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Biographical note

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THE IDEA OF UKRAINE'S ALLEGED "EAST-WEST" DIVIDE IN THE WESTERN EXPERT, MEDIA AND SCHOLARLY DISCOURSE

Petro Kuzyk

Abstract

The present article addresses the problem of representation of Ukrainian societal differences and cleavages in the Western public discourse. More specifically, the paper discusses the idea of Ukraine's alleged "East-West" divide in North American and partly also European expert, media and academic discourse from the early 1990s until the present. The analysis in this article consists of identifying the idea of Ukraine's divide in this discourse, tracing its transformation over time and, finally, following its development into some more disguised forms in the context of the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine. The study has concluded that the idea of Ukrainian regional and cultural differences in the Western discourse has been living a "life of its own." That is, the differences in perception and representation, for the most part, do not correlate with the actual situation in Ukrainian society since the country's acquisition of independence. The stereotypic interpretations of these differences by Western political commentators, pundits and researchers often exaggerate the problem of Ukraine's "East-West" cleavage with Russian myths and misconceptions about Ukraine and its society being partly internalised in their discourse.

Keywords: "East-West" divide, Ukraine, Western public discourse, regional and cultural cleavages, stereotype, Russian aggression.

1. Introduction

For more than three decades of its state independence Ukraine has been widely perceived as a country split between some Eastern and Western parts. In the West, no less than in other corners of the world, the conviction of a profoundly divided Ukraine has evolved into something of a prevailing wisdom. However, increasing empirical evidence, reflected in a growing

scholarship on this issue, suggests that the concept of Ukraine's societal divide along an East-West line is problematic (Haran & Yakovlyev, 2017, Hrytsak, 2015, 2024, Kulyk, 2018, Kuzio, 2017, 2020, 2022, Kuzyk, 2019, Onuch & Hale, 2023, Riabchuk, 2015, Schmid & Myshlovska, 2019, Shevel, 2023, Zhurzhenko, 2015).

The new in-depth research of both former and recent political developments in Ukraine, as well as the dynamics of cultural and political identifications in Ukrainian society, do not quite support this conventional idea. Thus, while some national election results and political crises in Ukraine indeed displayed an "East-West" polarization pattern, the division either played a trivial role or was entirely absent from other important political processes and contests. That Ukraine has an integrated political community is confirmed by the results of numerous sociological surveys, which testify to a diminishing relevance of political polarisation over once divisive issues, similarly high levels of patriotism throughout the country and a tangibly increased integration of the country's political and cultural space (IKDIF, 2018, 2023, 2024, KIIS, 2014, 2024, Rating, 2016, 2024, Razumkov Centre, 2024).

Moreover, the Ukrainian nation's united response and extraordinary resilience vis-à-vis the Kremlin's aggression since 2014 and especially the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of the country present by far the most conclusive proof of Ukraine's vibrant and cohesive society. It goes without saying that no country would be able to effectively challenge the direct all-out military attack of a much more powerful and resourceful enemy, such as Russia, for a considerable time if the former was split and hence weak and apathetic.

The incongruity between the idea of a divided Ukraine in the Western public discourse and the reality "on the ground" in Ukrainian society is a puzzling analytic dilemma requiring careful consideration. Answering the questions of how the international stereotype of Ukraine's regional and cultural cleavages developed, where and when it diverged from what can be regarded as the "actual" social facts about Ukrainian domestic differences, why the exaggerated interpretations of these domestic differences turned out to be so persuasive and what were the factors contributing to their popularity would certainly be of great theoretical and practical value.

The present article's overall objective is not as ambitious. This study does not intend to answer all of the complex questions mentioned above. Instead, it focuses on a rather limited but no less important dimension of

the problem. This paper attempts to analyse the prevalent idea of Ukraine's "East-West" societal cleavage as articulated in North American and, to some extent, also in European expert, scholarly and media discourse. More specifically, this study aims to identify the idea in this discourse since the early 1990s, trace this idea's transformation over time and, finally, follow its development into some more disguised forms in the context of the ongoing Russian aggression.

While doing so, I will focus on what I will call the "conventional" or "stereotypic" version of the alleged "East-West" divide in this discourse. Whereas there surely were (and are) other, more accurate, interpretations of Ukraine's societal differences produced by the Western expert, media and academic communities, the stereotypic idea of Ukraine's "East-West" cleavage still prevailed in their discourses.[1] Consequently, this study's chosen subject and goal have determined a specific emphasis on the sources analysed in the present article. For the most part, I will analyse widely circulated and/or authoritative texts and speeches bearing and developing the stereotyped idea of the Ukrainian societal divide. For the sake of the feasibility of this project, I will mainly concentrate on the English-language sources, especially those that originated in the US – whose influential expert, academic, and media communities perhaps have been primarily responsible for the birth and dissemination of the dominant approach to Ukraine's societal differences in the West.

At the same time, this study does not wish to ignore existing societal differences and cleavages in Ukraine altogether. Like many other modern societies Ukraine remains regionally, culturally and politically diverse, which includes the differences existing between its Western and Eastern regions. Rather, the paper seeks to demonstrate that the conventional idea of the "East-West" divide present in the Western public discourse has often been arbitrary and exaggerated and that the established stereotype of divided Ukraine does not really reflect the scale, intensity and political meaning of the existing regional and cultural differences.

The analysis in this article proceeds as follows. The first section examines the shaping of the stereotype of divided Ukraine which coincided with the period of Ukraine's acquisition of state independence and its early years of state sovereignty. This section covers the first attempts of Western (mainly English-speaking) political commentators and pundits to make sense of the Ukrainian societal differences in the context of the political and economic turmoil in Ukraine. It also considers the special

role of Samuel Huntington's concept of a "cleft country" in reinforcing the conventional approach to Ukraine's cultural and regional differences.

Section two of this paper will investigate the Western media, expert and academic discourse during some key political contestations in Ukraine's recent history – the Orange Revolution and the Euromaidan – as well as during the Russian aggression against Ukraine between 2014 and 2021. The analysis in this part of the paper will focus on a discursive relation between interpretations of the two Maidans and the conflict in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, on the one hand, and the stereotypic idea of divided Ukraine, on the other hand. It will be argued that many Western observers falsely regarded these events as markers of the Ukrainian "divide," which in turn distorted the representation of the pro-democratic Maidan revolutions and the Russian intervention in the Crimea and Donbas in their discourse.

The last part of this article will attempt to follow the shifts taking place in the Western discourse since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. It will consider the changes that the all-out war has had on the narratives of Ukraine's regional and cultural differences. It will be argued that the previous tone of the expert and media discourse in this regard has been now mitigated. However, the stereotypic idea and a general approach to Ukraine's societal differences have not entirely withered away and are still present in different forms.

2. The birth of the stereotype: Huntington's "cleft country" and its legacy

When it comes to determining the roots of the widely shared idea of Ukraine's "East-West" divide in the Western scholarly, expert and media discourse, no intellectual source appears to be more influential in shaping this conventional view than Samuel Huntington's portrayal of and prognosis about Ukraine's societal cleavages.

On Huntington's account, Ukraine was a graphic example of a "cleft country". In his 1993 article, he mentioned the country in the context of his argument about civilizational fault lines replacing past political and ideological boundaries "as the flash points for crisis and bloodshed" in the world. (Huntington, 1993, p.29) Huntington drew the lines on his map of civilisations in Europe so that, in most cases, the alleged boundaries ran between European countries, which were assigned to Western Christianity, Orthodox civilisation and Islam, respectively. However, the

case of Ukraine was used to illustrate the civilizational fault line cutting *through* the territory of the Ukrainian state itself by "separating the more Catholic western Ukraine from Orthodox Eastern Ukraine" (Huntington, 1993, p.30).

In his 1996 book, Huntington mentioned Ukraine several times and discussed the case of Ukraine in a separate paragraph entitled "Ukraine: A Cleft Country." In this way, he underscored the characteristic of Ukraine as an emblematic example of a country internally divided by two different civilizational entities. According to one of Huntington's scenarios for Ukraine, the "east-west split" could generate the country's disintegration "along its fault line into two separate entities," with either the eastern part merging with Russia or the western Ukraine seceding from "a Ukraine that was drawing closer and closer to Russia." (Huntington, 1996, p.167).

Additionally, Huntington reiterated several traditional russocentric claims. At one point, he agreed that Ukraine belonged to the Russian so-called "near abroad"[2] or, in other words, a close neighbourhood consisting of Russia's special "sphere of influence". He also emphasised that Crimea had utterly belonged to Russia before its 1954 transfer to Soviet Ukraine – in this way, failing to mention its centuries-long Crimean-Tatar past both before and after the peninsula's annexation by the Russian Empire in 1783 (Lutsevych, 2021).

Obviously, Huntington was not the first to come up with the suggestion of a divided Ukraine. When he referred to the example of Ukraine as a case of a "cleft country" to support his argument about the "clash of civilisations", the idea of a somehow divided Ukraine was already circulating in the political, media and intellectual discourses in North America and Western Europe.

The perceptions and ideas which later became the core of the international stereotype of Ukraine's "East-West divide" had started to appear in the Western discourse from the very beginning of Ukraine's independence movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s. At first, mentions of Ukraine's cultural and regional differences were rather balanced and cursory. Accounts on the political developments in the still Soviet Ukraine, such as the report by Bill Keller (1990), as a rule, stated the differences between "the relentlessly Russified Eastern Ukraine" and "the rambunctious western part of the republic, where independence is a popular notion," stopping short of any far-reaching generalisations.

