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Ukraine

Freedom and Social Identity in the Donbas

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The past is the locomotive that pulls the future. Sometimes it is someone else's past to boot. You go backwards and see only what has already disappeared. And to get off the train you need a ticket. You hold it in your hands. But whom are you going to show it to?

â€"Victor Pelevin, The Yellow Arrow

I was born in Donetsk to a family in whose home there were two diplomas on the bookshelf: a factory furnace builder's and an artist's. The holders of these diplomas desperately tried to build their happiness on the ruins of a communism that might have been. But what seemed like temporary measures turned into permanent professions, and now my father is a taxi driver with years of experience, and my mom has been selling flowers for fifteen years. Earnings were laid away; I studied foreign languages, graduated from a lyceum, got into university in Kyiv, and then went to Europe to study. It is time, in my self-imposed exile, to reflect on where I come from and how to live with it.

The Donbas, where I lived for eighteen years and where my friends and family still live, has now borne the brunt of post-Soviet society's collective hysteria. And so I feel all the consequences of the conflict that has broken out in my country and that rages in the hearts of many of my countrymen. Attempting to analyze what has happened is primarily a way of understanding myself, this flimsy construction of memories, desires, and ideas that threatens to crumble with each new surge of emotions.

In the most difficult moments of internal fragmentation and rethinking, I remember what French writer Amin Maalouf wrote on this subject in his essay "Deadly Identities": "The identity cannot be compartmentalized; it cannot be split in halves or thirds, nor have any clearly defined set of boundaries. I do not have several identities, I only have one, made of all the elements that have shaped its unique proportions." However, I have trouble with my identity, and finding its advantages and positive aspects is a matter of survival and mental health.

Today, the line between absurdity and reality has seamlessly disappeared for a long time to come, obviously, and one spends all one's mental energy only on understanding the causes of what has happened. For example, why did the separatist movement turn from a marginal idea in the east of the country into the cause of a political and military conflict that has riveted the world's attention for several months? Why does the line of fire run along the borders of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions? What exactly does this line separate? Russia and Ukraine? Asia and Europe? The Soviet Union and the capitalist West? The best minds (and not only the best minds) in different countries have been strenuously and almost fruitlessly reflecting on these questions day after day, especially in Ukraine, for which the situation proved indecently unexpected. I won't hid? the fact it was a surprise for me as well, and for all the people in Donetsk I know.

Donetsk is a city that had always lived comfortably without any ethnic identity. It is a city of immigrants, ex-prisoners, and a totally impoverished proletariat that owns nothing but the strength of its own hands. Its center was never a church or town hall, and for a long time no public square was provided in the city plan for assemblies or celebrations. The heart of Donetsk was the factory, something terrible, dangerous, and unpredictable, and at the same time necessary, generous, and paternal. The factory and the mine played the role of idols and taboos: they gave life and had the right to take it away.

Self-definition was based primarily on the principle of "private property," which clearly divided the proletarianized city and the kulak villages long before these concepts were adopted by the Bolsheviks. The total opposites of the townspeople psychologically, culturally, and economically, the villagers spoke Ukrainian to boot. Few people

nowadays know (and usually just deny the fact) that people who spoke Ukrainian had also inhabited the region. The reasons for this memory lapse largely lie in the policy of collectivization, “dizziness with success,” and the famine of 1932–1933. My great-grandmother, a resident of the village of Chicherino in the Donetsk region, was one of three survivors in a family of eleven children. The first time she talked about what she had been through was at the age of ninety, when she was finally convinced the hammer and sickle had been removed from the village council building for good and the yellow-and-blue flag had been hanging there for several years. It was already her grandchildren and great-grandchildren to whom she told her story. She talked about executions and cannibalism, finishing her story with the phrase, “If only Stalin had known.”

According to those whose children and parents had died of hunger, none of it would have happened if Stalin had known. It is quite scary to realize it is the regions that were most affected by the man-made famine that deny this crime most furiously. I am not willing to support Ukrainian politicians who claim it was a genocide of the Ukrainian people. The people who spoke Ukrainian back then did not always think of themselves as a nation, but they did feel the land belonged to them and they held onto it until the bitter end. My great-grandmother’s family suffered not because they spoke Ukrainian, but because they did not want to give up their patch of black earth and their cow. It was easier to nurture the new “Soviet” man on this scorched earth, and it was not hard to convince my grandfather to speak Russian and be ashamed of his uneducated mother, babbling in a dialect alien to the mighty country.

