

Categorizing to de-Legitimize

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EUROMAIDAN, THE FALL OF YANUKOVYCH AND RUSSIAN INTERVENTION

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Ukraine have resumed a so-called “anti-terrorist operation” this morning in Donetsk. An undetermined number of people are dead and Russia announced that it was now conducting military drills at the border, once again raising fears of a possible intervention. The name of the Ukrainian operation reveals anew the imperative by actors in a violent conflict to use categories aimed at delegitimizing their opponents. The storming of government buildings and police stations in Donetsk has in fact nothing to do with terrorism. My point is not to rehash the assertion that the only difference between a freedom fighter and a terrorist is one of political perspectives, and that following that logic the storming of government buildings and police station by Maidan activists in Western Ukraine in February was not terrorism because they were fighting for the right cause and against an illegitimate regime. The point is rather that as a concept aimed at describing a type of political violence, if terrorism has any meaning, it is to evoke indiscriminate violence, which thus necessarily involves the victimization of civilians.

Capturing government buildings by force is not terrorism, because the violence is in fact very selective – you target police forces entrusted to defend the

premises – and, short of taking hostages and threatening to kill them, which apparently has not happened in Donetsk (or in Western Ukraine in February), the action is not aimed at civilians. Judging by the information available to us, the civilians that have embedded themselves with the armed men in Donetsk have come of their own volition and their presence enormously complicates the tasks of Ukrainian armed formations in seeking to retake their buildings by force, since civilians are bound to become so-called collateral damage. What we have been witnessing in Donetsk is neither terrorism, from the “green men”, nor counter-terrorism, from Kyiv, but the use of the word has the clear purpose of utterly delegitimizing the actions of the Donetsk armed men. This follows not only Western practice (the “war on terror”), but more specifically the Soviet and post-Soviet practice of referring to insurgents as terrorists (or “bandits”).

And since words have social meaning, when a post-Soviet state uses the word “counter-terrorism,” the connotation is that civilians will be victimized (as in Chechnya). The post-Maidan interim government in Kyiv seems unable to shed Soviet discursive practices of delegitimizing state opponents. When the Yanukovich regime in extremis announced an anti-terrorist operation on February 19, one could not but have a foreboding of civilian victimization. A similar sentiment is likely prevailing in Donetsk. Terrorism in political discourse is an instrument to pass judgment. Analytically, the armed men in Donetsk are insurgents, whether or not they are guided by Russian special forces, the same way that the Pravyi sector activists were, and probably still, are insurgents. An insurgent is someone who take arms against the state. In doing so, he may resort to the tactic of targeting civilians, or he may not. With the exception of the abductions and torture by regime special forces during Maidan, techniques that have resurfaced in Donetsk this week, and, of course, with the exception of the killing of close to a hundred civilians on Maidan in February, the violence in Ukraine has not been of the kind that targets civilians.

The word “fascist” is incessantly used in the Russian media, however, precisely for the purpose of giving the impression that Maidan insurgents are killing civilians, or will kill civilians if left unchecked. “Fascism” in the Soviet narrative was equated with the German occupation of the Soviet Union, and German forces in World War II killed, directly or indirectly, millions of Soviet civilians.

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Ukrainian insurgents, the OUN-UPA, who allied themselves with German occupying forces, at the beginning and towards the end of the war, are called fascists because of their association with Germany, and also because they were involved in the killing of civilians (Jews and Poles, primarily). Historians debate to what extent the category of “fascist” is appropriate to describe an organization like the OUN in terms of its authoritarian nature, subservience to a leader and hostility towards minorities. Yet to reduce fascism to the killing of civilians empties the category of political meaning. Both the French Army and the FLN (the Algerian insurgency) destroyed villages to set examples (to collaborate or not to defect) and calling them fascists is of no analytical use. The purpose of referring to Maidan insurgents, and even the current Ukrainian government, as fascists is to criminalize the very act of opposition to Russian rule. The Ukrainian insurgents in World War II were engaged in actions that will have to be addressed in debates over historical memory (since they divide society), but it is their very act of resistance to Soviet power that could not, and still cannot, be categorized in political terms in the Russian narrative. In the Soviet lexicon, there was no space to describe political opposition otherwise than in criminal terms. I would submit that a similar logic applies in the current Russian discourse. An insurrection against a regime increasingly resembling the Russian regime (the Yanukovych regime) can only be framed in criminal terms, particularly when the insurgents symbolically claim lineage to the Ukrainian wartime insurgency. As always in the political use of categories, it tells us far more about the actors doing the categorizing, than the actors being categorized.

A note on the companion category of fascism, that of neo-nazism. The Russian state – not limited to the Kremlin-controlled media and including the President and the Foreign Ministry – routinely allege that fascists, neo-Nazis and anti-Semites are linked to the current Ukrainian government. I will leave the question of anti-semitism aside, since Jewish leaders in Ukraine, North America and internationally have roundly denounced as groundless these Russian claims (to no effect). I will instead focus on the neo-Nazis. A neo-Nazi is someone who believes in white supremacy, dabbles into Aryan symbiology (the swastika) and does not acknowledge the Holocaust. There were such characters on Maidan, fairly marginal, and some of them still belong to Pravyi sector. Yet the reference to neo-Nazis in political discourse casts a

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wide net. Inasmuch as Maidan insurgents appeal symbolically to the OUN-UPA, an organization which worked with Germans under Hitler, this makes these insurgents neo-Nazis in the Russian narrative. This erases the national dimension of the Ukrainian insurrection during World War II – and now. The political project of the insurrection was repressive, and the movement did terrible things to civilians, but the idea behind the insurrection was mainstream: to establish an independent state, to have the nation decide for itself. This core idea of self-determination is antithetical to Nazism and one reading of the current Russian narrative is to prevent Ukrainians from exercising self-determination, namely, to decide for themselves how they should be ruled.