as the "real" one (47). Online content such as visual materials and texts is crucial to community "imagining" and defines the creation and maintenance of a community's identity. Another important factor that affects community "imagining" is the existence/absence of an offline dimension of community. Fox proposes that if a community exists online only, it should be considered "wholly imagined," as it is not based on personal contacts (52). This means that in the case of the Anti-Maidan, analysis of online content allows accessing its communal foundations as "wholly imagined."

Furthermore, online representation of national identity is "crystallized" by the Internet as one that is based on a limited set of symbols and narratives. Therefore, an expression of national belonging by online groups tends to simplify the national identity. Chan, in her study of the ways Chinese national identity is expressed, underlines that such expression is based on the articulation of a precise set of narratives (26). She argues that emphasis on particular aspects of national identity online creates a distinct option for national belonging ("patriotic" or "critical" in her case). This theoretical point can be relevant to the case of the Anti-Maidan, as articulation of its national identity online may refer either to unifying symbols and narratives or differentiating ones. The criteria of the effectiveness of these processes are represented by the development of symbolic and affective commitments towards particular "centres."

Moreover, I contend that national identities can be accessed online via the analysis of perceptions of controversial historical events (such as the Holodomor, Stalinism, World War II, UPA, etc.) and an overarching vision of Ukraine and Russia's past, present, and future. Also, it is important to point

out that identity is not a static phenomenon, but rather one that is constantly changing and being reproduced by evolving discourses and representations. Resting on these conceptualizations, the following methods were used in the study of the Anti-Maidan.

METHODS AND DATA

The purpose of this study is to highlight the symbols, myths, and narratives that the Anti-Maidan relied on as an "imagined community"; how transnationalism is embedded into online social networks; and the main motivations and beliefs of Anti-Maidan supporters. The Anti-Maidan is addressed as an "imagined community," where both "national" and "supra-national" belonging is articulated by employing a particular set of symbols and narratives that was outlined above. As such, the investigation is concerned with the ways that Anti-Maidan and relevant groups are "represented" and "networked" on social media, and how they manifest national identity. The study is done by qualitative content analysis and link analysis techniques. The Anti-Maidan movement was approached as an "imagined community" that combines online and offline dimensions. Investigations into the latter were based on semi-structured interviews with Anti-Maidan activists who were involved in the "Russian Spring" protests. Overall, this combination of techniques is aimed at producing data on the Anti-Maidan as a collective phenomenon (Brubaker and Cooper 7), and also provides a perspective on it, both as an "imagined" entity and a "networked social movement."

A combination of online and offline elements of research allows for increased authenticity of the findings compared to if they had been obtained online or offline only. It is argued that research on identity which includes investigation of the online dimension of social reality should be supported by empirical evidence from offline (Turkle). However, accepting this principle does not mean that online- or offline-only research is less authentic, rather only that it tends to have additional limitations.

As suggested by Hine, the breadth and depth of online research, along with periodicity, constitute the foundation of online research design. While using theoretical sampling, the most numerous Anti-Maidan group on the social media service Vkontakte ("In Contact," or VK) was selected with the maximum depth of investigation ("AntiMaidan"). In other words, I analyzed all its rubrics. This was done over the period from 22 January 2014 to 1 June 2015. All data generated in the group during this period was archived. In the link analysis, relations between the Anti-Maidan and other groups and sites were examined. It allowed for following social networks online and cross-checking the content of the links provided by each pair of nodes (online

groups and/or user profiles). The results of this part of my investigation revealed the connectedness of the online spaces of the Anti-Maidan as a social network (Wellman). Thus, what lay "between" the online groups and individual users may be seen as the product of actual patterns of exchange, distribution of information shaped by the events offline, national contexts, processes, and agents. Thus, link analysis contributed towards mapping the Anti-Maidan online and understanding its transnational features, "centres," and "peripheries."

Content analysis was applied in order to understand expressions of national identity, topics and agendas, and types of information distributed within online groups. The first step of the analysis was to reduce the data related to the identity markers of an "imagined community." The second step was to analyze the context of material generation and who was involved in this process. In the third step the material was formally characterized in relation to the main research questions. These analytical steps were finalized in the form of summarizing the content analysis.

