

GROUNDWORK

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Everyday Nationalism
by Yevheniia Oliinyk

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Everyday Nationalism

By Yevheniia Oliinyk

How far-right movements may define the future of Europe – and how it's different and the same in the West and the East.

December 2017, Kyiv

Recently the leader of the German Social-Democratic Party, Martin Schulz, suggested that European countries should unite in a federal union – the United States of Europe. This, he insisted, could strengthen European integration and help to resist the rise of nationalism in such countries as Germany, Austria, Denmark, Finland, France and The Netherlands. The proposal was rejected by German conservative block as well as Germans themselves (according to the poll only 30 percent of the people support such political project). In the government Schulz's proposal was referred to as unrealistic and threatening the existence of the European Union. What was also mentioned was that at the moment people in Europe rather long for “the reliability that they believe they can find in national states”.

The concept is not new. In the recent years some European politicians addressed this concept, although it has never become very popular – rather the contrary, especially in the recent years. The current state of things makes the very name – the United States of Europe – ironic and ambiguous even in terms of semantics. It was the United States of America that used to be the place where diversity and globalization were celebrated and love won – right until last year when thousands of jokes about Trump's presidency unexpectedly were no longer funny (*The Yes Man* activists had to rethink their prank about the Trump Voting Machine overnight – imagine how upset they were). But the West should have been less surprised): earlier that year Great Britain voted for leaving European Union; and left the skeptics enjoy their witticism in all its bitterness.

As The Washington Post columnist Matt O'Brien wrote, one should never underestimate the power of status quo, which works until it doesn't¹. It seems that Western European society has spent last two years observing the consistent rediscovery of populism and nationalistic ideas not being quite able to believe this is really happening. We all, even here in Eastern Europe, being very busy dealing with our old fashioned post-soviet trauma and brand new war trauma, witness the struggle between those who proclaim the end of European Union and its values (and seem dangerously

radical) and those who mention the Enlightenment in every speech and clearly ignore the harsh economic challenges a lot of Europeans have to face (and seem very naïve about the changed world).

There are also pessimistic and optimistic views on how the 'specter of nationalism' will evolve. Some predict the end of post-WWII European ideals; some are convinced the far-right can only do as well as the center-right will let it². In France, for instance, the memory of collaborationist Vichy regime is strong enough to make the French want that period to be the last one when the far-right got the power – which also explains why Marine Le Pen didn't become the head of state.

But how well can historical memory deal with modern fear? In Britain hate crimes have surged to record-high levels over the last year – government figures show that more than 80,000 hate crimes were reported between March 2016 and March 2017. About 80 percent of them were racially motivated, researchers say. It is suggested that the increase in hate crimes was provoked by the Brexit, as well as the terrorist attacks in London and Manchester. Yet most of those responsible for terrorist attacks in Europe in the recent years had nothing to do with refugees, except that they were also Muslims. That appeared to be enough to fuel a powerful anti-immigrant movement across the Europe with all the walls on the borders being built and shelters for refugees being burned. The milder forms of prejudice included the ban of burkinis while swimming or lounging at the beaches in some municipalities in France and a 'jewelry law' that allows confiscating valuables from arriving asylum seeker to help finance their accommodation in Denmark. 'The resurgence of nationalism across the EU has become so powerful that parties from the political mainstream have been forced to tilt sharply to the right as well, often retreating from their core principles of tolerance, openness and diversity'³.

This 'correcting' shift, however, is not new. We all witnessed the awkward demonstration of identity politics in 1990's art, for example – in the exhibition, *The Magicians of the Earth* by Jean-Hubert Martin, traditional African art was showed next to the works of contemporary European artists without any consistent commentary. This year we saw it in at the Venice biennale, where Ernesto Neto turned Amazonian Indians into a living installation and Olafur Eliasson exhibited some refugees making lamps to make a living. Alain Badiou, one of those who disliked the concept of identity politics, criticized the 'human rights ideology' in his *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (a while before the term *Social Justice Warrior* appeared). His idea was that European excitement about cultural

diversity is hypocritical because its main rule is: 'Resemble me, so I can respect your differences'. Yet categorizing groups by their origin or culture is ultimately wrong, Badiou points out: 'There are just as many differences between a Chinese farmer and a Norwegian manager as between me and anyone else including me'. That is to say religion or political views do not define our differences.

