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RUSSIAN NATIONALISM SHIFTING: THE ROLE OF POPULISM SINCE THE ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA

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Abstract: This article focuses on the ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine (Donbass) that started with the events on the Euromaidan and the swift annexation of Crimea by Russia. Our analysis of key speeches by Vladimir Putin regarding the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbass demonstrates that in this case, populism extends beyond the dichotomy of the people against the establishment, since it relies on complex notions of enmity and alliance. We argue that the Russian political leadership deployed a discourse of Russian identity based on an overstretched definition of the Russian nation, a new discursive division of the political space, and the introduction of new and the reaffirmation of old symbols of unity. We also conclude that populism and nationalism were used interchangeably depending on the audience: the Russian leadership has used discursive strategies associated with populism to articulate this new vision of identity to residents of Crimea and nationalist ones when addressing domestic audiences.

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Putin's Russia "is not a democracy, but it is in the name of the people, and for the people. Putin's main constituency is 'the people.' All of his power comes from his rating with the people," explains Andranik Migranyan.¹ Popular legitimacy in Russia, however, is not derived from elections. Since the beginning of his presidency, Vladimir Putin has shaped domestic policies that have emphasized elements not only of patriotism,² xenophobia (especially against migrants)³ and anti-Westernism,⁴ but also of depoliticization⁵ and populism.⁶ The notion of populism points in a different direction than the study of nationalism or democracy and raises the following question: who precisely comprise "the people" that so matters to the Russian political leadership?

Russian official discourse under Putin has carefully disentangled ethnicity from national identity and has introduced into its definition of Russianness a mixture of pre-Soviet and Soviet symbols.⁷ Putin's way of conducting politics has led scholars to compare him to well-established populist politicians such as Hugo Chavez, Umberto Bossi, and Geert Wilders.⁸

His late political opponent Boris Nemtsov also accused Putin of "pursuing a policy of warlike populism in order to bolster his approval

¹ Quoted in Julia Ioffe. "What Putin Really Wants." *The Atlantic*. January/February 2018, At <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/01/putins-game/546548/>, accessed December 19, 2017.

² Richard Sakwa. 2004. *Putin: Russia's Choice*. London: Routledge, 166.

³ Sofia Tipaldou and Katrin Uba. 2014. "The Russian Radical Right Movement and Immigration Policy: Do They Just Make Noise or Have an Impact as Well?" *Europe-Asia Studies* 66: 7: 1080-1101, 1091-3.

⁴ Aleksander Verkhovsky. 2007. "The Rise of Nationalism in Putin's Russia." *Helsinki Monitor* 18: 2: 125-137.

⁵ Andrey S. Makarychev. 2008. "Politics, the State, and De-Politization." *Problems of Post-Communism* 55: 5: 62-71.

⁶ Philipp Casula. 2013. "Sovereign Democracy, Populism, and Depoliticization in Russia: Power and Discourse During Putin's First Presidency." *Problems of Post-Communism* 60: 3: 3-15; Philipp Casula. "Why Russia Needs Troops from the Caucasus in Syria—and How They Bolster Moscow's 'Eastern' Image." *The Conversation*, August 1, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/why-russia-needs-troops-from-the-caucasus-in-syria-and-how-they-bolster-moscows-eastern-image-81281>, accessed December 18, 2017.

⁷ M. Steven Fish. 2001. "Putin's Path." *Journal of Democracy* 12: 4: 71-78; M. Steven Fish. 2017. "What Is Putinism?" *Journal of Democracy* 28: 4: 61-75, 67; Sakwa, *Putin: Russia's Choice*, 169; Marlene Laruelle. 2009. *In the Name of the Nation: Nationalism and Politics in Contemporary Russia*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 153-174; Sofia Tipaldou. 2015. "Russia's Nationalist-Patriotic Opposition: The Shifting Politics of Right-Wing Contention During Post-Communist Transition." PhD diss., Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 186-188.

⁸ Stefano Fella and Carlo Ruzza. 2009. *Re-Inventing the Italian Right: Territorial Politics, Populism and "Post-Fascism."* London and New York: Routledge; Stefano Fella and Carlo Ruzza. 2013. "Populism and the Fall of the Centre-Right in Italy: The End of the Berlusconi Model or a New Beginning?" *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 21: 1: 38-52; Fish, "What Is Putinism?" 68.

ratings.”⁹ Warlike situations imply a populist dichotomization of political space. For Putin, a regular pursuer of antagonistic politics, politics is the continuation of war, to use Foucault’s famous inversion¹⁰ of Clausewitz’s statement: at the beginning of his tenure, Putin’s key to winning over large segments of the Russian population was the declaration of war against crime, a “dictatorship of law” that bifurcated the political space into order and chaos. He then connected his name with the war in Chechnya, i.e., against one of the Russian Federation’s own federal subjects. The Chechen war has divided the political space into terrorists and their opponents and has triggered one of the bloodiest conflicts of post-Soviet Russia.¹¹

Fourteen years later, Russia is again at the center of a war in the post-Soviet space. As with the Chechen conflict, the war in the Donbass is shrouded in a mixture of nationalism and populism that has triggered a “rally ‘round the flag” effect¹² in Russia. In contrast to the Chechen war, which could draw on a religious narrative that pitted Orthodox Russians against Muslim Chechens, the “people” to which the Russian State appealed during the Crimean crisis and the subsequent war in the Donbass was a much more unstable, slippery, and problematic construct, since Ukrainians were considered a brotherly Slavic nation. These “brothers”—including, to some extent, Crimea’s Muslim Tatars—had to be won over. This could not be achieved through the use of exclusive nationalism¹³ by the Russian government. Hence, official discourse activated the most populist and inclusionary elements of a tamed, official Russian nationalism.¹⁴

The special bond between Ukraine and Russia, cultivated over the course of centuries (especially by Russia), grants the Crimean and Donbass conflicts their exceptionality and constitutes the puzzle that the present investigation seeks to fathom. Against this backdrop, the research questions this article seeks to answer are: How can Vladimir Putin justify intervention in Crimea and war in the Donbass against Ukraine if the image

⁹ Antoine Arjakovsky. “Russia’s Headlong Rush into Populism.” *The Conversation*. January 11, 2017. At <https://theconversation.com/russias-headlong-rush-into-populism-71101>, accessed December 18, 2017.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon, 90.

¹¹ See also Henry E. Hale. 2000. *Is Russian Nationalism on the Rise?* Cambridge, MA: Davis Center for Russian Studies.

¹² John Mueller. 1970. “Popularity from Truman to Johnson.” *American Political Science Review* 64: 1: 18–34.