A distinct thread in the stories and analyses of Western political commentators underscoring Ukraine's "East-West" differences started

to develop in parallel. Such accounts typically exaggerated the scope and potential of the regional rifts and focused on potential security risks associated with them. Significant attention was dedicated to an issue defined by one commentator as "the most pressing nuclear proliferation problem" and particularly the "risk of nuclear weapons becoming involved in internal conflict" (Jencks, 1990). In the spirit of the times, the supposed dangers originating from within political communities were assumed to be much more essential than the conventional external threats to specific countries, regions or even the international society in general. Accordingly, as one of such accounts suggested, "[t]he main threat to Ukraine is not war with Russia but separatism among Ukraine's indigenous Russians." (Nuclear Backsliding, 1992).

As a rule, the latter type of report on Ukraine was accompanied by quite loose interpretations of Ukrainian history, which were creatively used to support the author's arguments. These brief historical excursions produced simplified and often factually incorrect versions of a Ukrainian past tailored to suit their stories. To some extent this was caused by a relative shortage of reliable sources on both past and contemporary Ukraine at that time. Yet another reason for the apparent misconceptions about Ukraine drew from a general lack of interest in and ignorance about Ukraine. At least in the 1990s, Ukraine and its people were essentially a *terra incognita* for many in the West. Andrew Wilson's (2000) characterisation of Ukraine as an 'unexpected nation' and Jack Matlock's (2000) notion of a 'nowhere nation' reflected how the general Western expert and media community perceived Ukraine on their surprised encounters with the European country with a population of around 50 million and a territory larger than that of France.

An article published by Celestine Bohlen (1991) in *The New York Times* was a good example of such inaccurate interpretations of facts. Bohlen wrote her report on the eve of a crucial 1 December referendum in 1991, when the Ukrainian society overwhelmingly supported the proclamation of Ukrainian independence, which eventually decided the fate of the Soviet Union. Evidently excited to find out that one possible version of the meaning of the ethnonym "Ukraine" derived from a word which translated as "border," Bohlen used it as a metaphor to support her dubious historical and political claims:

> "Literally, Ukraine means borderland, which is appropriate given its position straddling Europe's two halves, its split between two religions –

> Eastern Orthodox and Greek Catholic – and a history that has repeatedly put Ukrainians at the mercy of other peoples' territorial ambitions." (Bohlen, 1991)

Also, Bohlen argued that "[f]or much of the modern era, the Ukraine itself was split in half" and, while calling Russians and Ukrainians "two competing brothers," stated that "the two peoples continued to share a common fate" for the most part of their history (Bohlen, 1991).

The text of the article contained several widely circulated myths and misconceptions. For one thing, Ukraine was far from being divided in half for a significant time of its history: the borders of the Ukrainian lands, also when under foreign rule, were constantly moving. The reason the author stated the opposite was obvious: the painted picture of a "borderland" supposedly split into roughly two equal parts today needed to be supported by "evidence" of a similar divide in the past. The mentioning of the religious divide between the Orthodox and Greek-Catholic denominations clearly missed the point in this context too. By 1839 the Russian Empire liquidated all but one Ukrainian Uniate dioceses on its newly annexed territories on the right bank of the Dnipro river (Grabowski 1989). As a result, the religious and related cultural and political influence of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church was largely limited to the Halychyna (or Eastern Galicia) region remaining under Austrian rule. This amounted to less than 50 thousand sq. km (Arkusha & Mudryi, 2006) – or about 8% of the territory of independent Ukraine – stretching within three out of eight present-day oblasts of Western Ukraine.

The claim about a shared fate of Ukraine and Russia was a flawed interpretation of their relations as well. Such a reading of the Russian-Ukrainian encounters throughout modern history was clearly inspired by the Soviet and Russian propaganda myth depicting them as an amiable relationship of free but united and closely related "siblings". This misinterpretation of history was absolutely distorting as it ignored centuries of Russian colonisation, oppression and assimilation of Ukraine. Calling these horrible practices representative of Ukraine's destiny was incorrect and cynical. Anastasiia Kudlenko put this as follows: "Ukraine has long been presented as an integral part of the Russian world through 'common' history and religion, despite Ukrainians and Russians having radically different experiences of these shared times as colonized and colonizers respectively." (Kudlenko, 2023, 518).

The way the Western and Eastern parts of Ukraine – the two subjects of the alleged Ukrainian divide – started to be outlined in this discourse is worth noting in particular. The factually incorrect characteristic of Western Ukraine as overwhelmingly Greek-Catholic was complemented with its even more sticky label – that of an extremely nationalist region. In contrast, the Eastern and Southern parts of the country were usually portrayed as utterly pro-Russian and having little or nothing to do with Ukrainian identity and nationhood whatsoever[3].

"Ukrainians are rediscovering the deep division in their own nation: the western Ukraine, largely Greek Catholic, is a bastion of Ukrainian nationalism," reported Serge Schmemann (1991), a Moscow correspondent for the Associated Press. Eastern Ukraine, continued Schmemann, "including the Don coal basin, is more Russified and has close economic ties to Russia [while the south – the Crimean Peninsula and Odessa – has only tenuous Ukrainian roots." Such reporting shaped a clear discursive dichotomy of the "nationalist West" vs "pro-Russian East" which moved from commentary to commentary and text to text to become a commonplace characteristic of contemporary Ukraine's cultural and political differences.

The economically harsh and politically tense and chaotic early years of Ukrainian independence were not helpful in settling down differences and rifts in Ukrainian society. Neither did they soothe these differences' representation in the respective Western discourse. The year 1994 was one of the key points of Ukraine's independence history in many respects. That year, the country went through two important election campaigns: the early parliamentary and presidential elections, which were called to reload the government in a moment of mounting political tensions. The political crisis was caused by a dire economic situation Ukraine found itself in at the early stage of its transition to the market economy and people's frustration with the government's incompetent handling of this transition.

The 1994 elections turned out to be even more important for the way Ukraine was represented in the Western media and expert discourse. Deliberations about these elections in this discourse acted as an important link in the chain of events that convinced many political commentators, experts and researchers in the West that Ukrainian society was fragmented. To be fair to these commentaries, regional differences did surface in these elections. Political and ideological preferences of the Halychyna, together with the capital Kyiv, expressly contrasted with those of Southern and Eastern Ukraine, with the Central and Northern regions rather choosing

a middle ground. The three Western oblasts elected deputies with strong pro-independence and anti-Russian views. In contrast, the industrial East, which was also the most hardly hit by the ongoing economic crisis, turned increasingly nostalgic of the Soviet times. The rest of the country stayed rather undecided between the two regional poles (Solchanyk, 2001).

The presidential contest taking place in June and July of the same year was particularly polarizing. The two leading presidential candidates had their electoral bases in the Western and Eastern parts of the country, respectively, and ran on tickets claiming to represent two divergent trajectories for the country's development. The incumbent candidate, Leonid Kravchuk, formerly a Communist Party high-ranking bureaucrat, then was associated with a strong pro-independence stance mostly favoured in Western Ukraine. His challenger, a former "red director" from Dnipropetrovsk Leonid Kuchma, was a clear pick of the industrial East who campaigned on a rather pro-Russian but also pro-reform ticket (Haran & Maiboroda, 2000).

All in all, both the 1994 parliamentary and presidential campaigns were peaceful, free and democratic. Kuchma eventually won the presidential contest. As a result, unlike many other former Soviet republics, including Russia, Ukraine went through its first transfer of power in its independence history in an orderly and democratic manner.

Yet, in the West, these events were received differently. In an evident manifestation of its tradition of "Orientalism" towards Ukraine and its society (Ryabchuk, 2023, Kuzio, 2020, Chapter 3), the main emphasis in the discourse of the political, security and media community was on the threats and risks these elections were thought to be precipitating.

The expectations were extremely grim and alarmist. Western journalists and political observers spot what British correspondent Tony Barber unequivocally defined as "a clear rift, expressed through a democratic vote, between the nationalist west and the Russian-leaning east and south." (Barber, 1994a). Moreover, often writing on Ukraine while stationed in Moscow[4], these commentators contemplated the possibility of the country immersing into a bloody domestic conflict. Some, like Misha Glenny, evoked the prospect of the return of the "demons of Yugoslavia" (Glenny, 1994). The possibility of enhancing national cohesion, on the other hand, was regarded as a nearly impossible task in these accounts: "The histories and traditions of both eastern and western Ukraine are so different that the creation of a democratic, independent Ukraine involves unifying two countries" (Glenny, 1994).

Moreover, the danger of the country splitting into two parts as a result of a violent civic conflict was actively discussed and even anticipated. According to Barber, "the vote widened ethnic, regional and ideological fault lines in Ukraine and raised the biggest question mark yet over the republic's ability to avoid conflict." (Barber, 1994b). "The election results highlight the deepening split between eastern and western Ukraine, heightening fears among diplomats that Ukraine may split, with the eastern part and the Crimean Peninsula in the south realigning with Russia," assumed another American correspondent (Erlanger, 1994b).

These worries were, overall, shared by Western diplomats and political advisors. The views of Ian Brzezinski, son of Zbigniew Brzezinski and foreign policy expert who also served in the US Defence Department and was a one-time advisor to the Ukrainian government, were one such example. While observing the 1994 presidential election, Brzezinski concluded that it "has reflected, even crystallized, the split between Europeanized Slavs in western Ukraine and the Russo-Slav vision of what Ukraine should be." (Cited in Erlanger, 1994a).