The identity politics was a proclamation of the Western monopoly for the right to decide what's right for minorities and what's not – even if it was for the sake of human rights. All the European guilt, which Paul Bruckner described, is still very paternalistic as it doesn't grant the oppressed any responsibility for their life since decolonization. That idea was also very well depicted in a relationship of the refugee hero and a film director, who documented his story in *When Paul came over the Sea* by Jakob Preuss, who refused to be a silent watcher of human suffering but also didn't position himself as a savior. 'We all know the discourse that encourages us to give the voice to those who don't have it. It's impossible. It would be unfair to forget about the power I have when I shoot the film. But I'm not ashamed of it. I don't feel guilty for having been born in the country where I have those possibilities'⁴.

In this sense multiculturalism had no chances from the very beginning: 'the multicultural discourse with its policies of integration, assimilation and tolerance partially produced the opposite effect: a generation of young people who do not feel they belong, who do not wish to assimilate and who are not embracing either being tolerated or tolerate'⁵. And, I would add, a couple of generations who still judge people by their gender, religion, or color of their skin and media that has been producing cultural stereotypes for years.

What much less people think about when explaining the rise on nationalism is economics. The researches prove that the far right movement is most likely to succeed after a financial crisis. 'When people aren't getting what they think they deserve, they look around to see who's getting more than they supposedly should – and then blame them'⁶. Somehow that's almost never the bankers or corrupted politicians. It's much easier to blame those who are in spotlight – like immigrants who steal jobs (and never pay taxes) and simultaneously get government aid while doing nothing. Economic crisis brings inequality and unemployment, but also doubts globalization, technology (because wealthier and therefore better educated people benefit from it) and the power of intellectuals (because they are connected to the elite).

The rise of populism begins when there's someone who articulates the

common anxieties of the society; but doesn't propose any solid solution because it won't be easy or painless enough. Populists 'have no economic policies beyond an iconoclastic rage at the euro, free trade and foreigners alleged to be parasites on the welfare state. The new nationalism, in its radical rightist colors, has no credible solutions for a modern Europe that, despite all its troubles, must pin its hopes for a better future on mutual co-operation and an open face to the world'⁷.

Eastern Europe: "Refugee crisis" and compassion crisis

The ridiculous thing about anti-immigrant movement, which is the cornerstone of today's European nationalism, is that the most vigorously refugee hating countries have actually taken very few or none of them at all and in fact are not even refugee's final destination. The governments of Poland and Hungary have refused to take in anyone under a plan agreed by a majority of EU leaders in 2015 to relocate migrants from frontline states Italy and Greece to help ease their burden. The Czech Republic initially accepted 12 people but has since said it would not welcome more.

'This lifejacket was found, along with many others, on the beach of the Greek island of Chios. It belonged to a child on his or her way through the Mediterranean Sea. We don't know if he or she got to the shore safely or what happened to him or her. The only thing we know is that that child is not in Poland. Because we have not created humanitarian corridors. We did not offer help. This lifejacket should remind us of the lack of refugees among us', says the description on the real lifejacket that appeared in various public spaces in Polish cities during the project *Adopt a Lifejacket*.

Monika Vynchik is a performer and activist from Poznan and she is one of those who carries a lifejacket with her all the time promoting the project and explaining to people why discussing this issue is important. On another lifejacket somebody once pasted a sticker with the handwritten text: 'It's not true! We already have a million Ukrainians. Instead we should take back the Poles from Kresy Wschodnie (*the Polish name for territories of the Western Ukraine, Western Belarus and Lithuania which belonged to the Polish republic in the first half of 20th century*) instead!', she says. 'Here, in Poland, unfortunately, 'refugee' means 'terrorist' for many people', Vynchik admits.