¹³ We use the term nationalism in Anthony Smith’s sense, i.e., as an ideological movement for attaining as maintaining autonomy, unity, and identity for a population which some of its members deem to constitute an actual or potential “nation” according to narrowly ethnic terms or broader civic criteria, like belonging to a state. See Anthony D. Smith. 2001. *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

¹⁴ Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud. 2018. “Introduction.” In Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud, eds., *Russia Before and After Crimea: Nationalism and Identity, 2010-17*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 8.

of an “antagonistic Other” is blurred and the Other somehow belongs to the Self? What frames does the discourse he represents use to construct the features of the people to whom it wants to appeal? We conduct a thematic analysis of Vladimir Putin’s key 2014 speeches to get a clearer picture of “the people” and its allies and friends, its enemies, and the symbols that are used to keep it united. We have selected these speeches because they were delivered at a particular historical juncture, in the context of the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in Donbass. This selection offers rich empirical data to detail the dominant conception of the membership of the Russian nation and can hence be considered particularly revealing about the populism-nationalism nexus in contemporary Russian politics at this specific moment in time. All three constituent parts of populism—the people, the enemies, and the symbols¹⁵—are defined differently than in nationalism. In some instances, however, Russian nationalism and populism overlap, especially when governmental discourse returns to a pre-revolutionary definition of the Russian nation, one that was rejected under the Soviet regime.

Our analysis shows that the dichotomic separation of identities into “us” and “them” does not grasp the whole complexity of the issue. We argue that Vladimir Putin’s selective use of an overstretched definition of the Russian nation; a new, officially endorsed discursive division of the political space; and the introduction of new symbols of unity and reaffirmation of old ones are constitutive of a new pan-Russian identity regarding the annexation of Crimea and later the war in Donbass. Furthermore, we show that “populism” is used when “nationalism” no longer fits and that it provides Russia with a “non-ethnic nationalism” that seeks to unify the Eurasian nations under Russian leadership.

Studying Putin’s discursive strategies toward Ukraine—the way he constructs a people—advances our knowledge of the relationship between nationalism and populism as strategies to sustain the power of political elites and is of utmost importance to understanding European populist movements, with which Putin’s Russia entertains tight connections. Taggart and Wejnert argue that the flexibility of populism makes it particularly apt for sustaining all kinds of policies.¹⁶ Populism can be an oppositional, democratic, and emancipatory movement, as Laclau emphatically argued,¹⁷ but it can also be a tool in tension with democracy.¹⁸ For the present article, the crucial element is populism’s capacity to construct

¹⁵ Ernesto Laclau. 2005. *On Populism*. London: Verso.

¹⁶ Paul Taggart. 2004. “Populism and Representative Politics in Contemporary Europe.” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 9: 3: 269–288; Barbara Wejnert. 2014. “Populism and Democracy: Not the Same but Interconnected.” In Dwayne Woods and Barbara Wejnert, eds., *Many Faces of Populism: Current Perspectives*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing, 156.

¹⁷ Laclau, *On Populism*.

¹⁸ Wejnert, “Populism and Democracy.”

“the people,” or “in-group,”¹⁹ that is pitted against an outside enemy, as will be discussed in detail below. The study of populism in Russia has so far been widely neglected compared to discussion of populist movements in Western Europe or Latin America.²⁰ The dominant paradigm for looking at politics in Russia has been nationalism or (non-)democracy, despite the central role that populism has been acknowledged to play in neo-authoritarian regimes (e.g., Venezuela, China). Furthermore, we can expect the populist narrative used by the Russian government to define “the people” to have repercussions in the field of foreign policy,²¹ as populism can also be transnational, with appeals being made to foreign audiences, not least by the Russian international media: Yablokov explicitly links a Laclauian notion of populism to the strategies pursued in conspiracy theories as aired by RT.²² Thus, this article is relevant not only for scholars of populism, but also for scholars of foreign policy and policymakers.

The article is structured as follows. First, we introduce relevant aspects of the theoretical debate on populism and foreign policy, advancing a working definition of populism and the criteria that we use as the basis for extracting data from the key governmental speeches that we have chosen. Second, in the empirical section, we discuss populism in three parts. The first part presents the notion of “the people” that Putin has unfolded; the second part discusses the division of political space he sketches, i.e., who the enemies of the people are; and the third part presents the collective symbols that he proposes to unify the people. Third, we scrutinize the populist features of Putin’s discourse regarding the war in Ukraine.

Populism and Nationalism: Conceptual and Methodological Remarks

In this section, we discuss the complex relationship between nationalism and populism, unfolding the different layers of the connection between the two. Since this is not primarily a theoretical article, we aim at a tentative working definition of this connection. The way that populist leaders frame

¹⁹ Dwayne Woods. 2014. “The Many Faces of Populism: Diverse but Not Disparate.” In Dwayne Woods and Barbara Wejnert, eds., *Many Faces of Populism: Current Perspectives*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing, 12.

²⁰ Ernesto Laclau. 1978. *Política e ideología en la teoría marxista: capitalismo, fascismo, populismo* [Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism]. México, D.F.: Siglo Veintiuno; Michael Conniff. 2012. *Populism in Latin America*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press; De la Torre, Carlos and Cynthia J. Arnson. 2013. *Latin American Populism in the Twenty-First Century*. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press.

²¹ Alisher Faizullaev and Jérémie Cornut. 2016. “Narrative Practice in International Politics and Diplomacy: The Case of the Crimean Crisis.” *Journal of International Relations and Development* 20: 3: 578–604.

²² Ilya Yablokov. 2015. “Conspiracy Theories as a Russian Public Diplomacy Tool: The Case of Russia Today (RT).” *Politics* 35: 3–4: 301–315, 302.

politics can often result in polarization.²³ War and armed conflict need such a polarized condition of “us against them.” Defining “the people” is central, because narratives are used as instruments of political reasoning and persuasion, as Faizullaev and Cornut have shown in their analysis of the antagonistic narrative practices used in international politics such as the annexation of Crimea.²⁴

The Ukrainian crisis has opened up a space in which the populist dimension of current Russian politics has come to the fore. Indeed, the official narrative defining “us” and “them” against the backdrop of the intricately intertwined histories of Russia and Ukraine emerged first. Put differently, official discourse had created “a people” that subsequently became policy and, ultimately, an ad hoc constituency in the conflict with Ukraine. Teper has shown how in Russian state-controlled broadcasting, the focus of official Russian identity discourse has shifted from the state to the nation.²⁵ Hutchings and Szostek have presented the dominant narratives in Russian political and media discourse during the Ukraine crisis, which are linked to Russia’s “grand nation-building mission,” an idea that has intensified significantly under Putin.²⁶ In slight contrast to these arguments, we see not nationalism but populism as Putin’s major tool for maintaining power. Nationalism or “national glory” is but one feature of this populism.²⁷ Populism and nationalism are different, however. According to Yannis Stavrakakis:

although both (...) populism and nationalism share an equivalential logic, they are, firstly, articulated around different *points de capiton* (the nation and the people, respectively) and secondly, [they] construct a very different enemy as their antagonistic “other”: in the case of nationalism the enemy to be opposed is usually another nation, while in the case of populism the enemy is of an internal type: the power-bloc, the “privileged” sectors, and so on.²⁸

²³ Paul Taggart. 2017. “Populism and Unpolitics: Narratives of Conspiracy, Religion and War.” Paper presented at “Mobilising ‘the People’: The Rise of Populist Nationalism in Europe,” Loughborough University, January 16, 2017.