Nevertheless, it was the security community that played a pivotal role in fostering the idea of a divided Ukraine. It set a doom-laden tone of the public discourse assessing the future developments in Ukraine more broadly too. Possibly alarmed by increasing instances of political violence in other former Soviet republics at that time, security experts and plain security services representatives used their authority to voice a stark warning regarding an ostensibly imminent domestic conflict in Ukraine.

On the eve of the polarising elections, a CIA report predicting ethnic strife in Ukraine potentially leading to the disintegration of the country was leaked to the press. In January 1994, in a survey of the world's hotspots, the Director of the CIA James Woolsey highlighted "political and ethnic tensions that could fragment Ukraine." Above all, a simmering secession movement in Crimea was named as the possible cause, where the ethnic Russian majority's "clamour for unification with Russia threatens to fragment the fledgling republic." (Weiner, 1994)

The future course of events in Ukraine proved that this gloomy prognosis in the security experts' discourse had been mistaken. Moreover, it is doubtful that the voiced scenario of Ukraine's fragmentation was well-founded at all. If ethnic separatism was really at stake, then Crimea would have been the only part of Ukraine where it potentially stood a chance of succeeding. This far southern region was the only Ukrainian territory where a population of ethnic Russian descent was in the majority.

Crimea's territory is 27 thousand sq. km., amounting to less than 5 per cent of Ukraine's territory. And even there the separatist aspirations during the first half of the 1990s were largely confined to parts of the local political elites. In any case, these aspirations failed to evolve into a tangible secession movement and soon withered away (Dawson, 1997).

It is, therefore, clear that the picture of a divided Ukraine had already been there in the public discourse before Huntington and his "Clash of Civilizations". And yet, there are weighty reasons to assume that it was the author of the influential and catchy thesis of "cleft country" who cemented this view of Ukraine. Huntington elevated the alleged characteristics of the Ukrainian polity and society to the status of its fundamental distinctiveness.

The sheer circulation and prominence of Huntington's theory reached out to audiences far beyond the Academy, stirring hot debates on its key points among scholars, policymakers, commentators and wider circles of the public around the globe, and contributed to the embedding of the stereotype of a divided Ukraine. Surely, many Westerners remained unconvinced by the general thesis of Huntington's civilizational theory[5]. The same cannot be said about his portrayal of Ukrainian society and its past and future, which was rather uncritically accepted. His account of Ukrainian domestic cleavages, assessment of the state of societal unity and grim predictions about the country's future had a profound impact on a general perception of Ukraine in the West for years to come.

For students of Ukraine, Huntington proposed a framework for looking into Ukrainian societal differences that were difficult to ignore or break free from. By all accounts, Huntington's story was a shallow and controversial interpretation of Ukraine's cultural and regional differences (Goble, 2016). However, in a state of general ignorance about what Ukraine really was, his writings on the country and its society were enough to root this narrative deep in the consciousness of the elites and all those in the West who happened to hear anything about the country. Huntington's characteristics of Ukraine featured in intellectual and political debates on the country. The simple and captivating account of Ukrainian regional and cultural cleavages, as well as the controversy surrounding the general "clash of civilizations" thesis, cemented the radical variant of the idea of the Ukrainian divide – that of a 'cleft country', an international image that has haunted Ukraine ever since.

At a minimum, Huntington's account was used as an important point of reference for discussing and deciding on a whole range of issues related to Ukraine's demography and culture, domestic and foreign policies,

economic development or the country's potential joining of international alliances. As Raymond Taras (2023) points out, Samuel Huntington's theorems were "exhumed" every time a hint at a binary "East-West" political contestation occurred in Ukraine. What is worse, however, Huntington's arbitrary views about Ukrainian cleavages and their meaning were often uncritically adopted as the only possible explanation for any conflicts arising in or connected with Ukraine. "His prognosis that nations would return to their historical and cultural roots included a corollary that assigned an exceptional place to Ukraine: nations that were divided between civilizations called 'cleft' countries were spaces most likely to engender conflict." (Taras, 2023, p.6).

3. The false markers of the "divide": the Maidan contestations and the 2014 Russian attack on Ukraine

Despite the initial warnings and grim predictions, no part of Ukraine became a site of ethnic violence or armed conflict either in 1994 or the years that followed. To the surprise and ease of many observers and policymakers in the West, the Crimea question was resolved in a peaceful and democratic way and the next national electoral contests or political crises lacked a salient polarisation following an East-West line (Fesenko, 2003). As a result, the issue of Ukraine's domestic cleavages temporarily escaped Western political and media attention.

The same could not be said about the academic and expert discourse. Ukraine and its society finally began to attract long-overdue scholarly attention. However, the Western intellectual and expert community was yet to fully come to terms with Ukrainian independence and recognise the nation's right to self-determination. Then and later research on sovereign Ukraine was apparently influenced by preconceptions and myths rooted in the internalised Russian prejudices towards Ukraine and its people (Kuzio, 2023).

As Mykola Ryabchuk points out, in the 1990s and beyond, Western nations continued to share previously accepted and normalised "Russian imperial knowledge" about Ukraine, which included the so-called "Ukraine denial" – a claim that Ukraine (or, in fact, "Little Russia") always belonged to Russia (Ryabchuk, 2024b). Galyna Kotliuk takes this argument further, suggesting that the perception of Ukraine was trapped in a "double

colonial lens" shaped by a long-standing tradition of Russian colonialism and Western Orientalism:

> "Russian colonialism has invented the image of exotic Little Russians—subhuman 'brothers' of Great Russians; the West has seen Ukrainians as underdeveloped barbarians somewhere between Russia and European civilization." (Kotliuk, 2023)

In this light, it is not difficult to see why Ukraine's domestic policies, aimed at strengthening Ukrainian identity inside the society, or attempts at following an independent foreign course prompted suspicion and accusations of extreme nationalism. Some influential texts by fresh Ukraine pundits stood out in this regard in particular. In his renowned book, Rogers Brubaker (1996) proposed a pioneering framework for understanding modern nationhood and nationalism in Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, his one-sided take on the national projects in the newly independent post-Soviet societies under investigation (Ukraine included) perfectly aligned this approach with a traditional view of these non-Russian societies as marginal, backward and extremely nationalist.

At any rate, Brubaker's approach was not helpful for adequately grasping the complex essence and motives behind the nation-building processes in newly independent states like Ukraine. Brubaker failed to realise that these countries' "nationalising" policies were as nationalist as decolonising and rectificatory in nature, that is, aiming to correct the past injustices that Russia had been inflicting upon these societies. Instead, his interpretation defied the Ukrainian government's efforts at fostering the Ukrainian language and national identity, while these were, in effect, some indispensable and timely countermeasures checking the continuous pressure of Russian political, ideological and cultural expansionism. His approach overlooked the simple but important fact that the Ukrainian language and identity had been essentially erased from the public domain of Ukraine (and especially its East and South) by centuries of Russian and Soviet assimilation campaigns (Danylenko & Naienko, 2019).

David Laitin (1999), on his part, questioned the future success of the Ukrainian national project by overestimating the difference, cohesion and political power of the Russian-speaking population residing in the country's East and South. Laitin claimed that this large group of Russophones represented a distinct part of Ukrainian society, wrongly predicting the formation of a separate nationality based on the Russian-speaking

identification in Ukraine (as well as some other post-Soviet states). At least in Ukraine's case, Laitin's theory fell victim to two common mistakes. The first one was an apparent underestimation of the inclusive nature of the Ukrainian nation-building project in independent Ukraine. Perhaps, the same stereotypic view suggesting that the Ukrainian government's policies towards the Russophones were "utterly nationalistic" foiled Laitin's comprehension of how such national inclusivity helped Ukraine to relieve tensions in this area[6].

The second important shortcoming was conflating Russian speakers with the bearers of a Russian identity. At the time Laitin's book was written, the Russian-speaking Ukrainians indeed consisted of a numerous group. However, both in 1991, when an overwhelming majority of the Russophones supported Ukraine's independence along with their Ukrainian-speaking fellow citizens, and later, there were no significant grounds to believe that the Russian-speaking population formed, in the author's words, a potent "conglomerate identity" and a coherent group capable of challenging the Ukrainian national project. With time, Laitin's conception only lost any relevance for Ukraine[7].

Similarly, Anatol Lieven (1999) chose to frame his analysis of the political relationship between Russia and Ukraine using a "fraternal rivalry" concept. The conceptualisation of the message he meant to convey was plain and telling. First, it was supportive of the same old Soviet myth about Russians and Ukrainians as two "brotherly peoples" – albeit in a new setting. Second, such a framing evidently downgraded Ukraine's painful efforts aimed at bringing bilateral relations with the former metropolis on equal footing to nothing more than some "family squabbles."

Therefore, it came as no surprise that the idea of Ukraine's societal divide powerfully resurfaced in the Western media, expert and scholarly discourse in 2004. Starting from late November of that year, Ukraine was in the spotlight of international attention. Then, an attempt by the government to steal the victory from the opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko in a presidential contest was challenged by a massive civic protest in Kyiv Maidan. These events shortly came to be known as the Orange Revolution directed against the electoral fraud and growing authoritarian propensities of the government (Aslund & McFaul, 2006). The eventually triumphant democratic protest averted the country sliding down to despotism and extending Russian control over the country.