Zygmunt Bauman wrote that for people in great need discovering others in even greater need may be comforting as it allows them to feel human dignity again. In 2015 a poll in the Czech Republic showed that 44 percent insisted that the government shouldn't spend any money to help the

refugees. The same year Slovakia claimed it would only accept Christian refugees under EU relocation scheme (the country was due to receive 200 people from camps in Turkey, Italy and Greece). Also a couple of years ago an email from the Hungarian national television network leaked; it asked journalists to avoid showing images of the children of refugees. Six months ago a poll showed that the majority of Poles would be ready to give up their 'generous financial aid from the European Union or leave the bloc altogether to ensure the country can shut its borders to Muslim refugees'.

'What's the matter with Eastern Europe? Just three decades ago, *Solidarity* was its symbol', wrote Bulgarian political analyst Ivan Krastev in 2015 ⁷. Twenty years ago, he explained, Hungary and its Eastern European neighbors were transitional societies, and some of them still are. Then, overnight, those transitional countries have become transit ones. And Eastern Europeans believe that they are the ones to be helped. 'Today, a more appropriate symbol would be a bumper sticker reading 'Eastern Europe: Where Donald Trump comes off looking good', Krastev ironized. In two years, describing Donald Trump's speech in Warsaw this summer, he wrote: 'It resonated with the very real fears of societies traumatized by the refugee crisis and the equally real prospect of a two-tiered European Union. (The irony, of course, is that Poles accept a vision of a planet wrecked by terrorists and sullied by migrants when not a single terrorist act has taken place in Poland for decades and there are almost no refugees within the country's borders.) But while Mr. Trump is right that we live in a dangerous world and that citizens should be ready to define their way of life, building a new identity of the West around the idea of a fortress under siege is a risky enterprise. America and Europe might find themselves in the position of the man who, so panicked by death, decides to commit suicide'⁸.

In 2015 Ukrainian media didn't stand aside global anxiety about refugees; although Ukraine doesn't have to take any of them since it's not in the EU. The main concern was somehow about the soundness of European culture and how the refugee crisis would influence Ukrainian chance to get visa-free travels to EU approved (the latter, in fact, had a lot more to do with anti-discrimination legislation which Ukrainian government adopted only after a couple of protests). It seemed that in a way Bauman described it, we comforted ourselves with the fact that Europeans hate refugees too. It showed that our intolerance and fear of nonexistent danger was normal and, actually, responded European values, whatever they used to be. Ukrainian media restlessly named countries that refuse to take refugees by quota, published stories covering failed attempts of assimilation, and wrote quite epic pieces about the death of Christian culture in Europe.

The news about a temporary refugee shelter in Yagotyn, small town near Kyiv, were full of colorful verbal images of 250 people who were supposed to come: from wild tribes to awful rapists. The people of Yagotyn told journalists everything they already heard about refugees in the news these journalists had made before.

A very similar hate speech could be heard earlier when a journalist wrote about internally displaced people from the East who left their homes fleeing from Russian military aggression that started in April 2014. It was transference, in terms of psychoanalysis: our trauma resonated in unrelated circumstances. At that time we struggled to comprehend that most of Central and Western Ukrainians knew just as much about Africans or Syrians as about Eastern Ukrainians – because through its history Ukraine was divided between empires and its industrial (traditionally considered pro-Russian) Eastern part was never as fancy as the (traditionally considered pro-European) post-Habsburgian West. The people of Donbass were strangers, and even worse – our strangers, and therefore traitors.

The amount of displaced people from the East was a much bigger challenge for the rest of Ukrainian society and Ukrainian government (and it still is) than any foreign newcomers. Then it was ironic how the media questioned the reasons why Syrian and African refugees left their homes, stereotyped displaced people from the East, and at the same time – kept shaming those who stayed in war zones or occupied territories.