²⁴ Faizullaev and Cornut, “Narrative Practice in International Politics and Diplomacy.”

²⁵ Yuri Teper. 2016. “Official Russian Identity Discourse in Light of the Annexation of Crimea: National or Imperial?” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32: 4: 378-396.

²⁶ Stephen Hutchings and Joanna Szostek. “Dominant Narratives in Russian Political and Media Discourse during the Ukraine Crisis.” *E-International Relations*. April 28, 2015. At <http://www.e-ir.info/2015/04/28/dominant-narratives-in-russian-political-and-media-discourse-during-the-crisis/>, accessed December 19, 2017.

²⁷ Leon Aron. 2017. “The Kremlin Emboldened: Putinism After Crimea.” *Journal of Democracy* 28: 4: 76-79, 79; Fish, “What Is Putinism?” 66.

²⁸ Yannis Stavrakakis. 2005. “Religion and Populism in Contemporary Greece.” In Francisco

In turn, Paul Taggart argues that nationalism and populism are “distinct concepts and that attachment to either of them can have very different consequences.”²⁹ Put differently, with populism it is possible to identify enemies within the nation and friends outside the nation. Whereas nationalism has a delineated constituency,³⁰ populism does not. Its constituency is purely “political” and requires a political operation to bind this constituency together. Taggart underscores the anti-institutional politics of populism in general and argues that “populism has real difficulties in regularizing itself as political practices, institutions and regimes.”³¹ However, he fails to analyze precisely *how* populism institutionalizes itself and the examples he cites (mainly Peronism) point more in the direction of an autocratic and charismatic leadership.

Ernesto Laclau has developed a purely formal conception of populism, not describing it as a movement with a specific content and a specific constituency—such as the nation in nationalism, the peasants for the *Narodniki*, or the working class in socialism—but as a political logic, form, style, or mechanism.³² Politically, Laclau sees populism as an emancipatory force from below, in which underdogs unite and rise against an unresponsive institutionalized system, but his framework largely ignores populism in power. Despite Laclau’s focus on populism as a movement from below, his formal analysis allows us to trace elements of populism also when it does not come as a popular movement from below, but as a strategy “from above.” Although Laclau’s definition is a far more complex one, we will narrow it down to three elements that stand out and use these three elements for our empirical analysis.

The first crucial element in Laclau’s approach is to see the people not as a given, a pre-existing entity whom “populist” politicians can address and whose pre-existing interests they can represent. In this, it seems to clearly differ from nationalism, which assumes a mythical, ethnically pure entity that existed before political struggles or economic modernization. Most nationalists believe their people has existed since the dawn of time. Populists mostly do not. For scholars of populism like Laclau, the people is instead a political category, a political subjectivity that has to come into being.³³ Hence, this notion allows us to think more flexibly about what kind of “people” might be constituted in our empirical material. This is a particularly important aspect in the Soviet and post-Soviet contexts, in both of which different notions of the people have long coexisted, among

Panizza, ed., *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*. London: Verso, 224-249, 245-246.

²⁹ Paul Taggart. 2000. *Populism*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 96.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 116.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 73, 59.

³² Laclau, *On Populism*.

³³ *Ibid.*, 224.

them *russskii narod*,³⁴ *rossiiskii narod*, and *sovetskii narod*, with the latter two being the result of a fusion of different peoples.³⁵

The second crucial feature of such a conception of populism is the establishment of a dichotomic frontier, which splits the “political space” and separates “the people” from a common enemy. War is the archetypal example: in wartime, the political space is reduced to “Us vs. Them,” with no room for third options. This is similar to how nationalism operates, but here the dichotomization is not based on nationality, ethnicity, or race.

The third feature has to do with the means that can unify the people and that can hold these various segments and demands together. Symbols are the “glue” that unites disparate agendas and discursive elements into one populist discourse. This “glue” is needed because “the people” is diverse and “filled” with a variety of possibly incoherent demands. Hence, symbols act as nodal points that keep these demands together. In contrast to nationalism, populism lacks a foundational myth: it cannot refer to a shared ancestry or to ties of blood. It nevertheless needs symbols similar to those present in nationalism. However, in populism these are much more spontaneous and situational. In populism, collective symbols must arise that galvanize all the demands of a populist discourse, and a populist leader must emerge whose name can immediately bring to mind each of these demands.

Based on these three features, we conduct a thematic analysis to identify the agendas and demands that are raised in Russian official discourse in the context of the Crimean crisis and how this discourse has contributed to the emergence of a new notion of “the people.” Our research seeks to grasp the emergence and development of this new concept from the political elite; we therefore examine the Russian president’s most significant speeches during the year that the crisis spilled over from Euromaidan to Crimea to Eastern Ukraine: 2014. Our research aims to establish how this idea was presented to both domestic and international audiences.

As such, we selected four speeches by Vladimir Putin that were delivered as the Crimea events unfolded: 1) Putin’s response to journalists’ questions on the situation in Ukraine on March 4, 2014; 2) The “Crimea Speech” of March 18, 2014; 3) the “Valdai speech” of October 24, 2014; and 4) the *Priamaia Linia* Q&A of April 17, 2014. The first

³⁴ *Narod* in Russian can mean both the people and the nation (Vera Tolz. 2011. *Russia’s Own Orient*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 32).