After the online stage of data collection was finished, an offline investigation was carried out in order to deepen our understanding of the Anti-Maidan. Fifteen Anti-Maidan activists and supporters were recruited for interviewing. The interview guide included the following topics: understanding the reasons and nature of the Euromaidan, perceptions on the Anti-Maidan, social media use, and visions of the past, present, and future of Ukraine. Three participants were recruited during the protests in March and April 2014, and a fourth was contacted via an Anti-Maidan group on Vkontakte and later interviewed; the rest were found by employing a "snowball" sampling technique, with existing informants providing new contacts to a researcher. This was done in line with the suggestion that this sampling technique may be applied to people who have specific social experience and knowledge (Flick 165). In my study, this refers to participation in Anti-Maidan protests. In sum, the investigation is based primarily on a combination of theoretical and "snowball" sampling techniques.

Analysis of the interviews was completed on the basis of thematic coding, following these steps: "notice relevant phenomenon"; "collect examples of that phenomenon"; and "analyze that phenomenon in order to find commonalities, differences, patterns and structures" (Flick 323-324). The combination of online and offline empirical evidence allowed crosschecks between them and, as such, a deeper understanding of the Anti-Maidan–making processes within both online and offline dimensions of social reality. Having explained the data collection and analysis procedures, I now turn to the findings of this study.

The "Anti-Maidan" online group was created on 24 November 2013—just two days after the first Euromaidan protest took place in Kyiv. Its initial agenda centred on a discussion of Ukraine's European prospects. The administrators of the group posted various materials and links supporting the view that the Association Agreement with the EU would have a devastating impact on Ukraine's economy. The examples of Greece and Bulgaria were often used in order to demonstrate the risks. At the same time, the pro-European protests were described as an organized Western conspiracy aimed at separating Ukraine from Russia. The protesters themselves were portrayed as being paid for their participation, while the Berkut riot police (despite their excessive brutality towards protesters) were represented as the guardians of Ukraine, protecting it from "far-right extremists." Active discussions between the supporters of integration of Ukraine with the EU or with Russia constituted the majority of online contents.

The supporters of European integration had built their arguments upon a general democratization discourse, including the necessity to fight the corrupt regime of Ianukovych. In contrast, advocates of integration with Russia relied on several "supra-national" myths. First, that Ukraine cannot be separated from the other "fraternal peoples," Russia and Belarus, and that the European integration of Ukraine would mean its occupation by the EU. Here, essentialist views that "our people" cannot live the same way as Europeans were dominant.

Second, a distinct line of arguments focused on economic issues. Numerous contributors argued that the economies of Russia and Ukraine were very closely related due to the legacy of Soviet industrialization, and that Ukraine's economic prosperity depended on joining the Eurasian Customs Union (established by Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan in 2009). Third, homophobic propaganda constituted a large portion of both administrator- and user-generated content. Due to the protection of sexual minorities' rights in the EU, Anti-Maidan supporters habitually called it *Heiropa* ("Gayrope") or *Ievrosodom* ("Euro-Sodom"). Such online sentiments echoed Russian anti-gay propaganda, which aims to represent Europe (and the West in general) as decadent, whereas Russia is "imagined" as the stronghold of traditional values. For instance, one of the posts argued that incest is the norm in Europe ("Intsest").

The supporters of the Anti-Maidan cheered anti-protest laws that were voted in by the Ukrainian parliament, under questionable procedure, on 16 January 2014. With the escalation of violence and the first fatalities reported in Kyiv, many participants of online discussions called for an even stronger crackdown on the Euromaidan. The number of reposts of Russian news also

significantly increased in this period. The highest number of reposts in the Anti-Maidan group was from anti-Western and anti-American groups like "Informatsionnoe vzaimodeistvie" (Informational Interaction) and "SShA—sponsor mirovogo terrora" (USA Is a Sponsor of World Terrorism). Also, before the fall of the Ianukovych regime there were 117 reposts from a Russian patriotic group called "ETU STRANU NE POBEDIT'! Russkie ne sdaiutsia!" (THIS COUNTRY CANNOT BE DEFEATED! Russians Never Surrender).

