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#Euromaidan and its Europeanness in the Ukrainian Maidan (2013-2014). The discourses of Maidan's different political and media actors on European values

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Abstract:

This paper explores the different political and media actors' discourses on Europeanness and on the European values during the Ukrainian Maidan (2013-2014). Arguing that the utopia vision of Europe played an active role in the protests, the author analyzes specific examples of European values, defined by the protesters and their demonstrations. The author concludes that Maidan wanted to show its "European" multinational and gender-equal nature mainly in contrast to Russia, which is depicted as less cultural and civilized than Ukraine and Europe. As for the LGBT question, it became the main hostage in the media war between Russia and Ukraine, and was put on agenda "by default".

Key words: Ukraine, Maidan, Europeanness, discourse, Russia, LGBT

Introduction.

The topic of the current paper was inspired by the recent events in Ukraine and particularly by the Ukrainian protests, called Maidan or the Revolution of Dignity in 2013-2014. Initially followed by Viktor Yanukovich's refusal to sign a trade agreement between Ukraine and the EU (European Union), the protests started in Ukraine on 21 November 2013, originally known as Euromaidan, under the label "For a European Ukraine".

My paper offers an overview of political discourses on Europe, Ukraine's belonging to the "imagined European values", as well as organizational uses of social media during and after Maidan (2014-2015). Women's and LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender) rights are also linked directly to the discussions about the Europeanness of the Maidan movement, as it was one of the main disputes between the trade agreement opponents. The pro and anti-Maidan split into two camps: "Decadent Gay Europe" as initiated by Russian government and the Ukrainian "Europe with Gays".

The main questions are as follows: which types of the discourse on European values, Ukrainian political elites, as well as protestors, used in order to define their Europeanness? Which values (gender equality, social order, justice, gay marriage, etc.) are defined as "European" by Ukrainian new political elites and protestors during Maidan? Which themes, styles, arguments, symbols and artifacts were used? Which of these values endure, which have faded away or become superseded now, during the "after-Maidan period"? Does it include the LGBT and women's rights in the Ukrainian vision of Europeanness? How the theme of Europe was related to the perceptions of Europe and self-images held by new elite?

In order to answer these questions, my methodology will be based primarily on observations, interviews, polls and content analysis of different social media, particularly #Euromaidan, Eurointegration sites, Facebook groups such as BabaKit and StraiKplakat. The use of Facebook is also quite explicit, as it is international and Western-oriented use of social media in Ukraine. Social media are the important source, as it quickly emerged as the primary means for circulating information, commentary, creative work and appeals to action. Social media also allows us to analyze the Europeanness of these sites, often politically incorrect and transgressing the political correct rules, they allow to analyze and to "measure" the Europeanness.

The "imagined" European values are my primary target as they show the signs of "new European society in Ukraine". Articles, interviews and posts boast Maidan's multiculturalism, tolerance and generally a more "civilized European society" in Ukraine. Does it reflect the reality of the Ukrainian revolution? The European discourse is articulated by

the variety of different actors who do not necessarily constitute an organized movement. As it is often impossible to track the discourse of organized groups, I used the shared interpretations of Europeanness. This approach allows me to capture this discourse, which is often neglected in the academic literature because of its ambiguous nature.ⁱ

Stolen Europe.

Given the variety of ways in which “Europe” can be defined, it is not easy to see the Europeanness from the protestors but also from the EU side. Which Europe Ukrainian protestors mean and use in their discourse?

When asking about Europe, as the spatial place, both Maidan and Antimaidan protestors defined three “West(s)”: “almost an ideal place”, “good place, but not ours” and “sneaky enemy” (Minakov 2013, 61). The first, “West as an ideal place” is seen as the ideal life for Maidan protestors. Among the most positive moments of this “idealized West”, the following features have been mentioned: universal fair justice, fair education, social justice as well as the high revenues (Minakov 2013, 67). This idealized West is associated uniquely with Europe, as a “cozy home”, while the USA is seen as a “hard power who can protect” (Minakov 2013, 67).

In these interviews, geopolitics is seen as the primary decisive agent for the destiny of the Ukrainian state. Ukraine is seen as the hostage in the big chess game, while her future is decided by EU countries, Russia and the USA. Ukraine is seen as “a place” which is able to drift either to Europe or to Russia. This aspect is primordial also in posters and in the discourse of Maidan participants, when Ukraine is often seen as torn between Russia and Europe. Europe is displayed as the passive actor (mostly Angela Merkel) trying to negotiate with Vladimir Putin, who is caricatured as a terrorist or an aggressive devil. While other European countries, such as France, Hungary and Greece are displayed often as “Putin’s useful idiots”.

