

The Performative Power of Ambiguity of Myth: the Role of Ideology in Donbas War

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Introduction

While conducting interviews with anti-Kiev combatants and citizens of Donbas in 2016-2017, both in Moscow and on the site of the conflict – on the territories of unrecognized people’s republics, I was fascinated by narrative heterogeneity of their stories. They were emotionally intense and filled with personal details and revealing facts, and at the same time driven by some commonplace cliché – about life in Soviet Union and “ice-cream for a penny”, “a battle against fascists” and a repetition of the Great Patriotic War, “the West” wanting to destroy Russia, “Banderite threat”, and Novorossiia. Those clichés seemed unattainable apart from personal experiences of the war. Both locals who considered themselves as apolitical people, and Russian nationalists and left-wing activists personally devoted to the values of their movements and groups, - all of them, by one way or another, went back, again and again, to the same words and phrases which seemed artificial and alien to their experience.

The literature dedicated to war conflicts after the World war II is contradictory about the role of ideology. Following the idea that starting from the middle of 20th century people don’t fight for the sake of ideas any more, some scholars claim that war participants address ideology mostly instrumentally: to provide ex-post justifications to their actions (e.g. Kalyvas 2004) or to capture support and resources from different audiences (Collier & Hoeffler, 2001). Others refer to ideological affinity as a motive for joining war (Bosi and Porta 2012, Viterna 2006) or as a factor which influences behavior of combatants and armed groups: ideology can define objectives and program of action for armed groups (Sanin and Wood 2014, Ugarriza 2009), impose in-group discipline (Sanin and Wood 2014), shape relationships within a group and between members of a group and outsiders (Ugarriza and Craig 2013, Ugarriza and Weintraub 2015), regulate the use of violence toward civilian population (Ugarriza and Weintraub 2015). Group leaders can use ideology in order to socialize and discipline insurgents (Sanin and Wood 2014). However, it is not clear what exactly ideology is – a solid doctrine, like communism or Islamism, or everyday beliefs and practices (Parkinson 2020), how does it coexist with individual motives and values and what make it work since many people can be committed to particular beliefs but not all of them join a fight (Maynard 2019).

In light of those discussions the case of Donbas war seems of particular interest. Rare studies dedicated to the role of ideology in the conflict emphasize an inconsistency of views of local combatants (Kudelia 2019, Kudelia and Zyl 2019, Mikheieva 2018). Describing local participants of the rallies who later joined armed groups, Sergey Kudelia emphasizes, that

they “lacked a coherent ideology that could give a widely shared meaning to a CA [collective action – N. S.]” and “rather relied on a set of disparate ideational frames rejecting the legitimacy of the new Ukrainian government, characterizing power transfer in Kyiv as a ‘neo-Nazi coup’, amplifying threats of nationalist violence against locals and calling for integration with Russia” (Kudelia 2019, p. 286). In other article he and Zhyl claim that it was local identity what played a role of ideology for the movement (Kudelia&Zhyl 2019). At the same time, combatants from Russia who joined the movement are usually described as being ideologically oriented (Mitrokhin 2015), but diverse: nationalists, leftists, Stalinists, and Cossacks in peaceful realities of Russian everyday life rarely had much in common except mutual distrust and disgust. Furthermore, if we address the higher level – the role of Russian state and “ideological entrepreneurs” who also took an active part in making sense of the conflict – we won’t see a solid picture as well: while Russian propaganda aimed at addressing popular myths to frame ongoing events, those who are believed to be responsible for orchestrating the whole conflict – for example, Vladislav Surkov – easily switched from one framing to another in their attempt to respond changing stakes and situation (Hasaka 2019). Even the very “myth of Novorossiya” produced by Russian nationalist circles to legitimize Russian involvement was internally inconsistent, both from the point of view of social networks involved in its’ making and its’ content represented through three different narratives (Laruelle 2015, 2019a).

Thus, it seems that ideology constitutes an important dimension of the Donbas war but it is not clear what we call ideology here and what role it plays. And although the level of production – Novorossiya myth and narratives of “ideological entrepreneurs”, propaganda strategies and intentions of political technologists – are more or less studied, the impact of their narratives, i.e. the role of ideology in life of low-rank combatants and war participants, remains a mystery. Slavoj Zizek call an everyday existence of ideology ‘spontaneous’ distinguishing it both from a doctrine, i.e. ideology as a coherent set of ideas, and its material embodiment in social institutions, rituals and practices (Zizek 1994). In this paper I will address “spontaneous” ideology of rank-and-file combatants fighting on anti-Kiev side through analysis of the ways they try to make sense of war and their participation in it. Basing on unique empirical dataset of interviews with anti-Kiev insurgents from Donbas, non-Donbas Ukraine territories and from Russia, collected in 2016 and 2017 I will show that both levels of ideological existence – doctrine and spontaneous ideology – are united through “empty signifiers”: Novorossiya, Great Patriotic War, and Russian World are the most significant ones. Those empty signifiers constitute a common vocabulary, which provides narratives used by different groups of combatants, with “common words”, filled with different meaning depending on social characteristics and trajectory of mobilization of the combatants.

I start with drafting two different approaches to “spontaneous” ideology – narrative and semiotic. Then I propose my conceptualization ideology for the Donbas conflict. This conceptualization unites doctrinal and spontaneous level through the notion of empty signifier. Then I will describe my methodology and, basing on already existent literature, the “doctrinal” level. After that I will show, how different narratives fill the empty signifiers which create the base for the doctrine with new and different from each other meaning. I will reconstruct three narratives which belong to different groups of combatants to show, that while their motivations, logic of mobilizations and stories are different, they all use the same common words which they invest with different meaning. I will conclude with discussion of possible reasons explaining why in case of Donbas war ideology took this particular form.

Narrative approach to spontaneous ideology: ideology as a story

In social sciences the very idea that ideology disappeared from our life altogether with breakdown of big political projects – and utopias – of 20th century became a common place in last 20 years. At the same time, “rational choice” approach exhausted itself in many fields and different “turns” – narrative, cultural, emotional, etc. – brought back the idea of the importance of perception for understanding how individuals act in particular social circumstances (Smith 1995). As a result, the notion of ‘ideology’ in its old, Marxist sense, was either replaced with other concepts or changed its meaning. New iterations of ideology in different theories and sub-disciplines, which address the role of belief for political mobilization and political behavior – frames in social movement studies, performance and representations in cultural sociology, still ideology in war studies, but in narrower and more instrumental sense – however, have several things in common: they analyze spontaneous ideology as if it was a story, attributing its performative power – its persuasiveness and ability to mobilize for action – to its narrative characteristics. In the following I will show how narrative approach to ideology manifest itself in social movement, war, nationalism and political culture studies.

In narrative approach mobilization narratives whatever it is frames, representations, or performances, are more narrow and situational comparing to classical notion of ideology understood as an overarching system of meanings¹. “Big ideologies” such as communism, islamism, liberalism, or “myth-symbol complex” (Kaufman 2011), or “cultures” which includes rituals, myths, binary codes, etc. (Alexander) – function as both a constraint and resource, or a tool-kit (Snow & Benford 2000, Oliver & Jonston 2000, Snow 2007, Alexander 2002) in relation to any particular narrative aimed at persuasion or mobilization. By “reducing” ideology to its more concrete and situational embodiments, narrative approach resolves many issues at once, like why we believe and what “to believe” means. Narratives have certain autonomy from social structures and forces behind them (Alexander 2011, Jonston 2002²), thus they don’t “hide” any “real” social interests. People believe in them and act according to them when they properly communicate with symbolic systems, on the one side, and their publics – on the other.

Performative power of mobilization narratives thus comes from an extension that expands from script and actor to audience (Alexander 2004), or from bridging and alignment (Snow & Benford 2000). Successful mobilization narrative should effectively address already existed symbolic systems to create a trustworthy story which will be relevant to its audiences. Creative borrowing, skilful performance, and reflective communication are in constant interaction and not separable from each other: indeed, cultural text makes an action “meaningful” (Alexander 2011: 478), but even when “right” elements are borrowed, they can not “speak for themselves”. Nationalist mobilizational narratives often refers to already existed cultural memories beliefs and myths to re-articulate their meaning in new social circumstances. War-lords can appeal to values embedded in particular belief systems – religious or ideological, to support their claims and to make insurgency more meaningful (Tismaneanu 1998, Elsenhans

¹ For example, explaining the difference between ideology and frames, Snow and Benford emphasize that if the first refers to “fairly pervasive and integrated set of beliefs and values that have considerable staying power”, collective action frames function, in contrast, as innovative amplifications and extensions of, or antidotes to, existing ideologies or components of them” (Benford and Snow 2000: 613).

² Jonston distinguishes frame analysis from discourse analysis, which includes in analysis of a narrative contextual factors residing in the social conditions of textual production (Jonston 2002, 68).

2001) but their appeals should be geographically and historically relevant to the experience of particular people they aim to mobilize (Gutiérrez Sanin and Wood 2014).

