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RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA MACHINE: NEW DIMENSION

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The focus of the present study is how a propaganda machine operated in the Russian Federation over the period of five months – from December 2013 to April 2014. Drawing on our data, we have evidence to suggest that ethnic stereotypes can be exploited as a powerful vehicle for inciting national hatred within a state and even, ultimately, for ruining the country.

Key words: ethnic minority stereotypes, mistrust, social responsibility, provocations, provocateurs, pseudo events

The present study on stereotypes is based on the media material from the Ukrainian and Russian sources applying semiotic analysis. The research is still in progress, but we wish to present a few preliminary results.

Stereotypes about ethnic minorities can, in our view, play both a positive and negative role. Prototypically, the notion of ethnic minorities evokes connotations of injustice and persecution, implications that the victims are not enjoying the same rights as the majority of the population (ethnic majority). Such implications, associations and suggestions of bias that are invariably present in societies often help promote a regime of 'positive discrimination', which is to say conditions of protectionism, support, financial and other kinds of aid etc. To redress this imbalance for minority groups, many European countries and organizations, for example, have launched and run 'positive action' programs for people from ethnic minority backgrounds.

On the other hand, however, the very same connotations of persecution, discrimination and prejudice can be used as a source of conflict or to escalate disagreements between these ethnic minority groups and titular nations, i.e. majority populations by fostering feelings of mistrust, suspicion, and even hatred and xenophobia. And these are precisely the kind of actions that we have chosen to address in the present paper. In order to examine them, we have analyzed media material from Russian television channels and social media.

In our case, we are talking about the exploitation of the Russian minority by Russian propaganda. The minorities in question are Russian minority populations in the Baltic states, Moldova, and Ukraine. Just a little background. The Russian minority constitutes 17 per cent of overall population living in Ukraine. This minority enjoys over 60 per cent of overall circulation of newspapers published in the country. At the same time, this ratio is even higher for magazines – it is as high as 80 per cent. The

stark contrast between these figures may not be immediately obvious, so to put it in another words, 17 per cent of population boasts 60 (and higher – around 80 per cent for magazines) of printed media titles published in their mother tongue. One would not have to go far to verify this. A cursory look at newsstands – even in Lviv, the epicenter of the pro-Ukrainian and pro-European sentiment – will confirm this figure. It is note-worthy that the *Playboy* magazine, which has long come out in major national lan-guages around the world, has a Polish and Russian-language version. At one time, the management of *Playboy* contemplated launching a Ukrainian-language version (this was under Yushchenko, eight years ago). However, the magazine eventually gave up on the idea of the Ukrainian *Playboy*, deciding apparently that the Russian *Playboy* and partially Polish, would suffice. A few years ago, one could see a Russian and Polish versions of *Playboy* on newsstands in Lviv. Now, however, one can hardly find a ver-sion of this magazine other than Russian. And note please that this is not about Central Ukraine, let alone the east or south of the country: these skewed statistics are cited for the most prototypically democratic city in the west of the country.

This same situation, unfortunately, holds for all the international magazines in Ukraine, where the Russian-language edition is in fact the only available version. The only exception is National Geographic, which launched a Ukrainian edition last year. All the other popular European and international periodicals come out only in Russian (*Cosmopolitan, Elle, Vogue* etc.) As far as radio and television are concerned, only 3.5 % of all popular music was Ukrainian, according to estimates of last year (this study was carried out on the top six radio networks in Ukraine). The situation on television is not any different: Russian unequivocally dominates prime-time television in the country: during the October of 2012, according to a survey conducted by the Freedom Space movement in conjunction with the Texty.org.ua internet-site, on the top eight TV channels that broadcast nationwide only 28 per cent of overall programs were in Ukrainian, 44 per cent in Russian and the remaining 28 per cent were bilingual) [19]. Seventeen per cent of ethnic Russians live in a country where at least half the po-pulation use Russian as their main language and use it in everyday communication and all of them enjoy between 60 and 80 per cent of the media. It will probably be safe to say that ethnic Russians are as much 'at home' in Ukraine (no pun intended), if not more than the titular nation. This claim is corroborated by the findings obtained as a result of a monitoring mission held by the Office of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities in March – April 2009. According to their data on the state of protection of the Ukrainian ethnic minority rights in Russia and the Russian ethnic minority rights in Ukraine, conditions for securing cultural and linguistic rights of Russian national minority in Ukraine are estimated as much better than the average conditions provided to the national minorities by the OSCE member-states [http://www.smucc.us/uploads/3/3/6/8/3368062/eng___v2ol0_b018fo_c___a14.pdf].