The belonging to Europe is seen as a historical or ideological factor: historical because “we have always been there”, “we are a part of Europe” and ideological because “we are European because we share European values” (Minakov 2013, 68). The USA is seen as a part of the West, but is not European. For the interviewed it is rather the place to win money without idealizations which persists in the description of Europe. As Minakov notes, none of the interviewees expressed the ideal of a “cozy home” towards the USA. (Minakov 2013, 68).

Besides the USA, Ukrainian protestors distinguish “other Europeans”: 1) “our former neighbors” (post-communist countries), 2) Western Europe (Germany, France and Britain with neutral-respectful tonality), 3) the South in crisis (Italy, Greece and Spain (countries which complain about EU), 4) Scandinavian countries (positive attitude, countries with a real socialism) (Minakov 2013, 68).

Ukrainian official discourse was, however, quite confusing for outside observers or “remarkably consistent in its inconsistency” (White 2014, 136). However the Euromaidan discourse that “Ukraine is an inherent part of Europe” did not come out of the blue, it has solid roots in the Ukrainian society, often neglected by the political parties and leaders. Stephen White argues that Ukraine’s discursive field over the past two decades has been structured by the following discourses: “Ukraine as Europe”, “Ukraine as Alternative Europe” and “Ukraine as part of Greater Europe” (White 2014, 136). The Maidan’s discourse, “Ukraine as a part of Europe”, is traditionally centered on the idea that Ukraine historically belongs to Europe and is fundamentally different from a non-European Russia. This discourse contains few cores which include: the distinctness of Ukrainian culture and language, old Ukrainian history with the traditions of sovereignty and of independence, such as the period of Kievan Rus, the Cossack era and the period of Habsburg rule, and the European legacy of Western Ukraine.

This discourse implies that Ukraine is inherently a European nation, it had deviated from its natural path because of the external factors: stolen by Yanukovich, as well as previously by Soviet and by contemporary Russia. Ukraine’s belonging to Europe is not only implied by its geographical location but also its adherence to European civilization. A wide range of “civilizational” elements differ Ukrainians from Russians: from the recent comments eating with fork to calling Russians and anti-Maidan Ukrainians “vatnyk”, which means literally “head full of wadding.

This discourse is constructed through the constant reiteration of its difference from Russia, as well as proving the Ukrainian genuine ancient culture and its belonging to Europe. Some of the Maidan posters are the evidence of this popular belief showing the comparison between Ukraine and Russia: “Who was first?” with the image of old city of

Kiev and the wild forest for Russia. This poster undermines that the Ukrainian civilization is more ancient. In this sense, Europe is also an ideologically charged geographical term, suggesting a region culturally superior to Russia.

Showing Maidan's Europeanness.

If the Europe as an idealized place is quite explicit for Ukrainian protestors and in the posters, what about the European values? How do the protestors define them? Which of these values endure and which fade away?

European values have been a topic for debate among scholars. From the EU side, at least membership was a matter of values and practices, not simply of location, but which values and practices and who should decide if they were being observed or not? (White 2014, 6) The EU treaties (the Rome, the Maastricht and the Lisbon treaty) remained very vague about the values and principles. In the Lisbon treaty there is a reference to "the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities", but they remain general and intangible.ⁱⁱ

While monitoring and analyzing the posts of the Maidan protestors, the following values became the main demand: social justice, equality, not-corrupted state, the rule of law, civic order and fair universal justice. In interviews, as Minakov emphasizes, protestors had troubles with defining what it meant for them to be European. In most of the cases they mentioned it as the private responsibility for acts and the civic order (Minakov 2013, 68). The purpose of the EU integration faded away as a primary motivation; however, "Europeanness" remained as a discursive tool instead.

