Commentary

These Are Those That Faustus Most Desires: Identity, Iconography and 'Europe' in the Crimea Crisis

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Abstract

Since the inception of the European Coal and Steel Community in the late 1940s, leaders of the European Union have sought a common identity which transcends nation-states. Recent events such as Euromaidan, Brexit, and an ongoing shift towards eurosceptic populism in the EU are focusing attention on this 'Gospel of Jacques Delors' and how a "European identity" is expressed. Significant in studies of Europeanness is the role of symbols that express a myth of Europe. Manifestations of this myth have looked backwards to an imagined teleology of European unity in which all Europeans were united regardless of geopolitical divisions, particularly since the dissolution of the Soviet bloc. However, events in Ukraine have demonstrated not only public rejections of the myth of European unity, but also the use of the EU's symbolism to construct an '*alter*-Europe' defined by opposition to the EU. This overt use of iconography and iconoclasm to express political identities and affiliations challenges traditional interpretations of how the EU is received by its neighbours, and illustrates that there are multiple, competing versions of "Europe".

Keywords

Identity; Europe; Memory; Symbols; Ukraine

In Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragicall Historie of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* (1594), the protagonist's thirst for power leads him to summon a force which he believes he can manipulate to his own ends. To do so, Doctor Faustus invokes the primal power of symbols. Believing that symbols offer a gateway to malleable power, Faustus unleashes a primordial consciousness which quickly diverts from the path he predicts. The result is his downfall at the hands of a manipulative force which he himself had attempted to manipulate; a force whose emotional power, constantly changing in response to emotional whims, seduces him into the false belief that once unleashed, it could be controlled. At the end of the play, Faustus pays the ultimate price for his hubris.

Dabbling with lines, circles and schemes in an attempt to manipulate the affective unconsciousness is not confined to fiction. Since the beginning of the Maidan protests in November 2013, and accelerating since Russia's intervention in Crimea in March 2014, the same has been attempted by different political actors 'dancing with the devil' (Kubicek 2017: 143-162) in Ukraine, who have 'resurfaced old ghosts' (UvA 2016) by deploying the symbols of the EU, USSR, Third Reich, and Russian Federation, to simultaneously express, and attempt to render static, identities which are inherently fluid, hybrid, and in constant flux. Some politically significant consequences of invoking historical symbolism are the appearance of multiple, competing visions of "Europe", and a false bipolarity in Ukraine in which Ukrainians are expected to choose between two internally homogenous pro- and anti-EU identities distilled from complex, fluid, overlapping, and shifting identities, and which are equally incompatible, equally antagonistic, and equally artificial.

This paper argues three points. First, political iconography has a unique power as it relies on affect (Thrift 2004: 57-78). Iconography directly and immediately appeals to emotions. This emotive power cannot be matched by rational economic or constitutional politics; rather, the very appearance of symbols and iconography can trigger instant emotional responses to political projects, which

become indelibly stained by the appearance of particular symbolisms (Hutchison and Bleiker 2008: 385-403). This has been seen in EU nations, and this emotive power is even more pronounced in Ukraine, as the symbols used are saturated with the emotions and myths of the Soviet period, Nazi invasion, post-Soviet nationalism, and Russophilia/Russophobia. Political actors have relied on symbolism to act as a social solvent throughout history, but in the specific context of Ukraine, specific symbolism conveys profound historical and emotional connotations of distrust, conflict, trauma (Neumayer 2018) and the creation of unstable and unsustainable geopolitical rivalries wherein political identities become affixed to (contested) territorial spaces (Bassin et al. 2017: 665-692).