There was a paradox of how Ukrainian media covered stories about the latter: on the one hand, Ukrainian soldiers were fighting ‘Russian mercenaries’ or Russia itself, and on the other hand, those who stayed where claimed ‘brainwashed’ and not patriotic enough to fight for and also responsible for the war because of their political views. In fact, the stereotypes about the fundamental difference of inhabitants of Donbass and Crimea (which was also occupied in spring 2014) are legitimized through official discourse. For example, the school history textbook, issued in 2015 and recommended by the Ministry of Education, said that the Maidan revolution took place everywhere in Ukraine except for Donbas and Crimea, which is just absolutely not true. As human right activist Maksym Butkevych pointed out, we took stereotypes we used to apply to foreign ethnic groups or ethnic minorities and applied them to our own fellow citizens. This is crucial for understanding the phenomena of Ukrainian and European nationalism. It is only a symptom of inner social trauma and proposes a plain world view as well as simple solutions that, unfortunately, never work.

Multiple Ukraines

In 2001 Ukrainian journalist and analyst Mykola Ryabchuk published a piece called *Two Ukraines: The End of Ambivalence?* which became paradigmatic. He described a simplified model of future lifestyles and values systems from which, in his opinion, Ukraine was choosing at that time. It was actually based on two types of identities dominating in the country: soviet and anti-soviet. The first type prevailed upon the other in the East as it was there where Ukrainian language and culture were repressed for years: first in the Russian Empire, then – in Soviet Union. In the West though Ukrainian identity has been tolerated more. ‘The metaphor of the ‘two Ukrainians’ in general gives a good idea of the two poles (geographical, ideological, linguistic and cultural), the personification of which can be conventionally considered Lviv and Donetsk’, Ryabchuk implies. One pole is a symbol of ‘Ukrainian’ Ukraine, EU and NATO oriented Ukraine. The second pole symbolizes soviet Ukraine whose allies are Russia and Belarus.

Ryabchuk admitted that such contradiction is, however, of ideological kind. ‘The ‘two Ukraines’ outlined are more abstract ideas than the expressive geopolitical integrity that really opposes each other. It’s easy to say that there is one Ukraine in Lviv, and another in Donetsk. It is impossible to say where that ‘one’ Ukraine ends, and the ‘other’ begins’. Yet this part of the text hasn’t become very popular.

The idea of ‘good Ukraine’ and ‘bad Ukraine’ existed in different interpretations until the Maidan revolution in 2014. After that it was, on the one hand, deeply revised, on the other, radicalized by some public speakers. It happened because after thousands of people moved from one part of country to another, usual stereotypes suddenly failed to categorize the reality, or – because some of us failed to develop new point of view. There have been almost four years of painful rethinking about the relationship between the Ukrainian East and the rest of Ukraine; and although the price Ukrainians paid for that dialog is very high, there’s hope that through new connections, and discussion, and mutual help we might find out what our identity is like apart from binary oppositions.

Still, a lot of Ukrainians continue living in occupation. And not just because they support separatists – they just might not be able to leave their homes or relatives. Here in the Ukraine we really should start thinking about reintegration of those communities whenever the war ends. But obviously some part of society is still not ready to accept those people as legitimate citizens of Ukraine; and the handy concept of ‘two Ukraines’ is responsible

for that too. The only thing that changed about it is geography: it's not Donetsk versus Lviv anymore; it's spoiled, unfixable Donbas versus the rest of Ukraine – mourning for those who were murdered during revolution, but strong, renewed, united, on its way to reforms and bright future.

So from time to time someone gets to say it, just like Ukrainian writer Yuriy Andrukhovych did: Ukraine should finally get rid of occupied territories as they have chosen their destiny themselves. This discourse is not popular and is often judged but still exists and has its fans. This is how the art critic Olena Chervonik describes the evolution of this idea in the book of essays by another Ukrainian writer Olexander Boychenko: 'Like in a cheap comic book, Boychenko's Ukraine, narrows down to two protagonists: a Donetsk miner – dumb, criminalized, aesthetically ignorant pilgrim, and a highly educated, conscious aesthete – a Westerner of the highest level of evolution. Perhaps it is from this point we must start unwinding this propagandistic nonsense? Not for the sake of arguing with Boychenko, but to not allow the social entropy to form [...] the indisputable foundation of Ukrainian xenophobia' ¹⁰.