Social justice and civic order are the most common demands of the Ukrainian protestors, as Jennifer Dickinson argues the notion of social justice became tied to abstract notions of European-style democracy (Dickinson 2014, 87). Europe is often presented as a socially just space, where civic order reigns. The order becomes the most important "European value". To be European is to be civic; a lot of posters and images invite people to clean up after themselves, to park correctly and not to give bribes. Protestors used the shaming images and other forms of restorative justice, such as "the country changes and you still park as a bastard", which submerged the social medias. Another poster shows the crowd bringing the garbage to the garbage bin. This poster tries to shame users inciting them not to litter. The absence of civic order is seen as the main obstacle to Europe. Many users complain that "how can Europe take us with this garbage and the mess around?" In search for absent order, in some degree, Maidan became "an idealized social space of cooperation, caring, equality and justice" or the substitute of it (Dickinson 2014, 90). The absence of infrastructure and of civic order generates the feeling, commonly shared, that Ukrainians do not merit being in Europe. Democracy, freedom, human rights and dignity seem to be more abstract to the Ukrainian protestors, that belonging to Europe starts from the individual level: "the country starts from YOU", slogans claim, or "the country changes and you?".

Protestors used the tactic of the Europe/Russia duality, which expressively contrast each other. The main idea is to show the "civilized" (Europe) and "barbarian" (Russia) words while asking Internet users which world (civilization) do they prefer. Most posters show remote Russian regions with destroyed and muddy routes questioning "Do you want to live there?" The absence of infrastructure and rules is striking, while Europe is clearly put forward as a clean, ordered world with rules.

While most of Maidan share the same ideal of "imagined" European values, peaceful anti-Maidan movement recognized that Europe is "good but it is not for us" because "Europe will destroy our authenticity" (Minakov 2013, 69). Sometimes Europe is seen as the historical enemy, who destroyed and pillaged Ukraine. The radical Anti-Maidan answered that Europe and the USA use "our girls", "our natural resources" and "our brain" to enrich themselves, however the main fear is to lose the sovereignty as a state unit (Minakov 2013, 70).

Another topic is the Europeanization of Ukraine, which needs further research and investigations. The Ukrainian Maidan would not be possible without the slow Europeanization "from below" of the Ukrainian population. From 1991, the relative openness of the Ukrainian society, particularly compared to Russia, allowed Ukrainians to travel to Europe for work, for tourism or for studies. Ukrainians from the Western part of the country immigrated to Europe, mostly Spain, Portugal, Czech Republic and Italy. There is an extensive traffic of people, money and goods between Europe and Ukraine.

Olga Onuch describes the main profile of the pro-European protestor: they are mostly students and youth under 30 which protest for “EU ascension”, “global human rights”, “freedom” while older generation do it more for “economic security”, “visa liberation” or to live “in a normal European democracy” (Onuch 2014). Via the working, living and studying experience in Europe, Ukrainian youth, the most mobile segment of population, as well as Ukrainians of the West, became the Europeanizing agent in Ukraine.

Social media as a new soft power.

While the protestors determined the direction and nature of the protests, online media and social networks played a key role in the Maidan contributing to the “network battle”. There are three popular social networks in Ukraine: Facebook, VKontakte and Odnoklasniki. While Facebook is seen as English-speaking and pro-European network, VKontakte and Odnoklasniki are the alternative social network, originally created by Russian media holdings, using the interface in Russian.

Facebook was one of the most important tools to follow news and to organize the aide. Groups, such as #Euromaidan, #Euromaidanpress and #Automaidan were created to organize events and to publish news, interviews, commentaries and videos. Before the Maidan, Facebook was in competition with Odnoklasniki and Vkontakte, which had been the most used social networks, the Maidan and the war in East Ukraine changed the situation. These events divided its users and provoked the virtual war in the networks. Called Maidan 2.0 (Wilson 2014, 68), the virtual battle split the users: there were more Anti-Maidan groups on Odnoklasniki and VKontakte than on Facebook (Yakovlev 2013, 74).

Facebook, to the opinion of experts, played the most important role in the mobilization of the youth (80%), followed by Twitter and VKontakte (Galushko 2013, 87). The most popular Facebook groups were #Euromaidan (27%), #EuromaidanSOS (15%), #Automaidan (15%) (Galushko 2013, 87). Some groups, for instance, #Euromaidanpress, were created to publish news and events in English in order “to be a bridge between Ukraine and the English – speaking world”.iii Moreover, new opinion-leaders appeared in the social networks, which are broadly followed and “liked” competing with traditional media.

Initially sparked by Yanukovich’s refusal to continue negotiations for a trade union between Ukraine and the European Union (EU), social networks replaced the traditional media and played an active role in mobilizing the thousands of protesters. Why was its role so important during the Maidan events? From users’ point of view, there was no single Ukrainian party in their “European” understanding, in which users could trust. The political offer is incomplete, which allows the social networks and its experts to fill the void (Galushko 2013, 88). This is why social networks got the highest trust from users to follow the Maidan (4.7),^{iv} more than news channels (4.6) and radio news (1.5), while the printed media got only the index of 1.4 (Galushko 2013, 87).

