

From one war to another: Ukraine facing Russia

By Florent Guénard & Thomas Vendryes

As Russia sets out to invade Ukraine, eight years after the Maidan Revolution and Russia's annexation of Crimea, Ukrainian economist Volodymyr Vakhitov looks back at the transformations Ukraine has undergone since 2014, and its relationship with Russia and Russians.

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Books and Ideas: Dear Volodymyr Vakhitov, eight years ago, you provided some insights on the political crisis that was then unfolding in Ukraine. As of the end of this month of February 2022, after months of escalating tension, Russia has invaded Ukraine, starting a military conflict that has not been seen in decades on European soil. We would like to have your opinions and thoughts on several aspects of this conflict.

First, you told us eight years ago that even if there were differences between « Western » and « Eastern » Ukraine, you did not agree with the idea of a linguistic and cultural divide. As of today, after the long-standing existence of two secessionist regions, the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk Republics, have these differences increased and gained in intensity? Have they torn the Ukrainians apart? And how do ordinary Ukrainians perceive these Donetsk and Luhansk Republics?

Volodymyr Vakhitov: Both Donetsk and Luhansk “republics” are not “true” republics in any political, historical or even legal sense. They are clearly Russian

enclaves, fully governed by Russia. They claim there is a "People of Donbass". There is not. There are no specific "Donbass culture", "Donbass language", or "Donbass traditions" which would be drastically different from Russian or Ukrainian ones. The largest irony is in Putin's claim that Ukraine and Russia "are essentially the same people", but still, for some reason, there are two supposedly different republics, DPR (Donetsk) and LPR (Luhansk). As both an ethnic Russian and Ukrainian citizen, I will not be able to tell the difference with "citizens" from these two regions. They are, plainly speaking, Russians who were brought to these territories in Soviet times, and who settled in the dwellings of those Ukrainians who had perished during the Great Famine (*Holodomor*, 1932-1933). Some crossed the border even before, in the XIXth century, when the entire area was industrialized (mostly by British and American engineers). Traditionally, these people have had strong ties with Russia. They were watching mostly Russian news, were completely fooled by Russian propaganda and hence, at some point, they decided that it was time to secede from the rest of Ukraine. However, something did not work. First, the "republics" are located only in regions where Russian is most spoken. Second, they never became a "showcase" of the Russian regime, since the most able people have left these areas. Those who did not have their reasons (for example, relatives who need care, or no other place to go, and not enough wealth to settle in a new place). The Donbass region is definitely in decline. It is getting old faster than the rest of Ukraine, there is no development in the fields of education, science or culture, and even manufacturing is on the wane. On the other hand, the local propaganda works, and it seems that the local population truly believes that Ukraine wants to kill them all one day.

And now we come to the notion "they". There are several "they" in L/DPR. First, there are retirees who are entitled to receive their pensions in Ukraine. Since Ukrainian banks do not have their branches or ATMs there, but money still goes into their accounts, they either come to Ukrainian cities themselves, or hire special people - "shuttles" who collect all their banking cards, cash them in Ukrainian banks and return with the money. The shuttles earn some commission on these transactions, and everyone is happy. These elderly people are usually quite spoiled by pro-Russian news, but they are old, and in general, it looks like the Ukrainian government tolerates that part of their money goes to people who earned their retirement in Ukraine. Then we have the "vata". The term, which translates as "cotton", comes from "vatnik", the filling that can be found inside the garments specifically designed for Russian prisoners. Both "vatnik" and "vata" can be used interchangeably, and denote a person who has "[Russian] cotton in the head instead of brains", i.e. those who are strong believers in Russia. They wait for Russia to come and "free" them. Some of them have

dual citizenship, they frequently go to Russia, have some business (mostly small trade), and are, in general, self-sufficient. Ukrainians despise them. Sometimes, they get stupid enough to come to Ukrainian territory in the hope to spend some money, but end up being arrested by the State Security Service. Then, we have a group of citizens who sit quietly in their apartments, or work in some remaining firms. They neither support Ukraine, nor are they staunchly pro-Russian. They simply want to live in peace and feed their families. I suppose they constitute the majority of the “republic’s” population. They probably could become the backbone of the Ukrainian regime if Ukraine had enough capacity to liberate them. Some of them cooperate with Ukrainian authorities, but most of them just live by. Finally, there is a cohort of local “elites”. They all have double citizenship, they almost openly steal a part of the money that Russia sends to the “republic”, and they are openly enemies of Ukraine. This is them who scream about “genocide”, but it is also them who set up four concentration camps in Donetsk, where dozens, if not thousands of people were tortured for their pro-Ukrainian views or just for their money and businesses (as the infamous “Isolation jail”, a real concentration camp / jail in the center of Europe). If Ukraine liberates the territory, these elites will be torn apart by their fellow citizens before they get arrested and stand before court. And, of course, there are Russians who were put in charge of the key ministries and firms, and set the agenda for the region in tune with Russia. They simply must be eliminated as war criminals.