Whatever we talk about social movements, wars, nationalism, or politic debates, mobilization narratives are considered as something which make individuals act: to support (a candidate, a claim), to join (armed groups, rallies), to follow. It is possible also because narrative as stories are organized in a particular way: they “allocate causal responsibility for action, define actors and give them motivation, indicate the trajectory of past episodes and predict consequences of future choices, suggest courses of action, confer and withdraw legitimacy, and provide social approval by aligning events with normative cultural codes” (Smith 1995, 18). They identify problems, define course of action and “call to arms” (Snow and Benford 2000). They can mobilize through particular temporal organization of a narrative, like nationalist myths, which are based on juxtaposition of glorious past and degraded present (Bell 2003, Levinger and Lytle 2001), or a genre. Smith (1995) demonstrates that ways in which constituencies and players make sense of wars and the situations that might lead to them create foundations for their involvement: *apocalyptic* mode of narration where good confronting evil “enables the cultural constraints on violence to be overcome and for support to eventuate for the sacrifice of priceless human lives” (p. 26) and thus make violent involvement in a conflict justifiable and inevitable.

All those approaches are based on the idea, that we live and act within different stories or social narratives, rarely of our own making, which guide our actions and provide our experiences with meaning (Sommers 1994: 614). Those stories can not be reduced to any social “basis”: they have their own logic and coercive force, or performative power, in themselves. The latter originates from different sources: from a background culture, which both provides actors with a “toolkit” and defines potential effectiveness of narratives and genres; from a story itself, i.e. how masterfully it address the “toolkit”, its consistency, heroes, narrative structure, and temporality; and from the performance – the ability of those who perform a story whatever it is warlords, social movement leaders, medias, or politicians – to connect their claims with aspirations, views and identities of a public and respond to its critique. If we talk about ideology in *sensu stricto*, meaning a coherent set of beliefs, we expect it to be a narrative – both at the level of doctrine and at its spontaneous implementation in daily life: if those who produces a narrative can make it coherent and speak with the public, the public will believe in it, and the narrative will become their own story within which they live and according to which they act.

Semiotic approach to ideology: common words and empty signifiers

However, narrative is not the only one form of existence of ideology. Roland Barthes claimed that ideology is a metalanguage meaning that it builds on already existed linguistic systems, drying out their initial signifiers and using what is left as an empty container which it fills with a new meaning, optional and vague (Barthes 1987). Those structural, not narrative, characteristics provide ideology with performative power coming from its ability to create those empty, or floating, signifiers.

Roland Barthes (1987) proposed the notion of myth to address metalanguage of ideology. Each essay in his “Mythologies” is dedicated to some “myth of French daily life” (10). It can be an event, like Tour de France, an article from a popular magazine, a film, an advertisement – everything which manifests bourgeois values and beliefs without explicitly representing them. For example, a photography of Andre Gide reading Bossuet while going down the Congo in Le

Figaro or a reportage about cruise of Royal family state for the belief in natural difference between “ordinary” (popular readers) and “extraordinary” (nobles or artists) people, and a photo of saluting black soldier on the cover of Paris-Match – for the French imperialism. In myth, Barthes claims, the relation between initial signifier (say, a photo of a saluting black soldier) and signified (a black soldier himself, whose image we see on the photo) is broken. Myth “frees” signifier from signified and transforms it into a form, “empty but present”, and replaces initial signified by a new, arbitrary meaning, “absent but full” (122). The new meaning is present as something vague, but evident: it is a sort of knowledge which does not need to be articulated in order to be shared and believed. Myth neither hides nor symbolizes anything, it naturalizes: when we look at the photo on the cover of Paris Match we do not “see” “French imperialism” and thus we are not able to question it – it is simply there, and we take it for granted, as a matter of fact.

Ernesto Laclau (2005) describes a similar phenomenon but exploring it as political logic of populism. He argues, that populist movement starts with disconnected smaller movements. The only thing they have in common is the fact that their claims were not satisfied – and it became a basis for constitution of “popular” identity of the “people” opposed to “elites”. This identity does not represent any particular claim, only a unity based on equivalential link as such: “Although the link was originally ancillary to the demands, it now reacts over them and, through an inversion of the relationship, starts behaving as their ground” (94). Thus, populist identity does not represent anything specific to particular movements or their coalition, because they have nothing in common. However, it establishes the unity of populist movement because it creates an “empty signifier” – “the people” – which unites its participants. “Populism has no referential unity because it is ascribed not to a delimitable phenomenon but to a social logic” (xi).

Somehow similar phenomena is described by Michail Billig (1995), although he does not use a notion of “empty signifier” to describe what he called “banal nationalism”. As opposed to “hot” nationalism dominated in situation of social conflicts and referred to particular and solid belief systems, “banal” nationalism is a nationalism of routine and peace. It appears in routine uses and references to familiar images, banal words and clichés. Flags on the streets, words of linguistic deixis, such as ‘we’, ‘this’, and ‘here’, as well as the definite article in speeches of politicians and in newspapers “don’t let people forget that they are the part of a nation, preventing the danger of collective amnesia” (58). Without making strong claims, banal nationalism naturalizes a certain world view – that everybody belongs to some nation and the world of nations is actually “*the* world” (92). It appeals to “ideological consciousness” where “nations, national identities and national homelands appear as ‘natural’”, and “the ‘world of nations’ is represented as a natural moral order” (10). And while the content of particular national ideology can stay vague and blurred, the belief in nation itself is reproduced unconsciously on the everyday basis through “reading” of the signs of banal nationalism.

Billig demonstrates one more opportunity which ideology based on empty signifiers opens to those who have power to speak for others. Since we take our own nation and a world of nations for granted, somebody can speak in a name of a nation or on behalf of the national world order, ignoring any possible distinctions within those not at all monolithic entities: “In this way, ‘our’ interests – those of party, government, nation and world – can appear to coincide rhetorically, so long as ‘we’ do not specify what ‘we’ mean by ‘we’, but, instead, allow the first person plural to suggest a harmony of interests and identities” (90). Thus, if signifier is empty,

if it already was shorn of any specific and concrete meaning, or if this meaning was not initially verbalized but experienced and attached to a particular form, linguistic or not, it can be appropriated and used for political goals. Zizek (1994) argues that “meaning does not inhere in elements of an ideology as such – these elements, rather, function as ‘free-floating signifiers’ whose meaning is fixed by the mode of their hegemonic articulation” (?). For example, ecology is never ‘ecology as such’ – it can be appropriated by leftists, conservatives, nationalists, and so on, who will fill it with a meaning suitable for their political goals.

Empty signifiers open a possibility for an appropriation, but appropriation makes sense only in cases when they are already invested with some meaning, emotions, expectations, etc. Yla-Anttila shows, how Finnish nationalists appropriated shared experiences and emotions associated with *Survivirsi* song – a Summer Hymn, which pupils in Finnish schools traditionally sing in spring graduation ceremonies. He shows that this song serves as a container “capable of evoking or accommodating forms of collective sensibility” (Oushakine, 2011: 249) because it accumulates shared familiar experience (instead of referring to any particular value system). By referring to the powerful feelings associated with this song and shared by many people, Finnish nationalists transformed the song into a sign of “finnishness” which distinguishes them from “others” who threaten a national unity of “people” (Yla-Anttila 2017).

Yla-Anttila claims that what he demonstrates is opposed to Laclau’s argument about the emptiness of populist “floating signifier”, because “these signifiers are sometimes not ‘floating’ or ‘empty’ – on the contrary, in this case, they are strongly connected to spatial, physical, concrete and familiar experiences which enable them to carry a strong weight and emotional power to be harnessed in populist argumentation, constructing a people against perceived threats” (353). However, appropriation became possible exactly because *Survivirsi* – as well as symbols and words of “banal nationalism” – is invested with not-articulated meaning. In a way Laclau’s populist identity refers to a similar phenomenon: people believe that they are “the people” because they had already invested in the particular claims, and although the claims were replaced with “equivalence”, moral investment stayed there and made this equivalence felt like a common identity.

I claim that “empty signifiers” connect different ideological levels – spontaneous ideology of low-rank participants of the conflict and “doctrine” produced by media, state officials, and political leaders. On the level of production empty signifiers are built and invested with meaning through particular narratives. They become “empty” either because of multiplicity of the discourses (“Novorossiia myth”) or their initial political vagueness (“Russian world”) and/or extensive political usage (“Great patriotic war”). On spontaneous level, those “empty signifiers” occupy already existed narratives, social claims, emotions, and personal experiences, which were not articulated through particular political concepts. I will use the notion of “empty signifier” for the level of production and “common words” for spontaneous level of existence of ideology.

To get a performative power the empty signifier “floating” in official discourse or appearing in media coverage should be invested with meaning. If it does not happen it is perceived as an “official” language (“*oficiozniy yazik*”) – empty, cynical and lacking of any sense. Researchers often describe Russian attempts to create an ideology justifying Russian

involvement in Donbas conflict as if it was a process of creation of empty and meaningless forms (Hosaka 2019, P....). Partly it is true, but it is not all the truth. Those empty forms can travel down and attach themselves to already existed meanings. To explain how it happens I use a metaphor of parasitism. Parasitism is different form an appropriation. Appropriation refers to grasping of a form already invested with meaning, and to investing it with something new without destruction of the old. Parasitism is occupation by new forms of already existed meanings which thus became articulated through concepts alien to them. In the following, basing on empirical data, I will demonstrate the connection between “empty signifiers” of doctrine level and “common words” of spontaneous ideology by consequently analyzing narratives related to the first and to the latter.