“Decadent Gay Pride” vs. Russian world.

In the background of the military conflict in East Ukraine, another battle quickly arose, the “civilizational” choice between the EU and Russia, was switched to another quarrel to choose between “European decadent Gay Pride” and Russian world without LGBT people.

The new Iron Curtain split Europe: from one side: Western Europe, based on homonationalism, with LGBT rights recognized and in some countries, gay marriages allowed, from another side: the Russian government promoting the “Russian world”, which is based on traditional family between a man and a women, and where LGBT community is excluded. In the war context, the LGBT question and its rights became the political hostage between Russia and Ukraine. Strongly debated in Europe, gay marriage became associated with the EU giving birth to myths and fantasies.

Russian’s views on Europe are still a wide and long-standing debate in Russia. In 2007, Putin emphasized that Russia in its “spirit and culture was an alienable part of the European civilization” (White 2004, 10) while claiming the opposite many times. Nevertheless, it is the gay issue, which became political with Putin’s promotion of “Russian world”, while the LGBT community were persecuted and “the homosexual propaganda” became prohibited. In protest against the homophobic legislation, the gay flag became a symbol of opposition in Russia and in Ukraine held alongside with Ukrainian ones.

The Russian government tries to discredit the European choice of Ukraine by sending messages to the public in order to link Europe with the pro-gay ideology. In Russian media Europe is displayed as the “decadent gay pride”, where gay parades are held the whole time, for instance, a Russian deputy, Vitaly Milonov, an eminent gay-fighter, commented on Ukraine's choice not to forbid the propaganda of homosexuality “is not at all surprising. All countries that are choosing to be loyal doggie on the doorway rug by the rich owners, allocated the corresponding functional - not to blather, stupidly follow the commands of European deputies, even the most delusional ones, and completely abandon the Christian values and the Orthodox self-identity”.^{vi} The issue was used by the former Ukrainian government too, when fake demonstrations in defense of the LGBT people were organized in order to discredit the European choice during Maidan in January 2014.^{vi}

For the Ukrainian new government and Maidan, the LGBT rights question became political “by default” when the Ukrainian side had to reply on Russian attacks, if even the LGBT rights were not primarily on Maidan's agenda. The main Euromaidan discourse was about the human rights, dignity and equality, but does it include the LGBT rights? New political right parties in Ukraine became the hostages in this battle, as they cannot be homophobic, because it means to be identified with their “right-wing colleagues” in Europe, as well as with Putin's Russia. The best illustration is when Ukrainian politician said that “it is better a Gay Pride once a year than Russian tanks in Kiev”.^{vii}

The claim that the EU asks for the same-marriage law to be adopted while signing with the EU is another wide spread fantasy. Previously, the Prime Minister of Yanukovych claimed that the EU asked to legalize the same-sex marriage in exchange for the visa liberalization regime with Ukraine. The Head of the EU Mission to Ukraine Ian Tombinsky had publicly reminded that The Association Agreement with the EU has no relation to the same-sex marriage issue.^{viii}

Moreover, for the sake of social stability political leaders in Ukraine postponed the LGBT issue and women's rights issue. KyivPride 2014, also known as the Equality March, was scheduled to take place in a very different context than that of the cancelled KyivPride 2012 and 2013, but Vitaly Klitschko, mayor of Kiev, refused to offer police protection for the participants of KyivPride2014 arguing that “I think that currently, when battle actions take place and many people die, holding entertainments events does not match the situation existing”.^{ix}

The war is also another excuse, which political leaders use to pretend that there is no time now for “pride celebrations”. It sheds light on the perception of the LGBT rights in Ukraine: that gay pride seems to be inappropriate and “not serious” during “the hard time of the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity”, as well as their perception as “entertainment” shows the lack of information about the LGBT community in the public sphere and media in Ukraine, except the vision of the scarecrow, particularly well presented by the Russian media.