By and large, Ukrainians seem to perceive the majority of the population in L/DPR as “vata”. As I mentioned, this is not true, since the majority of people just keep silent and don’t want to get in trouble with the local secret police (the MGB, or Ministry for Local Security). It is widely believed that once Russian support of these territories stops, the “republics” will fall apart within a matter of days.

Books and Ideas: Eight years ago also, you described the enormous Russian preponderance in the Ukrainian cultural landscape – whether in terms of books publishing, TV programs, etc. Have things changed since then?

Volodymyr Vakhitov: Yes. Ukrainian content is much more prevalent now. Partially because we now have a 25% Ukrainian quota on local radio and TV. Second, more and more young people are replacing the old Soviet population and simply do not understand what it has to do with Russia. They might speak Russian or Ukrainian, but they self-identify as Ukrainians, they listen to Ukrainian music, read Ukrainian books, watch movies with Ukrainian dubbing, and it has become a new norm. Publishing in Ukrainian has also developed a lot, as it is more difficult to get a Russian

book in a store than it was eight years ago. On the other hand, Russia is still a producer of an enormous amount of sitcoms, comedies, movies, and books (including some important translations that are not available in Ukrainian), so it is difficult to neglect this influence. What is important, though, is that many people have seen that it is possible to live and work completely in a “Russia-free” environment. They watch Ukrainian movies (which have started to appear, though some of them are of dubious quality), read Ukrainian books, watch Ukrainian TV programs, etc. I suppose this is what Putin calls “Nazism” or “nationalism” and cannot stand. Russian culture is becoming obsolete and uninteresting, it does not generate new meaning, and in recent years, it has become extremely archaic, with all these “traditional values”, including state-supported misogyny, the undermining of the role of women, the public condemnation of abortions and anti-LGBT discrimination, not to mention the cult of the Great Patriotic War (as the fight against Nazi Germany on the Eastern Front is known in Russia).

These topics are not interesting to young Ukrainians, while older people got used to the fact that whatever comes from Russia is mostly rampant lies.

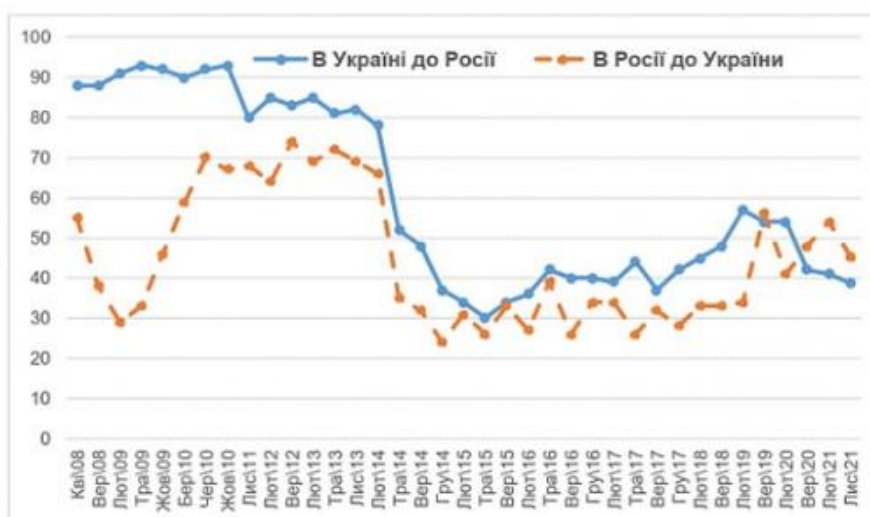
Books and Ideas: One of Putin’s main talking points is his insistence on the very deep connection between Ukraine and Russia, their « fraternity » - to the point where the former could never really be autonomous from the latter. How do Ukrainians themselves feel about this connection?

Volodymyr Vakhitov: Many people here believe this is just propaganda bullshit. Russians do not understand “funny Ukrainian dialect” as they call it, nor do they understand the culture, or the relationships between people here. Historically, Ukraine has always been suppressed by Russia. The number of times Ukrainian language was banned or restricted in Russia reaches several dozens, going as far back as the time of the Cossacks. Russia generates these narratives, as any Empire does, and tries to assimilate all people residing on its territory. Since Russian and Ukrainian are close languages, this “brotherhood” myth has become quite strong. I do hope it will be clear to everyone in the world now that bombing and killing your brethren in cold blood is not exactly the expression of brotherly feeling. We are different, and have become more and more so over time. All similarities arose in the context of the Russian and Soviet assimilation. Yes, we can laugh at the same jokes from the same Soviet movies. But after thirty years, our paths have significantly drifted apart, and it is very disturbing to observe that a leader of the neighboring state is in such deep delirium regarding a simple historical fact.