I was born to a Russian-speaking family, but I went to a Ukrainian-language school (then one of fifteen in a city of a million people) only because it was close to home. I never cease thanking the heavens that my teachers were people with “double” identities who gave us the ability to think critically and try on different “folk costumes.” Thanks to our history lessons, Bandera is not a dirty word to me, but nor is he a guiding light. I was never faced with the question of choosing heroes and ideals, because I felt my future should not and would not depend on my country’s past. And the issue of countries never came up. I always loved the Russia “we had lost,” while contemporary Russia mostly inspired pity and disgust, increasingly causing me to try on the Ukrainian embroidered blouse known as “it’s not much of a democracy, but it’s a democracy all the same,” because it obviously fit better.

While I was wearing embroidered blouses, speaking Russian in Lviv, studying French in Kyiv, and insisting on my proletarian background in the company of European students, life went on its own way in the Donbas. When revolution began in Ukraine, I once again actively reconstructed my identity, organizing fellow citizens to demonstrate outside a UN building in Geneva, giving fiery speeches about my love for Ukraine, feeling I was needed, and also feeling guilty towards those who were risking their lives for our country.

Then one day some Donetsk friends sent me a video. A column of several hundred people with foreign flags and shouting the name of a foreign country march down Ilyich Avenue, where I was born and where I went through more than one stage of socialization. A woman at a bus stop ostentatiously displays her Ukrainian passport, which the marchers snatch from the woman, violently insulting her in the process. I can use bare facts, surveys, and other data to analyze why this happened, but I cannot get my head around the fact that it happened on my street.

As a native of Donetsk, what has surprised me about this situation is the demand of the regions to grant them greater economic and cultural powers. Over many years, not counting the Kravchuk and Yushchenko administrations, the Donbas received unprecedented subsidies, since the Donetsk and Dnipropetrovsk clans were in power. But the local bosses, who tirelessly chanted the mantra that Donbas money was going to feed the idlers in Lviv and Kyiv, pocketed the money. The region’s economy was totally controlled by the local authorities. What greater powers could there be to give? And to whom could they be given? To the same local bosses who all these twenty-three years, working like dogs, “raised the Donbas from its knees”?

They say each region should decide what language to speak and what heroes to honor. But in order to decentralize one fine day, it would be first necessary to centralize the country around a common cultural concept. Complaints

about excessive Ukrainization of the region not only do not correspond to reality, but contradict it. Ukrainian was more exotic sounding than Arabic in Donetsk: I never heard anyone speaking Ukrainian on the streets there. No newspapers were published in the language, and the local TV stations did not broadcast in Ukrainian. To find the books I needed on Ukrainian literature, I had to order them from Kyiv. The last step to de-Ukrainization was removing the Ukrainian flags from government buildings, which were the few signs of Ukraine's presence in its eastern lands. And the popular masses took this step to de-Ukrainization.

The Ukrainian project failed because it did not succeed in making the Donbas part of Ukraine over these twenty-three years. No unifying idea based on a vision of a common future, rather than on the historical legacy, on ethnic and linguistic identity, was found. So Ukraine lived for its heroic and tragic history of the struggle for freedom, while the Donbas was left to dream about returning to the Soviet Union.

The project of creating a "Soviet people" was a success in the Donbas, and now the hour has come to reap its fruits. The fact that the "Kyiv junta" is being warded off there with two iconic images simultaneouslyâ€"those of Stalin and Christâ€"should not be taken seriously. They are merely symbols, shells, talismans, and amulets. People in the Donbas are motivated by the honest desire, which no one makes any bones about, to obey someone who can embody the image of the "father" (or batya, in the common parlance).

Whence this desire for a strong hand? Increasingly, journalists provide a simple explanation: it is all because mentally, physiologically, and almost genetically they are slaves, sovoks (homo Sovieticus), irrational, and uneducated besides. I find explanations like this unacceptable. They render this gap almost biologically insurmountable, and doom attempts to find common ground to failure before they start.

First of all, it is worth remembering this society had no experience of building horizontal social ties. This chance was first given in 1991, but the criminal clans quickly took advantage of it. They grabbed the "strong hand" baton, leaving behind, in terms of social welfare, the working people, who were totally out of their depth and utterly discouraged.

A government that controls nothing, but instead shifts responsibility to its citizens, is a weak government. For example, many people in Donetsk consider democracy a weak form of government. Why are the local housing authorities dysfunctional? Why are there no light bulbs in the stairwells of residential buildings? Because all that has multiplied like rabbits is democracy and freedom, they think. Freedom turned out to be something no one needed, because it was confused with the liberty to do what you want and survive as you can.

