

Why do Ukrainian liberals hate the left?

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In another bashing of me by nationalist intellectuals, I was framed by one of them as a danger to the “dear cause” of the “Ukrainian nation-building project.” It may be interesting to reflect on any rational reasons they may believe so beyond irrational conspiracy theories.

It is quite obvious not because of what I write. They do not engage in substantial discussion with the arguments. They certainly do not care about the left-leaning part of my audience, from which they are very distant beyond any controversies about post-Soviet politics. The East European experts part of my audience is certainly capable of their own judgment. Whatever I could even possibly write, there are so much stronger forces in media and politics, making any imaginable “threat” negligible. It is certainly not what I DO threatens the nationalist “cause” but, I think, simply the EXISTENCE of me and the growing number of people like me.

For over 30 years, they were trying to articulate a very specific project of Ukrainian modernity and fight for its hegemony. The two most important components of this project are a rejection of the Soviet modernization (common for a large group of the post-Soviet intelligentsia) and, connected but autonomous, “anti-Russian” (not just non-Russian) articulation of Ukrainian national identity. These intellectuals were aspiring to draw an equivalence between everything “Ukrainian” (in their specific articulation) and everything modern, while on the opposite side, they were hoping to leave everything backward tightly connected with everything “Soviet” and “Russian” (in their designation). In effect, they were trying to reverse the symbolic hierarchy identifying “Ukrainian” with backwardness, which, as they feared, existed behind the screen of the Soviet internationalist project. Now, “Ukrainian” would be more and more young, metropolitan, cosmopolitan, fluent in English, stylish, mobile, liberal, well-educated, successful. The opposite side was supposed to concentrate more and more not of just Soviet or Russian-speaking but of old, conservative, parochial, rigid, clinging to dying industries, poorly or inadequately educated, bad-taste, losers.

This polarization does not require full homogeneity on the “good” side. After all, modernity is also about free rational discussion and challenging boundaries. Of course, fulfillment of Ukrainian modernity requires “Ukrainian feminists,” “Ukrainian liberals,” “Ukrainian leftists” - of our own specific kind of “Ukrainian” and among modern Ukrainian rightists too. Of course, there should be a discussion of the nationalist crimes during WWII (with compulsory disclaimers that the Soviets were worse). Of course, there should be concerns about far-right violence nowadays (with compulsory disclaimers that it benefits Putin). And so on, and so on. But at the critical moments, when these discussions could really matter politically and would not be just appeasement of “enlightened” conscience, all the red lines are strictly enforced, and one must get back in line. Or get in trouble.

This Ukrainian modernity project has been unsuccessful so far as post-Soviet transformation turned out to be not modernization but demodernization. Even Euromaidan, contrary to the nationalist intellectuals’ wishful thinking, did not reverse this trend but only intensified it. Zelenskyi’s landslide victory over Poroshenko was powerful proof of this. This is why the nationalist intellectuals still hate him so much, despite his real policies repeat so many of Poroshenko’s.

More and more people were coming through the institutions that were supposed to be not just springboards of vertical mobility but softly converting intellectuals into a “proper” Ukrainian modernity project. However, the ideological inculcation was not supported by the modernization of the country. The old Soviet modernity has been dying, however, the new one has not been capable of replacing it.

I am one of those many people who are so similar to them but still have not started to think like them. We share so much in biography. We went through the same universities, same fellowships, same programs, same civil society institutions, same conferences, speak same languages, and are still not “their own” in our hearts. But we can challenge them at the same forums as equals. An unwanted nuisance to their monopoly. Not really traitors to the imagined community project that we were only supposed to be “educated” in but the traitors of a really existing social group. “Class traitors,” not “national traitors.”

Here’s the real hate. We are also Ukrainian and modern but not like them. This is why not rational engagement but only denial, silencing, rejecting, canceling. You could write thousands of words against Russian imperialism; you could literally write “I hate Putin,” but you would still be “a troubadour of the empire.” You could challenge propaganda cliches, but you would still be a “propagandist.” Our intellectuals are not intellectuals. Our media are not media. Our scholarship is not scholarship but “political activism”. Political repression is not political repression. Threats and violence against us have never happened. We were simply not supposed to exist. We are not allowed to exist; otherwise, the specific articulation of modern and backward does not work anymore. Whatever we do, we just cannot BE.

We are potential embryos of alternative Ukrainian modernity. The one that defied the polarization of 2014. The one that can draw the modern-backward line in a very different way. The one that can continue the glorious, not shameful pages of the Ukrainian past. The one that can be more “organic” to what most Ukrainians feel now, the real Ukrainians, not imagined. The one that can fit much better the future trends, at least with what more and more young people around the world would prefer as their future. The one that can really lead Ukraine’s modernization.

This is why our sheer existence is dangerous. But we shall overcome because the future is ours.

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