Books and Ideas: And what about this connection between Ukrainians and Russians from a personal point of view – I mean, how do Ukrainians perceive Russians as people, in a context where personal ties appear to be quite widespread, due to long-standing family and friendship networks?

Volodymyr Vakhitov: The chart below shows the dynamics of “good feeling toward thy neighbor”. The blue line represents the Ukrainians towards Russians, while the orange stands for the Russians towards Ukrainians. I believe that today, this number have fallen near to zero in all regions.

Графік 1. Динаміка доброго ставлення населення України до Росії та Росії до України



source: <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=1078>

However, there are family ties. For some people they are important, and they continue visiting their relatives across the border. For others, it has become a burden, especially after 2014, and many of them have never spoken to their kin since then.

Again, the feelings are quite primary: Russians were affected *en masse* by the propaganda that says we are all Nazis over here in Ukraine. Consequently, us Ukrainians don't want to have anything in common with them before they somehow cure themselves. Also, since Russians cannot stand up for their freedoms (whereas we could in 2014 and are doing this again right now), they are “weak” and “hopeless” and must be avoided. My personal encounters with Russians abroad are not quite pleasant either. They seem to be losing some basic culture and behavioral norms. Most significantly, they act as if they can buy anything. But I would say that the greatest crime of the Russian propaganda against its own people lies in the fact that these

messages - about the greatness of Russia, the pride in Great Victory of 1945 or the will to depict Ukraine as a “Nazi” country - has killed all humanity, especially empathy and the ability to show compassion, even to those of their flock.

Books and Ideas: Eight years ago, once again, you told us that Ukraine was a potentially dynamic and rich country, but crippled by corruption. Over the years, in the context of lingering and even increasing tensions with Russia, and a bumpy political situation, have things changed – for better or for worse?

Volodymyr Vakhitov: Large and swift waves of reforms in 2015-2019 have given hope that something can change in this country, that something intrinsically good can emerge. There was a huge reform of the banking system, with the National Bank to become truly independent and professional. There was a strong attempt at a reform in Health Services. We now have better access to medical services at the expense of the state budget. There were nice attempts to reform science and education. Universities were given more autonomy from the Ministry of Education, and schools were given new programs (“New Ukrainian School”) that use a more modernized approach. There is this phenomenal case of “Prozorro” (from the Ukrainian word for “transparent” and Zorro, of course), the state system of public procurement, which eliminated huge corruption agreements in large tenders. New people, professionals with long business experience, joined or even headed large state businesses (such as Ukrposha, the Ukrainian post, or the Ukrainian railroad system). Besides, we do have true, competitive presidential and parliamentary elections.

I strongly believe that official Russia, with its corrupted government and the same president for twenty years, its incredible level of inequality between the elites and ordinary people, and its trillions of oil money spent on palaces and Bentleys, really despises this country. In the last year, our average salary was slightly greater than in most Russian regions, without oil, gas or a “corrupted government”. I think it bothers Russia that we show a different way of life in a country whose population was once part of the “Great Soviet People”.

Books and Ideas: In your opinion, what could be Putin's interests in destabilizing Ukraine? Could it be linked with the democratization dynamics that has been taking place over the last years?

Volodymyr Vakhitov: I think, apart from what I said above, that this is all revenge for Medvechuk, a Ukrainian politician who is tightly connected with Putin’s

family (one of them baptized the child of the other, and this is considered a very strong tie, almost like a family bond). Medvechuk was temporarily jailed in Ukraine, which enraged Putin. On the other hand, Putin's model of governing has come to an end. He has used up all possible ways to extend his tenure, and he is simply afraid that if he steps down, he will have lost all his wealth, position and influence the next day. Also, he is a true offspring of Soviet historiography. He was fed the myth of three brotherly nations, Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, and he cannot believe that one of them turned out to be quite different. He projects a lot, and from his words, we may guess what many Ukrainians might expect if we lose this war. Whatever he said about torture, death and genocide will become true. It is a pity that the collective West prefers not to notice this reality.

Books and Ideas : Western countries have so far displayed a united front, and a strong willingness to sanction Russia for its invasion, with economic means – do you think their consequences (like, maybe, the fall of the rouble, constraints on trade and financial exchanges with Western countries...), might affect Russia, the daily lives of its ordinary citizens, or even jeopardize Putin's grip on power?

Volodymyr Vakhitov: Putin and his elites are extremely, extraordinary rich. They really don't give a damn about the sanctions. They already have whatever you can dream of.

Published in *booksandideas*, 28 february 2022.