Methodology and data

War in Eastern region of Ukraine localized in the part of Donetsk and Lugansk oblast' officially started in April 2014, after the acting president of Ukraine, Petr Poroshenko, announced the beginning of the “Anti-terrorist operation”. Regular fights between Ukrainian forces consisted of regular army units and volunteer militia, from the one side, and anti-Kiev militia and later in summer Russian regular troops, started later in April. Those events were preceded by growing clashes within Ukrainian society. In Autumn 2013, as a response to the decision of ex-president of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich to sign and police violent toward first protesters, Euro-maidan appeared as a mass movement united people with different views who became more and more unsatisfied with a political regime and ruling party. Demonstrations and protest camps resulted in clashes with police and special forces later in winter, during which Ukraine nationalists acquired extended political support and media visibility. Finally, in February, after violent fights where more than 100 protesters were killed, Viktor Yanukovich resigned. But “Maidan victory”, as well as violence which preceded it, provoked growing fears among a part of population who was not in support of the protest movement and solidarized with Yanukovich. Protesters were against alignment with Europe and supported further alignment with Russia, associated Maidan with nationalist threat, and claimed that Maidan was illegitimate “coup d’etat”. At first organized by the Party of Regions, Anti-maidan rallies acquired more and more of a mass support, especially in Eastern regions of a country. In March and April rallies resulted in occupation of administrative buildings. In March 2014 Russian former military intelligence officer Igor Girkin crossed Ukrainian border illegally with a group of armed men and occupied Ukrainian city Slavyansk. Although during April and May of 2014 many rebel groups were transformed into battalions by their leaders, direct military confrontations between them and Ukrainian forces were rare and random. At that time “volunteers” from different countries, mostly from Russia, started arriving to Donetsk and Lugansk regions. At the end of May, after the referendum in Donetsk and Lugansk regions (where, according to the rebels, popular majority voted for Donbas independence from Ukraine) and the election of new Ukrainian president, systematic warfare began. In autumn 2014 the insurgent armed groups started to transform into regular forces of the new quasi-independent states, Donetsk People’s Republic and Lugansk People’s Republic. In spite of many attempts of peaceful settlement, war conflict is still ongoing.

The ethnographic research of the Donbas war was conducted by the author of this article and her colleagues from Public Sociology Laboratory during one-year period between the Summer of 2016 and the Spring of 2017 in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Donetsk and Lugansk region, Ukraine. Three field trips total length of about 10 weeks were made in Donetsk region

(August 2016, November 2016, March 2017) and two in Lugansk region (August 2016, April 2017). In general, 107 biographical interviews were collected, including 53 interviews with anti-Kiev combatants.

The biographical interviews with combatants focused on both the life story and the actual sequences of events he/she experienced (Rosenthal 1993, Bertaux & Thompson 1997). The interview guide consisted of two parts. The first part concentrated on life course of the informants before the conflict, the second – on pre-war months and war experience. Both parts began with opening questions asking an informant to relate the story of his/her life from the childhood and his/her participation in the war consequently. Only after the interviewee's own story ended, supportive questions were asked. When informants referred to the ideas of "Novorossiia" or "Russian World", they were asked what did they mean by those words and how they got familiar with them. In addition, each researcher kept a field journal by taking field notes every day during the visits to the Donbas region and while conducting field work in Russia.

The interviews with combatants lasted between one and five hours, averaging at two and a half hours. Since one of the main challenges of conducting research in conflict environment is gaining the trust and access to the field, snowball sampling has been used (Cohen & Arieli 2011). Due to the absence of any uncontested knowledge about social composition, number, and specificity of armed groups in general, as well as due to the fact that data collection was conducted during ongoing war, interviewees were selected to achieve maximum diversity, not as representative of a general population. In an attempt to do it, different channels to reach and identify combatants with diverse backgrounds and from different armed groups were used. Although the majority of data was collected in the war zone during ongoing military conflict, two reasons made the informants trust researchers and facilitate access to the field. First, Russian citizenship of interviewers helped to build trust because Russia was considered as a main ally of Donbas. Second, an official permit to collect data from newly created DPR's and LPR's ministry of information provided researchers with an official status confirming in the eyes of informants the absence of hostile intentions. This strategy was successful: nine out of every ten individuals we contacted agreed to be interviewed. The suspicion that taking part in the study can compromise the well-being of the newly created Republics was the most frequent reason of refuse. Additionally, some individuals refused to be interviewed by referring to the confidential charter of the information about warfare they possessed.

First informants, usually former combatants who returned or immigrated to Russia after taking part in the war, were found in Moscow and St. Petersburg through researchers' personal connections. They shared contacts of their fellow soldiers in Donetsk and Lugansk, where the snowball sampling was continued. Interviews were conducted in the places chosen by the informants, such as their own houses, workplaces, cafes, or parks. All interviewees were informed about academic goals of the research, that all data will be anonymized and stored at the password-protected cloud services, and that no personal information allowing the identification of the subjects will be disclosed. All of them gave their consent before the interviews.

Among 53 combatants in the sample, 20% were between 23 and 30 years old in the beginning of the war, 45% were between 30 and 45 years old, and 33% were between 45 and 58 years old, and one informant was 15 years old by the beginning of the war. Approximately 45% of our informants came from the families where at least one parent had high education and

was occupied as white collar worker. The same proportion of informants had no parents with high education, and both their parents were occupied as blue collar or service workers. Finally, about 10% of our sample came from military families where parents had either high education or vocation secondary education. 40% of the informants had high education themselves. About half of them were occupied as white collar workers before the war, while approximately 30% had blue collar jobs and 20% were involved in different kinds of unskilled labor.

The analysis of interviews included several stages.

1. I analyzed personal narratives of combatants as stories which make sense of their mobilization. I understood that very often combatants referred to the same words, names and historical events: fascists, Great Patriotic War, Russian world, etc.
2. I made a list of those common categories – “common words” – and reconstructed the meaning acquired to them within different stories. Basing on it, I classified narratives into three different groups.
3. Classification of narratives appeared congruent with classification of careers of combatants³ I was working on with my colleague Svetlana Yerpyleva (Sav&Yerp unpublished manuscript). Thus, I added biographical dimension to the reading of narratives. It extended the interpretation of meaning invested in particular notions: I interpreted them as a part of a narrative – a story told – and from the point of view of a logic of development of particular combatant career and biographical trajectory intrinsic to it.

In the following I will address three main categories which constitute “empty signifiers” on the level of the doctrine and “common words” of spontaneous level of ideology: Novorossiya, Russian World, and Great Patriotic War. First, I will discover the discourses which support them on the level of the doctrine and explain why those particular words and phrases became “empty”. Then I will show, how those “empty signifiers” occupy different spontaneous narratives and being transform in “common words”.

“Empty Signifiers” of the Doctrine: Novorossiya, Russian World, Great Patriotic War

Three main categories used for framing the conflict by media, leaders and Russian state officials – of Novorossiya, Russian World, and Great Patriotic War – had very different trajectories before the conflict. Ideas of Russian World and Novorossiya were pretty marginalized before 2014 and used within limited circles of nationalists in Russia and pro-Russian nationalists in Ukraine and by people related to previous conflicts on post-Soviet space. Great Patriotic War, on the contrary, for many years was considered as a main event of Russian history in 20th century and as a unique and solid basis for Russian post-Soviet identity. I will show which meanings was attributed to those categories before and during Donbas conflict and how they were transformed into “empty signifiers”.

In Soviet period, the word “Novorossiya” was associated with the imperial past and used only in specialized books or in historical novels (O’Loughlin, Toal, and Kolosov 2016). Later in 90s Novorossiya became one of a number of Russian nationalist fantasies about Ukraine (Lieven 1999,

³ Career of combatant is a social pathway of involvement which describe the process of mobilization of a particular group of individuals and unfolds through stages which reflects changing of perception of a situation of a conflict, behavior and social position of a person (Savelyeva and Yerpyleva, unpublished manuscript).

106): after dissolution of Soviet Union a few marginal groups within Ukraine and Russia clung to the idea of Novorossiia as a primordial imperial region (O’Loughlin, Toal, and Kolosov 2016) and a “romantic lost cause” (Toal 2016 book). Then idea of Novorossiia re-emerged in 1994 among Transnistrian separatists, who wanted to substantiate their right to join the Russian Federation. The term then appeared only in spring 2014. On May 24 the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics decided to unite as a new “Union of Novorossiia”. Putin did use the term in his speech on April 17 addressing the situation of the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine. Putin has not used the term again; instead, Novorossiia has been promoted by actors outside the Presidential Administration (Laruelle 2019).

Marlene Laruelle describes the spreading of the concept of Novorossiia as a live myth-making process orchestrated between March and September 2014 by different Russian nationalist circles. While legitimizing the insurgency the concept carried “multiple, overlapping ideological meanings, ranging from paralleling the official narrative to calls to overthrow the Putin regime” (195). Novorossiia myth included three paradigms, or “colors”, referring to different but overlapping doctrines and networks, which produced them: the “red” color emphasizes the memory of the Soviet Union with its large territory and great power, and actualizes imperial character of Russia’s nationalist imagery, also opposing Russia with its socialist mission and the West; the “white” reading of the events refers to Tsarist nostalgia and political Orthodoxy “that would confirm Russia’s status as the herald of conservative Christian values and spread nostalgia for the Romanov monarchy” (208); the “brown” idea “comes from the European fascist tradition and claims that Novorossiia will be the battleground that gives birth to a new national revolution overthrowing the old world order” (209). However, Novorossiia utopia did not last for too long: Laruelle dates its death by 2017 when Donbas insurgency stop calling for a utopian alternative to Russia and moved to the literary realm (Laruelle 2019b), while others claim that “Novorossiia project” died even earlier – somewhere at the beginning of 2015 when its main proponents proclaimed the project suspended and a failure (Whitmore 2015), or even already in May 2014 (Toal 2016 book).