Second, the use of symbols in Ukraine impacts scholarly debates on the frontiers of the EU, the distinction between "Europe" and "EU" and the existence of alter-Europe(s). Iconography in Ukraine reflects an existing antipathy towards the EU in the Union's border zone, and expresses popular sentiments not only on who is and is not 'European', but who should and should not be considered such. This is significant as it reveals substantial *passive rejection* of the European project, in contrast to 1990s-2000s assumptions that the populations of the former Soviet bloc, and USSR itself, desire to join the EU (Sasse 2007: 155-174). Additionally, this symbolic behaviour indicates an imagined *alter*-Europe, whereby the EU is symbolically constructed as a partial or undesirable unification of Europeans, and a force to be resisted. This *alter*-Europe is not unique to the Ukrainian context, and has been invoked in the Brexit campaign, continental Euroscepticism, and the appearance of pro-European but anti-EUropean discourses (Foster and Grzymski 2019). This *active rejection* is manifest in the adoption of iconography which is not only non-EU but *anti*-EU (e.g. the positive embracement of Russian Federation and/or Soviet Union symbolism) while simultaneously constructing and expressing a parallel alter-myth of Europeanness. The Maidan protests and subsequent counter-Maidan, anti-EU activities in Crimea (Wilson 2014: 86-117) demonstrated the creation of an EU myth *beyond* the borders of the EU; a myth in which the EU is either entirely benevolent or entirely malevolent. This has been replicated in the polarisation of EU sentiment in Brexit Britain (Foster 2019). But the Ukrainian case demonstrates a myth of the EU in which the EU is constructed as a force to be violently defended or violently resisted (UvA 2016), impacting popular understandings of the EU by transforming the Union from something banal and technocratic, to an entity with the emotional appeal, and power, of a nation.

Third, the use of symbols in Ukraine informs debates on the nature of European identity not only in the former Soviet bloc but across Europe more broadly. Events in Ukraine from 2013 onwards have been characterised by a rejection of national symbolism (i.e; of Ukraine) in favour of foreign and/or meta-national symbols (i.e: EU, USSR, Russian Federation), a phenomenon which partly replicates and partly diverges from a polarisation within the EU, where national symbolism is resurgent. This suggests that while populations within the EU continue to negotiate their relationship with the EU and with Europeanness through institutional and legal pathways, the strongest European identity is found among those populations – in Ukraine and the UK – who are not of the EU, and who negotiate their relationships with the EU through emotion and affect. As Ukraine demonstrates, this is partly because of the emotions mediated through the power of symbols.

THE POWER OF SYMBOLS

Symbols – from the Greek *σύμβολον* or *sumballein*, "to bring together" (Whittick 1960: 4; Gheerbrant, Chevalier and Buchanan-Brown 1996: 11) – act as a 'visual shortcut' between the mind and an abstract concept. Symbols and iconography connect the individual to a broader imagined community in space and time, and as consequence symbols are inherently imbued with inherited imaginations, acting as both a social adhesive and a solvent which simultaneously signify who does and does not belong in a group. This imbues symbols with a political and emotional power which

manifests in shaping political behaviour and political attitudes by uniting a nation across time and space; ultimately 'social and economic activities are carried on by means of symbols… society is held together by acceptance of, and reverence for, its symbols' (Cooper 1978: 36-37).

Reverence offers a useful starting point, because of particular significance is the emotional power of symbolism. Political symbols are emotionally charged as they convey the nation's history, myths, and unite fellow-subjects scattered across space and time into an imagined community which is immediately recognisable through symbols. The Ukraine situation demonstrates the deployment of political symbols which have especial significance to Ukrainians and Russians, notably the iconography of the Third Reich and the Soviet Union alongside EU iconography. The use of this highly emotionally charged symbolism has rendered EU symbolism more significant in Ukraine than it is in the EU or even Brexit Britain. This is particularly significant for Ukraine, where political symbols convey highly emotionally-charged memories of the Soviet and Nazi past, and the Russian present.