³⁵ Deniz Kandiyoti. 2002. “Postcolonialism Compared: Potentials and Limitations in the Middle East and Central Asia.” *Journal of Middle East Studies* 34: 279–297, 290; Sven G. Simonsen. 1996. “Raising ‘The Russian Question’: Ethnicity and Statehood—Russkie and Rossiya.” *Nationalism & Ethnic Politics* 2: 1: 91–110, 91; Tolz, *Russia’s Own Orient*, 36. For general attributes of “the people” in Russian official discourse, see Marina V. Gavrilova. 2015. “Smyslovaia dinamika kontsepta Narod v vystupleniiakh rossiiskikh prezidentov” [Semantic Dynamics of the Concept “People” in the Speeches of Russian Presidents]. *Simvolicheskaiia politika* 3: 316–333.

two—the session with journalists and the “Crimea Speech”—were staged with a focus on Ukraine and were intended to inform both domestic and international audiences about Russia’s position vis-à-vis Ukraine. The second two—the Valdai speech and *Priamaia Liniia*—take place annually with the aim of targeting international experts on foreign policy and the Russian electorate, respectively, but in 2014, a critical juncture, they both addressed the issue of Ukraine. These four speeches are significant for two main reasons. First is the historical moment at which they were delivered—at a time of crisis and the takeover of territory, these speeches had to address and justify the brand of nationalism or populism that the Russian state was pursuing. Second, all of them contain a specific vision of “the people” to which Russia wants to relate and which Russian policy aims to address. Hence, the speeches reveal the positioning of Russian populism and nationalism in relation to Ukraine at a particular moment in history.

We extract various demands, agendas, and identities from these speeches based on the distinction between a nationalist and a populist discourse. The former makes national or ethnic demands; the latter constructs a people by unifying different demands based on a putative common enmity. “The people,” however, is a slippery concept that can be used by text producers and politicians to conceal power relations through the presentation of an “Us vs. Them” distinction.³⁶ In addition, we spot different elements that do not necessarily belong together and achieve meaning only in relation to one another within a discourse.³⁷ That is, these discursive elements are politically linked. A good example of this is the connection that Putin establishes between the Second World War and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, which corresponds to the widespread (Russian) practice of constructing historical narratives.³⁸

In accordance with the three components of populism outlined above, we analyze three sets of problems in Russian official discourse in the context of the Ukrainian crisis in order to assess the extent to which it features a populist setup. First, we identify the collective political subject that has been established, or, to put it differently, which “people” is at stake. The Ukrainian case is intriguing because in Russia there is a long tradition of considering Ukraine, and especially Kyiv, the cradle of the Russian state. Additionally, to further legitimize the incorporation

³⁶ David Machin and Andrea Mayr. 2012. *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis. A Multimodal Introduction*. London: SAGE, 84.

³⁷ Laclau, *On Populism*, 73.

³⁸ Olga Malinova and Philipp Casula. 2009. “Identidad política y nacional en el discurso político ruso” [Political and National Identity in Russian Political Discourse]. In L. Moreno and A. Lecours, eds., *Nacionalismo y democracia. Dicotomías, complementaridades, oposiciones* [Nationalism and Democracy: Dichotomies, Complementarities, Oppositions]. Madrid: CEPC, 287-304, 295-301; Olga Malinova. 2008. “Diskussii o gosudarstve i natsii postsovetsskoi Rossii i ideologema imperii” [Discussion about the State and Nation of Post-Soviet Russia and the Imperial Ideogeme]. *Politicheskaiia nauka* 1: 31-58.

of Crimea into the Russian Federation, a new definition of Russianness had to be presented, one that goes beyond simple ethnic nationalism and perpetuates the 19th-century image of Crimea as part of Russian national space. Indeed, the discourse of the period even went beyond this, describing Crimea as the cradle of Russia, as we will see below. In the context of the referendum, an array of disparate grievances, demands, and complaints from the Crimean population that Kyiv had failed to address were united to help create a new political subject. For this reason, both populism and nationalism were used interchangeably: a populist discourse for residents of Crimea and a nationalist one when addressing domestic audiences.³⁹

Second, we analyze the binary political situation in which this political subject had to be placed and for which referenda are particularly apt. The division of the political space took many forms, among them an opposition between the Crimean people and the Kyiv elites, who were cast as unresponsive to Crimean and later Donbass demands. The division was also couched in national, linguistic, and political terms, as we will outline below.

Third, we present the collective symbols used for creating this new political subject. During the crisis, many collective symbols, slogans and leaders emerged, such as the slogan *Krymnash* ("Crimea is ours"); the Saint George's ribbons or *lentochnki*, which predate the Second World War but became a symbol of victory in 1945 and today serve as a wider symbol of Russian patriotism; Crimea prosecutor Natalia Poklonskaia, who rose to become a YouTube star; Vladimir Putin himself; and the enigmatic Donbass commander Igor Strelkov. Finally, the conflict witnessed the resurrection of communist symbols, such as the very name of the Donetsk and Lugansk "people's republics," which make a direct reference to the Soviet Union, as well as the portrayal of Putin as a wise decision-maker in the state-sponsored documentary "The Road to Crimea," which parallels how Stalin was portrayed prior to Khrushchev's de-Stalinization policy.

The Use of Populism in Russia's Policies in Eastern Ukraine: The People

In Russian official discourse, as expressed in the speeches of Vladimir Putin that are the focus of this analysis, "the Russian people" is defined in such a way as to produce a generic and yet multiple vision of Russianness. Russians are for Putin a multinational people, an understanding based on both a pre-Soviet Russian definition of the peoples' spiritual fusion (*dukhovnoe sliianie*) and the emergence of a Soviet people.⁴⁰ Putin points to the fact that the different ethnic groups, nations, and nationalities that

³⁹ Teper, "Official Russian Identity Discourse."

⁴⁰ Tolz, *Russia's Own Orient*, 36.

live in Russia are held together by their common cultural and “very powerful genetic code,” which encompasses the whole Russian world (*Russkii mir*). For instance, people belonging to the Russian world are united by a distinct morality; they are connected by a vision of the collective that goes beyond the individual. Other values, such as giving one’s life for a friend or for the homeland, form the backbone of Russian patriotism. Putin claims: “We are less pragmatic, less calculating than representatives of other peoples, and we have bigger hearts. Maybe this is a reflection of the grandeur of our country and its boundless expanses. Our people have a more generous spirit.”⁴¹ Hence, it is not nationality, ethnicity, or language that determine Russianness but a set of qualities and values. This type of rhetoric, which shifts the attention from racial to civic characteristics, is widely used by Western European nationalist groups (including in Britain and Greece) and shows that populist and nationalist claims can, and often do, overlap.

Soviet history is evoked to build up an image of Russians as victimized: as the major victims of Soviet regime repression, of Second World War fascism, and even the dissolution of the USSR. Russians are framed as a disenfranchised, disadvantaged, and even oppressed people—all peoples suffered with the breakup of the Soviet Union, Putin contends, but Russians above all. To quote Putin, “millions of people went to bed in one country and awoke in different ones.”⁴²

Putin frames Ukraine in cordial terms. Ukraine is not only a neighbor, but also “a brotherly neighboring republic” and “a friendly country”; Ukrainians “are all equal in our eyes, all brothers to us.” Putin states straightforwardly that Russia will not fight against the Ukrainian people.⁴³ Ukrainians, according to Putin, are people with whom Russians have close historical, cultural, and economic ties. This statement highlights the interconnectedness between the two nations in historical, emotional, and pragmatic terms. “The people in Ukraine are Russia’s friends,” Putin claims. Putin considers what the role of “a good neighbor and the closest relative” of Ukraine should be and expresses his hope that the people in Ukraine will understand that Russia could not do otherwise with Crimea and that they will respect the choices of Crimean residents.⁴⁴

Putin does not stop there. He presents himself, instead, as a fighter for Ukrainians’ rights, stressing that corrupt politicians in Ukraine have “milked the country, fought among themselves for power.” He expresses

⁴¹ Vladimir Putin. 2014. *Direct Line with Vladimir Putin*, At <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20796>, accessed December 14, 2017.