All too soon, however, the discussions of the Orange Revolution shifted away from compassionate accounts praising the Ukrainian democratic

breakthrough[8]. Instead, they focused on what was regarded as a dangerous pitfall that the Orange Revolution produced: the re-emerged "East-West" pattern of electoral geography and consolidation of the regional elites and the common public around their respective candidates, Yushchenko and Yanukovych, during the political stand-off. Eventually, the crisis was once again resolved in a peaceful way – this time by a rerun second round of the presidential election – which confirmed the victory of the democratic and pro-European candidate Yushchenko (Clem & Craumer, 2005, pp.374-375). Nevertheless, the political compromise helped Yanukovych to consolidate his constituency in the Eastern and also Southern parts of the country and, in this way, paved the path for his future rise to power in 2010.

These dramatic political developments resulted in the whole range of the former international myths and stereotypes of a divided Ukraine coming in from the cold in the media and political experts' discourse. Political observers and correspondents from various corners of Europe and North America enthusiastically picked up the theme of the resurfaced electoral and political "East-West" line, highlighting the supposed risks associated with this.

Some, like Chris Stephen from *The Guardian*, used formulations directly borrowed from Huntington. Stephen spoke of a revived "spectre of Ukraine tearing apart along old east-west fault lines" with the "Russian-speaking Christian Orthodox" East and "mostly Ukrainian speaking and Greek Catholic" West divided by "the great Dnipro river" (Stephen, 2004). Others reintroduced the chilling theme of the "nightmare of Yugoslavia" in "a deeply divided country" with a visible "East/West contrast" back into the discourse on Ukraine. "It is possible that Ukraine will succumb to an increasingly bitter dispute over political identity, language and culture between Europe-leaning western Ukrainians […] and their Russian-speaking fellow Ukrainians in the eastern industrial and coal-mining regions," stated a lengthy analysis of the Orange Revolution in *Spiegel* (Neef & Mayr, 2004).

Overall, such perceived risks and negative projections of the aftermath of the Orange Revolution for the unity of the nation became a significant part of the discourse, so much so that an assertion that the "presidential election of 2004 brought Ukraine to the brink of disintegration and civil war" found its way into the Encyclopaedia Britannica (Makuch & Yerofeyev, 2024).

This time, however, the situation was further exacerbated by Russian interference in the Ukrainian 2004 presidential election. Openly picking the side of Viktor Yanukovych in this contest, the Kremlin hoped to block Ukraine's path toward democracy and integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures. In the West, this move was received as an act of defiance of democracy promotion in the post-Soviet space and a rejection of the West's influence in the region in general. Consequently, from this time forth, the issue of Ukraine's alleged domestic divisions started to be seen as part of a wider dilemma of a reviving East-West geopolitical confrontation between Moscow and the collective West.

As one American expert described this at that time, "Russian President Vladimir Putin's ill-judged intervention and Western reaction have now set the country on a spiral that might turn fear into reality: Ukraine is rapidly becoming a battleground between Russia and the West." (Darden, 2004). Such flawed "internationalisation" of the question of Ukrainian regional and political differences and rifts had a negative effect on the image of Ukraine. It was clearly undermining its efforts at becoming a strong, integral and independent agent capable of sorting out its own problems.

All these judgements were echoed in the academic writing that followed. Scholarly interpretations of the nature and meaning of the Orange Revolution certainly varied. Immediately following the revolutionary events, the Orange Revolution was acclaimed for an unparalleled mass mobilisation of the pro-democratic civil society as well as for the peaceful resolution of an acute political crisis – fitting in the democratic wave of the so-called "coloured revolutions" in the region (Aslund & McFaul, 2006, Karatnycky, 2005, Kuzio, 2005, Way, 2005). A significant part of other texts and publications, on the other hand, did focus on the East-West electoral and political polarization with some accounts again reaching categorical and alarming conclusions.

Several frequently cited publications on the 2004 Maidan protests exemplified the latter take on the events. An article by the prominent Ukraine student Dominique Arel (2006) represented one kind of such reaction: Arel assumed a fundamental and lasting regional division between the Centre-West and South-East parts of the country and warned against what he envisaged as a dangerous denial of the problem on the part of Ukrainian authorities. Ivan Katchanovski (2006) characterised the Orange Revolution as just another manifestation of the strong "regional political cleavages in the post-communist Ukraine [reflecting] cultural differences that emerged as a result of distinct historical experience in

regions of Ukraine before World War II." (Katchanovski, 2006, p.528). And David Lane (2008) went as far as to unwarrantedly accuse Western "sponsored democracy promotion" for helping to organize a "revolutionary coup d'état" in Ukraine which, among other things, "led to greater division between East and West Ukraine." (Lane, 2008, p.545).

The latter attitude was also tangible among political elites in the West. The growing attention to Ukraine, generated by the Orange Revolution, did not really translate into a deeper and balanced perspective on Ukraine. Narratives of some representatives of the political class, in fact, rather solidified the stereotypical perception of Ukraine's political disputes and their sources. This was particularly noticeable in those cases when a speaker was not bound by requirements of strict political correctness. In his 2005 interview, the former French president Valery Giscard d'Estaing argued that only a part of contemporary Ukraine had a "European character." In contrast, the lands on the eastern bank of the Dnipro River and in the south of Ukraine had a "Russian character." According to d'Estaing, this meant that "these lands cannot belong to the European Union unless Russia is admitted to the EU" as well. (Cited in Ryabchuk, 2024a).

So, when another massive protest began to unfold on the Kyiv Maidan nine years after the Orange Revolution – in the late autumn of 2013, the Western myths and stereotypes concerning Ukrainian societal cleavages were fully in place and ready to be employed again.

The Euromaidan was set off by a handful of youth activists in response to a government decision that threatened to curb the country's European integration. The last-minute refusal of the Ukrainian authorities to sign the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement took place under intense pressure from the Kremlin (D'Anieri, 2019, p.264). Very soon, however, the protest evolved into a powerful nationwide Revolution of Dignity against an incredibly corrupt and repressive regime. The culmination of the Euromaidan was triggered by the security services' mass shootings of demonstrators in central Kyiv in February 2014, which prompted Yanukovych's escape to Russia and the subsequent start of the Russian military and hybrid operations against Ukraine (Shveda & Park, 2016).

In many respects, the Euromaidan resembled the Orange Revolution. Both were massive pro-democratic popular protests, with Kyiv Maidan as their epicentre. Both revolutions challenged the corrupt and authoritarian government and overall succeeded in overthrowing the regime. Just like the Orange Revolution, the Euromaidan was decisive in keeping the

country on its Europe-bound foreign course and developmental trajectory. During both the first and second Maidan revolutions, the two conflicting political camps were actively or tacitly supported by key Western powers and institutions, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other hand. These similarities, however, overshadowed their differences and, to some extent, played a trick on Euromaidan's international perception.

Unlike during the 2004 protest, the Revolution of Dignity did not involve a contest between two leaders and two antagonistic political forces, which mainly represented the Centre-West and South-East of the country, respectively. In 2013-2014, the anti-hero of the two Maidans, Yanukovych, was politically embodying the crooked and autocratic government rather than the Eastern and Southern regional constituencies where his authority and political appeal were already fading (Pifer & Thoburn, 2013). Not coincidentally, therefore, the protest was also able to spread to major cities of the East and South, including Ukraine's second-largest city, Kharkiv, in Eastern Ukraine and Odesa in Southern Ukraine (Onuch, 2014, pp.45-46). Conversely, the Euromaidan that eventually toppled Yanukovych's regime lacked a single leader or commanding political force but consisted of a conglomerate of political organisations and miscellaneous civic grassroots initiatives from around Ukraine.

Yet, the seal of a "cleft country" in the Western political, media and expert discourses on Ukraine affected their perception of the Euromaidan. In many reports and analyses, the democratic nature of the Revolution of Dignity was eclipsed by commentaries and stories underscoring its alleged connection to the 'traditional' East-West societal divide. Perceived in this way, the protesters' clashes with the police and armed thugs employed to defend the regime, and particularly the massacre of approximately one hundred demonstrators during the decisive phase of the Euromaidan (Shveda & Park, 2016), served as an additional 'proof' of the problem of Ukrainian 'split'. "President Viktor Yanukovych's refusal to sign an agreement establishing closer cooperation with the EU has resurrected deep tensions about the soul of Ukraine. […] Ukraine is often described as a divided country, but the scene in central Kiev this weekend provides an unusually striking picture of the split," reported a Moscow-based correspondent of *The Guardian* (Walker, 2013).

The Russian occupation and illegal annexation of Crimea and the start of its disguised intervention in the Donbas in 2014 encouraged even greater attention to and discussion of the role of Ukraine's cultural and regional cleavages in these violent events.

"Many politicians, experts, and journalists around the world have played into Russian propaganda, framing the war in Donbas as a civil war," notes Anastasiia Lapatina (2024). In actuality, it was not difficult to see that the conflict in Ukraine was an act of Russian aggression[9]. The Kremlin took advantage of the opportunity created by the power vacuum in Ukraine following the hasty escape of Yanukovych. In this way, Putin attempted to achieve his old dream of bringing the country fully under Moscow's control as well as annexing its Southern and Eastern regions, which he regarded to be genuinely Russian, in an old imperial tradition calling them "Novorossia."[10]

Russia used its agents and troops without insignia during both its Crimea and Donbas campaigns (Sukhankin, 2019). Yet, while Crimea was shortly fully occupied and formally annexed in a blatant breach of international law in March 2014, a different tactic was chosen in other parts of Ukraine. The Kharkiv and Odesa operations failed, which forced the Kremlin to put the "Novorossia project" on hold (Kuzio, 2019, Loiko, 2016). The infiltration of the local security forces and authorities turned out to be more successful in the two Donbas oblasts, Donetsk and Luhansk. As a result, the so-called "Donetsk People's Republic" and "Luhansk People's Republic" (or "DNR" and "LNR") were formed, becoming Russia's camouflaged military bridgeheads as well as political proxies for continuous attacks on Ukraine.