But the main opposition to the Euromaidan derived from memory politics. The Euromaidan protesters were maligned as followers of Stepan Bandera—war-time leader of a Ukrainian nationalist organization—and labelled as "fascists." This comment by Aleksandr S. is very typical here, and thousands of similar ones were posted in the group:

> [translated from Russian] I would never reply to the slogan *Slava Ukraini!* ("Glory to Ukraine!") For me, heroes are my parents and grandparents, who freed my fatherland from the fascist occupation and Bandera's police. You should not say that only alcoholics and the homeless support the legitimate authorities; the east [of Ukraine] works hard; we do not have Maidans here. The Maidan does not reflect the views of the majority of the country. The Maidan is a staged and paid show. This is an attempt at an unconstitutional coup. Shame on these [so-called] heroes! (Aleksandr, Anti-Maidan VK group, 22 Jan. 2014)

Active debates on the future of Ukraine continued until the fall of the Ianukovych regime, which was portrayed by the Anti-Maidan group administrators and ordinary contributors as the end of Ukrainian nationhood. "Ukraine is no more [translated from Russian]" was the main motto of Anti-Maidan supporters; alternatively, Ukraine's sovereignty was constantly questioned, and post-Maidan Ukraine was represented as a U.S. colony.

The beginning of the annexation of Crimea was cheered by the group administrators. Notably, though, after the "Russian Spring" began on 22 February, the option to comment on the posts made by administrators was disabled, and the main discussions of the Anti-Maidan took place in the form of comments to pictures uploaded by users. This user-generated content generally portrayed the new Ukrainian government as the "Kyiv Nazi junta" and "Banderites." During March there was a dramatic surge in group membership; while on 23 February 2014 the membership was less than six thousand (5,785), by 1 April it increased nearly sixty-fold, to 338,543 members. More than a half of them stated their country of origin as "Russia." Therefore, it is possible to argue that the Anti-Maidan was transformed from a group supporting the Ianukovych regime to a transnational counter-movement opposing the Euromaidan, Ukraine's European aspirations, and

the West.

From February to May 2014 the administrators of the group posted news on the developments of the "Russian Spring" across Ukrainian cities. Calls to come to pro-Russian demonstrations were posted daily. These calls featured "imaginings" of the new Ukrainian government as the "Nazis who once again came to conquer Ukraine," and who must be repelled by any means. One such call to a demonstration in Kharkiv read [translated from Russian]: "March of the 'Russian Spring': as a response to the 'Euromaidan winter' and the 'Arab spring'—both funded by the West. Let's show the strength of the Russian spirit! Come and protect the rights of the Russian people!" (Anti-Maidan VK group, 27 Feb. 2015). Another call contains a peculiar explanation of "Russianness":

> [translated from Russian] Russian is not a nationality, Russian is a concept, a worldview . . . . Internationally, "Russian" means Ukrainian, Tatar, Belarusian, and many other people. On the territory of Ukraine emerged and existed a Great Russian state—Kyivan Rus. We are the descendants of Kyivan Rus and we have the right to be called "Russians." Nowadays we are Ukrainians as well, but we are Russian Ukrainians! Today, 1 March 2014, we get up from our knees in order to show the world what our Russian Spring means. Publish all news on the revival of the Russian people with hashtag #RUVESNA so everyone can follow it on Vkontakte. (Anti-Maidan VK group, 1 Mar. 2014)

On 16 March the "Manifesto of a Citizen of Kharkiv" was published in the group and immediately disseminated across all online communities related to the Anti-Maidan ("Manifest"). Several parts of this manifesto clearly articulate "imaginings" that Ukrainian identity can be seen only as a part of the Russian one:

> [translated from Russian] We were forced to deny our great deeds and the achievements of our great nation, Our Great Nation. So our heroes [imposed by the present government] are those whom our grandfathers fought during the Great Patriotic War. How could it happen that we are now destroying monuments of our ancestors, our fathers and grandfathers? . . . Why are we trying to whitewash the traitors and make heroes out of them? . . . We have believed in false idols and heroes. They are small and miserable in comparison to those we had just yesterday. Is it even possible to compare Bandera and Gagarin? It is not important who our ancestors were: Ukrainians, Tatars, Jews, Buryats, or Uzbeks. It is not important what our religion is: Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Islam, or Judaism. The most important thing is that we are Russians! And we belong to a great nation and great country.
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> I am a true patriot of Ukraine and now the destiny of my nation and my Ukraine is at stake. . . . I am Ukrainian, but more than this, I am Russian. ("Manifest")

This manifesto went viral and was even read on Russian state TV by the famous movie director Nikita Mikhalkov several days after its publication. Essentially, with the beginning of the "Russian Spring," the debates on Ukraine's future stopped. Instead, the main discourse centred on the idea that Ukraine should be re-made in terms of political organization or dismantled as a state, with its southern and eastern regions becoming incorporated into Russia. These regions were referred to as *Novorossiia* (New Russia). After the tragedy in Odesa on 2 May, the online discussions between those supporting the separatists and those holding pro-Ukraine views halted almost completely. Anti-Maidan supporters described the tragedy as a purposeful killing of innocent people or a "new Khatyn."[2] The group administrators were constantly banning those expressing support for Ukraine; thus, by the end of the research period on 1 June 2015, the Anti-Maidan represented a homogenous online space with predominantly like-minded contributors expressing similar views. The rare discussions between supporters of the opposing sides were filled with angry rants and hate speech.