⁴² Vladimir Putin. 2014. *Address by President of the Russian Federation*, At <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>, accessed December 14, 2017.

⁴³ Vladimir Putin. 2014. *Vladimir Putin Answered Journalists’ Questions on the Situation in Ukraine*, At <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20366>, accessed December 14, 2017.

⁴⁴ Putin, *Direct Line with Vladimir Putin*.

an understanding of “peaceful slogans against corruption, inefficient state management and poverty,” exploiting the diversity of the Maidan movement.⁴⁵ Putin also wants to be the leader of these “ordinary” people’s fight against a corrupt political elite, and he claims to effectively act as such with the Crimeans.⁴⁶ For Putin, it is the government of Ukraine that has failed, not the Ukrainian people. Putin, therefore, claims to sympathize with Ukraine, which is a “long-suffering land” that is experiencing the re-emergence of nationalism and neo-Nazism in its western territories.⁴⁷

Putin also appeals to the Ukrainian military by stating that the armed forces are “comrades-in-arms, friends, many of whom know each other personally.”⁴⁸ He evokes common military experiences, especially of the top echelons of both armed forces, such as the Soviet military mission in Afghanistan. The “peaceful” annexation of Crimea, Putin claims, is a major expression of this unity between the two armies. These two armies and two peoples are, for Putin, essentially one army and one people. After all, according to Putin, the events in Crimea were an attempt by a “group of armed men” with Western backing to unconstitutionally overthrow the government. The Crimean people, however, set up “self-defense committees” and took control of all the armed forces in Crimea.⁴⁹

In these statements, however, Putin also seems to divide the Ukrainian population. He claims that the situation in central, eastern, and south-eastern Ukraine is “another matter” than in the rest of the country. These territories, which for Putin constitute *Novorossiia*,⁵⁰ were given to Ukraine in the 1920s by the Soviet government and their roots are intertwined with Russia. *Novorossiia*’s residents “have a somewhat different mentality,” which makes it difficult for them to establish relations with the West. Putin also mentions the ethnic composition of Crimea as a point of difference from southeastern Ukraine.⁵¹

As far as the Crimean people is concerned, Putin unfolds a highly complex notion that distinguishes the Crimea speech from simple Russian nationalism and irredentism. “The people of Crimea,” who are “the ultimate source of all authority,” are a “unique blend of different people’s cultures and traditions.” However, he mentions only three groups: Russians, the Ukrainians who predominantly consider Russian their native language, and Crimean Tatars. In his own words: “Crimea was and remains a Russian,

⁴⁵ Olga Onuch and Gwendolyn Sasse. 2016. “The Maidan in Movement: Diversity and the Cycles of Protest.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 68: 4: 556-587.

⁴⁶ Putin, *Address by President of the Russian Federation*.

⁴⁷ Putin, *Direct Line with Vladimir Putin*.

⁴⁸ Putin, *Vladimir Putin Answered Journalists’ Questions*.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Here Putin—accidentally or not—also includes central Ukraine in the definition of *Novorossiia*.

⁵¹ Putin, *Direct Line with Vladimir Putin*.

Ukrainian, and Crimean-Tatar land.”⁵² In contrast to Teper’s descriptions of TV coverage,⁵³ here Putin draws on a mixture of imperial thinking and populism, as “the people” he refers to now relates to the Russian Empire. Tatars might have suffered under Stalinism, but so did all nationalities, above all ethnic Russians. Thus, Putin not only diminishes the injustices suffered by the Tatars, but he essentializes the ethnic set-up of the peninsula and reduces it linguistically to Russophones and Tatars.

For Putin, the separation of Crimea from Russia enacted under Nikita Khrushchev was the result of bad decisions taken by bad politicians. After the Bolsheviks added large sections of Russia’s “historical South” to the Republic of Ukraine without much thought, Khrushchev transferred Crimea to Ukraine for dubious reasons. Putin depicts these decisions as ill-guided, contrary to common sense and the will of the people. Thus, the annexation of Crimea becomes the expression of a popular will, a rebellion against bad decisions taken by former politicians. People had hoped for a new political entity that would replace the USSR and had hoped the CIS would fulfill such a role.⁵⁴

Putin stresses that Russians are “native persons in Ukraine,”⁵⁵ adding a new twist to the interconnectedness between Russians and Ukrainians in the post-Soviet space. The people for whom Putin claims responsibility are *all Russians everywhere*, including those in Ukraine. Especially in Crimea, a large part of the population speaks Russian. As the Ukrainian government could not provide a sufficient level of security, Russia had to step in, Putin explains. Russia always hoped that all *native Russians*—the Russian-speaking people living in Ukraine—would live in a comfortable political environment.⁵⁶

It is in these sections where the careful balance that Putin tries to establish between all people of the USSR and all people of Crimea tips in the direction of a hardly veiled preference for ethnic Russians, whose rights Putin claims to restore by “returning” Crimea to Russia. This return of Crimea to Russia is presented as a small step in a larger process of bringing the CIS countries closer together, by broadening the conception of Russianness, by arguing for a broader, more inclusive view of who can call herself or himself “Russian” (*russkii*). It was precisely this aim that lay behind the proposed Eurasian Union, pursued in the years before the Euromaidan, and which the Euromaidan, the annexation of Crimea, and the war in the Donbass thwarted.⁵⁷ As such, Putin is cast as a leader of “Ukraine and Russia” and of “Eurasian integration.” In this sense, “the people” in

⁵² Putin, *Address by President of the Russian Federation*.

⁵³ Teper, “Official Russian Identity Discourse.”

⁵⁴ Putin, *Address by President of the Russian Federation*.

