



The other within: Reflections on fieldwork in Ukraine before the Russian full-scale invasion

Per Ståhlberg | Associate Professor in Media and Communication, Södertörn University

ABSTRACT: In this article, I reflect on several instances of symbolic communication that has been taking place in the shadow of the ongoing Russian war on Ukraine. The article should be read as some afterthoughts from a research project that was completed just before the Russian full-scale invasion. It builds mainly on material from intermittent fieldwork among PR consultants and government officials in Ukraine, with particular interest in meaning management. The theme that conjoins rather scattered examples is a concern with the colonial legacy in a country at war.

Keywords: Ukraine, Russia, war, postcolonial, the other, national imaginaries

Introduction

When Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, one of the first places that Russian troops occupied was, strangely enough, the former nuclear plant of Chernobyl. It might have been a coincidence with hardly any military significance; the place of the world's worst nuclear accident happened to be on the route when Russian troops advanced from Belarus toward the Ukrainian capital. The incident was however, widely reported and commented around the world – as well as in Ukraine. There might have been a very real risk of radiation exposure involved, but it also seemed to have a kind of symbolic significance. What was that about?

First, it is not distinctly odd that the Russian occupation of Chernobyl, though a rather small detail in the terrifying war scenario, made headlines internationally. After all, as a metonym of man-made disasters, the name Chernobyl might have been more familiar than the name of the country in which it is nowadays located. The 1986 nuclear disaster is primarily associated with the Soviet Union, a political entity no longer existing, and before the occupation many people in Europe and elsewhere would probably have been rather hesitant to point out the exact location of the ruined nuclear plant on a current map. Furthermore, the conjuncture of an evil being perpetrated presently, and a historical disaster somehow accentuated the profoundness of the situation. The Chernobyl nuclear disaster had threatened to desolate large parts of Europe, were we now facing a risk of the same magnitude?

Second, and more importantly in this context, I suggest that Chernobyl, as a residue of the former Soviet Union, has a particular meaning within Ukraine. I will argue that it symbolises the intricate role that Russia has as 'the other' of Ukraine's national imaginary. The danger that threatens Ukraine is in a sense also concealed within the history of the country.

This essay does however, only start and end with Chernobyl. In between, I will reflect on several other instances of symbolic communication taking place in the shadow of violent threats from a dangerous other. The article should be read as some afterthoughts – presented in an essayistic style – from a research project that was completed just before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. It builds mainly on material from intermittent fieldwork among PR consultants and government officials in Ukraine, with a particular interest in meaning management. The theme that conjoins rather scattered impressions is centred around the colonial legacy in a country at war and my reflections involve both a revolution and a song contest. The war that escalated in a dramatic manner, has indeed provoked rethinking of ethnographic experiences that have been dealt with in more stringent research publications previously (see also Bolin and Ståhlberg 2022b, 2023a). Let me explain.

I have been visiting Kiev regularly for the past decade, two-three trips a year, usually a couple of weeks each time. The purpose has been to conduct interviews and collect material for a couple of research projects. The last one was about Ukrainian communication efforts during the drawn out war preceding the Russian full-scale invasion (Bolin and Ståhlberg 2023b).¹ The research team, consisting of scholars of media studies, history, journalism, and anthropology (me), have largely focused on people, organisations, and authorities that were managing information about the conflict for the benefit of an international audience.² Our informants were trying to respond to what they perceived as powerful Russian propaganda and promote the ‘Ukrainian perspective’ during the low scale war situation.

However, our first visits were conducted as early as in 2013, before the Euromaidan revolt, when no war with Russia was going on. At that time the research team aimed to study Ukrainian information management in a rather ‘banal’ form. We were interested in the phenomenon of *nation branding*, which we understood as “the practice of governments, PR consultants, media organizations, and corporate business to promote a specific image of a particular nation-state” (Ståhlberg and Bolin 2016: 274). The branding of countries was at the time frequently appearing in the form of commercials on international television channels, or as advertisements on billboards, in the press, and on the web. Usually, these campaigns were directed toward a foreign audience of tourists, investors, and political elites. There was also a growing field of research into this widespread phenomenon of marketing ‘nations’ around the world (See Aronszyk 2013; Kaneva 2012). What had caught our curiosity was the blurring of lines between imaginaries of nations as communities and commodities, in branding practice, as well as theoretically within the research field (Bolin and Ståhlberg 2010; Ståhlberg and Bolin 2016). The reason why we had chosen to pay attention to Ukraine was not that this was a particularly successful case of promoting a country for foreign audiences; in fact, it was quite the opposite. While several post-communist European states had been very visible in campaigns aiming to refashion their image and to dissociate themselves from a grey Soviet past, Ukraine seemed to be notably absent in this context. Furthermore, the country was rarely mentioned in the growing field of research around national imaginaries in the contemporary world, despite being a major case in the history of nationalism (Armstrong 1963).