Since late 2013, the Ukraine situation has seen multiple factions deploying the political iconography of defunct states, namely the Soviet Union and the Third Reich, with both Nazi and Soviet emblems being used as symbols of nostalgic pride and/or contemporary rejection and/or as reminders of past atrocities whose cultural memory is transferred, and attributed, to a demonised Other. As a consequence, waving the EU flag in the same settings as the waving of Soviet or Nazi flags associates the EU with the same historical memory; not equating the EU with the USSR or the Reich but imagining it as the virtuous mirror image, a flawless paragon which is desirable simply because it is not the Other (UvA 2016). This constructs an imagination of the EU as inherently good simply because it is an alternative to the inherently evil USSR and Reich. The use of symbolism thus accelerates a force which separates complicated, dynamic, and overlapping identities into two irreconcilable camps – EUropean and non-EUropean – who each claim to be right while rejecting the other as wrong. Like Doctor Faustus torn between the Good Angel and the Evil Angel, each trying to persuade him of their faction's merits, the deployment of Nazi, Soviet, EU, and Russian iconography alongside or in place of Ukrainian national iconography, obliges Ukrainians to take artificial sides in an artificial contest between an imagined good and an imagined evil – with the EU, USSR, Third Reich, and Russia moving between "good" and "evil" depending on the faction. This theme was replicated to a degree in the Brexit campaign by Leavers and Remainers, and has become much more pronounced since Brexit as Leave and Remain have become more polarised, moralistic, and intolerant of one another (Foster 2019), but the Ukrainian case remains unique in the invocation of context-specific, traumatic histories of "Europe". This not only signifies developments in Ukraine, but further signifies a shift in the imagination of "Europe", or "EUrope" (Foster and Grzymski 2019), from emotionless abstraction to a powerful, emotional norm which appeals not to banality or bureaucracy, but to good or evil (Foster *2019]*).

MORE EU-ROPEAN THAN THE EU-ROPEANS?

According to what might be termed the 'Maidanmyth', the EU's symbols signify a homogenous bloc of which membership was a desirable trait; not for purely commercial or bureaucratic reasons but as an apparent exemplar of freedom, progress, and civilisation – values which are expressed and imagined in fundamentally emotional terms. This is visible not only in the choice of symbols, but in the way in which they are used. At Maidan, EU iconography was not passively displayed but actively performed, with the flag being waved at protest sites and even worn on the body. Significantly, this frequently took place alongside Ukrainian national iconography. A consequence of this is the centrifugalism of identity; a visual claim that Ukraine belongs in the EU and has a historical destiny to fulfil, and thereby tacitly rejecting identities based on pro-Russian, anti-EU (but not necessarily anti-

Europe), or neutral norms. For examples of this symbolic behaviour, see (Chatham House 2017; AvaxNews 2013; Reuters 2013; New Eastern Europeans 2013).

Symbols are both adhesive and solvent, and one consequence of deploying EU iconography was the alienation of non-aligned factions who adopted EU symbolism for the purposes of iconoclasm; the public destruction of symbols. By embracing EU iconography against Russian/Soviet iconoclasm, a polarised dichotomy is constructed in which Ukrainians must make a choice between either the EU or Russia (no third option is ostensibly allowed), and in which the EU and Russia (or the Russosphere/*alter*-Europe) are constructed as mutually and perpetually incompatible. This is apparent as, in response to the proliferation of EU symbolism, Russian iconography appeared in public performances. The use of Russian and Soviet iconography in Crimea (see below) triggered response from pro-EU Ukrainians, namely iconoclasm against symbols of Russian identity. This iconoclasm is both direct (e.g. demolishing Soviet symbolism) and indirect (e.g. equating the Russian Federation with the Third Reich). This suggests not a passive objection to pro-Russian Ukrainians, but an active rejection of alternative identities which further emphasises the myth that Ukrainians are forced to choose between two mutually incompatible identities. The use of symbolism, therefore, constructs a false (and potentially extremely dangerous) dichotomy. This, in turn, contributed to an escalation of iconography, iconoclasm, and the further centrifugalism of a highly complex and fluid identity politics into a false binary of pro-EU/anti-Russia *or* pro-Russia/anti-EU. For examples, see (WJLA 2014; NBC 2014a; *Le Monde* 2015).

As a consequence of the use of EU symbolism, the iconography of the Russian Federation became public and visible among pro-Russian factions. Yet of particular significance is that Russian symbols often appeared *alongside* Soviet symbols. The simultaneous use of Federal and Soviet iconography suggests popular emotional identification not specifically with the Russian Federation, and even less with the USSR; but rather, an emotional identification with an *alter*-Europe which symbolically overlaps with an imagined Russosphere. It is in this context that the use of Soviet iconography should be interpreted. The juxtaposition of Soviet and Russian iconographies strongly suggests identification and affiliation with an *alter*-Europe: one which is dominated by Russia as the hegemon of post-Soviet "alter-Europe" (Neumayer 2018). It is therefore reasonable to interpret the use of Soviet iconography as *alter*-Europeans adopting a clearly recognisable symbol (one which retains some residual emotional capital among some demographics of the former USSR) only as a placeholder, a temporary icon to express their identification not with the USSR and not necessarily with Russia, but with a conscious rejection of the EU. This hypothesis is supported by the post-Maidan surge in iconoclasm.