If Novorossiia initially referred to a particular territory being a part of Russian Empire in 18th century, the concept of the Russian world never had any real referent – a territory, a group, or an event. Its meaning was defined by its political usage. The genesis of modern framing began in 19th century while the concept itself reemerged as a gathering node for self-definition and meaning after the collapse of the Soviet Union (O’Loughlin, Toal & Kolosov 2017) due to the attempts of Gleb Pavlovskiy, and intellectuals he invited, to create an ideology for the post-Soviet Russia. One of the authors of the term in its current form, a son of a soviet philosopher Petr Shchedrovitsky, recounted that the notion appeared 1993 and 1997 within the walls of Russian Institute created by Pavlovskiy (Laruelle 2015). Russian world was defined by a shared destiny and a common language, which united Russian people all over the world. Both Laruelle and O’Loughlin with coauthors mention that the concept itself is polysemous, fluid, vague, and empty in substance: it refers both to the cultural sphere of the Russian language and its productions, community that transcends the materiality of actually existing political borders, Russian special civilizational role which makes it different from other countries (O’Loughlin, Toal & Kolosov 2017) as well as to Russia’s policy for its near abroad, Russia’s interaction with Russian diasporas in the world, and Russia’s brand, both as a public-relations project and a messianic project (Laruelle 2015, 6). This blurriness and elasticity are the key elements of the Russian World functionality: being an empty signifier which can be filled with different meanings, the concept can be used for the different political goals, including justification of Russian participation in Donbas conflict (O’Loughlin,

Toal & Kolosov 2017; Laruelle 2015). In 2014 Putin mentioned the Russian World – just for the third time during his all presidencies, while justifying Russia’s annexation of Crimea, and his secretary Dmitry Peskov, almost two weeks earlier said that Russia is the country that underlies the Russian World and the President of the Russian Federation is a guarantor of security for the Russian world (Laruelle 2015). As geographical frame, Russian world serves as a dichotomizing performative, drawing the boundaries between “us” and “them” (O’Loughlin, Toal & Kolosov 2017). Being framed a part of the Russian world in 2014 (Fog...), Ukraine was transformed in an object of care and violence, and the framing itself produced a lot of narratives why exactly Ukraine should be “with” Russia and not “with” the West.

As opposed to Novorossiia and the Russian world, Great Patriotic War was loaded with meaning long before 2014. The memory of the Great Patriotic War has proven to be the most “politically usable” element of Russia’s past (Malinova in: ed. Fedor et all 2017, p. 45) and a core element of Russian identity (Dubin 2015). Some scholars have argued that the Great Patriotic War has become a foundational myth for post-Soviet Russia (Koposov 2011: 163, Nuzov 2017). While in Russia there is a basic consensus on the role of the war in national history, in Ukraine the divided collective memory contributes to regional pluralism and fuels ongoing political conflict (Zhurzhenko 2015 chapter, p. 190). Collective memory about war was initially, even before Ukraine became an independent state (Shevel 2011), split and was based on two different and contradictive historical myths and memory politics accordingly: the one glorified the heroism of Soviet people who fought fascism and Great patriotic war, the other – Ukrainian people, and especially OUN-UPA (considered by the first narrative as “fascists” and “traitors”) who fought German and Soviet imperialism (Grinevitch 2005, Shevel 2011). Later, those myths were politicized and instrumentalized for political goals (Cox 1997; Stoll 2013; Osipian 2015; Osipian and Osipian 2012, Shevel 2011). The differences were especially marked amongst the residents of two regions in particular, Galicia/Galychyna and the Donbass, where Party of Regions was especially strong (Osipian 2015, p. 130). The Donbass regional identity has frequently been used by the Party of Regions in order to gain and retain voter support. Osipian claims that it adopted the historical mythology of the Great patriotic war that had been put in place in Russia, and, during the Orange Revolution in 2004 it made its first moves towards constructing the mythical existential threat of “Ukrainian fascism”.

In Russia, the term “fascist” had long since become a synonym for “enemy”. For example, in 90s democrats called communists “fascists,” and vice versa (Tumarkin 1994, 222). Starting from 2013 Great Patriotic War was widely used to denounce pro-Kiev side first during Euromaidan events and later Donbas war, as well as to a diverse range of objects in Russia and abroad (Gaufman 2015; ed. Fedor et all 2017). However, although federal state TV and in social media often refer to Great Patriotic War to frame the conflict (Gaufman 2015), the way the memory of WW2 was instrumentalized reflects a long-lasting tendency. This tendency, which is probably also relates to death of “living memory” of the war (Norris 2011), transformed GPW into a symbolic tool similar to Novorossiia myth and the Russian world through proliferation of a new temporality of the event which merged together elements of past and present. Although some scholars claim that this temporality appeared only in 2014 (ed. Fedor et all 2017), the very process of the change started much earlier and touched both Russia and Ukraine before the conflict. It started with launch of Nashi in 2005 – a supported by the government youth movement declared its fight against all forms of fascism in Russia (which primarily included liberal opposition, nationalists, and US influence). The idea of Nashi activists as descendants of those who saved the country from fascism was a key

component (Luxmoore 2019)⁴. The same idea of descendance was voiced by Party of Regions in 2013 (Osipian 2015) and became a common place in 2014 among ordinary Russian citizens who in response to the sanctions promised to “repeat” the victory of their grandparents over Germany. As I will show in the following section, local combatants address the great patriotic war in a similar way. This temporal perspective presupposes the collapse of linear historical time when instead of adaptation of historical legacy to the formats and conventions of a new period we see reenactment of the past when observers are replaced with participants, and remembrance – with experiencing of the past here and now (ed. Fedor et al 2017, Oushakine 2013)⁵.

By using a particular language to qualify the events, both combatants, journalists, experts and state officials insert the current events into the framework of the Soviet myth of the Great Patriotic War (Osipian 2015). Many researchers claimed that building on already existed opinions, beliefs, and even word combinations constructions made Russian propaganda effective (Osipian 2015, Gaufman 2015, Fog?). But this argument works only for Great patriotic war while nor Novorossiia neither the Russian world do not refer directly to any significant beliefs, memories or identities. However, there is one thing which make all three main concepts similar: they were either emasculated due their intensive ideological usage, like GPW, or initially vague and invested with multiple meanings, like Novorossiia or the Russian world. The memory of the war is versatile and capable of fitting various cultural frames, ranging from “heroic sacrifice,” “national glory,” “defense of freedom,” and “salvation of civilization” to “mass suffering,” “unrecoverable losses” and “national victimhood” (Malinova in: ed. Fedor et al 2017) while the flexibility of the term fascism, combined with the strong stigma associated with it, opens up wide possibilities for its abuse for propaganda purposes (Gaufman 2015, p. 149). That made them able to function as empty signifiers on the level of official state discourse and in media coverage. In that quality they became a part of propaganda, and due to the same reason – occupied spontaneous vision of the conflict shared by its rank-and-file participants.

In the following I will show how those “empty signifiers” occupied the narratives of combatants who has similar combatant careers – social paths which brought them to participation in this conflict on the Anti-Kiev side.

“Common Words” and Spontaneous Ideology

Laymen and repetition of Great Patriotic War

Combatant career of laymen is typical for Donbas residents occupied in civilian jobs with no paramilitary experience in their past except compulsory army service. In total, 24 individual trajectories (23 males and one female) in the sample represent the career of laymen, including three members of Communist Party of Ukraine. Most laymen were in their 40s and 50s when the war started, while the youngest was 15 and the oldest 58. Laymen were born in Donbas region and had diverse social background. In general, laymen represent a group of well-established pro-Russian Donbas citizens: many (16) were graduated from universities, were married and had children (20), and reported an income higher than average before the war. They had successful professional careers and were imbedded in local communities. Among their

⁴ And apparently Surkov’s team which dealt with the Donbas conflict was staffed with his former colleagues and experts specialized in domestic politics, including Nachi (Hosaka 2019, p. 765)

⁵ Seanse films

relatives, many supported Communist Party of Soviet Union and came to Donbas from other ex-soviet republics to work in industries or mines. At least one, but often more of their relatives were either in captivity, or in partisan detachments, or served in the Soviet army during the World War 2. In an interview, they note that stories about that were preserved and passed down from generation to generation, while holidays like February 23 or May 9 until 2014 were “sacred”.

All laymen had strong local identity to which they appealed explaining their decision to join armed groups, and were mobilized by growing fear and alienation from Ukrainian state. They were actively involved in pre-war phase of the conflict and their family members sympathized with the anti-Maidan movement.

Group narrative of laymen is based on comparison of Donbas war and Great Patriotic War. Novorossiia serves as a metaphor of a “normal country” and a possible way out of the conflict – something in between Ukraine before 2013 and nostalgic image of Soviet Union, and Russian World – as a description of idealized imperial Soviet principle of the “friendship of nations”, where representatives of different nationalities are equal in their rights, but “Russian” identity is inclusive and dominate the others.