Thanks to the experience of living in a European country, I became aware of the inconsistencies in this understanding of freedom. I once had to explain to a Western classmate the perennial dilemma of our society: the question of whether order or freedom was more important. He saw such reflections as something out of the Middle Ages, because for many Europeans it is evident that the freedom of each citizen is the sole guarantee of order. Freedom of choice and democracy are, in fact, the mechanisms that enable society to control those it elects to leadership positions.

It seems the Donbas lived until 1991, and after that it only survived and was more like a terminally ill patient. It was not only high salaries that disappeared along with prosperity but also the meaning of life, which had been based on a belief in slogans about the invaluable contribution of miners and workers to building the bright communist future. And then it was gone: the privileges, the confidence in the future, and the pride in one's work. Poverty is easy to manipulate, and the people who stated at every opportunity that "the Donbas feeds Ukraine" and that it "could not be brought to its knees" have secured a comfortable future for themselves at the expense of the region's population, who live below the poverty line.

All these twenty-odd years, people of the Donbas who had been born in the Soviet Union recalled it with nostalgia, reviving only the good things in their memories. My mother often recalled how there was such delicious fatty milk every day in kindergarten, and how she had been paid a phenomenally high salary for frescoes depicting athletes and cosmonauts on the walls the Mariupol House of Young Pioneers. Even queues for dish sets and rugs, and then for sausage and bread, were recalled as something bright, as a symbol of the people's unity amidst its misfortune. After all, almost everyone stood in queues for sausage, and those who did not stand in them avoided flaunting their wealth.

People are not looking for politicians who tell them uncomfortable truths. And the truth is that the coal industry has long been a loss-making dead end. The whole industrial structure of the Donbas has to be changed and the process of retraining the region begun: there are no other chances. It is not hard to guess that the population has preferred to be robbed, but consoled. In Orwell's anti-utopia 1984, there is the following passage: "[Winston] knew in advance what O'Brien would say. That the Party […] sought power because men in the mass were frail, cowardly creatures who could not endure liberty or face the truth, and must be ruled over and systematically deceived by others who were stronger than themselves. That the choice for mankind lay between freedom and happiness, and that, for the great bulk of mankind, happiness was better." Maybe those born in the Donbas can fully sense the meaning of these lines.

The Soviet-era rhetoric came back pretty quickly, while the standard of living increased very slowly: the population contented itself with the myth of the good life more than the real thing. My neighbors on the landing spoke with pride of what a pretty stadium Rinat Akhmetov (the oligarch and "boss" of the Donbas) had built, and how nice it was that the European football championship was being held in our city. They were genuinely happy, although they had no way of buying a ticket to any of the matches and had no idea who had footed the bill for building stadiums they could only look at from afar.

All reputable political forces in the Donbas persistently promised one thing: union with Russia. No one dared promise a return to the Soviet Union, but the descriptions of Russia were exact copies of a landscape from the lost Soviet paradise. In this fairytale Russia, everyone was equal, loved the motherland and the supreme leader, despised the rotten West, and belonged to the Moscow Patriarchy of the Orthodox Church (the real patriarchy). But most importantly, everything was stable in Russia: there was a normal life there without shocks and unnecessary hassles. Well yes, there were parasites there, too, who scoffed at the government and the church, demanding some kind of freedom, but they were quickly isolated from normal healthy society, thank God.

Honest naÃ¯ve citizens believed in this caricature of the Soviet Union. They took the flagrant mockery at face value and raised it on a pedestal as a national idea. This unimaginably grotesque amalgam of tsarism, Stalinism, National Bolshevism, Eurasianism, the cult of victory in World War Two, and Orthodoxy was crowned with the name of Putin, who subsequently betrayed the sincere faith of Donetsk's people.

I am faced with a lot of questions. First, how will these deceived people go on living if the twenty year-old promises of the Russian world do not come true? Second, how will those who never believed in these fairytales live alongside them? How can I return to my hometown? After all, my age-mates, who once waited outside the entrance to my building to scare or insult me for the fun of it are now toting machine guns and having fun the adult way. Who knows when I will get answers to my questions, when I will be able to live at home and not travel in search of gracious hosts willing to shelter me. Who knows when my parents will again find work in desolated Donetsk, where no one takes a taxi nowadays, and flowers are bought only for funerals.

Identity comes at a high price to us. Thousands of people have been killed, and one of the reasons is so that more and more Russian-speaking people in the country can say with confidence, "We are Ukrainians," not because we speak Ukrainian, but because we want to be free. People are not free if they do not want to know the truth and are

comfortable living in ignorance. People who began to think become free. That is why I want Ukraine to become free in the search for truth, which often hurts the eyes, but cleanses the soul.

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