¹ Some passages in the text build on our analysis in previous publication, particularly Bolin and Ståhlberg (2015; 2023a) and Ståhlberg and Bolin (2016).

² The research team consisted of Göran Bolin, Paul Jordan, Per Ståhlberg, Liudmila Voronova and Yuliya Yurchuk.

The idea of Ukraine

Thus, our initial intention was to understand why Ukraine seemed to be a deviant state among its East European neighbours. In Kyiv we met government servants and branding professionals who explained to us that they had indeed tried to rebrand Ukraine in several campaigns, though rarely successful and usually not with long lasting effects. The country had also missed several opportunities to make itself more visible – for example a colour revolution (in the Orange Revolution 2004) and the hosting of large European sports and cultural events (Eurovision Song Contest 2005 and the European Soccer Championship 2012) – and seemed to remain in obscurity. The reason that was mentioned by many, was that all branding efforts had been very uncoordinated, but also that Ukraine was a tricky case because it was so heterogenous with many coexisting ethnicities, languages, and religious denominations. And it had a confused history, having been dominated by several large empires and with only a brief experience as an independent state (though for a long time striving for this)³. The idea of Ukraine as a nation was vague, both abroad and within the country, claimed the people who we talked to in the government as well as in the promotion business.

Admittedly, there were concerns about the problem of having a huge neighbouring state in the east, that seemed to consider present day Ukraine as a historical aberration and Ukrainians as second-class Russians (In Russian historiography, the Kiev Rus is often regarded as an ancient preform of the Muscovite Rus). There was even an irksome name for that, inherited from Tsarist Russia and upheld during Soviet times: Ukraine was known as Little Russia (Kuzio 1998). Still, few people who we met at that point of time were insistent on clear distinctions among peoples, neither between those belonging to bordering states nor domestically, dividing citizens of Ukraine. For example, we should not be under the impression that language was a marker of national identity; our informants explained that most people in Kiev spoke Russian, but it had nothing to do with ethnicity. And in all parts of the country, speakers of Ukrainian could easily switch to Russian. Ukraine was not like the Baltic countries, with Russian minorities speaking Russian, and a majority population speaking the national language (cf. Kulyk 2016). Furthermore, we were told that a Ukrainian had very similar cultural competence as a Russian. People of the two countries consumed much the same books, music, films and tv-programs.

In the last efforts to create a Ukrainian brand image, this blurring of lines was even declared an asset. A PR company in Kyiv had, on commission from the ministry of tourism, created a new design for promoting the country. Just a month before the Euromaidan revolt started in late 2013, the company presented an idea with Ukraine defined by cohabitating differences. Ukraine was both East *and* West, traditional *and* modern, Orthodox *and* Catholic Christian, and so on. In logo designs this idea was cleverly expressed graphically with the letter “U” (for Ukraine). Each font-height represented binary opposites, but joined together forming a smile. This kind of vagueness concerning the ‘we’ of the Ukrainian imaginary also had its counterpart in a non-distinct contrast. In our discussion with informants, Russia was always a point of reference at that time, and in several ways a problem, but rarely explicitly conceptualised as the adversary. After all, Russian language, history, and culture were not

³ In the aftermath of the First World War there were attempts in parts of the Ukrainian region to build an independent state in 1917-1921. Full independency was gained in 1991.

situated in a distant ‘other’, it was all familiar to ‘us.’