This group of combatants demonstrate the deep embeddedness of Ukrainian pro-Russian/Soviet identity rooted in the past and mobilized during spring and summer 2014 (Olzacka 2017). This past does not only refer to Soviet history of Ukraine, but also to its post-Soviet period when specificity of the Donbas region with its traditions of collective memory build around commemoration of Soviet army victories and losses (Himka 2015, Kasianov 2015, Shevel 2011), its industrial orientation and multinationalism was transformed into “Donbas myth” (Osipian 2015) instrumentalized for political goals (Cox 1997; Stoll 2013; Osipian 2015; Shevel 2011).

Laymen was the only category of combatants who started their life stories⁶ - which is also a story through which they explain their vision of the conflict – with reference to their descendance from their parents or other relatives who fought or witnessed World War 2:

“My father is K. D. G., he was born in 1905. He volunteered for the front when the Great Patriotic War began. He passed the whole war. Was in German captivity. Then he was released from captivity. When the war had ended he hold the rank of a captain of the Soviet Army. But I don’t remember my father, he died, I was three years old. My mother was born in 1927, native of Poltava region. When she was fourteen years old teenager she was indentured to Germany for work. She was in captivity for three years. At first, she was working at a military factory. Then she slaved for a master, a farmer. She was fed, was given water. She was like a slave. And not only she was. There were Italians and French too. Therefore, I heard about the war firsthand. My father died, and my mother told me about Western Ukraine and Bandera: how the families of doctors and teachers were cut out. How they skulked in woods even till 1950-s, they hid, destroyed collective farms, boiled red army soldiers alive in caldrons” (Interview 53, m., 1965)

In the vocabulary of laymen Great Patriotic War – another way to refer to WW2 to emphasize the sacred and unique character of the event – is a metaphor explaining the nature

⁶ The opening question of the guide was: “Please, tell me about you: you can include everything you consider worth telling – your family, education, professional life. You can start from your childhood or from any other moment”.

of a current conflict. It transforms Donbas war from a local conflict to the existential fight between evil forces – the fascism – and heroes who try to stop it.

There are different ways to make a connection between past and present. In this narrative the connection is made through establishing a temporal continuity between two events – Donbas war and WW2 – and their participants. This continuity is genetic (and family), historical (and collective) and geographical at the same time. Genetic continuity transforms representatives of current generation into heritors of their relatives witnessed the Second World War. As heritors they are obliged to fight: “My father was a defender of Leningrad. My wife’s relatives also took part in the Great Patriotic War. In a week after occupation of a building of a Security Service of Ukraine [SBU] I was here, on barricades” (Int. 54, man, ap. 1953). Historical continuity transforms the current participants of the conflict into heritors of soviet people and Soviet Union defeated fascism. A phrase “*I was born in USSR*” refers to this continuity and at the same time serves as an explanation of a motive transformed into vocation and necessity to fulfil the destiny: “Well, I don’t know, I am a man of the Soviet Union [*ya chelovek Sovetskogo Soiuz*], so, well, when here... those people started coming to power who said that people who wear SS dress in Ukraine can be heroes, for me it does not work, it’s not an option, it’s an outrage, that’s all” (Int. 19, man, 1977). However, the opponents of anti-Kiev combatants inherit the past as well. “Banderites”, a common labeling for Ukrainian nationalists, pro-Ukrainian combatants and their supporters, are also successors – not of heroes but of “collaborators” who during World War II bolstered “German invaders”: “this is probably a snake which was not finished off in 1950s, which Stalin did not eradicate” (Int. 53, man, 1965). In this narrative it is Ukrainian people who support nationalist views – “banderites”, “fascists”, “Nazis” – represent the main enemy and the greatest evil. While the West, an important figure in other narratives, also appears more as an enemy, it is blamed in using the situation in favor for itself without really understanding how dangerous “the fascists” could be:

Is that US who give instructions, I mean, not directions, but stupid ideas? Those people [Ukrainian nationalists] are stupid [s duriu v golove – N.S.] by themselves. They were born like that. And US, they are just orchestrators [dirizhery – N.S.], smart people. Of course, they are fighting not on their site, they got a lot of money, they value their people. And those stupid scums kill their own people. (Int. 58, man, born 1967)

Finally, the narrative of the Great Patriotic War also rests on geographical continuity. The territory of Lugansk and Donetsk region were a battle-space during World War II. In the narrative, this fact appeared through the references to the sameness of the scenery and settings (“[We] used trenches and crevices dug during the Great Patriotic War” (Int. 52, man, born ap. 1960).

In the heart of this narrative lies the idea that there is no difference between past and present: when the history, an “unfinished war [nedovoyevannaya voyna – N.S.]” (Int. 56, man, ap. mid. Of 1980s), repeats itself, i.e. “fascists” embodied in Ukrainian nationalists who came to power due to Maidan reappeared, the heritors of great people have to commit the same act of heroism as their grandparents did. The obvious character of the necessity to repeat⁷ represents itself in phrases which replace causal link with constatation of the connection to the

⁷ The sad irony is that this idea of repetition became a part of Russian official position in 2015, and was definitely supported by many Russians who use the meme “We can repeat” to demonstrate their superiority in relation to the West.

past: to be a heritor means to have a vocation, and this is why the descendants of the heroes have to fight with the descendants of the “fascists” in the same place for the same reason. The narrative of Great Patriotic War represents a phenomenon similar to the “affective management of history” (Oushakine 2013) – a set of practices which transform remembrance into the act of reenacting⁸. They collapse space and time by bringing the two separate time frames together, “simultaneously leaves out all traces of historical, political, or, for instance, ideological incommensurability of the two periods. The formal semblance of bodies and objects is presented as an indication of a more profound – substantive – similarity” (273). The narrative of Great Patriotic War is based on the same principle: participants see current events as a continuation of WWII and they relieve substantive sameness of two events (“now I really understand how is that when a shell bursts / to be an artillerist / to tell children war stories – how my parents / grandparents did”, many combatants said). Through this operation the narrative eliminates time differences and transforms past event – World War II – into everlasting Great Patriotic War, some eternal nontemporal truth, an authentic reality access to which is opened by the conflict.

In this narrative the conflict is represented both as a moment of truth which reveals a “real” nature of the parties participated in it (heroes and villains), reminds of values lost during the years of Ukrainian independence and suddenly found.

The phrase “to be born in the USSR” refers not only to descendancy from heroic relatives and soviet people in general, but also to a deep commitment to some norms, ideals and principles, acquired through Soviet upbringing and experience of everyday Soviet life. The main value is anti-nationalism. As well as in case of the World War 2, anti-nationalism appears in the narrative through references to history of a family and the region:

“My family is multinational, the city, the city is forty years old roughly, so they built mines and people came from everywhere. My grandmother and grandfather on my mother’s side, they are from Belorussia. That is, my grandmother is Polish, my grandfather is Belorussian. On my father’s side, my grandmother is Russian, my grandfather is Ukrainian. So that’s that, that is, everybody is different [in my family]” (Int. 19, man, b. 1977).

Idealized soviet past appears – again – as a “golden standard”, a norm for measuring of the present of Ukrainian society. According to this standard, all national, ethnic or other differences of the people who were the part of “soviet family” are artificial: they were created in 90s, when Soviet Union was destroyed, and new, artificial boundaries between states and people were constructed:

“Before people of all nationalities – Georgians, Armenians, Belorussians, Ukrainians – lived in a common family. Donbas is fundamentally multinational. ... Here [in Donbas region – N.S.] we did not have that division: you are Ukrainian, you are Russian. Everybody gathered

⁸ Analyzing 2011 Victory Day parade in Moscow and media discourses about WWII and Soviet past, Sergei Oushakine shows that memorialization in general and remembrance in particular are perceived not so much as an activity aimed at adapting or adopting historical legacy to the formats and conventions of a new period but rather as “a repetition of perceptual activity.” “Remembrance here is an act of reenacting. Or, to be more precise, it is an act of the (literal) embodying of symbolic and behavioral forms inherited from the past. To put it somewhat differently, this type of remembrance utilizes reenactment as a symbolic form and a protocol of interaction that make possible an experience of verisimilitude by translating the past into “a real space with real objects and people” (Oushakine 2013, 272).

together in courtyards [*vse sobiralis' dvorami*]. ... And it was fun, it was in a friendly fashion. No killings, nothing of what we faced now" (Int. 53, man, b. 1965).

Maidan and political decisions made by its adherents aimed at further alienation of Ukraine from Russia, strengthened building of new boundaries where there should be no boundaries and distinctions at all. If new Ukrainian post-Maidan identity was cruelly exclusive because it recognized as Ukrainians only those who supported Maidan, Soviet identity represented in this narrative is cruelly inclusive: absorbing all post-soviet nations and nationalities and declaring differences between them secondary and artificial it postulates a general principle – belonging to Soviet, or Russian, world – which makes all of them “brothers” and “friends”. This is why some pro-Russian participants in the conflict still continue to consider themselves Ukrainians: since there is “major” and “minor” identities, you can easily combine particular self-identification with a common and general one.

“I am Ukrainian, I am Slav, why Russian, well, I consider myself as Slav... It makes no difference to me, I sort of don't make a difference between Russians, Ukrainians, I think, they all, Bulgarians too, and Serbs, and so on, they all brothers. ... That is, like brothers, the Buryats or else, they speak that language, they already, well, that culture... It is rather a Soviet man, rather Soviet. That is, when everybody are friends, you are a Muslim, for example, I am a Christian, he is an atheist. But we have a common motherland, common home” (Int. 48, man, b. 1974).