⁵⁵ Putin, *Direct Line with Vladimir Putin*.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Putin, *Address by President of the Russian Federation*.

this speech means the Eurasian people as a whole and not just Russians, Ukrainians, and Russophones who “live in Ukraine and will continue to do so.” With the return of Crimea as “common historical legacy” to Russia, Putin can restore a small piece of the Soviet Union.⁵⁸ In this multinational vision, however, Russians come first, and it is Russians who determine which peoples have the right to exist and how they are to live.⁵⁹

The Use of Populism in Russia’s Policies in Eastern Ukraine: The Enemies

In all of his speeches under scrutiny, Putin alludes to a number of different enemies. Here, we introduce the distinction between temporal categories of enemies (past vs. present) and spatial (inside vs. outside) ones. As a matter of fact, in the discourse that Putin deploys, time and space are blurred. Putin leaves unclear whether Ukraine and Ukrainians are inside or outside the state entity and the community he addresses. In a populist guise, he also declares certain social strata (the establishment) to be foes of the people. Most surprisingly, we find the Russian president listing several unlikely “enemies of the past.” He accuses the Bolsheviks and the Soviet leadership under Nikita Khrushchev of crimes against popular common sense. Both allegedly took decisions that ran counter to the will of the people and against objective ethnic divides: Khrushchev when he gave Crimea to Ukraine and the early Bolsheviks when they established new administrative borders within the USSR.⁶⁰

The reactionary, nationalist, and anti-Semitic forces in certain parts of Ukraine can be described as “enemies of the future” and are represented by the new Ukrainian authorities, who are pronounced “nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes and anti-Semites,” murderers, terrorists, radicals and rioters. However, the enemies of the future have a close relationship with other enemies of the past, foes of the USSR, personified in the figure of Stepan Bandera, Hitler’s accomplice in Ukraine during the Second World War.⁶¹ Putin even compares certain participants in the Euromaidan protests with Nazi storm troopers and makes reference to neo-Nazis in western Ukraine. In the case of Ukraine, it seems that by demanding fundamental political reform, the people let the genie of fascism out of the bottle: “we see them today, people wearing armbands bearing something resembling swastikas still roaming around Kyiv at this moment.” In Putin’s understanding, therefore, the past enemies of the USSR could also serve as Ukraine’s future enemies.⁶²

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Teper, “Official Russian Identity Discourse,” 386.

⁶² Putin, *Direct Line with Vladimir Putin*; Vladimir Putin. 2014. *Meeting of the Valdai In-*

However, the presidential discourse is not free from a spatial categorization of enemies. Some of them are even on the inside of the audience addressed, within the Self. They are subsequently externalized by ascribing to them the political status of traitors—in populism, this would be the establishment that betrayed the people. The first and foremost enemy of the present is the (new) Ukrainian political class. As Putin describes it, one set of thieves has been replaced by another set of thieves, and oligarchs, the product of a “dishonest privatization,” are taking over political positions (eg., Kolomoisky as Governor of Dnepropetrovsk). Putin claims that “people” dislike the fact that the Kyiv-appointed oligarchs became the new governors. The “real problem” is that previous Ukrainian governments failed to pay proper attention to the people and thus disappointed them.⁶³ Another issue that concerns “the citizens of Ukraine, both Russian and Ukrainian, and the Russian-speaking population in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine” is uncontrolled crime. Putin portrays Russia as the unlikely champion of the Ukrainian people’s cause and refers to his alleged accomplishments in ridding Russia of corrupt politicians, oligarchs, and crime.⁶⁴

Additionally, Putin claims to “understand why Ukrainian people wanted change. They have had enough of the authorities who have been in power during the years of Ukraine’s independence,” as they have only cared about “power, assets and cash flows and not about ordinary people.”⁶⁵ Furthermore, the Ukrainian state and its political class has become Russia’s enemy, since it has sent in tanks and aircrafts and has committed “one more serious crime” against its people.⁶⁶ Finally, nationalist groups did not surrender their weapons and they threatened to use force in the eastern regions, in response to which inhabitants of the eastern zones started to arm themselves.⁶⁷

Another set of enemies are indeed “external enemies,” although the lines between the interior and the exterior are blurred. “External” here means outside Russia and outside Ukraine. Foreign enemies are those in the West, who purportedly serve as “foreign sponsors” of the newly emerging politicians in Ukraine. “Western Europe and North America” turn against Russia, against the incorporation of Crimea into Russia and the popular will. They support the enemies of the inseparable Ukrainian and Russian peoples. Western countries, Putin stresses, “have lied to us many times, made decisions behind our backs, placed us before accomplished

ternational Discussion Club, At <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860>, accessed December 14, 2017.

⁶³ Putin, *Address by President of the Russian Federation*.

⁶⁴ Putin, *Vladimir Putin Answered Journalists’ Questions*.

⁶⁵ Putin, *Direct Line with Vladimir Putin*.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

facts,” and, citing Kosovo’s independence, selectively interpreted international law.⁶⁸ According to Putin, Russia did not start “this.” Russia has, instead, encouraged its American and European partners not to proceed with “hasty backstage decisions” on Ukraine’s association agreement with the EU because such an agreement would pose a serious threat to Ukraine’s economy and to Russia’s interests as Ukraine’s main trade partner.⁶⁹

Russia’s top external enemy is the United States. Having declared itself the winner of the Cold War, the US has not seen the need to carry out a rational reconstruction or to adapt the system of international relations to new realities. Putin accuses the US of behaving “the way *nouveaux riches* behave when they suddenly end up with a great fortune” and calls it the “big brother” who is spending billions of dollars on keeping the world under surveillance. The U.S. establishment, as the world’s “sole power center,” has led to the construction of a unipolar world that is unable to deal with the “real threats,” such as regional conflict, terrorism, drug trafficking, religious fanaticism, chauvinism, and neo-Nazism. Instead, it has produced inflated national pride, the manipulation of public opinion, and the suppression of the weak by the strong in the international domain.⁷⁰

The final enemy of the present is the West in general, especially as embodied by NATO. NATO, Putin argues, broke its promise not to expand beyond its eastern borders, instead incorporating former Warsaw Pact member countries and the Baltic states. As such, Russia is facing the immediate threat of “being really ousted from this region that is extremely important for us.” Putin emphasizes the double standards that the Western-dominated international community promotes; the US is allowed to intervene in countries such as Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, but it is considered inappropriate for Russia to “defend its interests,” with Kosovo as the most significant example.⁷¹ Putin also complains that Russia’s “Western partners” refused to have talks with Russia about Ukraine’s association agreement; instead, they decided to overthrow the government and plunge Ukraine into chaos, “into a civil war with enormous casualties.” In the end, he claims, everyone is a loser from this situation. Nor did Western countries pursue a dialogue between the Eurasian and the European Union, even while Russia insists that the only way of ensuring state sovereignty is through continuing talks and not through armed conflict.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Putin, *Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club*.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Putin, *Direct Line with Vladimir Putin*.