We have to concede, however, that this domination is probably less so than what it used to be under the Soviets and part of the complaints Russians have has to do with exactly this fact: the absolute domination has given way to mere domination that seems to be the issue. In view of the statistics we have cited, it seems obvious that, if any-

thing, it is Ukrainian that is in need of government support, even though de jure it has an official language status.

These figures also point to the fact that the ethnic Russian minority in terms of the rights they enjoy is probably better off than any other minority in the world or any other Russian minority in other countries in the world. The only other country where ethnic Russians fare even better is Belarus, where the Russian language enjoys an undisputed role of the High Variety and the functions of Belorussian are severely restricted (it performs a small number of ceremonial functions and is spoken primarily in the home in rural areas).

Against this background, portraying the Russian minority in Ukraine as persecuted, harassed and bullied is more like ideological and political *chutzpah*. As we know, one of the interpretations of the origin of the term 'chutzpah' is a story of a young man who has murdered his parents and now claims he deserves help and financial aid as an orphan.

One cannot help but draw parallels between the story of chutzpah and the way the Kremlin has been accusing Ukraine of the harassment of the Russian minority. The chutzpah executed by the Kremlin lies not in the parents being killed by their children, but by the killing of the proverbial children, in this case – the ethnic Russian minority or, rather their representatives. So the Kremlin is even prepared to put fellow Russians in harm's way in order to prove that the non-existent threat is in fact there. But if we move away from the more specific situations, we will notice that Russia seems to be taking advantage of two major elements in its propaganda.

The first of these is a generally positive and sympathetic attitude to ethnic minorities that we see almost everywhere in the Western world. They are viewed not only as a source of diversity (cultural, linguistic and otherwise), but also as a self-sufficient asset to any nation. And because such minorities may be at risk of not being treated fairly, there are special programs in place (I am specifically talking about positive discrimination projects and initiatives) which are specifically meant to make up for the potential mistreatment of minority populations. Yet, by clever manipulations of the Russian propaganda, the world's most privileged minority turns out to be victimized. This is basically the mechanism which makes possible stirring up trouble and apprehension between ethnic groups instead of maintaining what has been otherwise peaceful co-existence before. As a result, not only the Russian minority and its reputation are damaged (other ethnic groups grow more suspicious), but also, even more importantly, the very idea of positive discrimination and preferential treatment of ethnic minorities is compromised.

This is validated by our modest semiotic analysis based on the Google image search. When we typed in 'ethnic minorities' in the search engine, the search turned up an optimistic picture of smiling faces, people dancing and singing (Roma people, etc). When, as a next step, we typed in 'ethnic minority rights', it brought up somewhat more somber images, images evoking connotations of anxiety and apprehension. This was the case with approximately 110 images out of the overall 300 (this accounts for 30 per cent). And finally, when we typed in 'Russian ethnic minority rights', the search turned up 40 per cent of the images that were explicitly military, violent and aggressive in character.

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Non-existent threats to the Russian minority in Ukraine can also be treated as provocations or pseudo-events that were extensively used by the Russian propaganda from the very first days of the EuroMaidan movement in late Novemeber – early December 2013. It was a time when the first, propagandist phase got underway, a phase which was meant to prepare the target audience for a belief that the protests were dominated by ultra-nationalists, extremists, Banderites, and Russophobes. 'Provocation' has been one of the most frequently heard words during EuroMaidan, Ukrainian protests in late 2013 and January 2014, which were recognized at one of the EU meetings in Strasbourg as the biggest pro-EU demonstration in the entire history of the European Union. This was stated at one of the meetings of the EU by Guy Verhofstadt, Belgium's former prime minister. These were the kind of peaceful rallies and demonstrations which, starting on September 21, 2013, broke out in various towns and cities and swept much of the country, with the epicenter in Kiev, chiefly on Independence Square. All of these events have now come to be known as EuroMaidan, since the first wave of anger was triggered by a sudden diplomatic U-turn by the Ukrainian government when it cancelled the signing of a deal that would lead to closer ties with the EU. The pro-EU Ukrainian public was outraged, seeing the move as a betrayal of the country's foreign-policy vector – the course of the European integration is defined in the constitutional law – in favor of closer ties with Russia instead. This was the trigger that made Ukrainians take to the streets.