“Russian world” during the conflict became a new and actual name for the rejection of Ukrainian nationalism and new civic identity and for a nostalgia for idealized soviet past where all nations were “relatives in life, not cousins, but brothers” (Interview 22, m., 1965).

“Novorossiia” is the other world with which Donbas citizens were barely familiar before the conflict. In the narrative, however, it loses its initial connotations and serves, as “Russian world”, to mark alienation from post-Maidan Ukraine as well as to voice some social claims common both for Maidan and Anti-Maidan activists⁹, such as critique of Ukraine pre-war social politics, corruption, low standards of life. Basing on meanings the word “Novorossiia” acquired within the narrative, its presence became more palpable when the conflict went more violent and possibility of reintegration of Donbas region – more subtle. It is used to emphasize specificity of Donbas (“Donbas myth”), but in a situation when Donbas itself demands a new status: either an autonomy within a post-Maidan Ukraine, independence from it, or a new capital for a post-post-Maidan Ukraine liberated from fascism. Whatever specific meanings are, they all refers to a need for a new name not for just a territorial entities (DNR and LNR), but for Donbas in a new reality of post-Maidan Ukraine which, in its current state, can not reintegrate it, or for a new Ukraine itself rebuild on a new basis:

“Initially I defended my home, well, I wanted Novorossiia. Exactly Novorossiia, not DPR or LPR and so on. ... Because I know, that the East, the South-East – they are all hardworking people. And very talented, very much. First, we have a mixture of different bloods. One hundred and fifty nationalities, all which were in Soviet Union, all those nationalities live in Donbas. Each

⁹ As shown in a study dedicated to comparison of two movements but also by interviews with local combatants among which some were supportive toward Maidan at the beginning because it criticizes Ukrainian regime and voiced social critique. Their support toward Maidan was altered after “nationalistic turn”, as they call it – violent fights with police and state military forces in February 2014 when nationalists acquired a lot of media visibility, resulted in escape of Victor Yanykovich. For more details see: Savelyeva and Yerpyleva (unpublished manuscript).

has at least one representative. ... We have a great potential, factories, manufactories... And third: everything they [Ukrainian nationalists] do, I have a disgust for it” (Int. 48, man, b. 1974).

“The very word Ukraine, in my understanding, it has worked itself out a little bit, we need a new name for it. Maybe let’s call it Russia, but then the whole world will be outraged, so maybe Novorossiia, Malorossiia. But it should be something pure and innocent, like a new born child. ... Ukraine is stained with blood, that’s why it should be given a new name”. (Int. 58, man, born 1967)

“Before [spring 2014] I never heard about Novorossia. First time I heard about it from Gubarev [one of Anti-Maidan leaders in Donetsk – N.S.]. I liked it. It’s Ukraine in its new capacity. Bezler [a leader of his armed group – N.S.] also believed that Ukraine should become a new Ukraine. ... To build a new Ukraine on the basis of the old Ukraine”. (Int. 31, man, ap. 1980)

Thus, laymen used notions “Novorossiia” and “Russian world” to articulate grievances. Although those grievances were connected with pre-existent culture of the region with domination of pro-Soviet views, traditions of commemoration of Soviet army and belief in “Donbas myth”, they were raised as a result of development of conflict within Ukrainian society. Meaning for both notions were provided by specificity of the culture of the region and trajectories and experiences of people who lived there. Thus nor “Novorossiia” neither “Russian World” were false claims created by Russian propaganda in order to mobilize locals for a fight; on the contrary, those concepts served as containers for meaning. If references to World War 2 gave sense to the ongoing conflict and provided it with a level of dramatism correspondent to the perception of situation by local combatant – which was rooted both in their growing fear and their views – “Novorossiia” and “Russian world” gave an alien name for specific local concerns, the possible vision of the “normal” society and resolution of the conflict. Anti-Maidan, a movement preceded the anti-Kiev mobilization, raised social claims and negation of Maidan; “Novorossiia” and “Russian world” embodied alienation from post-Maidan Ukraine and some general desire of a better life based on the best available image of idealized Soviet society. “Novorossiia” served as a name for a possible new future, defined vaguely through the discontent with the life before the war, the war itself and inability to see the way from a current crisis, while “Russian World”, also a vague concept, serves as a possible basis for this future.

Militants and the fight between Russian World and the West

Combatant career of militants is typical for Russian citizens who participated in other wars in the post-Soviet space before 2014, and for minority of Ukrainian citizens in our sample (two out of eleven) who has the same trajectory. Depending on the year of birth of informants (e.g., 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s), it was wars in Afghanistan (1979-1989), Abkhazia (1992-1993), Transnistria (1992), Chechen republic (1994-1996 and 1999-2000), South Ossetia (2008). For militants, war became a sort of vocation: in periods of civilian lives they had a nostalgia for war participation which brought to their lives important meanings (e.g., “real friendship”, strong social ties, feeling of their own importance) they lack in their civil lives.

The military dispositions of the representatives of this career began to form early in their lives. Being children, they professionally engaged in sports activities, such as hand-to-hand fighting, karate, judo, unarmed self-defense, or target shooting. Many of them had close

relatives which identified themselves as the Cossacks¹⁰. When finished secondary schools, the militants enrolled to the mandatory military service which they found desirable and meaningful. Then six militants enrolled to the universities (mostly, military colleges), while others went directly to the job market. Their professional trajectories differed but shared one specific feature: periods when they worked as civilians intermitted with the periods when they joined contractual army. While being enlisted by contract, most of them participated in various military conflicts. Their civilian professional careers were mostly unsuccessful as they were occupied in unskilled labor, changed many workplaces, and had low incomes. Even those of militants who were able to build successful professional careers, felt unsatisfied with what they had and missed strong emotional fulfillment which they experienced during war participation. Most of the militants (nine) were married by the time of the conflict and some had children.

The group of individuals, who see their vocation in travelling from one post-Soviet war to another, in general is not studied enough. Basing on our data, several characteristics can be attributed to their collective ethos: they love “alternative versions of history” and their thinking is based on conspiracy theories as a genre (which is very much noticeable in their stories of mobilization). Some of them have strong Soviet identities and all respect a “strong hand” and conservative ideals of masculinity. They feel a strong disgust toward any protest movements which question a ruling regime either it is Maidan or “For fair elections” movement in Russia (2011-2013).

Group narrative of the militants frames Donbas war as one of the stages of lasting for ages conflict between the West and the Russian. The Russian world is a unity of people united by their intrinsic Russianness (Russian spirit, not blood or territory). Ukraine, being a part of it, lost its initial path due to Western influences which fed its nationalism, and militants, the main heroes of the narrative, have to protect Russian world, as they have done that before, fighting against West on the Ukrainian territory.

In this narrative, the Second World War, as well as the events in the Donbas – along with the Cold War, the collapse of the USSR, and conflicts in the post-Soviet space – are simply episodes of the global war lasting for centuries. In a sense, this global war has no starting point - the “Russian world” always, even before Russian state and the Russians appeared, opposed the “West”, which always wanted to destroy it:

“The Western world <...> will never wish us well, they always had the task to destroy us, for thousands of years, damn, starting with Alexander the Great and the ancient Romans, who wanted to capture us, and the Scythians piled on them, damn, ending there, Napoleon and Hitler, and so on, you know. Even this Margaret freaking Thatcher, in my opinion, yes, “Iron Margaret”, the former prime minister of Great Britain, said that, ideally, we need no more than 30 million Russians on the planet. It was their plan. And *ykri*, who rely on the West world, they think the West world is their friend, they are just stupid sheeps, damn it, who go to the slaughter, that's all. (Interview 29, m., b. 1984).

In this narrative the very process of making a decision about joining armed groups is described as unfolding chain of confirmations that persuaded the militants that the West finally started its last and probably fatal for Russia act of aggression:

¹⁰ Ethnic self-identification of group of people historically inhabited areas around Dnieper, Don, Terek, and Ural Rivers. Currently in Russia, Cossacks have a reputation of military-oriented people supporting conservative values and the political regime – although, this reputation obviously do not describe all those who self-identifies as Cossacks.