Less than ten years later, this vagueness regarding Ukraine is completely gone. No PR-skilled professional is needed to remind the world that the country exists, or where it is located, or what the name of its capital is. Furthermore, the Russian army launched its full-scale attack on people who seem to be far away from uncertainty about their national belonging, and who are willing to fight to defend it. Of course, there exists no doubt as to who ‘the other’ is. The idea about cohabitating differences seems to have vanished and heterogeneity is hardly upheld as an asset in the current war context. All traits of Little Russia are actively discouraged (see The Guardian 2022).

The transformation

Today, Ukraine is apparently a nation with a strong collective identity, that is defending itself against the enemy’s assault. The transformation is remarkable. PR professionals who we first met in Kyiv a decade ago, were pragmatic constructivists in their approach to the nation. Ukraine was an object of desktop work, an entity that could be designed and promoted with creative skills. Today, the same people would obviously die for their country. They have become patriots with an almost essentialist conviction that Ukraine is eternal. In the current war with Russia, nothing but victory is thinkable. The nationalist motto *Slava Ukraini* (Glory to Ukraine) has replaced branding slogans like *Diverse Ukraine Now*. Moreover, Ukrainian politicians, professionals, and scholars who we have befriended during the past decade, and kept contact with on social media, are not only taking a patriotic stance toward the aggressive state that has launched a war on their country, they are often also expressing an inexorable hostility towards ‘Russians’ in general. It is not Putin or Kremlin that is making war on Ukraine. It is the Russians. People are referring, of course, to surveys showing that the Putin regime indeed has popular support in Russia, including even after the war started. Furthermore, well known Ukrainian artists, writers, and intellectuals are denouncing Russian film, literature, and music. Often, they have refused taking part in any dialogue, even with their liberal (read: Putin critical) Russian counterparts. As the Ukrainian minister of culture claimed in an opinion article in *Guardian*: “This war is a civilizational battle over culture and history” (Tkachenko 2022).

This amazing shift of attitude did however, not institute itself overnight with the Russian invasion of 2022. The change had already commenced eight years earlier. It started in the context of the Euromaidan Revolution in the winter of 2013-14 and continued with the Russian annexation of Crimea as well as the Russian supported insurgency in Donbas, that followed soon after. It was easy to note that the idea of Ukraine was growing into a more robust ‘we’-shape among people that we met in Kyiv, and that the ‘Russians’ were increasingly being conceptualised as ‘the others’. We could witness its concrete manifestation. Several people from the commercial PR business became engaged in the conflict with Russia, producing texts, images, and films promoting “the Ukrainian perspective”. Of course, they did this equipped with the skills from their professions, but also, as we soon understood, with genuine engagement. In some cases, PR professionals were even founders of voluntary (not for profit) organisations contributing to functions that a weak state could not handle or afford.

One example was a press information center that was rapidly formed after the Euromaidan revolution. Foreign journalists who flew into Kyiv to report on the dramatic

events during the Spring of 2014 needed to be informed on the current situation. Thus, daily press briefings by the army spokesperson, Colonel Lysenko, were held at 1 p.m. every day in Hotel Ukraine, conveniently located at the well-known Euromaidan square. The hotel had already been prominently displayed around the world as film footage captured those turbulent months of street protests and fights. Bullet holes in the façade testified to the presence of snipers shooting at nearby protesters. At this facility, foreign reporters could now get assistance with information about Ukrainian losses and gains, contacts, translations, and practical arrangements needed for covering the war in Donbas. However, the press information center was not run by government authorities, as would be expected in a war, but by an NGO established by PR professionals, who had hitherto often worked with nation branding. Rather soon, the organisation expanded its mission, offering not only press center facilities but also initiating projects for monitoring Russian-origin propaganda and producing its own content in texts, videos, posters, analyses, and reports about the war. One could say that they continued producing images of Ukraine, but in a very different context from their usual and earlier work.⁴

Previously, these PR professionals had been constructing imaginaries of the nation in a rather prosaic form; basically they were advertising Ukraine as a *commodity* on a global market. Now, during the hot situation of low-scale war, their engagement turned towards imaginaries of Ukraine as a threatened national community. Michael Billig's (1995) distinction between hot and banal nationalism might be helpful here. "Banal nationalism" describes the routine, everyday practices that symbolically reproduce the idea of a nation, but which hardly create much exaltation. "Hot nationalism" occurs during extreme situations when a society is threatened. In times of war, national sentiments grow. It is hardly surprising that Ukraine has become a rather contemporary schoolbook example of a situation in which hot nationalism emerges.⁵