ICONOCLASM

Iconoclasm in Ukraine occurs in two contexts. First is what might be termed active iconoclasm; the destruction of symbols. Parallel to this is passive iconoclasm; the use of historical symbols to associate the present with a traumatic past. The first aspect of iconoclasm concerns Soviet emblems. While anti-Soviet iconoclasm preceded Euromaidan, it accelerated following the Crimean independence referendum as Ukrainian nationalists, pro-EU Ukrainians, pro-Russian Ukrainians, and white power separatists, publicly destroyed the symbols of the multi-ethnic Soviet oppressor. For examples, see (Yahoo News 2014; NBC 2014b; *Occupy* 2014).

A significant dimension of anti-Soviet iconoclasm in Ukraine is that the iconoclastic surge appeared alongside other factions' appropriation of Soviet symbolism to visually express political and emotional identification with *alter*-Europe. Consequently, the destruction of Soviet symbols is arguably best interpreted as a rejection not of the Soviet past but of the Russian present. Active iconoclasm in Ukraine, which has largely taken the form of anti-Soviet activity, is not an act of public

negotiation with the past but an active political rejection of contemporary Russia and therefore, tacitly, a public declaration that the citizens of a 'semi-authoritarian' Ukraine (Kubicek 2017: 156) must choose one of two sides aligned to "Europe" or "alter-Europe". Passive iconoclasm is parallel to this, and, as illustrated by the complex anti-USSR *and* anti-EU iconoclasm of various political and racial extremist groups, involves the appropriation of the symbols of the Third Reich.

The use of Nazi symbolism to denigrate Vladimir Putin has been visible, but it is rare. When used against the EU, though, it is not specific individuals or members but the entire institution. The use of Nazi iconography in Ukraine is arguably more emotionally charged than in the states of the EU, rendered more powerful when Ukrainians are starkly offered a visual dichotomy (Figs. 11-13). Equating the EU with the Third Reich further simplifies complex identity politics into two camps which are not merely separate, but incompatible and hostile. Examples of equating the EU with the Third Reich are visible at (RT 2014; Guardian 2014), equating Russia and President Putin with the Reich ("*Putler*"), at (Washington Post 2014).

In the case of Nazi iconography, a symbolic duality appears. In the aftermath of Maidan, Nazi symbols were used not merely to condemn the Ukrainian state or the EU but also to suggest that Russia is a righteous bulwark against this demonised Other. One symbolic consequence of Maidan, in a reflection of 'messy geopolitics' (Flint 2016), is that the deployment of pro-EU iconography has strengthened the mediatisation of anti-EU symbolism, and that the symbolic representation of an imagined virtuous EU has strengthened the symbolic representation of an imagined malevolent EU.

Iconoclasm of EU and USSR symbols thus reveals not a passive objection but active rejection – rejection of the EU's version of Europe, or rejection of the *alter*-Europe which is symbolically (and perhaps temporarily) represented by the hammer and sickle as a placeholder icon. The destruction of Soviet symbols such as statues and architectural ornaments might therefore be interpreted not as a rejection of the past but of a EUropean future. Soviet iconography in Ukraine represents not merely a historical period, but is a symbolic representation of the Russosphere, the *alter*-Europe forming in opposition to the EU. The public deployment of Soviet iconography (and its subsequent iconoclasm) demonstrates the continuation of myths in constructing identity: an identity in which Europe is yet again essentialised as a false dichotomy between West and East, EUrope and alter-Europe, Europe and Eurasia (Mações 2018: 227-252; Menon and Rumer 2015: 93-96). Significantly, according to this myth, this is not merely Europe *alongside* alter-Europe, but Europe *versus* alter-Europe. The myth constructs an imagination of two internally homogeneous, mutually incompatible, mutually opposed "Europe"s – with Ukrainians falsely forced to pick one (and thereby tacitly declare that they not only reject the other, but actively oppose it). The use of symbols in Ukraine, and perhaps in the UK too, demonstrates the multiplicity of "European" identities, and that a European identity cannot be extracted from the memories of twentieth-century trauma which gave birth to the post-war European project. Rather than speaking of a "European" identity, it is instead more appropriate to ask – "which Europe?"