It is important to note here that for the Russian propaganda machine it was crucial to cast Maidan protesters – who participated in *strictly* peaceful marches in the early days – as 'extremists' and 'fascists'. On making these labels (and hence notions) stick in the minds of the target audience, it was relatively easy afterwards to move on to the "second installment" of the propaganda series. As a result, threatened and victimized by the Ukrainian fascists and extremists, the Russian narrative goes, ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking people in Crimea and the east are trying to save their families and communities by insisting on secession from a country which is now headed by a "junta".

Exactly for this reason the story of EuroMaidan included events that gave an impression of having been conceived specifically with a view to being extensively covered. It might be assumed that at least a part of them could have been designed with a visually catching TV image in mind. It may be pertinent at this point to refer to the *Mediatisation* theory, which, according to Darren Lilleker, argues that it is the media which shapes and frames political communication as well as the society in which that communication happens [Lilleker 2006:117].

Among the reports about Maidan, the world's major news channels (CNN, EuroNews, and Al Jazeera) focused the most attention on the assault on the President's administration on December 1, 2013. This story received more coverage than any other Ukrainian event – Maidan-related or otherwise – in 2013. It was reported that participants in protests clashed with the police on Bankova Street not far from the presidential administration in Kyiv on December 1. "Some people wearing masks arrived at Bankova Street on a road grader and attempted to break through a police cordon" [*Kyiv Post*, Dec. 3, 2013].

All the global news channels reported that the activists were behaving aggressively and pelted the police cordon with smoke grenades, stones, metal rods and fireworks. Some time later, the law enforcement retaliated, throwing stun and gas grenades at the rioters. The clash continued for about three hours, after which the Berkut task force cleared Bankova Street of protesters.

Dozens of law enforcement troops, journalists, and demonstrators suffered injuries in the incident. The opposition claimed that the attack on the police cordon was staged by agent provocateurs bribed by the authorities in an attempt to provoke the use of force in dispersing the crowds. A great number of peaceful demonstrators who were not involved in the clashes with police sustained injuries in Berkut's counter-offensive [Ibid.]. A member of the Batkivschyna parliamentary faction, Hennadiy Moskal, said that the government was plotting provocations against members of the main opposition faction in the parliament, journalists and public activists with the aim of discrediting protesters at the EuroMaidan rally: "A systemic provocation against well-known journalists, members of public organizations, and MPs is being prepared. This is done so that the government-controlled media can spread reports that it is only terrorists and extremists that operate on Maidan" [*Kyiv Post*, Dec. 8, 2013].

As is apparent, the main objective behind provocations is discrediting EuroMaidan as a political phenomenon. Provocations as an instrument for undermining opponents, on the one hand, are beyond the law (provocation as a criminal offence) and, on the other, they are designed to conjure up a visually attractive picture of scuffles, flaming cars, clashes with the police, etc. We are thus talking about a phenomenon that can best be described as a 'spectacular criminal provocation'.

However, an increased sophistication of political communication has already made it standard practice that the design and orchestration of complex pseudo-events are now within the purview of specially trained advisers, also known as political strategists or spin-doctors. Darren Lilleker construes a pseudo-event as an event that takes place strictly to gain media and public attention. A pseudo-event is not an event per se, according to Lilleker. However, it is assigned the task of communicating "image-related symbolism to the audience" [Lilleker 2006: 165]. Although the concept of pseudo-events has taken on a whole new dimension, given the scope and complexity of today's political communication, it has to be noted that the notion itself is hardly new.

Boorstin viewed the pseudo-event as a synthetic element of US news culture observable as early as the 1920s. Journalists, he noted, would seek out such events "to make up for the lack of spontaneous events" [Boorstin 1969: 9].