The Use of Populism in Russia's Policies in Eastern Ukraine: The Symbols

In the context of the Crimean crisis and the war in Donbass, there has been a massive upsurge in the number of symbols visible.⁷² It started with “polite little green men” popping up at various spots in Crimea: these “military men” looked like elite assault troops, dressed in special uniforms, helmets, protective glasses, and knee pads, and holding automatic rifles. Many people thought them to be Russian troops, but there were some doubts, as they bore no national insignia. According to Alexei Yurchak, at the beginning, this was a pure, naked military force—“a force without a state, without a face, without identity” with whom everybody could potentially identify, irrespective of nationality. This was true of Russians and Ukrainians (the latter have an army in a particularly difficult state) as well as of Crimeans, whose “self-defense forces” looked like and acted “as a motley crew of civilians in camouflage, sportsmen in tracksuits and self-styled Cossacks in grotesque uniforms.”⁷³ The little green men represented pure military prowess. When it was eventually revealed that these were Russian special operation forces, they contributed to the image of an advanced military power that had fully overcome the trauma of the past and the embarrassing defeats in Chechnya. This was a new Russian force, a new Russian man, a new Russian power that was unfolding in Crimea and of which many Russian men expressed pride in the blogosphere.⁷⁴ It also stood in contrast to the Ukrainian armed forces, whose combat readiness was comparatively low.

The manly, professional, and strong “little green men” stand in contrast to another symbol of the early phase of the Ukraine crisis, Natalia Poklonskaia. While the highly trained Russian soldiers represented a resurgent Russia, Poklonskaia was the weak, victimized, threatened, female Russian-Ukrainian fusion in danger. On March 11, Poklonskaia was appointed Prosecutor General of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. On this occasion, the young, newly appointed female prosecutor gave a defiant press conference, repeating the tenets of Russian official discourse and stating the unconstitutionality of the coup in Kyiv, to which she referred as an armed seizure of power. Ukraine's new parliamentarians were, for her, “devils from the ashes.” At the same time, the speech was clumsy and emotional.

⁷² The authors categorize under symbols both human and material objects, in the knowledge that there is a difference in their sources of symbolization, because they emphasize the emotions that these symbols provoke and not their source as such.

⁷³ Alexei Yurchak. “Little Green Men: Russia, Ukraine and Post-Soviet Sovereignty.” *Anthropoliteia*. March 31, 2014. At <https://anthropoliteia.net/2014/03/31/little-green-men-russia-ukraine-and-post-soviet-sovereignty/>, accessed December 14, 2017.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Poklonskaia was appointed after other candidates refused the post and displayed uneasiness with the task. It is this mix of defiance and insecurity that was crucial for her symbolic value. Furthermore, like Crimea itself, she switched sides from Ukraine to Russia, and like Crimea, while pledging allegiance, she begged for Moscow's protection. Poklonskaia also fits into the narrative of a female, victimized Russia that was under threat from fascism, in danger of being attacked and raped by Banderists as in the Second World War—this is the same narrative that Putin employed in his 2014 Address, which was riddled with allusions to that war.⁷⁵ Like all Crimeans, it seemed, she rejected the “coup” in Kyiv and sought the same key promises that Putin gave to Russia when he became president: law and order, security, the “dictatorship of law,” the reestablishment of pride. In later speeches, Poklonskaia returned to the topics so dear to Russian official discourse. She claimed that “Ukraine, Russia, Belarus—all came from one big country—the USSR (...) Therefore, the fundamental principle of law, the requirements that comply with all international regulations, they are the same.”⁷⁶ It was the manly, strong, and heroic little green men, who represent the heroic, masculine side of Russia, who saved Poklonskaia from “fascism.” Today, Poklonskaia is a parliamentarian in the State Duma and advocates a religiously grounded Russian nationalism.

Another key symbol became the bridge connecting Russia and Crimea, opened ahead of schedule in May 2018 by Vladimir Putin in a media stunt in which he drove a Kamaz truck from the mainland to Crimea.⁷⁷ The highly expensive (\$4.5 billion) and symbolic project meant that funds had to be redirected: some observers claim that money was taken from the Russian Railroad pension fund⁷⁸ or from projects in other underdeveloped regions, especially the Caucasus republics. These republics then appealed for Moscow's attention by sending troops to Syria.⁷⁹ Earlier, an interactive exhibition at Moscow's GUM store had been put on to underline the importance of the bridge by underscoring not only that projects to build a bridge have existed at various points in history, but also

⁷⁵ Putin, *Address by President of the Russian Federation*.

⁷⁶ “Crimean Chief Prosecutor Natalia Poklonskaia Swears Oath to Russia.” *RT English*. May 10, 2014. At <https://www.rt.com/news/157556-prosecutor-poklonskaya-oath-russia/>, accessed December 14, 2017.

⁷⁷ Alex Horton. “Putin Made a Show of Crossing the New Crimea Bridge. But He Was Upstaged by a Cat.” *The Washington Post*. May 16, 2018.

⁷⁸ Danilo Elia. “The Kerch Strait Bridge is a Metaphor for Putin's Russia.” *EastWest.eu*. August 24, 2017. At <http://eastwest.eu/en/opinions/riding-the-russian-rollercoaster/the-kerch-strait-bridge-is-a-metaphor-for-putin-s-russia>.

⁷⁹ Ian Bergman. “How Russian Rule Has Changed Crimea.” *Foreign Affairs*, July 13, 2017, At http://afpc.org/publication_listings/viewArticle/3561, accessed December 18, 2017;) “V Siriiu napravili batal'on voennoi politzii iz Ingushetii” [A Battalion of Military Police from Ingushetia Was Sent to Syria]. *RBK*. February 13, 2017, At <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/13/02/2017/58a1c09e9a79475806d0095d>, accessed December 14, 2017; Casula, “Why Russia Needs Troops.”

that Crimea has always been an integral part of Russia: “The historical part of the display tells about the timeline of the linking-up of the two coasts of the Kerch Strait from the time of Prince Gleb to our day and the various stages of the construction of the Crimean bridge.”⁸⁰

And finally, Crimea itself became a symbol in populist discourse that was able to unite various groups, nationalities, and demands. In his “Crimean speech,” Putin stresses the cultural and symbolic significance of Crimea for Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians, alluding to the baptism of Prince Vladimir in Crimea and the suffering that Crimea endured during the Russian Empire and the Second World War.⁸¹ Sevastopol, in particular, is used as the symbol of “Russian naval glory, which every Russian citizen knows about.”⁸² But probably the most powerful symbol is “the Russian-speaking Crimea.” It is this symbol that creates and unites the “people” Putin addresses:

Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride. This is the location of the ancient Khersones, where Prince Vladimir was baptized. His spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilization and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. The graves of Russian soldiers whose bravery brought Crimea into the Russian Empire are also in Crimea. This is also Sevastopol – a legendary city with an outstanding history, a fortress that serves as the birthplace of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet. Crimea is Balaklava and Kerch, Malakhov Kurgan and Sapun Ridge. Each one of these places is dear to our hearts, symbolizing Russian military glory and outstanding valor.⁸³

Putin mixes an array of discourses and ideas in this section of his speech. Crimea is about culture and values; about Russia, Ukraine, and even Belarus; about the 19th century and the Crimean War; the Second World War and fighting fascism; and Orthodox Christianity and Russian military glory. “Crimea” thus becomes a highly loaded and empty signifier, representing a multiplicity of identities and demands, but particularly the Russian and Soviet past. The signifier “Crimea” points to the Slavic and Christian peoples on the peninsula, but particularly highlights the Russians, reflecting a “*primus inter pares*” position attributed to Russians

⁸⁰ Author’s observation.