Nevertheless, the camp of the supporters of the idea of Ukraine's societal split in the West came up with an alternative interpretation of these events. The Kremlin-friendly speakers and authors became particularly engaged in discursive activities persuading the Western audiences that Euromaidan was an illegal ousting of Yanukovych as the representative of Ukraine's East, that Russia was forced to annex Crimea, whereas the Donbas conflict was a separatist and civil war between the two respective parts of the country instigated by Ukrainian nationalists' threats to the Easterners.

In some instances, interpretations of these events consisted of an outright distortion of reality. This included the narratives endorsed by academicians and social scientists in particular. Thus, apart from calling the Revolution of Dignity a "coup" that led to a "civil war" in the Donbas in several of his publications, Ivan Katchanovski openly spread Russian disinformation about mass killings of demonstrators in central Kyiv in February 2014. Writing in the style of a conspiracy theorist (and slightly of a ballistic expert, too), Katchanovski (2016, 2023) argued that the murders were a false-flag operation of the demonstrators who plotted to

shoot their fellow protestors paving their way to an unlawful seizure of power in the country.

The Russian Studies scholars and Western Russia experts turned out to be among the leading transmitters of the pro-Russian narratives about the Euromaidan and Russian aggression against Ukraine. Richard Sakwa, a political scientist and renowned expert on Russia, was wary of the conventional version of the shootings in Kyiv. Apart from that, he, for instance, fully sided with the Russian account of the deaths of dozens of anti-Maidan protesters in Odesa on May 2, 2014, where the Kremlin was actually trying to orchestrate the same 'Russian Spring' operation as in Donetsk and Luhansk (Sakwa, 2015, pp.97-99). These cases were just two small episodes that Sakwa (2015) was using to support his main argument in his "Frontline Ukraine" (as well as a number of other publications). According to him, both the West and Ukrainian nationalists from the Western part of the country (which he argued were attacking an ethnic and political pluralism of the country's East) were to be blamed for what was happening in Ukraine.

Virtually all such pro-Russian accounts portrayed the alleged "East-West" societal split as the major cause of the upheavals in Ukraine. Stephen Cohen, a celebrated American Russia expert with weighty political connections who also worked as an editor for *The Nation* magazine was another example.

Cohen was known for a staunchly pro-Putin position. He was a frequent guest at the Russian propagandist Russia Today TV channel and did not shy away from spreading outright disinformation regarding Ukraine and the Russo-Ukrainian war, which he unsurprisingly called "civil war" (Kuzio, 2020, p.119). Just as many other pro-Russian experts, Cohen was keen to cite Ukraine's domestic cleavages as the key source for the Ukraine calamities. "When the current crisis began in 2013, Ukraine was one state, but it was not a single people or a united nation" argued Cohen in one of his texts on this issue. "Everything that followed, from Russia's annexation of Crimea and the spread of rebellion in southeastern Ukraine to the civil war and Kiev's 'anti-terrorist operation,' was triggered by the February coup." He concluded: "[t]he underlying causes of the crisis are Ukraine's own internal divisions, not primarily Putin's actions." (Cohen, 2014).

These resolutely pro-Russian narratives about the conflict in Ukraine did not represent a mainstream interpretation of the events. Nonetheless, these claims' presence in the public discourse widened the spectre of opinions available to both ordinary citizens and political decision-makers

in Western countries, opening a long discussion on the nature of the conflict. This contributed to the shifting of the focus of attention away from Russia and its attack on the sovereign state and softened official rhetoric towards the aggressor eroding political and military support for beleaguered Ukraine. What helped these manipulative narratives about the war in Ukraine sound more persuasive to the average public and various factions of the Western elites was that these narratives were, to a significant extent, rooted in and encouraged by the stereotypic idea of Ukraine's societal divisions. In this sense, the "seeds" fell on good "soil".

Stories by other experts and commentators writing on the situation in Ukraine or referring to it as an example for wider generalisations highlighted the alleged role of the "East-West divide" as well. The prior normalisation of the idea of a divided Ukraine in the Western public discourse influenced the assessment of the contemporary developments as well as these experts' policy proposals.

Thus, former American diplomat and statesman Henry Kissinger drew on the traditional Huntingtonian argumentation before getting to unveiling his plan for solving what he defined as the "Ukraine crisis". In one of his essays after the start of Moscow's military aggression against Ukraine in 2014, Kissinger painted the following account of Ukraine's "East-West" cleavage:

> "The west [of Ukraine] is largely Catholic; the east largely Russian Orthodox. The west speaks Ukrainian; the east speaks mostly Russian. Any attempt by one wing of Ukraine to dominate the other — as has been the pattern — would lead eventually to civil war or break up." (Kissinger, 2014)

While approaching the problem from a different angle, a prominent IR scholar, Benjamin Miller, cited the situation in Ukraine as a case to support his idea of "state-to-nation imbalance" – or "a mismatch between state boundaries and national identities" – as a source of trouble and potential break up in such societies (Miller, 2014).

Even pundits with a thorough knowledge of and sympathetic towards Ukraine were sometimes drawn into following the stereotyped discourse. Thus, Steven Pifer (2015) chose to call the other side confronting Ukrainian forces in the Donbas conflict simply as "separatists". Pifer stated that Ukraine's domestic differences were quickly eroding and singled out the role of Putin's aggression for strengthening Ukrainian national identity. Then, he mentioned that "the Kremlin inspired, provided leadership for, and equipped an *armed separatist conflict*,"[11] adding that it "later sent in

regular Russian army units." (Pifer, 2015). In view of the admitted intensity and scale of Russia's implication in the Donbas conflict (let alone the Crimea campaign), it was certainly questionable whether the definition used – "separatist conflict" – really was an accurate choice of words.

Once adopted and rooted in the conventional perception of the developments in Ukraine such language was employed even in the contexts when it was apparently self-contradicting or making no sense at all. In his article for *Foreign Affairs* entitled "Ukraine's divided house still stands", Brian Milakovsky (2019) deliberated the Ukrainian government's potential choices in dealing with the parts of the Donbas "controlled by Russia and its separatist clients". When continuing to explain who was actually in charge in these territories, he came up with an oxymoron: they were administered by "separatists installed by the Kremlin." (Milakovsky, 2019).

The reality described by Milakovsky and other commentators evidently needed to be defined by different terms instead. Moscow did not only create, arm, finance, and fully control the fake Donetsk and Luhansk "republics" but handpicked and appointed local bosses and fighting commanders, many of whom were seconded there directly from Russia[12].

Most importantly, however, the stance implying a predominantly domestic nature of the conflict in Ukraine firmly made it into an everyday media discourse. Starting from late 2013, many reports on Ukraine implied that two parts of Ukraine faced each other during the Euromaidan. It was even more so the case with the conflict in the Donbas. The routine media narratives maintained that in the East Ukrainian security forces confronted some "pro-Russian" or "Russian-backed" "separatists" or "rebels" – and not Russia's collaborators or proxies.

The coverage of the war in the Donbas was influenced by its assessment as a domestic separatist conflict. "Can Ukraine avoid an East-West split and bloody civil war?" asked the title of a report on *NBC News* on the eve of the Russian aggression in 2014. (Can Ukraine avoid, 2014) "Deadly pro-Russian unrest in eastern Ukraine […] has exposed deep divisions in Ukrainian society – between the European-facing west and the Russian-facing east," argued an article on *BBC News* following the ousting of Yanukovych. (Ukraine's sharp divisions, 2014) Already in early 2015, another BBC report explaining the causes of the war in the East attributed the fighting and seizure of the Ukrainian territories there exclusively to the "pro-Russian rebels," without even mentioning the role of the Russian army and secret service either in the Donbas or the illegally annexed Crimea. (Kirby, 2015)

The routine interpretations of the situation in Ukraine between 2013 and 2022 were made through the lens of the previously shaped "East-West divide" stereotype. This was all the more disappointing due to an apparent strengthening of the Ukrainian identity and Europe-leaning orientation taking place following years of a successful nation-building process in the independent Ukraine. While this trend was discernible at least after the Orange Revolution (Kuzyk, 2011), it became truly unequivocal since the Euromaidan and the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. (Kulyk, 2016, Kuzyk, 2019, Razumkov Centre, 2024) Factors contributing to the improved societal cohesion based on Ukrainian national identity included the structural power of nation-state institutions, generational shift and growing interference and aggressiveness of Russia towards Ukraine with a simultaneous demonstration effect of the West. The regional East-West polarisation was hazy and often illusory, and to the extent that it did surface in the political landscape of the country, this line was steadily moving from west to east.[13]

The subsiding of the "East-West" polarization in Ukrainian society reached the point of no return with the Russian military incursion in Crimea and Donbas in 2014 (Haran & Yakovlev, 2017). So, contrary to its goals, the Russian aggression cemented the disappearance of the "East" as a potent political and ideological pole in Ukraine. By mid-spring 2014, the "symbolic East" shrank to a mere two regions. According to a nationwide poll conducted in April 2014, only the population of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts considered the protests on Kyiv Maidan "an armed coup d'état." Conversely, either an absolute or relative majority of the public in every other Eastern and Southern oblast (with the exception of the already occupied Crimea) defined it as a "civic protest against corruption and oppression of the Yanukovych dictatorship." (KIIS, 2014)