“[In 2009] I accidentally found the report of American national intelligence agency about development of geopolitical situation in the world. ... It emphasized five possible scenarios of development of situation with Russia. The main one stated that Russia falls to seven sovereign states. And the most interesting thing mentioned there was that Russia would enter a war. ... When Maidan started ... I thought that they started to claim that Ukraine should become a part of Russia, become closer... When fascists appeared on Maidan, I thought: come on. And then, when Crimea happened, when that happened in Odessa¹¹ – that was it, I became completely mad. ... I had the impression that I fight for my family, for my children, for the land where my ancestors were buried, that’s it. ... I understood that if we will fail, what was written in that report happen” (Int. 7, man, b. 1973)

For this informant, as for many others, the war in Donbas was a fight for his family and land because they considered it as a fight for the Russian world. The Russian world is both represented by the unity of lands and people populated them. Russian world from geographical point of view in this narrative is understood much wider than in the narrative of laymen. In the latter the Russian world consisted of ex-Soviet republics: it was built by Soviet Union and it preserved its common nature after its dissolution. The Russian world and the West in the narrative of militants are mutually exclusive and defined through the declaration of a radical difference: thus, the Russian world is something that opposes the West, it is rather people, spirit and culture, then lands and blood. Contradiction between the Russian world and the West, thus, has a substantial character: they are divided by the differences in their intrinsic nature. This is why to be Russian and to belong to the Russian world relates less to geography and history and more to the “spirit”. Thus, potentially the “Russian world” can be everywhere and can include anybody regardless his or her ethnicity, nationality, etc., as well as defenders of the Russian world whom consider themselves the militants, can fight for it anywhere too:

“I am an ordinary simple Russian officer. A reserve major. A person who can’t remain indifferent to the things happen on my Motherland. I consider all Russian world as my motherland: not just, say, administrative borders, state borders of Russia, but all Russian world in general, everywhere it reveals itself. It can be on Cuba, it can be in Europe, it can be everywhere. Everywhere where Russian spirit exists – it is my motherland as well. ... For me being Russian [*russkiy* – N.S.] is not about blood, Russian is a state of a spirit. For me all representatives of different ethnic groups who lived in the territory of Russian Empire are Russians. There were a lot of Germans who got into Russian spirit – there are not less Russians for me than I am. ... In Donbas I defended my motherland. For me motherland and the Russian world are the same. If I have to defend Russian world somewhere in Cuba, I will go to Cuba. ... Both Donbas and Syria are frontlines now. It is a single whole, do you understand? Not many people understand that (Int. 14, man, 1981)

Take any nationality – it is a noun. Russian [*russkiy* – N.S.] the only one adjective, because you can be a Russian Ukrainian, a Russian Georgian, a Russian Jew, and so on. That is, Russian [*russkiy*] is a state of soul, it’s not a nationality. I don’t like the word *rossianin* [Russian citizen – N.S.] – it is absolutely artificial, it shocks the ear. ... Russian [*russkiy*] is an adjective, not a nationality ... It is like we all, in the big scheme of things, descended from some indigenous communities, say, Viatichi, right, it is also not nationalities, right, but they all were Russians [*russkimi*], I love the word Slavs (Int. 49, man, 1968)

¹¹ The fire in the House of Unions in Odessa on May 2, preceded by violent clashes between Euromaidan and anti-Maidan supporters and resulted in deaths of 42 anti-Maidan followers during the fire.

The West can destroy the Russian World by destroying Russians either physically or morally. Until Russian lands and people stay united, it is difficult to achieve. The lands which can be included in the Russian world should stay united as political partners and allies as well as they should preserve their internal unity. The West is intent on weakening of partnership between countries belong to the Russian World (this is manifested through the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine) and it tries to break those countries into small pieces to make its expansion more effective. It is what happened with Soviet Union and this is what can happen with Russia if the West will not be stopped.

The West world lives according to the principle of ‘divide and conquer.’ Here, Yugoslavia is a vivid example, they split up Yugoslavia into a bunch of different states and made those states contingent on them, and they want to do the same with us. Soviet Union was broken, right now Ukraine will be torn apart, then Russia follows” (Interview 29, m., b. 1984).

In the struggle between Russian world and the West, militants are the main heroes. They have double identity of defenders: they defend both the Russian world and victimized civil population which is in many narratives are represented through the images of women, children and old people. As opposed to laymen, they never defend themselves. Militants believe that they have already tried to save the Russian world for several times before Ukrainian conflict because they took part in previous conflicts – in Chechnia, Abhazia, ot Transistria – followed dissolution of Soviet Union. But Ukrainian conflict stands apart because it manifests the last, decisive stage of the confrontation. Although the territory of the Russian world does not have clearly defined borders, its heart is Russia. Current conflict takes place in a dangerous proximity to it, on the territory of Ukraine which, at least its central and eastern parts, belongs to the Russian world historically (Kiev is “the mother of all Russian cities”, and Novorossiia includes historically Russian lands). Loosing this battle means to loose the whole universal war, because the next war will be on the Russian territory.

The role and place of Ukraine in this narrative is ambiguous. It is not a Western country – it belongs to the Russian world and it is not a nation or a state (“The Russian world, it includes, first, brotherhood. Second, brotherhood of nations [*bratsivo narodov* – N.S.], essentially, we constitute one nation. There is no Ukrainian nation. It does not exist. There is Russian nation [*ruskiy narod* – N.S.], Slavic tribes” (Int. 14, man, 1981)). Ukraine as a nation-state was artificially created, made up of different pieces glued together. This artificial, in a way liminal character makes it a potentially unstable territory which poses a threat to the Russian world in general.

Ukrainian nationalists are artificial, too. As opposed to the narrative of laymen, where Ukrainian nationalists were descendants of collaborators and Bandera’s followers in the past, in the militants’ narrative they were created by the West. In fact, even those first Ukrainian nationalists were created by the West (“Fascist Germany sponsored Bandera and Shukhevych efforts in building of Ukrainian nationalism” (Int. 14, man, 1981)). During “years of independence” Ukraine was transformed by Western influence: cultural and political expansion, money given by the West for the development of democratic values and institutions, direct financial support of nationalists. Contemporary Ukrainian nationalists, as well as Ukrainian state with its new government brought to power by Maidan, are nothing more than ‘pawns’, marionettes of the West in a global geopolitical game.

“Those Nazis [meaning Ukrainian nationalists – N.S.], they have nothing in common with Stephan Bandera’s ideas. You know, they are like contemporary Wahabis ... who have

nothing to do with original Wahabis sect ... it's a new movement, created in the depths of British intelligence service. It is a social engineering at its finest, it's a new approach to warfare" (Int. 13, man, ap. 1970)

"When USSR ceased its existence, Ukraine as a state appeared, and immediately the West started giving grants, a serious money to inflame interethnic hostility" (Int. 8, man, ap. 1970)

"This war is a crime by itself, because it is a fratricidal war. Which was ignited by USA and Europe. Seven years ago the article appeared in the internet titled 'USA will overcome the crisis due to the war of Ukraine against Russia'. ... We can see the consequences now. (Int. 6, man, 1961)

In some variants of this narrative Ukrainians are represented either as "stupefied Russians" who can be brought back to the Russian world, or as an "other ethnos" developed as a result of Western influences. Depending on how much the Ukrainians are lost for the Russian world we have different definitions of the war. If Ukrainians are still Russians, this is a civic war where "Slavs kill Slavs" (Int. 13, man, b. 1976), insinuated by the West with the intention to make Russians kill each other and thus to weaken Russian World. If Ukrainians represent a different ethnos, this Donbas war is an ethno-cultural war – "metaphysical war, because worldview of those people who support Russia, it is radically different from the worldview of the people, who support contemporary Europe" (Int. 28, man, b. 1967).

Novorossiia appears in this narrative situationally and plays secondary and supplementary role. Usually it refers to a particular territory – sometimes it appears as a synonym of DNR and LNR, sometimes as a territorial unity existed before Ukraine artificial state appeared ("Novorossiia occupied the territory from Ternopil to Azov sea, it was Novorossiia, not Ukraine" (Int. 8, man, ap. 1970)). As an aim of struggle, Novorossiia sounds too narrow comparing to the Russian World and its initial territories: "We should not decide on Novorossiia only. We should talk about Kievan Rus' in general. I mean imperial cities: Kharkiv, Odessa. Why only Novorossiia? Why should we give up our positions?" (Int. 13, man, ap. 1970)

Narrative of laymen is based on the idea of continuation and finalization of the past event – the Great patriotic war. Novorossiia in their narrative appears as articulation of a necessity to see the future for the people who live in a situation of an ongoing conflict. Militants also live in a situation of an ongoing war, but most of the time this war happens in their imagination. The war is the way they see the Russian and global history and the world around them in general. Their narrative is based on presentism: the war between the Russian World and the West has been already lasting since the beginning of times and will be lasting forever in the future if militants continue their mission of protecting the Russian world. For somebody for whom the war represents an authentic experience in itself, who "came to help" and was free to leave any time they want this timeless perspective and the absence of the need for the formulation of any project for the future seems understandable. Their disposition does not make militants fight for the sake of the better future or idealized past – they make them just fight.

Activists and the Dream of Novorossiia

Combatant career of activists is typical for Russian citizens (two women and four men, aged between 23 and 49). They share two characteristics: the privileged social background—they all came from soviet middle-class intelligentsia families—and a specific political experience. Privileged social background and material stability during childhood

provided the representatives of the activists' career with substantial cultural capital: all informants reported that their preferable activity during childhood was reading, they had extensive libraries at home as well as an access to variety of afterschool activities. Although both men and women in the sample chose their specialization following their own interests (art, philosophy, science, history, law), men graduated from universities, while women received only vocational secondary education. None of men in our sample did obligatory military service which can be seen as another sign of their privileged social position.

At some point of their lives, all activists were closely connected to various oppositional political groups and participated in various political events. Political development of the representatives of the activists' career followed a path from enthusiasm and belief in efficacy of political actions to disappointment and disenchantment. As a result, on the eve of the war they shared specific worldviews: they prioritized ideal values (e.g., social justice, personal heroism, devotion to the cause, contempt for bourgeois wellbeing, consumption, and personal success) over banal and material concerns. The Donbas war was seen by the activists as an opportunity to overcome their frustration with both the inability to pursue political changes and a life deprived of heroic meaning. They had similar political views—a mix of nationalist, leftists and anti-western attitudes—and considered themselves to be in opposition to the Russian political regime and President Putin (as the latter, from their point of view, never advocated enough for Russian interests at international arena).