⁸¹ Putin, *Address by President of the Russian Federation*.

⁸² Putin, *Direct Line with Vladimir Putin*.

⁸³ Putin, *Address by President of the Russian Federation*.

in the USSR as a whole during the Soviet era. Crimea represents the former Soviet Union in a nutshell and points to a vision of a future Russia where these ethnic relations are restored.

After 2014, “Krymnash” (literally: “CrimeaIsOurs”) became in Russian popular parlance an equally empty slogan that was used in everyday language and on the Russian internet with seriousness and patriotic conviction (“Crimea is ours”) and with irony (“Things went wrong again ... but at least: *Krymnash*”). It also echoes the widely mocked statement by Dmitri Medvedev, who told Crimeans: “there is no money, but you be strong” (*deneg net, a vy derzhites*). Through Crimea, Putin addresses both Ukrainians and Russians by underlining that:

Crimea is our common historical legacy and a very important factor in regional stability. And this strategic territory should be part of a strong and stable sovereignty, which today can only be Russian. Otherwise, dear friends (*I am addressing both Ukraine and Russia*), you and we – the Russians and the Ukrainians – could lose Crimea completely, and that could happen in the near future.⁸⁴

This move constitutes the establishment (or re-establishment) of a shared past, one that ties Ukrainians and Russians together forever. To further stress this bond, the speech mentions that “Kyiv is the mother of Russian cities. Ancient Rus is our common source and we cannot live without each other,” thus denying Ukraine a specific identity and forcing Ukraine into a Russian embrace, in which Kyiv is reduced to a part of Russia and incapable of “giving birth” to something independent—Ukraine is stuck in a colonial situation.⁸⁵ Once more, this means an indirect resurrection of an oppressed Soviet people.

Conclusions

Following a three-dimensional definition of populism, our article has shown that official Russian political discourse has assumed stark populist features in the context of the Crimean crisis and the subsequent war in the Donbass. Putin’s populism “from above” works according to the same logic as a Laclauian populism “from below”: it has attempted to construct a people, to divide the political space and create various enemies, and to produce collective symbols. However, this conclusion comes not without

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ilya Gerasimov and Marina Mogilner. 2015. “Deconstructing Integration: Ukraine’s Post-colonial Subjectivity.” *Slavic Review* 74: 4: 715-722.

a couple of caveats that show how difficult it is to generalize the model of populism.

Our analysis shows that Putin is at pains to sketch a vision of Ukrainians and Russians as one people with shared past experiences, shared symbols, and common enemies. Thus, internally, Putin homogenizes “the people,” i.e., he presents it as a unified whole, despite internal divisions. Instead of a simplified, i.e., merely ethnic, notion of Russian nationalism, Russian official discourse as represented in Putin’s speeches needed a broader concept of “a people” in which everyone can be accommodated. This is why Russian ethnic nationalism alone cannot do the job. Putin emerges as a man of the past, oddly addressing the defunct Soviet people time and again, or conflating today’s Russians with the Soviet people—Hrytsak argues that the present-day “Soviet identity” actually has such a Russian ethnic dimension.⁸⁶ What this “people” shares, beyond a common past, is an opposition to certain elites and certain current and historical enemies. This posture is Putin’s strength but also his weakness. The speeches activate historical narratives not to portray a “nation,” but rather to construct “a people.”

Following the logic of populism, externally, Putin perpetuates and essentializes divisions. While Putin claims that the West is the enemy, it is not seen as such by large parts of the Euromaidan-people, while his view is more widespread in the Donbass and in Russia. Invoking the West as the enemy is a device intended to re-create a *Sovietskii narod* (Soviet people) that felt a common threat. “Bandera,” fascists and anti-Semites are the enemies of the defunct Soviet people in equal measure.

Another palpable enemy of all across the post-Soviet space is the “corrupt elite.” Ukraine was the perfect stage on which to present Putin as a provider of just, fair, and efficient policies in contrast to the Ukrainian politicians, who “robbed” the country. Putin claims to have stood with the people, and the symbols he deployed spoke the same language: the highly trained and efficient soldiers that occupied key positions in Crimea were a symbol of efficiency that could counter the fragility and weakness of Crimea, embodied by Natalia Poklonskaia. The swift construction of the bridge between mainland Russia and Crimea, yet another sign of Putin’s hands-on approach, became the symbol of the unity between Crimea and Russia but yet erected a wall between Putin-supporters and large swathes of the Ukrainian population, which feel increasingly estranged from Russia.

Conceptually, our article shows that the Laclauian notion of populism can direct our analytic attention to things other than the concepts of nationalism or Russian irredentism, or geopolitical considerations. However, it also discusses the limits of this notion. On the one hand,

⁸⁶ Yaroslav Hrytsak. 1998. “National Identities in Post-Soviet Ukraine: The Case of Lviv and Donetsk.” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 22: 263-281, 276.

populism can be wielded as much “from above” as “from below,” as long as the official discourse can bind different popular demands and produce leaders. Putin tried to set himself apart from the “corrupt” Ukrainian political establishment, which actually involved adopting a tactic that he had already successfully deployed in Russia (“Putin against the oligarchs”). He had to show that he will be a better leader for Crimea, and possibly of other parts of Ukraine too. On the other hand, the political space does not bifurcate neatly into two halves, even if Putin’s speeches are at pains to suggest this. Rather, the political space is crisscrossed by various demands, which are at times outright nationalist and not just social. We have shown that in line with the bulk of current research on Russian politics, a resurgence of nationalistic themes is certainly taking place. Indeed, nationalism does not disappear, and it has a role to play in Russian official discourse, in which populist, imperialist and nationalist elements are intertwined. However, so does populism. Through our selection of speeches, given at a crucial moment in the history of the region, we have also deciphered populist themes and discursive strategies that go beyond Russian (ethnic) nationalism to construct a multinational oppressed and victimized people pitted, especially within Ukraine itself, against corrupt elites, “fascism,” and the West.

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