So what were the key symbols and narratives that defined the boundaries of the Anti-Maidan online? It is evident that within the Anti-Maidan online spaces, Ukrainian national symbols (such as its flag or coat of arms) were used with positive connotations only before the fall of the Ianukovych regime. After this, various such visual symbols were mostly denigrated. A big trend consisted of various maps of how Ukraine should be divided, e.g., which of its territories are "historically" Russian and which are not. In these maps, the regions of western Ukraine were ubiquitously presented as "non-Russian" or even "Fascist" territories. These maps drew "imagined" borders to which Russia was to expand.

The main body of visual materials in the Anti-Maidan VK group referred to either Russia or the USSR. On those occasions when national belonging was articulated by such materials, they usually focused on glorifying the Soviet epoch. The neo-Soviet myth of the "Great Patriotic War" constituted the core of the Anti-Maidan "imaginings." The most important symbols that framed the "imagined community" were the victory over fascism, the St. George ribbon as its symbol, and Joseph Stalin as its architect. The latter was described as a great leader, and some online group members had his portrait as a profile picture. Moreover, images of Stalin were the most common after images of Vladimir Putin. However, the majority of the "Sovietophile" imagery was not represented by the original Soviet symbols, but rather by their re-configured and "re-invented" versions (like the portrayals of Putin

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[2] Khatyn is a village in Minsk district, Belarus, where Nazis burned all the inhabitants in a barn in 1943.

on Soviet-like posters) that were aimed at mobilizing opposition to the new pro-European government and Euromaidan supporters. The online group posted numerous calls "not to betray the memory of our grandfathers" and "to repel the Nazis once again."

The outcome of this analysis points out the importance of "supra-national" symbols for the construction of the "imagined" boundaries of the Anti-Maidan. The popularity of the Soviet symbols can be explained by the fact that they still belong to "communicative memory" for the Anti-Maidan supporters, and their articulation served as the main mobilizing frame (Assmann). It must be underlined that the Russian language also served as one of the primary identity markers, with the adjectives "Russian" and "Russian-speaking" used interchangeably by Anti-Maidan supporters (see footnote 1). The group was actively used by people from Russia for their expression of support for the pro-Russian demonstrations in Ukraine. On 7 April, when assaults on government buildings were taking place in Kharkiv, Luhansk, and Donetsk, hundreds of posts were made by the group administrators. These read as follows: "Hold on, brothers! [Name of a Russian city or town] is with you!" These posts were aimed at cheering up the protesters and expressing solidarity. Individual contributors from Russia also frequently used familial ties as their justification for following and commenting on the events in Ukraine. A comment by Oleg F. from Saint Petersburg is typical here:

> [translated from Russian] My grandmother is from Ukraine and I always thought of Ukraine as my country. I've never been there, but I cannot stay impartial to the fact that the Nazi junta has swept to power over there. Go and protest, brothers and sisters! We'll support you by any means. I hope that our government will be wise enough to send "polite people" [Russian soldiers without insignia that operated in Crimea] to Eastern Ukraine as soon as possible. (Anti-Madan VK group, 07 Apr. 2014)

The portrayal of the Other within the Anti-Maidan group focused on Western Ukraine and the global West. The former was clearly ruled out as part of the "imagined community" adhered to by both group administrators and contributors. In contrast, south-eastern regions were constantly portrayed as being part of it.

While "Sovietophile" national symbols dominated within the Anti-Maidan online spaces, they were not exclusive. On several occasions, Russophile symbols were also used. These referred to the Russian imperial epoch, the idea of the *Russkii Mir* based on Russian Orthodoxy, articulation of Slavic identity, and the ideas of a "triune nation" of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. A growing number of entries on "Slavic unity" emerged after the military group of Strelkov-Girkin occupied the town of Sloviansk. Symbolic support expressed for the separatists in Sloviansk has "sacralized"

the town as a stronghold of the "true Slavic people" who fight the "Nazi hordes." At this time, online posts by the Anti-Maidan dovetailed/converged closely with TV coverage of the events in Sloviansk by the Russian media.