Ukraine's East and South turned out to be much more Ukrainian in their dominant identity and political loyalty than the commonplace "East-West divide" idea had allowed. Tatiana Zhurzhenko, a Ukrainian scholar from Kharkiv, came to the following conclusion in her reflections on this problem shortly after the start of the Russian incursion:

> "Recent events have proved that there is no such entity as 'the East' or 'the South-East'. In facing the separatist threat and Russian aggression, Dnipropetrovsk, Odesa, Kharkiv, and other big and small cities have rediscovered their 'Ukrainianness' and are manifesting it in various ways." (Zhurzhenko, 2014)

Similar to the previous assessments of the Orange Revolution a palpable international and geopolitical factor featured in the Western public discourse on the Euromaidan and the 2014-2021 war in the Donbas. This time, this element of the discourse was even more pronounced. The supposedly divergent foreign allegiances of Ukraine's Western and Eastern regions were considered to be at the heart of the domestic contestation. Hence, the most important divide in Ukraine, argued the prominent Sovietologist and Russia expert Michael Rywkin, was between regions with a prevailing "European identification," on the one hand, and the regions with dominant "pro-Russian feelings," on the other hand. (Rywkin, 2014)

What was noteworthy about such categorical claims like those voiced by Rywkin about the "East-West" divergence on the foreign preferences and identities in Ukraine was that they indeed went well with the existing stereotype. However, one significant problem with such claims was that they did not correlate with the prevailing attitudes and identifications registered in Ukrainian society. The experts and commentators adhering to the myth of "two Ukraines" were either unaware or simply unwilling to admit that starting from 2014, the presumably firmly pro-Russian "East" has ceased to be pro-Russian.

Support for an economic union or military alliance with Russia among the Ukrainian population has steadily declined since the mid-2000s. The Russian aggression against Ukraine triggered nothing less than a collapse of the Russian foreign and security vector in the whole of Ukrainian society, including the Eastern and Southern regions. In fact, since 2014 these regions witnessed the biggest shift in the public attitudes towards Russia and Russia-controlled alliances. Their popular support in these regions truly plummeted. By July 2015, the popular support for Ukraine's potential joining of the Eurasian Economic Union in the East and South dropped to 26 per cent. This was notably less than the endorsement of the EU integration in these same parts of Ukraine. (IKDIF, 2015) What is more, between April 2012 and May 2016, the rates of support for a military alliance with Russia and other post-Soviet states dropped from 38 to 15 per cent in the East and from 31 to 12 per cent in the South (IKDIF, 2016).

The external dimension of the geopolitical component in the expert, scholarly and media discourse was no less important. In this part of the discourse, Ukraine's domestic cleavages were increasingly perceived as not just Ukraine's problem and, therefore, not up to Ukraine alone to decide. Following the start of the Russian occupation of Crimea, Kissinger suggested that Ukraine should not be accepted into NATO in order not

to annoy Russia. Instead, the Ukrainian foreign course was to liken that of neutral Finland at the time, hence serving as a bridge between Russia and the West (Kissinger, 2014). Ukrainian sovereignty and international agency were clearly not valued in these "realpolitik" calculations.

A cohort of International Relations scholars belonging to the Political Realist tradition was instrumental in promoting such kind of discourse. These scholars were convinced that Russia had been provoked by supposedly "reckless" NATO, EU, Ukrainian nationalists and some individual Western powers. Moreover, they believed that Russia had legitimate security concerns that eventually forced the Kremlin to act in Ukraine based on its strategic reckoning. In this way, they rationalised and justified the Kremlin's decision to invade a sovereign state, annex part of its territory, and fight a camouflaged war in its other regions.

One of the Realist School's most authoritative theoreticians of today, John Meirsheimer, belonged to the group of the most ardent promulgators of the pro-Russian narratives. According to Meirsheimer (2014) Ukraine's Euromaidan was a US-supported "coup" in a divided society. Arguably, this triggered an escape of the pro-Russian president and subsequent "insurrection" in Eastern Ukraine. This, in view of the EU's and NATO's "irresponsible" eastward expansions, became "the final straw" that compelled Putin to intervene. Similar to Kissinger, Mearsheimer called for converting Ukraine into a "neutral buffer between NATO and Russia."

It did not matter that, in the words of Paul D'Anieri, "realism has been poorly applied to the Ukraine case by one of its leading voices." (D'Anieri, 2016, p.501) Mearsheimer's ideas appeared to be persuasive to many – and not just inside Academia. Apart from his scholarly texts Mearsheimer's public speeches and lectures on the relations between Russia, Ukraine and the West hit millions of views on *YouTube* alone.[14]

All in all, the idea of a divided Ukraine clearly lived a life of its own. The commonplace perception of Ukraine and its social and cultural cleavages reflected in the expert, media and political discourse became all the more irrelevant over the course of time. The discourse did not match the political and social developments taking place in Ukraine. It evidently missed Ukraine's growing societal cohesion and strengthening of the Ukrainian national identity, which resulted from an overall successful nation-building process since independence. After all, by the mid-2010s, Ukraine has become the third most ethnically homogeneous country in Europe, with over 90 per cent of its population now declaring their Ukrainian ethnic identity (Identychnist hromadian, 2017, Razumkov Centre, 2024).

Contrary to the stereotypic interpretation of these events in the Western public discourse, the two Maidan revolutions that happened within roughly 10 years' time prevented Ukraine from sliding into authoritarianism and turning the country into a Russian appendage. They also became important stages in the process of shaping a strong and integrated civic nation. Russia's military aggression against Ukraine since 2014 only accelerated this evolution.

4. The idea of "East-West" divide today: a stereotype debunked?

Russia's unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine since 24 February 2022 has shaken the world. In the first weeks and months of the war, the Western political leaders, experts and the common public were equally surprised to find out that Ukraine was not overwhelmed by the powerful offensive of the Russian army but was able to effectively challenge the incursion. Contrary to prior expectations, Ukrainian society demonstrated extraordinary resilience and unity in its efforts to counter the Russian incursion. The failure to foresee the strength of Ukrainian resistance was described as "embarrassing for a Western think-tank and military community that had confidently predicted that the Russians would conquer Ukraine in a matter of days." (O'Brien, 2022).

The ideas about Ukraine reflected in the Western public discourse have finally met the reality. The myth of a helplessly divided and weak Ukraine, so widely circulated in the West, was among the key reasons why the country was initially regarded as standing no chance of surviving a major Russian attack. The deep-seated conviction about a prevailing pro-Russian character of the country's East and South was evidently at odds with these regions' crucial role in repelling the Russian aggression. This was the case during 2014-2021, when, for instance, the Eastern city and region of Dnipro/Dnipropetrovsk turned into an outpost of resistance to the Russian attack (Kupensky & Andriushchenko, 2022). The Dnipropetrovsk oblast also registered the biggest number of Ukrainian soldiers killed in action (Zahybli hromadiany, 2018). The same pro-Ukrainian trend was even more obvious following the Russian full-scale incursion, apparently calling the "Ukrainian divide" idea into question.

"In Moscow and among Western experts, Ukraine's Russian speakers were deemed to be inherently unreliable and likely to swing to supporting Russia if Moscow invaded the country," writes Kuzio. It was believed

that a "shock-and-awe style Russian invasion of Ukraine would exert tremendous pressure on Ukraine's regional divisions, leading to the state's fragmentation and the collapse of the Ukrainian army (as in Afghanistan)." However, this did not happen "because Ukraine was never a regionally fractured country; its Russian speakers were Ukrainian patriots, and there was never any possibility the Ukrainian army was going to disintegrate in the same manner as the Afghan army" (Kuzio, 2022). The previously unnoticed or stubbornly denied evidence of a robust Ukrainian identity held by most of the Russian-speaking population of the Eastern and Southern regions has now been fully exposed. So has the inconsistency of the well-established general interpretation of Ukraine's societal differences and cleavages that otherwise would have been regarded normal for a modern society.

All this has questioned the general belief about Ukraine being a "cleft" or "borderland" country doomed to survive only in the form of a "neutral buffer" or "bridge" between Russia and the West – if they would allow it. The Russian genocidal war against Ukraine and the latter's subsequent united response to it has indicated that the stereotypical ideas about Ukraine's social and cultural cleavages were significantly exaggerated. These led many in the West to make incorrect judgements about the level of cohesion and potential of the Ukrainian nation, and not least about the nature of the conflict dragging on its territory since 2014. Now, with all these "revelations" finally on full display, the myths and stereotypes contained in the expert, media and political discourse have been asking for their critical re-consideration.

Since early 2022, the Western media, expert and academic discourse have indeed witnessed some signs of the change taking place. In many respects, Russia's war of aggression has been an eye-opener. The tone of the expert and media talk on the Ukrainian regional and cultural differences has been mitigated, while the critical voices calling for parting with the old mantra of the Ukrainian "East-West" split (as well as other myths and misconceptions about Ukraine) have been gradually gaining momentum (Klein, 2022, Kotliuk, 2023, Kudlenko, 2023, Kuzio, 2022, 2023).