However, members of the LGBT community were very active in the Euromaidan movement and fought from the beginning of the pro-European protests. During the Euromaidan, the LGBT people were welcome, as Adriana Helbig notes that “the collaboration of gays and non-gays positioned the Euromaidan as a perceivably homonational struggle” (Helbig 2014, 77). But in the same time the LGBT community decided not to fly the LGBT flag on Maidan. For them, it was no time to fight for their rights; they sacrificed themselves for the European choice of Ukraine. Ukrainian LGBT community hoped that the victory of pro-European opposition in any case is more advantageous to protect its rights and interests, rather than to keep the post-Soviet status quo, not to mention the victory of pro-Russian forces.

Conclusion

In one of Maidan's posters it was written: “In search for Europe, we found Ukraine”. This slogan reflects the current state of events in Ukraine, when its citizens discovered themselves Ukrainians. The physical Maidan faded away but the virtual Maidan goes on, in which millions of Ukrainians participate locally or internationally. The utopian vision of Europe plays an important role during this virtual Maidan and it is still an important discourse in the Ukrainian society.

This powerful vision of an idealized Europe shows the weakness of the Ukrainian political and ideological discourse, which cannot offer a clear political agenda, and this is why Europe fills the void. The “utopian” slogans and ideals of making changes are quite normal in the post-Soviet countries; Ukraine is not an exception here. It can be explained by the fact that Ukrainians have been frustrated by the politicians and they don't see another way to change things.

Another aspect of Euromaidan is its demonstration of multinational, multilingual, gender-equal and a more “civilized” nature, particularly compared to the “Russian world”. Protesters’ following values became the main demand: social justice, equality, not a corrupted state, the rule of law, civic order and fair universal justice. The wide-spread feeling of not meriting entry to the EU is also the lack of the knowledge about the EU and how it works. Europe is seen as a kind of idealized place, where everything is perfectly organized. Protesters used shaming tactics to incite Ukrainians to be more “civilized” and more European. Europe, as the clean and ordered world is compared to Russia, which is displayed as the chaos and the decadent civilization.

The LGBT community became the main hostage in the media war between Russia and Ukraine for European or Russian values. Ukrainian right-wing parties, being known previously for their homophobic rhetoric, have to moderate their discourse, as the homophobic discourse is now associated with the Russian world. In some kind, the LGBT question became political “by default” and put on agenda, but in the same time the gay prides seem to be inappropriate during time of war in Ukraine. The situation is quite ambiguous when the LGBT community is used as a scarecrow by both camps. However, I argue, this situation is the chance for the LGBT community to impose their rights as they become visual indicators of Ukrainian government’s will to adhere to European values.

While the LGBT community claims that their situation has become worse, I argue that at least their rights have been taken into consideration and were put on the agenda. At the same time, there are no debates about women’s rights and the situation in Ukrainian society. The situation is quite different for the women’s role in Euromaidan, women emerged as makers of the revolution, but they were put aside as revolution is perceived to be “man’s affair”. Maidan was full of gender stereotypes.

Whatever happens now in Ukraine, serious changes occurred and there is no way back for the new political parties. Once, Joseph Roth, a Galician Jew, wrote in 1924 when he travelled in Galicia (Ukraine): “it was when Franz Joseph reigned, and so it is today. There are other uniforms, other eagles, other badges, but the essential things do not change, as eternal mud, which reflected in the moon. Does Europe stop here?” (Wolff 2010, 389) The Ukrainian Maidan helps to understand the nature of European values in Ukraine, but not only. The fight for the social justice and European values is also a mirror test for Europe and its values, which Ukrainians try to impose on themselves to be accepted as a “European home”.

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ⁱ Most of academic literature focuses on the discourse of elites or the political groups. For instance, Stephen White analyses the discourse of elites and distinguishes three degrees of Othering: unconditionally European, Alternative Europe and Europe as a non-radical Other. See White 2014, 26.

ⁱⁱ See Charter of Fundamental rights of the European Union », Official Journal of the European Communities, 2000/C 364/01, http://europa.eu/pol/pdf/qc3209190enc_002.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Euromaidanpress. 2014. About. Accessed April 6. <http://euromaidanpress.com/about/>

^{iv} The scale from 1 to 5 was used. 1 is the lowest trust, while 5 is the highest.

^v Quoted in http://upogau.org/eng/inform/uaneews/worldnews_1364.html

^{vi} http://upogau.org/eng/inform/uaneews/worldnews_639.html

^{vii} <http://ukranews.com/news/103157.---.uk>

^{viii} http://upogau.org/eng/inform/uaneews/worldnews_619.html

^{ix} http://upogau.org/ru/inform/uaneews/uaneews_1198.html