

While the PiS are fighting the «Banderites», Putin is rubbing his hands with glee

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Poll results have demonstrated that Poles are the most liked nation in Ukraine, ahead of Belarussians and Canadians. Yet, we do our best to make Ukrainians stop liking us.

In the night between 8 and 9 March, a group of drunken passengers assaulted a Ukrainian Uber driver who dared to listen something else than disco polo. They yelled at him: “You Ukrainian fucker!” and insisted: “Go back home, you damn Ukrainian!”.

It was not an isolated case. Violent reactions are a daily occurrence for Ukrainian Uber drivers working in Poland. The reasons for such assaults range from their alleged disrespect for disco polo, traffic jams, waiting at a wrong side of the street to misunderstanding of commands or wrong accent. They are attacked because of the Volhynian Massacre and ‘Great Poland’.

Unfortunately, no reliable crime statistics are available, as according to the Commissioner of Human Rights and OSCE only 5 percent of hate crimes committed in 2018 were reported to the Police. The data gathered in Małopolska Voivodship alone shows that in the years 2016-2017 the number of hate crimes affecting Ukrainian community was 44 thousand. How many criminal procedures have been instituted by law enforcement authorities in connection with such offences? Well, only eighteen. And Małopolska Voivodship is no exception to the rule.

Activists who support foreigners emphasise that such acts of xenophobic violence are often classified as hooliganism. Law enforcement authorities unwillingly handle complaints issued by Ukrainians. In some cases, they just dismiss them. On the other hand, Ukrainians themselves prefer not to get into trouble, being afraid of bureaucrats on whose discretion their residence permits in Poland depend.

Ukrainians falling victim to the Law and Justice’s (PiS) politics of memory

There are no available studies that would clearly demonstrate that the growing incidence of hate crime is linked to the contemporary political situation in Poland. Apparently, their frequency had been growing even before the currently ruling party came to power in 2015. From the statistical point of view, this phenomenon could be correlated with the growing number of migrants coming to Poland, mainly from Ukraine. Nevertheless, we should never allow such acts of violence to be approved of or tolerated in any manner whatsoever, be it systemic or non-systemic, symbolic or literal.

In these circumstances, we should ask ourselves about the Law and Justice’s political and moral liability for assaults at foreigners, including, in particular, Ukrainians, the largest migrant community in Poland. Historically, our mutual historical of our nations used to be quite tense sometimes. As a consequence, Ukrainians have now become the main victim of the Law and Justice’s politics of memory, which nowadays governs all our international relations. Instead of supporting the development of the Ukrainian state and process of Ukraine’s integration with the EU, the government’s flagship concerns now include the alleged lack of remorse for the Volhynia Massacre which is manifested by the omnipresent cult of Stepan Bandera and

Ukrainian Insurgent Army (disregarding, however, all nuances, such as Ukrainian sensitivity and the current political situation of Ukraine).

One may say that the foreign policy of the Polish government has been taken hostage by the internal one, and Jarosław Kaczyński is more interested in wooing his extreme right-wing voters, than in maintaining healthy relations with our neighbours and promoting our good international reputation. Obviously, this does not apply to Ukraine only. We have been witnessing similar processes and proliferation of hate speech in the case of Germany and Israel (the consequences of such developments have also backfired on the small Jewish community in Poland). However, in the case of Ukraine, such hostilities are quite widespread, which make them so dangerous. Even though I am native Pole, I am often being called a “Banderite” and advised to focus on “protecting democracy in Ukraine”.

The Euromaidan unified Poles

I am not completely unbiased and I will never be. My wife is Ukrainian and I have been in love with Ukraine since the Euromaidan Revolution in 2013/14. The Euromaidan has obviously become a turning point in the history. The event was followed by the Russian assault on Ukraine and massive influx of Ukrainian migrants. Until that time, many of my peers used to think of Ukraine mainly as a homeland of their ancestors, or in a more contemporary context, as a country famous for the Orange Revolution of 2004 and its heroes. The Euromaidan was yet another traumatic pro-European uprising to which Poles – both politicians and common folks – responded with great solidarity across divides. Ukrainians could also rely on Poles during the first years of their war against Russia. At that time we used to engage into many public fundraising initiatives in order to provide Ukrainian soldiers and IDPs from the occupied territories with humanitarian aid (including helmets and bulletproof vests). Owing to the support of the Municipality of Warsaw, we have also managed to open the Ukrainian World centre in Poland.

Neither the number of organisations engaged into supporting Ukraine at that time, nor initiatives undertaken, nor the value of such support provided at that period can be measured precisely. The idea united liberals, left-wingers, migrants, conservatives and religious groups (including Caritas). Everyone believed that supporting Ukraine was perfectly in line with our national interest. The missions and initiatives organised by our Foundation attracted and joined together, despite their domestic animosities, a large number of parliamentarians representing Palikot’s Movement, the Civic Platform and the Law and Justice.

Ukrainian fondness for Poland

This Polish solidarity combined with our relative prosperity, at least in comparison with the situation in Ukraine, fostered genuine admiration and fondness on the part of our neighbours. Few Poles realise that the poll results have demonstrated they are the most liked nation in Ukraine (ahead of Belarussians and Canadians). On the other hand, Poles are most fond of Czechs, and Ukrainians are almost at the bottom of the stake, next to Russians.

After the Euromaidan, Ukrainians started to perceive Poles as friends, and Poland was viewed as an epitome of a successful country and gateway to Europe. They hoped that the Polish

scenario of systemic transformation and European integration could be, to some extent, imitated by Ukraine.