The biggest shift concerned the focus of the discourse. Now, it has been – quite naturally – redirected towards the issues relating to the Russo-Ukrainian war. The less immediate themes involved discussing the motives behind the Russian aggression and Putin's obsession with Ukraine, sources of Ukrainian resilience, etc. Separate threads of the respective

reporting and commentary were catching up on some general themes and information that had usually been missing in the pre-2022 discourse on Ukraine and its society. Ukraine was finally emerging on the mental map of the Western world as a complex but integral sovereign actor.

What the change in interpreting some key episodes of Ukraine's modern history relating to its regional and cultural cleavages could mean for the routine media discourse is exemplified by an article by David Gormezano (2024) published in *France 24*. The author produced a fairly balanced analysis of the major causes, actors, sequence of events and political context of the conflict in the Donbas since 2014. In his analysis, Gormezano considered the war as not an isolated incident but a precursor of the large-scale military invasion of Ukraine by expansionist Russia, noted an important role of the past brutal Russification of the Donbas for breeding local pro-Russian communities and demonstrated how these proxies were exploited by the Russian secret service and military going after their strategic objectives in Ukraine.

Yet, the inertia of the previous narratives has been there too. The difficulty in coming to terms with the suddenly exposed reality in and around Ukraine following the start of the all-out Russian war was apparent in many pieces of analysis and reporting. The dissonance between the previous stories of the alleged societal "split" or "civil war" and the present-day experience of the unified society fighting the aggressor was simply too big to swallow straight away.

The case of the pre-2022 war in the Donbas offered multiple examples of the inertia of the old discourse in particular. Leading global news agencies have been evidently perplexed with accommodating the former senses and discursive conventions from the years of their sticking to the myth of the "pro-Russian separatists" and "rebels" allegedly representing the chief force behind what actually was a foreign occupation of the Ukrainian territories of the Donbas and Crimea.

The clumsy efforts at integrating the former narratives into the current discourse at times ran to apparent logical absurdity. The formerly internalised narrative about the "separatists" and "internal conflict" in the Ukrainian East led to confusion caused by *Agence France-Presse*. The Agency once again bought into the Russian propaganda trick following months of intense fighting on the fronts of the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war. On 3 July 2022, the *AFP* reported some tactical advances of the "Russian-backed Ukraine separatists" in the Donbas – mistakenly implying that the troops fighting there were something different from the overall

Russian forces encroaching on the Ukrainian sovereign territory. This information was subsequently disseminated by *Le Monde, Deutsche Welle, Barron's* as well as *Al Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiya*. "What [would they report] next? [That t]he 'Ukrainian separatists' launch cruise missiles from the Caspian Sea?" mocked the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs the *AFP*'s interpretation of the events (Ukraine's Foreign Ministry, 2022).

Similarly, traces of the old approach to the Ukrainian societal differences and cleavages and their political repercussions (or lack thereof) have been no stranger to the current expert and political discourse. The recent epistemological twist in the perception of these cleavages encouraged by the upfront experience of the Russo-Ukrainian war has not worked for all researchers and political commentators either.

At the very least, the change has not affected the diehards from the *Putinverstehers* camp. These scholars and pundits, on the whole, have continued blaming the West and Ukrainian radicals for the outbreak of the war and actually calling for respect for Russia's "interests" in the "fragmented" Ukraine. The previously cited Mearsheimer (2022) spoke about the ever-intensified "animosities that have fuelled the conflict in the Donbas between pro-Russian separatists and the Ukrainian government," the "irresponsible" West supporting Ukraine's war efforts, and claimed that Moscow "did not invade Ukraine to conquer it."

In a similar way, a former career diplomat and historian who served as the last American ambassador to the USSR, Jack Matlock, has stuck to his old story once laid out in the essays with symptomatic headings: "Ukraine: the price of internal division" (Matlock, 2014) and "Ukraine: tragedy of a nation divided" (Matlock, 2021). Matlock reiterated familiar claims about Ukraine being "deeply divided along linguistic and cultural lines." According to him, this was a problem stemming from the past "haphazard assembling" of the country from parts that were not "mutually compatible" (Matlock, 2022).

The inertia of the concepts from the old discourse concerns some more mainstream intellectual circles as well. Fans of the "Clash of Civilizations" are not prepared to part with the concept of the "cleft country" as an explainer of Ukraine's troubles and to admit that Huntington got the Ukrainian case wrong. An American political analyst and columnist Ross Douthat is one such example. Douthat (2022) conceded that Huntington's "assumption that civilizational alignments would trump national ones hasn't been borne out in Putin's war, in which eastern Ukraine has resisted Russia fiercely." However, Douthat still insisted that Huntington

had accurately foreseen "internal Ukrainian divisions, the split between the Orthodox and Russian-speaking east and the more Catholic and Western-leaning west" (Douthat, 2022).

Today, the stereotypic idea of Ukraine's "East-West" divide has also been reproduced in the political and expert discourse in different contexts and forms. Thus, one of the key distinguishing features of the present-day Ukraine narratives of the discussed Kremlin-friendly expert camp is promoting some true *realpolitik* solutions for ending the war. It is noteworthy that the suggested possible compromises do not really presuppose punishing the aggressor for waging an unlawful and brutal war, attempting to annex foreign territories, and overall threatening the international order. Instead, such "compromises" essentially come down to a formula: peace at Ukraine's cost.

Implied in such proposals usually are concessions expected from Ukraine, which include yielding chunks of its sovereign territory. Helping Ukraine to make sure that it survives the war as an independent state, writes Matlock, "does not mean that Ukraine has to recover all the territory it inherited in 1991". Moreover, this would be undesirable "given all the passions aroused by the war and what preceded it (the violent change of government in 2014 that many Russians considered a coup d'etat organized by the United States), the population in some areas is likely to resist a return to Kyiv's control" (Matlock, 2022b).

"Even after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine," notes Kudlenko, "scholars defended Russia's 'legitimate security concerns' and discussed how Ukraine's choices were a threat to Russia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, not vice versa" (Kudlenko, 2023). Perhaps these experts and academics could not have come to a different conclusion when guided by the long-standing views of divided Ukraine as well as foreign-orchestrated "coups" and "civil war".

Unfortunately, the general line of reasoning expressed in these narratives is shared not just among the now somewhat outmoded *Putinverstehers*. The set of ideas consisting of the former consent regarding divided Ukraine, realpolitik advocacy for the Russo-Western détente and readiness to sacrifice Ukrainian interests can be found in different proportions in the mainstream expert and political discourse. These ideas have penetrated the expertise up to the top echelons of political and security apparatus in some key North-Atlantic capitals, affecting statements and views of the political leaders.

In early December 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron suggested that Russia's need for security guarantees had to be addressed by the West once Putin agreed to negotiate the end of the war in Ukraine. The statement was made in the context of American-French discussions of the future security architecture, NATO enlargement and "the deployment of weapons that could threaten Russia" (Clercq, 2022).

The legacy of the old myths and stereotypes about Ukraine surely played a role in arriving at such suggestions. Admitting such a possibility was irrational but rewarding for Putin. However, what is usually not voiced in such remarks and passages by experts and decision-makers alike is implicitly rooted in the very logic of the messages they convey. The idea clearly transpiring from these messages is that due to the limited support the West is willing to contribute, Ukraine's own supposed domestic problems, as well as Russian "comprehensible" (even if illegitimate) claims and interests in this country, Ukraine may need to give up something for the sake of the future peace settlement. And in view of the Russian appetite that "something" is no less than parts of its internal and external sovereignty.

The so-called "Korean scenario" as a possible model for ending the Russo-Ukrainian conflict that has been actively circulating in the Western discourse since the start of the full-scale invasion is another sign as to what the genuine picture of Ukraine is on the minds of Western experts and commentators. A number of recent publications contemplated the possibility of ending the war using the general approach that settled the Korean conflict in the mid-1950s (Malkasian, 2023, Rachman, 2022, Radchenko, 2023, Segura, 2023). The argumentation in support of applying such a model to Ukraine's case mainly focuses on its effectiveness in halting the hostilities at the existing contact line and turning this into an indefinite armistice. It is believed that this would save lives and prevent further destruction, as well as shield the bulk of the Ukrainian territory and population from the threat of further Russian aggression and influence.

The suggested "Korean" model for settling the conflict declares benign objectives. Yet, just as the previous approach, it presupposes Ukraine's territorial concessions for achieving peace. At the same time, it lacks some crucial international instruments and mechanisms to realistically expect the plan's successful fulfilment. Among them, a shortage of foreign troops stationed on the Ukrainian side and ready to fight to safeguard the fixed separation line should Russia breach the truce is a particularly essential circumstance in this case. To date, the political decision of the Western

countries to deploy a weighty contingent of troops to such a mission seems very unlikely.

However, it is even more noteworthy that the suggested scenario, once again, reveals the authors' tacit acknowledgement of the stereotype of the divided Ukraine. The implicit reasoning behind the "Korean scenario" draws on a proposition that the Eastern and Southern regions, parts of which are currently under Russian occupation, are significantly different from and, therefore, of lesser importance to the rest of the country. Even if the "East" is not really regarded to be representing a plain Russian proxy – as analogous to the relation of Northern Korea with China and the USSR – then, at the very least, this logic implies that it is a territory and part of the Ukrainian society culturally and politically so close to Russia that it can be easily traded for the peace and well-being of the western part. The familiar stereotypical idea of Ukraine being bitterly divided between "East" and "West" clearly lurks in the background of such proposals.