That kind of discourse, multiplied by war trauma with all its natural fear and anger, creates perfect environment for miscommunication and zero tolerance to anyone defined as *the other*. And also proposes very few ways for culture to evolve and denies the complexity of historical processes that took place in different parts of the country. In fact, it proclaims the negative identity to be the only right one. What is Ukraine? Everything that Russia or Soviet Union is not – despite inevitable historical and cultural connections between countries and the whole soviet habitus we still live in because we don't know any better. The trick is, the denial of confronting Russian (which is often a synonym of soviet) values and identity is very similar to Russian denial of European ones. Hence Ukraine is not Russia, but that doesn't make it more of a European country. Our intellectuals keep fighting for the existence of Ukrainian cultural and political independence just like they used to in 19th and 20th century and forget they don't need to do that anymore. And rather than defending the concept of Ukrainian nation, they should think of the ways to modernize it.

Many believe that this crucial choice between the East and the West, between Russia and Europe, Donbas and Lviv (pick any metaphor) happened after the Maidan revolution. My parents who are now in their fifties, born and raised in Soviet Union, say it felt like Ukraine finally tore off the relations with Russia both in political and mental sense. And they are not the only ones to think so. Russia stopped being 'the big brother' to look

out for; and Ukraine finally, after 20 years of official independence, could present its own interests to the world. In the very beginning Ukrainians really stood out for European integration (the protests started as Ukrainian government decided to suspend the signing of an association agreement with the European Union and choose closer ties to Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union instead). But after police had beaten the protesters on 30th of November 2014, the rebellion became a struggle for human rights and rule of law.

And that was indeed the manifestation of European values in action: Ukrainians fought for democracy and dignity and everything considered to be the political and cultural achievements of the West. We didn't choose between two options, we tried to escape tyranny and going back to terrifying times where we, as human beings regardless of nation, were oppressed by the state. This urge was fixed in one of the names of that revolution – Euromaidan. It was used to mark the initial intentions of the protesters but later established itself in the language. Now, from the prospective of historical memory, it means that the active part of society finally made that crucial choice and chose to be a part of Europe by sharing its fundamental values and forming civil society. And the most important, wasn't the choice accepted by people, it was their demand.

The faithful spirit of the Maidan revolution united people of different ages, origins, classes, and political views. Yet very soon it became clear that since becoming a part of European society means defending human rights and embracing equality, we should actually start implementing those principles in our own society. And that was when the nationalistic movement rose.

It must be said, that nationalistic parties in Ukrainian parliament are marginal and their leaders have no real authority even for those who believe in nationalistic ideas. However, in 2014, as the conflict in the East of Ukraine escalated, the volunteer battalions appeared. Some of them have now transformed into far-right organizations making a stand against gay-rights and feminist movements in Ukraine, people of color, refugees, and everything Russian, of course. It was them that attacked gay-prides in Kyiv (and when the mayor's office finally provided police to reassure security last year, they chased activists after the march), them who threatened the presentation of Larysa Denysenko's children's book *Maya and Her Mothers*, them who confronted women's rights activists, them that ruined the exhibition of Davyd Chichkan in VCRC, them who sabotaged screenings of 'unpatriotic movies', like *People, who came to Power* by Olexiy Radynsky,

and them that attacked the Lebanese café in Kyiv, because the waiter talked to customer in Russian. The list, of course, is much longer – these are just the very recent cases. And yes, it was them that are literally never being punished for what they do – because their intentions are, of course, purely patriotic. And because nationalism is, in popular opinion, ‘defending human rights’ since it is opposed to soviet ideology that violated them.