Overall, both "Sovietophile" and Russophile narratives and "imaginings" overlapped with each other and were aimed at blurring the borders, both real and symbolic, between Ukraine and Russia. The online entries and visual materials of the Anti-Maidan group represented a "Russian territory" that was far beyond the geographical borders of the Russian Federation. Therefore, Anti-Maidan supporters tend to "imagine" Russia and Ukraine, along with other post-Soviet countries as one community, thus performing online irredentism. This is achieved mainly by promoting a "supra-national" identity online. Here, the identity construction processes reflect an eclectic unification of a number of elements that in actuality seem to contradict each other. For instance, the glorification of Stalin can hardly be consistent with Orthodoxy, but both played an important role in the articulation of the group identity. But what is behind these eclectic representations of collective identity of the Anti-Maidan online?

The interviews with Anti-Maidan activists reveal several important points. First, there is a strong opposition to the "national" project and memory politics in Ukraine. All the participants refused to accept any recognition of the UPA or the Holodomor, and argued that Soviet heritage must be preserved. Second, while most of them shared the "Sovietophile" symbolism of the Anti-Maidan, their participation in demonstrations generated negative experiences, so there were barriers to developing a sense of belonging to the movement. Third, the interviews uncover a deep disbelief in democratic values and principles. Also, distrust in public institutions can be traced in all the interviews. These findings can be illustrated with the following examples.

Outrage at the attempt by the Euromaidan activists to topple the Lenin monument in Kharkiv motivated seven participants to join the Anti-Maidan. Ivan,[3] an unemployed 33-year-old, gave the following explanation:

> [translation from Russian] This was a beautiful and nice monument and this is our HISTORY! It showed who Lenin is and how everything was before. Why did they want to ruin it? Why does a western Bandera come to my city to ruin it? Did I go there [to western Ukraine] to topple a monument of Bandera? But I am against him, as he is a Nazi and fascist. But I did not go there, but they came here and finally ruined our monument. . . . I am not a big fan of Lenin,

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[3] Following ethical considerations, the participants' real names are replaced here with pseudonyms. As the original names were given in Russian, the pseudonyms are also in Russian, not Ukrainian.

but we have to protect our values . . . such as friendship and a NORMAL family. (Ivan, 12 Oct. 2014)

Several participants underlined that they do not share Communist ideas, yet they expressed their adoration of Stalin. They described him as a great leader, who created a great country that was feared and respected. But such adoration is somewhat ambivalent: "Yes, Stalin is the greatest leader in human history. It is a pity that we do not have such a leader now . . . . What would I do if someone like Stalin becomes a ruler of Ukraine? I would leave the country immediately" (Evgenii, 37, labourer, 10 July 2014). Such sentiments illustrate a peculiar adoration of Stalinism, "from a safe distance." Moreover, the participants were well-prepared to challenge the "national" Ukrainian narrative. Oleg, a 50-year old businessman, explains his views on Stepan Bandera: "Of course, he is a Nazi. It is ridiculous that he has so many followers in contemporary Ukraine. Do you know what his nickname was? *Baba*! It is just because they practiced male rape in the UPA. Basically, all of them were gay" (Oleg, 14 Dec. 2014). Igor', a 25-year-old labourer and a former member of the "Sut' Vremeni" (Essence of Time)[4] organization's Kharkiv branch, provides his view on the reasons for the Holodomor:

> [translation from Russian] The myth of the Holodomor is made by anti-Russian propagandists. Of course, the famine took place, but the reasons for it were different from those claimed by the Ukrainians. In the 1930s there was a "gold embargo"—Western countries were not buying our gold, of which we had plenty. Instead, they supplied us with industrial machinery in exchange for grain. So we had to sell our grain in order to industrialize our country. We had no choice, so it is the West that is to blame for the famine. (Igor', 12 Sept. 2014)

The idea of selling grain at the cost of millions of lives does not seem to be bizarre to Igor'. However, he struggled to name the countries that imposed this "gold embargo," the type of machinery that was imported, or the enterprises that benefitted from such an "exchange." Furthermore, most participants argued that subscribing to pro-Russian groups on VK allowed them to learn a lot about "real history."