In activists' narrative Donbas war is a local conflict. "Fascists" represented by Ukrainians who support wrong ideas and share wrong values and who, because of that, intent to destroy local Russian speaking population. Activists want to stop them from doing that. The main conflict between "fascists" and activists is ideological. But it is not the only one goal of activists: they are motivated by the possibility to finally bring into life their ideas and ideals, not only through participation in the armed conflict, but also by investing their efforts in creating Novorossiia – a dream-country embodying all the political ideals they were not able turn into reality in Russia.

The narrative of activists has much more in common with temporal logic of nationalist myth than all other narratives. It is based on the idea that an ideal world is possible. It was embodied, for some of them fully, for others only partially, in Soviet past, but after its dissolution it was lost. In current conflict they saw the opportunity to create this world anew, now under the name of Novorossiia.

All but one activist who was born before the collapse of the USSR paint their childhood years it as a happy and cloudless time. They tell about their "ordinary Soviet families", "an ordinary Soviet childhood" in a nostalgic manner: "A well-to-do family. My grandfather is a war veteran, my grandmother is a chemistry teacher. In general, well, a standard, decent, good Soviet family. Happy childhood, ice-cream for a penny" (Int. 3, man, 1982). The women, born in 1991, explained that her adherence to the Soviet past came from reading and talking with representatives of the older generation: "I often heard 'in our time'. I always wanted to ask: tell me, how it was in your time. So, the Great Patriotic war, five years plans, pioneer and Komsomol detachments – all was interesting for me. I had a craving to read about it. Then, of cause, I had a craving to repeat" (Int. 10, women, 1991). USSR as an ideal of social justice appears in some narratives of laymen, but for activists not only that is important. USSR was not only a happy place from their past, experienced or imagined through reading, it was not only a just society based on anti-capitalist values – it was a world with "something you

can believe in” (Interview 3, man, b. 1982). Dissolution of Soviet Union destroyed it. For those who pictured USSR as a lost paradise the it means a collapse of values of social justice and high moral standards (scholarships for students, decent salaries, stability, the absence of a “consumer attitude to life”, “more [than things] books were valued” (Interview 16, m., b. 1973), etc.) and transformation it into a “stinking swamp” (Interview 16, m., b. 1973) where people value only money and things. An anti-communist who at first welcomed Perestroika became suddenly disappointed by the collapse of a single country into small states, “small nationalists [*malen'kie natsionalizmiki*]” (Interview 5, m., B. 1973). But besides all contradictions in views all activists describe dissolution of the Soviet Union as a moment when they suddenly understood that something was lost and what replaced it was much worse.

After dissolution of USSR the lives of activists has been changed too: it lost its meaning because in the world around them there were no more place for ideals. Many of them was associated with different left-nationalist groups, and those who were born later were active participants of National-Bolchevick party. But all of them by the year 2014 were almost sure that they would not have a chance to fulfill their ideals and vision into life. This is how one of activists described his mood: “And you understand, that even if you are a good person, even if you have talents, if you can’t fulfill them you throw away your life [*prozhil zhizn' zria*], as well as others did. But the others did that without understanding, and you – with understanding, but with no result” (Interview 16, m., b. 1973). Donbas conflict gave them that opportunity, as well as a chance to feel themselves and to act as heroes. In this narrative WWII represents not a stage in the metaphysical war between West and Russian world and not as an everlasting event of contradiction between good and evil. It is something which happened long ago – a chance activists were deprived with because they were born too late:

“So, you see, well, in general, the war, in our, Soviet children’s, understanding is something that happened once very long ago. There are special people – the veterans – who wear their military medals on holidays and not only. So they wear their trackies and claim that they know what the war is. But at that time [in our childhood] nothing like that happened in the world ever more. ... and suddenly this [Donbas war] has happened – this is very interesting” (Int. 5, man, 1973).

In this narrative WWII cannot be repeated, because continuity of time was broken, “out of join”, in 1991. Descendants no longer inherit the fate of their ancestors – nor do they inherit their fame. They must perform their own feat, proving that, unlike the mediocre crowds surrounding them, they are capable to follow high moral standards they believe in. This is why the ancestors in the narrative appears as someone who are waiting and blaming: “... his [grandfather's] photograph was in my room, and ... this fact, well, it largely influenced my decision to go to war. His orders and medals. Well, it seemed as if he really looked at me” (Interview 3, m., b. 1982). Participation in war itself is considered not just as a duty, but as a test: “... it was especially scary – what if I will be terrified? Because the worst thing for me was to show myself as a coward” (Interview 16, m., b. 1973)

Participation in the war conflict in Donbas turns out to be a chance for activists to “change the world for the better” or at least “not let bad people make it worse,” as one of the informants says, that is to preserve in an imperfect world something that responds to the ideas of informants about how the world should be arranged:

“Well, for any normal person, the existence of fascism, Nazism on the planet, anywhere, is generally unacceptable. ... there are no good wars. There are bad wars and worse. And

this one too. If you tell the whole truth, it's not at all heroic and not at all inspiring. On the other hand, the alternative to this war is even worse. I understand perfectly well that there is nothing here to be proud of. We do not make the world a better place. We are just trying to prevent it from getting worse. If we leave [Donbas], there will no locals left pretty soon." (Interview 16, m., B. 1973)

Since serving the idea is a moving force in the narrative, heroic motive of saving of local population appears here framed as a part of this fight: people with wrong ideas ("fascists") want to cut out locals. As one of informants said: "I understand that we are killing the intelligent people who, being like us by the will of fate in history found themselves on the wrong side. Whose brains, whose moral turned out to be undeveloped" (Interview 16, m., b. 1973). Saving locals means not to give the wrong idea to win. In the next quotation this motive of "fighting for the idea" appears even in a more obvious way: in this imperfect world somebody want to take away a last hope for the better – the idea of a Russian world – and this is why activists join the fight:

"(In response to the question of why people from the Ukrainian SBU switched to the side of pro-Russian combatants) Well, these were people who considered themselves to be part of the Russian world. So Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin cannot explain what the Russian world is, it is for him such a word that he trumps, for him it is some kind of political brand. He does not think about what lies behind this world. But the Russian world exists (laughs), there are people for whom it is the homeland, is the only possible reality in which they can live, in which they want to live. And they decided to take this reality from them, as a matter of fact, and those people were exasperated by it, and they went to fight. Really fight for what they believe in. For the Russian language, for Pushkin, for the sailor *Koshka*, yes, for that very reason." (Interview 5, m., B. 1973)

Defensive motives like "helping the fraternal people" and protecting the "Russian world" go hand in hand with the creative ones: to make a dream of ideal world become a reality. This is where the image of Novorossiia arises. The same respondent, whose words about the liberation of Ukraine from Nazism were quoted above, says: "Here, at least in the [name of non-state armed group], we all fight not for the bite called "Lugansk Region", not for the bite called "Donetsk Region", they are fighting for Novorossiia, and not just as a small republic, but as a prototype of the great future of Russia" (Interview 16, m., B. 1973). Novorossiia in this narrative embodies a state of perfection which is defined very vague and filled in accordance to particular political views of those who fight for it. For them, it was impossible to build this perfect world in Russia (and, as activists figured out later, in Donbas too because of active Russian involvement) because Russian state always opposed any attempts to do it. Thus, activists had a hope that Eastern Ukraine can be an empty space, free from any state and its repressive power, where bringing a dream into reality would be possible:

Well, why many people went to the Donbas – the idea of Novorossiia itself, it's clear that it was utopian, that ... there was still some little hope that it's possible to create some kind of island, an island of true freedom, free from that ... from this system, to create something new. Here. Without, roughly speaking, the oligarchs and capitalism. ... The kingdom of God on earth." (Interview 3, m., Born 1982)

Conclusion

In this article I addressed the role of ideology in Donbas war through the analysis of narratives and social trajectories of anti-Kiev combatants. They made sense of their involvement through using "common words" – empty signifiers, such as Novorossiia, Russian

world, and Great patriotic war, which connect their narratives to the discourses produced Russian state officials, media and leaders to justify Russian involvement in the conflict. However, I show, that although combatants use the same words, they invest them with different meanings: different if we compare those narratives with each other and if we compare them with narratives which support empty signifiers on the level of the doctrine.

When there is no words – for example, an articulated political program – for describing actual experiences and future goals, “common words” replace the possibility of indigenous language: in laymen narrative Novorossiia stands for a vague idea of a possible resolution of a conflict, in activists’ narrative – for unrealized project of a better society. In both cases Novorossiia does not belong to people who use it – it is alien to them. And in both cases it operates as an empty form, a vessel, which can be easily filled with any meaning. When there is a name for the future, we can use a name instead of creating a program – and this is exactly what happens: the word, an empty form, dominates and replaces the meaning. Laymen, who fight for their future, have only a vague feeling of what that future can look like, and activists, who fights for the dream, as well have only vague image of it in their heads. That makes common words stronger, and a meaning weaker. Finally, when the signifier is an empty form, it is easy to appropriate it and to manipulate it. “Common words” create an illusion of a common cause which unites people who have nothing in common, and makes them believe they do. Ideology, which relies not on the coherent narrative, but on parasitism of empty signifiers, creates the same illusion for states and people, making different actors to believe that they belong to something together.

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