While forced to cover the activities of electoral candidates, journalists will often be subjected to a staged event that diverts coverage from other, less favourable events or news items. Equally, candidates from opposing organisations will compete for media coverage by staging events to clash with those of their opponents, though, at times this can result in the media's refusal to cover either. Hence the concern relates to the fact that the news of pseudo-events can drive out news covering real issues and real events. However, is this always the case? Journalists have the power to frame coverage of the event to fit existing news agendas. They also create their own events [Judith 2003: 50-75].

In Baudrillard's view, pseudo-events, while not being real, "represent a simulation of reality (...) stupefying range of images that present us with a false reality of life beyond our homes" [Baudrillard 1993]. It appears that the concept of pseudo-events has both journalists and academics locked in heated debate. Yet the authors above talk about pseudo-events that operate within the legal framework. These can be interpreted in terms of the so-called 'white' PR. The events of Ukrainian EuroMaidan, by contrast, are more like dark or 'black PR' (negative public relations, also called dark public relations – DPR [Wattenberg 1999]), since what takes place is clearly outside the law. To extrapolate the term to pseudo-events, one can talk about 'black pseudo-events', meaning events that were arranged and carried out by means of illegal methods. Resorting to such methods constitutes an offense that carries criminal liability. In the set-ups described above, in particular, one can detect a method of a punishable 'spectacular provocation'.

Another provocation – although on a somewhat smaller scale – that happened on that same day, occurred during a torch march that was conducted by the all-Ukrainian national association Svoboda and other forces of the radical right to mark the anniversary of the birth of Stepan Bandera, a figure that remains controversial to this day both in and outside of Ukraine.

What Svoboda's press service referred to as a provocation took place in the evening, when someone participating in the march hurled burning flames at the central entrance of Premier Palace hotel. It turned out that two young men who were responsible for it were indeed Svoboda party members, although they were reportedly expelled from the association immediately after what happened. Following the incident, the Kyiv police opened a criminal case on hooliganism charges against the two men.

As emerges from the statement issued by the Svoboda public relations department, the party leadership does not believe its activists had instigated the arson attempt, noting instead that they "had swallowed the bait". Incidentally, the footage of the incident distinctly shows a man with a microphone addressing the participants of the torch procession, who called the hotel a contemporary brothel and clearly encouraged "sending them (the hotel – B.P.) our warmest regards with fireworks, smoke bombs and the like". According to the opposition, therefore, this unidentified man was a specially trained provocateur and that the Svoboda association condemns the provocation. Upon a closer examination of the incident, a decision was taken to expel from the association the two members who allowed themselves to be involved in the incident [13].

In the above-described incident, the spectacular staged event – the attempted arson of the entrance to a hotel – was meant to undermine the reputation of the right within the Euro-Maidan political spectrum, an intention which, incidentally, was attested in a blog post on *Українська правда* (Ukr. "Ukrainian truth") by Andriy Okara, a political strategist and political scientist: "While Svoboda intellectuals go around Kyiv setting fire to the entrances of luxury hotels making for excellent video footage for Russian and Western news channels and contributing to stories along the lines of 'Ukrainian Maidan-esque fascism posing ultimate threat to mankind', EuroMaidan has

found itself in grave danger, but this time the danger is to do with information working against it*"* [Okara, Jan.3, 2014]*.*

On the other hand, the authorities have launched counterattacks by imitating the tactics that the opposition employed: accusing the other side of provocations. With exactly this purpose in mind, the authorities resorted to a special category of people:

"At one time, in Kyiv near subway Voksalna (Ukr. Railway station), unknown persons gathered homeless people and gave 80 gryvnya to each of them. They wanted these people to go to EuroMaidan to "chant and kill" [20].

We are, therefore, close to a conclusion that of all pseudo-events, there is a distinctly identifiable category, which – on account of its very spectacularity – is specifically designed for widespread media coverage. This coverage usually aims at modifying political decisions by bringing about a shift in public opinion both inside the country and abroad. The considerable media potential that such events possess makes people in charge of them resort to any methods and techniques available to them, including ones that are outside the law.