While some participants were denying the very existence of the Ukrainian nation and were portraying it as an "artificial invention" (in contrast to the "natural" Russian one), there is "civic" belonging that can be traced in some interviews: "Actually, I do not wholly support the idea that Ukraine should join Russia. Why do we necessarily have to join anything? I would prefer to live in a strong, prosperous, and independent Ukraine. Of

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[4] A neo-Stalinist and pro-Kremlin Russian organization chaired by Sergei Kurginian. The English name they use is not an accurate translation.

course, it should be without Bandera and gays" (Ol'ga, 25, manager, 21 Dec. 2014). For another participant, Aleksei, 31, the victory of the Euromaidan signified his break-up with Ukraine: "I considered myself to be a Russian Ukrainian, but now I want to call myself only Russian, just because there is no Ukraine anymore. Ukraine has disgraced itself. I am against everything that is related to the Maidan" (Aleksei, 28 Oct. 2014). Furthermore, Ivan even admits that certain goals of the Euromaidan, such as the rule of law and removal of oligarchs from power were acceptable, but according to him, the protests were overtaken by "Nazis."

Social media was instrumental for interview participants to learn about the ongoing events, and to join them. Only three of them were not members of the Anti-Maidan group online. However, while the participants tended to repeat the narratives that were posted online, their actual experiences of taking part in the demonstrations were quite negative. Valerii, 36, recalls how he and his friends joined the protest on 7 April 2014:

> [translated from Russian] I and my friends learned about the protest from Vkontakte. We came to the square [Freedom Square in Kharkiv] . . . . The people there were paid. They denied this, but I heard a conversation that someone was paid 600 hryvnas for the attack on the oblast administration . . . . There were a lot of not very nice people . . . how would I call them? [pause] *Gopniki* [thugs]. Some of them were intoxicated and aggressive. They even tried to force me and my friends out of the administration building. So we had to resist . . . . But I met many nice people as well. (Valerii, 08 Aug. 2014).

Other participants pointed out that the level of violence during the demonstrations and attacks on Euromaidan supporters were excessive. For four participants, this was the main reason why they stopped attending the protests. The rest stated that the danger of being arrested or being killed by "far-right extremists" was the most important factor in their decision to withdraw from protesting.

All the participants demonstrated a deep disbelief in Western democracy. Also they expressed the idea that corruption is universal, and that Russia is no more corrupt than any other Western country. In such sentiments the scale of corruption is never addressed. Some even tended to explain that corruption is a part of "our traditions," so Ukrainians cannot live the same way as Europeans do. They portrayed social movements as "masses" that should be led by a charismatic leader. Thus, the absence of such a leader in Kharkiv's Anti-Maidan was blamed for its ultimate failure to join the *Novorossiia* project.

So, how do these findings resonate with ideas about "imagined community" and "networked social movements?"

Discussion

The Anti-Maidan can be defined as a counter-movement that is focused on deconstruction of the Ukrainian "national" project and belonging. Its collective identity is a fragmented swirl of "re-imagined" and "re-invented" Soviet and pre-Soviet mythology and symbolism. While questioning Ukraine's sovereignty and boundaries, the Anti-Maidan represents this country as either inseparable (and, as such, not sovereign) from Russia or as a non-existent artificial construct. This movement executes an irredentist strategy, as its concerns go beyond the territory of Russia and encompass other post-Soviet countries, including most of Ukraine's territory. Moreover, within its online spaces one is hard-pressed to separate the "Sovietophile" from the Russophile symbols and narratives; they are assembled, re-presented, and constructed online in a rather unsystematic and ambivalent way.

Marlene Laruelle differentiates three ideological paradigms behind the pro-Russian insurgency in the Donbas and the *Novorossiia* project: these are "red" (Soviet), "white" (Orthodox), and "brown" (Fascist) (59). She emphasizes the importance of the "red" ideas of Aleksandr Dugin and Aleksandr Prokhanov for *Novorossiia* and for the "Russian Spring." However, Dugin's ideology of "Eurasianism" can hardly be called "red," as it never promotes Communism. And it is also difficult to trace their ideas in the Anti-Maidan group: except for two reposts of Dugin's articles within the group, no other direct references were found. Instead, the "imagined community" of the Anti-Maidan relied on the ideas of such "narrators" as Nikolai Starikov, Evgenii Fedorov, and Sergei Kurginian. These "narrators" produce a discourse that builds upon simplified and vulgarized historical narratives and conspiracy theories, portraying the West as an eternal threat to Russia. The Euromaidan is represented by these "narrators" not as a popular demonstration but as a well-prepared plot against Russia. These ideas seem to resonate with the general beliefs of Anti-Maidan members, and similar narratives were reproduced by the interviewees.