CONCLUSIONS

The use of symbols in Ukraine has had, and continues to have, a centrifugal effect on identity politics, distilling the complex and fluid identities of its people into two warring camps who force Ukrainians to choose sides.

The public use of symbols is significant for three reasons. First, political iconography has a unique power as it relies on affect and emotion. As such, symbols are important in the formation of identities; the very appearance of symbols and iconography can trigger instant emotional responses

to political groups, leaders, or projects, which become indelibly stained by the appearance of particular symbolism. In the specific context of Ukraine, specific symbolism conveys profound historical and emotional connotations of distrust, conflict, trauma, and the creation of unstable and unsustainable geopolitical rivalries wherein political identities become affixed to (contested) territorial spaces (Bassin et al. 2017: 665-692). Second, the use of symbols in Ukraine impacts scholarly debates on the frontiers of 'Europe', the future of the EU, and the existence of *alter-Europe(s)*. Iconography in Ukraine reflects an existing antipathy towards the EU in the Union's border zone, and expresses popular sentiments not only on who is and is not 'European', but who should and should not be considered such. This is manifest in the adoption of iconography which is not only non-EU but *anti*-EU (e.g. the positive embracement of Russian Federation and/or Soviet Union symbolism) while simultaneously constructing and expressing a parallel alter-myth of Europeaness. Events in Ukraine demonstrated the creation of an EU myth *beyond* the borders of the EU; a myth in which the EU is either entirely benevolent or entirely malevolent. This same myth has developed in Brexit Britain between polarised camps of Remain and Leave, and indicates the likely trajectory of "European identity". This identity is no longer vague or lacking interest, instead "European identity" is splitting into two fundamentally opposed camps whose adherents construct imagined histories and imagined communities. At present this is most visible in the 'fringes' of the EU – Ukraine and the UK. It is reasonable to predict that as the EU adapts to the consequences of Brexit, populism, a new Parliament and Commission from 2019, and the ongoing unclear future of Ukraine, that this same false dichotomy will become more visible and more pronounced within EU states.

In the final scene of *Doctor Faustus,* Faustus himself is dragged down to Hell by the same elemental forces which he had unleashed in the belief that he could control the consequences of meddling with arcane symbols. Like Doctor Faustus, Ukrainians (along with the British, and perhaps EU citizens in the near future) are forced to choose between the Good Angel and the Evil Angel – each of which whispers that the other is entirely wrong and both of whom construct a false dichotomy. In a rapidly polarising political world, Europeans increasingly face the same Manichean choice of God or the Devil. Yet it is possible that through analysis of symbolic interactions, imaginations, and communications, and by critically reassessing the significance of symbols in constructing imagined identities, "Europeanness" may yet avoid Faustus' fate.
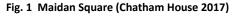
Fig. 1 Maidan Square (Chatham House 2017)

Fig. 2 Symbolic centrifugalism (AvaxNews 2013)

Fig. 3 Maidan Square (Reuters 2013)

Fig. 4 Performing Europeaness (New Eastern Europe 2013)

Fig. 5 Crimea, March 2014 (WJLA 2014)

Fig. 6 Independence referendum, March 2014 (NBC 2014a)

Fig. 7 Flags of the Russian Federation, Soviet Union, and the Republic of Crimea (*Le Monde* 2015)

Fig. 8 Soviet iconography in Ukrainian national colours, Moscow (Yahoo News, 2014)

Fig. 9 Monumental iconoclasm: Kharkiv, Ukraine, 2014 (NBC 2014b)

Fig. 10 White-nationalist separatists burn the USSR, UPP, and EU flags (*Occupy*, 2014).

Fig. 11 Billboard on referendum, Crimea, March 2014 (RT 2014)

Fig. 12 Billboard on referendum, Crimea, March 2014 (Guardian 2014)

Fig. 13 Imagining a Fourth Reich: Kiev, 2014 (Washington Post 2014)

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