What will, no doubt, strike the reader as odd about this model is the media constituent, which appears to be one that is the most rigid, inflexible, and unchanging. If we were to use the metaphor of Internet phishing here, mass media – in a kind of pun – comes across as a big 'fish', which is prepared to swallow just about anything, as long as it is sensational, shocking and visually striking enough. Here it might be pertinent to make a reference to Neil Postman's seminal book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, which discusses television and makes a point that TV, as a medium, by virtue of its very nature, cannot be altered, improved upon just because it constitutes pure infotainment. "Indeed, we may have reached the point where cosmetics has replaced ideology as the field of expertise" [Postman 1986: 129]. If we were to expand Postman's observation, it might be safe to argue that television is not only about amusing ourselves, but also about scaring ourselves to death.

Going back to the events in Crimea and the east of Ukraine, it is important to point out that owing to Russian spin and propaganda, there is now a virtual political environment in place, which is distinctly marked by the 'brown' tinge of 'Ukrainian neo-fascism'. It is this environment that has become a favorable background for playing out a scenario where the Russian minority is severely maltreated by relentless *Banderites*. At the same time, as Leonid Bershadsky from BloombergView aptly points out, «Ukrainians Are More European Than the French»: "Despite Russian President Vladimir Putin's assertions that "neo-Nazis" and "anti-Semites" rule the roost in Ukraine, the extreme right did badly in Sunday's Ukrainian election. It was in the European Parliament election, which ended on the same day, that they triumphed" [BloombergView, May 26, 2014]. Assuming, as the author does, that European ideals are a citadel of tolerance and common human values, Ukrainians, as the vote of May 2, 2014 demonstrated, seem more European than some nations in the EU itself. Proof of that is 25 per cent of French voters who carried the *National Front* to victory on Sunday, or the 27 per cent of British voters who ensured first place to the anti-immigrant *UK Independence Party*. Ukrainians, on the other hand, gave their pro-European presidential candidate Petro Poroshenko a bigger share of the vote than his 20 rivals

combined, whereas Dmitry Yarosh, the presidential candidate of the supposedly rampant neo-fascist *Pravy Sektor*, won 0.7 percent of the vote. Oleh Tyahnybok of *Svoboda*, a party that might sit alongside Marine Le Pen's *National Front* on the scale of extremism, won a mere 1.25 percent.

It has to be recognized that in the Ukraine-Russia conflict of February-March 2014, it is the pro-Russian propaganda building on deliberate manipulation of the most blatant type that has ended up being the winner. Indeed, the Russian media machine which operates on brazen lies, made-up stories, events that have nothing remotely to do with reality, in other words, totally factitious reports about the Russian minority being bullied, harassed and otherwise discriminated against and the Russian language banned, has emerged victorious. It may be, therefore, stated that the Kremlin (not without the help of its unscrupulous Western media allies) has claimed a victory in its all-out information war against Ukraine. In their turn, reports about maltreatment of the Russian ethnic minority in Ukraine provided a pretext for Russia's military invasion in Crimea and now in continental Ukraine.

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РОСІЙСЬКА ПРОПАГАНДИСТСЬКА МАШИНА: НОВИЙ ВИМІР

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Дослідження зосереджене на особливостях пропагандистської машини Російської Федерації в період з грудня 2013 р. до квітня 2014 р. Ґрунтуючись на наших даних, маємо підстави припустити, що етнічні стереотипи можуть екплуатуватись як потужний інструмент стимулювання міжнаціональних антагонізмів й руйнування країни.

Ключові слова: стереотипи етнічних меншин, недовір'я, соціальна відповідальність, провокація, псевдо-подія

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РОССИЙСКАЯ ПРОПАГАНДИСТСКАЯ МАШИНА: НОВОЕ ИЗМЕРЕНИЕ

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Исследование сконцентрировано на особенностях пропагандистской машины Российской Федерации в период с декабря 2013 г. по апрель 2014 г. Базируясь на наших данных, имеем основания предположить, что етнические стереотипы могут екплуатироваться как мощный инструмент стимулирования междунациональных атагонизмов и разрушения страны.

Ключевые слова: стереотипы етнических меньшинств, недоверие, социальная ответственность, провокация, псевдо-событие