What is worse, nationalistic discourse prevails in governmental policies and rhetoric although none of it is being officially claimed nationalistic. The most odious cases became kind of political memes. For example, in November 2015, under the constraint of the activists, Ukrainian parliament adopted an amendment to the Labor code that prohibits any discrimination, by gender identity or sexuality, in particular. After that Head of Parliament Volodymyr Groyzman found it necessary to reassure everyone that that doesn’t mean the country became any more progressive: ‘I’ve heard some fake news that there may be same-sex marriages in Ukraine. God forbid this happens, and we will never support it. We support family values’, he said.

The concept of family values is also very popular in discussing domestic violence in Ukraine. In Ukraine 39 percent of criminal justice officials believe that domestic violence is a private matter and 60 percent of them believe that victims sometimes provoke violence against themselves. Most of them also believe that 60 percent of domestic violence reports are false. Meanwhile it’s been a year since Ukrainian parliament refused to ratify the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence because its terminology ‘ruins Ukrainian identity’, namely words ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality’. Eventually, deputies approved the law on domestic violence in the first reading but decided to remove mentioned words from it and to work on other alterations along with the Council of Churches. This December they adopted the law without those terms and now there’s legitimately no such thing as gender-based violence in Ukraine.

No one knows exactly what these traditional family, values, or identity are but most politicians (male and as well often female) feel obliged to defend them. This is exactly what populism is all about: it proposes some phantom ideals that appear to be empty inside, with no clear concept, always wishing for the best, suggesting fast solutions, changing nothing.

The same populist methods are used in official cultural policies. For example, Ukrainian government gives about 18 million dollars from the budget this year for the production of films that ‘encourage patriotism’ (a lot of these movies have

already appeared in the last few years and one can only eagerly watch them out of love for Homeland as they resemble the worst pieces of Soviet propaganda). This year Ukraine banned the import of Russian propagandist and anti-Ukrainian books (although no legal mechanism for checking their content was introduced). The release of the Polish movie Volyn about the massacres of Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia in 1944 (clearly very pro-Polish with a lot of prejudice about Ukrainians) in Kyiv was canceled by Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for 'security reasons'. This all demonstrates how much we long for simple ways of making things better. The problem is that deep internal cultural, historical and social conflicts cannot be resolved in a year or two by prohibiting some words, books or movies. We need a complex strategy that requires effort and resources. However, long-term plans are never popular. They include self-improvement, not only plain denial of everything that seems to be wrong.

The rise of populism and nationalism are in some ways reasonable, of course. There's a lot of fear and rage in Ukraine, as well as in Europe right now. For us it is also a way to think of some 'third Ukraine', alternative option that is neither pro-Russian, nor following up the union that has an identity crisis and has values not fully accepted by Ukrainian society. War had a great impact on our ways of thinking in the last years and many of us have chosen to perceive the world as a set of binary oppositions, where friends and enemies are clearly specified. The need of a strong identity also has become crucial so we just implied the old patterns in new circumstances.

All these are emergency measures. They may be comforting for now but they don't propose any perspective, or any future project. It's just a way deal with the fact that we weren't ready for economic crisis, refugees or military aggression.

European Union and independent Ukraine are the same age. And they obviously are experiencing identity crisis due to global shifts in world's economic and social processes. For both of them the future project still remains unknown, they are grasped by drastic changes not knowing what they are anymore. The only thing that is clear is that Europeans (Ukrainians included) should still put the human rights first and realize that the denial of basic values is not a solution, it's just a symptom.

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FOOTNOTES

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Yevheniia Oliinyk

Yevheniia Oliinyk, 24 years old, was born in Kyiv, Ukraine. Journalist, cultural critic and illustrator. Yevheniia Oliinyk studied journalism in Kyiv Institute of Journalism, later gained a Masters degree in Cultural studies in Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. Her Master's Thesis covered the propagandist, political and cultural aspects of visual representation of the war in the East of Ukraine. She worked as cultural reporter for Kyiv Radio Liberty Bureau and since 2016 is a co-editor of KORYDOR, online magazine about contemporary culture. Yevheniia Oliinyk also works as freelancer for various media both as journalist and illustrator. Her professional interests are trauma and inclusion, human rights, historical memory, visual culture, and participatory practices in art.