The legacy of the former perception of Ukraine's societal differences and cleavages, in fact, triggers a reversed causality in the present-day Western expert discourse on Ukraine. Yet, contrary to the explicit or implicit messages present in this discourse, the current Russian aggression against Ukraine has not been instigated or even helped by an alleged "East-West" split in the country. The inconvenient truth that this discourse is unwilling to admit is that Ukraine's domestic cleavages never represented a factor potent enough to trigger a major domestic conflict and have just been withering away over time.

In reality, the de-facto-divided Ukraine today could only emerge as a direct consequence of Russian aggression – with the physical border inflicted upon Ukraine by brutal force. It is this border or "wall" that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyi referred to in his Bundestag speech in June 2024, alluding to the years when the Berlin Wall separated Germany. "You can understand us in Ukraine; you can understand why we are fighting so hard against Russia's attempts to divide Ukraine, why we are doing everything we can to make sure there is not a new wall in our country." (Ukraine: Zelenskyi, 2024).

5. Conclusion

This article has analysed the idea of an "East-West" societal divide in Ukraine as contained in the Western media, expert and scholarly

discourse. The study has outlined a general perception of Ukraine's regional and cultural differences in the West. The analysis has revealed that starting from the early 1990s, political pundits, commentators and some authoritative scholars focusing on Ukraine were able to shape a dominant stereotypic view of Ukraine's domestic cleavages. According to the established conventional interpretation, the "East-West" cleavage was posing an insurmountable problem for the unity of the Ukrainian state and society. It was believed that the alleged societal divide epitomised a key hurdle for Ukraine's development that doomed the country to the role of an unstable buffer between Russia and the West or could even lead to a catastrophic disintegration.

The idea of a divided Ukraine started to appear in the Western media and expert discourse during the tense process of the country's acquisition of the state's independence. Then, in the early 1990s, Ukraine consisted of a confused and heavily Russified post-Soviet society with vast regional and cultural differences at an early stage of nation-building. Still, these narratives were unbalanced, focused heavily on societal differences and carried a heavy imprint of the internalised Russian myths about Ukraine in the context of the Yugoslav wars and ethnic and political unrest in other parts of the former USSR. In the mid-1990s, Samuel Huntington's concept of "cleft country" applied to Ukraine in his popular theory of "Clash of Civilizations" was instrumental in turning the image of a divided Ukraine into a full-blown stereotype. His conceptualisation of Ukraine's "East-West" differences drew disproportionate attention to this case and cemented the differences' stereotypic interpretation in the expert, media and academic discourse.

The Orange Revolution in 2004 and Euromaidan in 2013-14 were important democratic breakthroughs which helped the country to stay on its course of democratic development and Euro-Atlantic integration. However, the narratives of some authoritative experts and academic backers of the stereotype of the "East-West" divide presented an alternative discursive reality. Contrary to the two Maidans' actual meaning for the forging of a civic Ukrainian nation, they were declared to have represented a formidable sign of the Ukrainian "East-West" split. The Western mainstream media discourse, overall, picked this line of argument up also when covering the Russian aggression against Ukraine between 2014 and 2021. Russia's treacherous attack and occupation of the Crimea and its military intervention in the Eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk were

portrayed as an essentially domestic conflict triggered by local pro-Russian "rebels" or "separatists."

Ukrainian society's strong and united response to the full-scale invasion of the country by the Russian Federation has brought about some important changes in the media and expert and scholarly discourse, shaking the old stereotype. The focus on Ukraine's alleged deep divisions has given way to a more sophisticated and balanced analysis of Ukrainian society and its history. However, the traces of the old discourse remain. Some of the former stereotypical perceptions of Ukrainian societal differences transformed into new forms in the wartime context. Today, the idea of the Ukrainian divide, *inter alia*, is either explicitly or implicitly reproduced in some *realpolitik* proposals for ending the Russo-Ukrainian war at the cost of Ukrainian territorial concessions and its internal and external sovereignty. Such scenarios would not have apparently been voiced so intensely had the experts not subscribed to the belief about a different and essentially pro-Russian "East".

The analysis in this article has demonstrated that the depth of Ukraine's "East-West" cleavage and its true political influence in the country were exaggerated. It is possible to state that the stereotypical idea of a deeply divided Ukraine in the Western discourse has, in effect, lived a life of its own. While one could speak about political and cultural "East-West" differences in Ukrainian society in the early periods of its independence, these were comparable with the cleavages many contemporary European societies faced. Furthermore, over the course of a successful nation-building process in independent Ukraine the significance of the cleavage has been continuously subsiding. The trend of strengthening national cohesion was noticeable before the start of the Russian military and hybrid aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and has only intensified ever since.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine that followed in February 2022 and the genocidal character of the Russian war have made this change inside Ukrainian society irreversible. However, today, almost three years into the all-out Russo-Ukrainian war, Ukraine is facing the danger of a real divide imposed upon its society and territory from outside – by means of sheer brutal force. It has been concluded that once Russia is allowed to keep effective control over the occupied parts of Ukraine's East and South, such a potential demarcation line can physically separate them from the rest of the country in the future. In this way, the idea of Ukraine's "East-West" divide may indeed materialise becoming an actual border separating the integral parts of the Ukrainian nation.

Endnotes

1 I thank the anonymous reviewer of my paper for explicitly making this point to me.

2 In the book the mentioned paragraph on Ukraine was placed within a larger section entitled "Russia and Its Near Abroad." See Huntington 1996, 163-168.

3 It is also noteworthy that in such reports and commentaries Russian or Soviet nationalisms were never mentioned in this context, effectively associating any nationalistic views with the Halychyna or Western Ukraine more generally.

4 It was the time, writes Riabchuk (2023), "when anybody who spent a few years in Moscow, learnt some Russian and read Riasanovsky's antiquated Russian history textbook could boldly comment on all things Ukrainian – either in politics, history, culture, religion or language. Unintentionally, they became custodians and promotors of the empire that supposedly rested in peace in 1991 but still retained its discursive power and rhetorical dominance".

5 The scholarly significance of the "Clash of Civilizations" is reflected in its citation's statistics. As of September 2018, both the 1993 article and 1996 book were cited more than 36 thousand times. See Haynes, 2019.

6 Paul D'Anieri regarded this liberal inclusivity on the part of the Ukrainian government and political elites in the 1990s and 2000s as a rather forced measure stimulated by the large size of the Russophone minority. In his opinion, the resultant balance of power between the centre, regions and cultural minorities allowed Ukraine to avoid violence and separatism. See D'anieri, 2007.

7 The Russian speakers constituted a weighty proportion of Ukrainian society, which in the 1990s and 2000s nearly equaled the proportion of Ukrainophones in the country. (Panina, 2004, p.37) Included in these statistics were, for instance, many inhabitants of the capital Kyiv, the largest and mostly Russian-speaking city at that time. And yet, because of the proximity of ideological and political preferences of its citizens to those of the residents of the Halychyna, Kyiv was always allotted to the symbolic "West" on the "East-West" scheme. At the same time, the use of the Russian language for the most part did not coincide with holding of an ethnic Russian identity. The ethnic Russians represented a much smaller group in Ukraine which was furthermore steeply diminishing. This reflected the trend that Volodymyr Kulyk (2018) called the "bottom-up de-Russification".

8 "Why are so many west Europeans being such lemons about Ukraine's orange revolution?" rhetorically asked Timothy Garton Ash at some point of the revolutionary events in Ukraine in the late 2004. "Every day brings a

new example of some feeble, back-handed or downright hostile reaction." See Ash, 2004.

9 The accounts of the events in the Crimea and Donbas based on such understanding of reality were surely present in the Western expert and scholarly discourse as well. See, for instance, an article published shortly following the start of the Russian intervention by Roy Allison, 2014 or a comprehensive study of the motivations and ideological sources of the Russian 2014 attack on Ukraine by Taras Kuzio, 2017.

10 Putin and his close circle were fairly explicit and straightforward regarding their chauvinistic and expansionist plans towards Ukraine in general and the Crimea and large parts of the Southern and Eastern Ukraine in particular. These plans were also voiced in direct communications with fellow-leaders of the Western powers long before the start of the 2014 Crimea and Donbas campaigns. For a compilation of the eliminationist rhetoric coming from the high-ranking Russian officials and directed against Ukraine, its state, identity and culture see Apt, 2024.

11 Emphasis mine.

12 Among the Russians sent to Ukraine with the task to instigate and "manage" the conflict in the Donbas two figures with direct links to Russian secret service and ultra-nationalist oligarch Konstantin Malofeev stick out: Igor Girkin and Aleksandr Borodai. Igor Girkin (*nom de guerre* Strelkov), an FSB colonel, was a unit commander who took control of Sloviansk agglomeration in the Donetsk oblast. From May to August 2014, Strelkov was a "defence minister" of the bogus DNR "republic". He was sentenced to life in prison (in absentia) by the Dutch court for downing the Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 in June of the same year. Girkin-Strelkov claimed that he, together with his detachment, was "the one who pulled the trigger on the war" starting the "flywheel of the war." (Antonova & Pertsev, 2023). Aleksandr Borodai was initially involved in the operation of ceasing the Crimea and then was moved to the Donbas. There, he was appointed as the first head of the "DNR" but shortly resigned in August 2014 after Moscow found a more suitable candidate with a Ukrainian background for the post (Weselowsky, 2019).

13 The issue of the growing integration of Ukrainian society has been dealt with by the author of this paper elsewhere. See Kuzyk, 2019.

14 Just one of the *YouTube*'s videos of Meirsheirmer's many talks, "Why is Ukraine the West's fault," (Meirsheimer, 2015) attracted almost 30 million views by July 2024.

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