Remarkably, while relying on Soviet symbolism, the Anti-Maidan clearly rules out Communist ideology. With a few exceptions, calls to build a communist society were absent. Also, the groups that are linked to the Anti-Maidan cannot be called "red." The radical left group "Borot'ba," while important in the pro-Russian uprising in Kharkiv, was only mentioned two times by the group administrators, and there are no direct links to its website.

The articulation of national belonging of the Anti-Maidan both online and offline can be characterized as a "resistance identity" that emerged as a response to the failure of the pro-Russian nation-building project by the Ianukovych regime, and the earlier collapse of the USSR (Castells, *The Power*

of Identity). The Anti-Maidan clearly rejects Ukrainian "national" mythology and symbols that serve as key identity markers of the Other. Some traits of a "civic" identity can be found before the fall of the regime, but after, Ukrainian nationhood is actively denied. Anti-Maidan online spaces are fuelled by outrage at the "national" Ukrainian symbols and narratives, whereas "hope" centres on the re-creation of a new version of the USSR or the Russian Empire. Such "hope" can be seen in the advocacy of non-progressive changes, with the ideals of modernization and democratization replaced with legitimization of either totalitarianism or absolute monarchy.

Social media allowed the Anti-Maidan to create a transnational space where not only citizens of Ukraine but those of Russia could co-produce discourses and reflect upon the ongoing events. These emergent transnational networks of the Anti-Maidan contributed to the reinforcement of a "supra-national" identity in Ukraine and, as such, illustrated that "the space-compressing power of modern electronics allows persons who have command of these resources to engage in transnational activities without the need for face-to-face contact" (Portes 223).

In its heavy reliance on "Sovietophile" "imaginings," the Anti-Maidan demonstrates the traits of "cultural trauma." Peter Sztompka points out that "cultural trauma" results from dramatic events such as war, collapse of an empire, acts of terror, etc. (452). As did Vladimir Putin, the collapse of the Soviet Union is "imagined" by the Anti-Maidan as a catastrophe, and this paper highlights that the ideas of non-progressive changes are widely shared by Anti-Maidan supporters. This trait "is paralyzing rather than enabling agency" (Sztompka 450). The idea that a strong leader is needed to achieve success, which is well-reflected in the interviews, articulates a general disbelief in democratic principles, civil society, and grassroots initiatives. Also, the interviews reveal that the Anti-Maidan failed to create any significant emotional attachment among its supporters offline. Such attachment is usually seen as a crucial factor for the overall success of a social movement (Della Porta and Diani 116). Finally, the escalation of violence in Eastern Ukraine polarized and radicalized the Anti-Maidan audiences making dialogue between people holding different views impossible. As such, it is evident that with the beginning of the full-scale war, the Anti-Maidan stopped its existence as a conventional social movement. Such a transformation is highlighted by Castells, who points out that armed conflicts kill not only people but also social movements (*Networks* 97).

CONCLUSIONS

The development of the Anti-Maidan group manifested contradictory, ambivalent, and dynamic myth-making processes. These "re-invented" and

"re-imagined" myths initially boosted the idea of integration of Ukraine with Russia and Belarus, but later switched to undermining the sense of national belonging to Ukraine. The Anti-Maidan constructed and performed online a "supra-national" identity that is based on the eclectic usage of "Sovietophile" and Russophile symbols, myths, and narratives; the latter rely on simplified visions of history and conspiracy theories. Arguably, the emergence of the Anti-Maidan is driven both by the collapse of the pro-Russian regime in Ukraine and the inability of Russian Federation elites to formulate a nation-building project in non-imperial and non-irredentist terms.

This paper has attempted to show how an "imagined community" as well as social media converged in a "networked social movement." While social media is usually portrayed as an ultimate tool of democratization, this study provides evidence-based support of Evgeny Morozov's argument that new media may also foster authoritarianism (318). Despite the inconsistency and, at times, absurdity of the Anti-Maidan's "imaginings" that were analyzed above, it was capable of mobilizing hundreds of thousands of people, and ultimately played a key role in igniting an armed conflict in Ukraine.

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