What about today? By getting into a conflict with the EU, we have buried the chances of having a strongly pro-European Ukraine. Although their positive feelings towards us are still vivid, no unrequited love will last forever. We are trying the best we can to talk them out of such sentiments. When I visited Kyiv, not long afterwards the emergence of the controversies surrounding the Law on the National Remembrance Institute, a local cab driver sadly asked me: "Do you think that Poles are now going to wage war against us, just like Russians did? What have we done to you?".

Hate speech from Kremlin vs. domestic one

Apparently, the fish has already started to stink from the head down with the most primitive chauvinist odours. The aggressive and excessively patriotic policy line followed by the Law and Justice has fostered xenophobia and radicalisms, thus copycatting the works of Putin's propaganda, either unknowingly or intentionally. During the Euromaidan Revolution, some users of social media in Poland suddenly started to recollect the Banderites.

The same clichés are exploited by the today's propagandas created both by the Law and Justice and the Kremlin. TVP, Sputnik and RT channels seem to share the same broadcasting band. They all promote coarse traditionalism, contempt for foreign nationals and disdain for degenerated, decadent, pro-European left-wingers who advocate tolerance, respect for diversity, equality before the law, and protect women's and minorities' rights.

At the very beginning of this process, one could still hope that the revival of historical hostilities was fuelled by the Kremlin which attempted to slow down the tightening of bonds between Poles and Ukrainians. Unfortunately, hate speech which my wife and friends experienced for the first time since their arrival to Poland, has eventually become their daily reality. Fuelled by online instigators, such attitudes have eventually spread among the so-called "borderland communities" represented for e.g. by Rev. Tadeusz Isakowicz-Zaleski, nationalists and football ultras. Shortly before the parliamentary elections in 2015, a surprising move was made by Paweł Kukiz, who suddenly converted to the 'Volhynian religion" and joined the political mainstream by introducing a group of openly pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian nationalists to the Polish Sejm. Interestingly, only a year ago the same Paweł Kukiz played a concert to help the Euromaidan protesters.

The authorities need to find their enemy

Nowadays the Law and Justice Party seems to be the major reservoir of anti-Ukrainian sentiments. Their policy, in which we all seem to be trapped in a besieged fortress and lonely island of (non)freedoms and pseudo-Christian values, requires an external enemy and maintaining a permanent sense of insecurity. In this context, the Law and Justice Party much resembles pre-war fascists and post-war communists.

The first enemies were Islamic refugees who allegedly raped women and spread parasitic diseases. In the meantime, Prime Minister Beata Szydło, in her discussions with the EU institutions, often stressed that Poland opened its borders to one million of Ukrainian

migrants, or rather 'refugees', which was the largest number across all Europe. The Polish government has never withdrawn from this preposterous claim (notwithstanding the Ukrainian protests) and last year the same manipulative technique was deployed again by Mateusz Morawiecki at the European Parliament. It should be noted that the Polish authorities generally reject all applications for the refugee status filed by Ukrainians. This anti-refugee propaganda has brought about negative consequences only, and foreigners often fall victim to assaults.

However, not only the current government is guilty of the sin of negligence. No effective migration policy has been developed by the previous cabinet either and our administrative system has never been well prepared for accepting hundreds of thousands of newcomers from the East. Inefficient border control systems have been making travellers' lives hard, and long queues at border-crossing points have become an inherent part of the local landscape. The situation is further aggravated by the frustrated border guards and customs officers, who seem to gain sheer satisfaction when humiliating our neighbours.

Nevertheless, on political and symbolic levels, the Law and Justice Party has developed a hostile narrative showing Ukrainians as suspicious intruders and potential bullies, rather than respectful and friendly newcomers representing a nation which committed itself to the struggle for freedom and right to self-determination, the values so close to us, Poles. At best, Ukrainians are treated as barely tolerable visitors who should never criticise their hosts and be grateful and impressed by all aspects of life in Poland. If they do not conform, they are clearly looking for trouble. In such case, they are accused of deservingness and reminded that they are not at home, so they had better go home with no delay. And the slogans "We will never forget the Volhynia" because "This is Poland!". And this comes really close to yelling about "death to enemies of the Homeland".

State-owned and right-wing mass media have stopped presenting the Euromaidan (even though its idea was once supported by the leaders of the Law and Justice) as a synonym for freedom fighting, and now it is perceived as a threat and example of bloody street riots, just like it is shown by the Russian mass media.

Obviously, the ruling party is in charge of all these developments. However, we should also admit our own mistakes. As a society we often try to hide our own complexes by humiliating Ukrainians, approaching them instrumentally and with paternalist attitude. The governmental propaganda which dehumanises our alleged enemies, also divulges our most vile instincts. The lack of definite response to the emergence of neo-fascist organisations such as ONR, glorification of criminals and perpetrators of genocide dressed up in the uniforms of the so-called "cursed soldiers", xenophobic, antisemitic and anti-Ukrainian assaults make disco polo lovers feel unpunishable too. Meanwhile, the so-called decent majority prefer not to stick their necks out, in order to prevent being hit by the backfire. And this is the message we have for the planet: Poland shall not bend the knee any longer. Deputy Minister Andruszkiewicz, one of the main breeders of Internet trolls in Poland can be proud of himself. However, the one who has the best reason to celebrate is Vladimir Putin.

Link: <http://wyborcza.pl/7,75968,24549603,pis-zwalcza-banderowcow-a-putin-zaciera-rece.html>