Our vantage point of studying a professional elite in Kyiv might not be entirely representative of how common people have changed their perceptions of Russia during these years of war. However, sociologists who have surveyed Ukrainian attitudes towards Russia might have more general clues. For example, a Kyiv based institute claims that between 80 and 90 per cent of Ukrainians had 'good' attitudes toward Russia before 2013. When the war started in 2014, that figure halved, and after the full-scale attack in 2022, only a tiny 2 per cent of the surveyed population had 'good' attitudes toward Russia (Hrushetskyi 2022). As the Kyiv institute also admits, these kinds of surveys are very difficult to conduct during times of war, when large parts of the population have become refugees. It is easy to doubt its results in terms of precise numbers. Still, the tendency that Ukrainian attitudes toward Russia have changed dramatically during the last decade of war, seems rather obvious. More interesting perhaps, is that the survey shows how attitudes have changed through two giant leaps. First, the Euromaidan Revolution halved the sympathies of Ukrainians toward Russia; still, about half of the population continued to nurse 'good' attitudes toward their eastern neighbours. It was not until the full-scale invasion that almost all sympathies with 'Russia' were gone.

What is interesting is not so much the hegemonic patriotism and strong anti-Russian

⁴ The name of the NGO is Ukraine Crises Media Center and it is still active. See <https://uacrisis.org/en/>

⁵ For a further discussion about distinctions between forms of national imaginaries, see Ståhlberg and Bolin (2016).

sentiments that have emerged after the 24 February 2022 attack. It is rather the first leap of attitude change, in the years between the Euromaidan revolution and the full-scale invasion, that is intriguing. This was also the time during which the research team regularly visited Kyiv and often noticed how the discourse about Ukraine, Russia, and their relations gradually transformed.

One should remember that the Euromaidan Revolution of 2013-14 was not initially an anti-Russian revolt. As indicated by the name, it rather started as a pro-Europe manifestation. The Ukrainian government had negotiated an association agreement with the EU, which would bring the country closer to the rest of Europe. Since it also included a trade agreement, it was hoped that it would also bring higher living standards to a stagnated post-Soviet society, marked by a strong oligarchic structure and high levels of corruption. In early 2013, we consistently encountered great prospects among business professionals and politicians whom we interviewed. They talked about the radical change and the new opportunities that would come. Foreign investment would intensify; the tourist flow was expected to double in five years; and several international sports events would be organised (Ståhlberg and Bolin 2016: 277f). A high ranking official at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs told us in October 2013:

European integration is associated with progress, associated with developing the right way. It's a great impetus for self-esteem, self-respect [...]. Today you can feel psychologically that no-one is satisfied where we are, or those who feel degraded, like we are moving back to the Soviet Union.

Then suddenly, in November 2013, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich backed out from signing the Association Agreement with the European Union. Instead, he opted for closer trade arrangements with Russia. Apparently, it came as a surprise even to the people within the government, whom we had interviewed. The aspirations and hopes of many seemed to be crushed. People started to gather at the Independence square in Kyiv, to express their discontent with the regime. The manifestations were initially peaceful but were violently suppressed by the police. The conflict between protesters and police special forces escalated, leaving a death toll of over one hundred civilians (Orlova 2016). Eventually this also led to President Yanukovich being ousted and escaping to Russia.

The intimate enemy

Several months later after the revolt was over and the regime had changed, remnants of the violent clashes between the protesters and the police were still to be found on the Maidan and neighbouring roads. We had followed the Euromaidan revolution from Stockholm (the events were live streamed on internet by several newly established media platforms) but returned to Kyiv in May 2014 and walked among the burnt-out vehicles and debris from the barricades. Military tents had been erected, and the remaining revolutionaries in tattered uniforms were watching over the space. Along Kreshchatyk, the main street of Kyiv, entrepreneurial people were selling revolution merchandise, such as toilet paper and doormats printed with the faces of Vladimir Putin and Viktor Yanukovich. The square and the adjoining streets looked like an open-air theme park of a violent revolution, but

temporary memorials with flowers and pictures of fallen heroes reminded visitors that this had been real. Later, the people killed during the fights were honoured as the Heavenly Hundred; the revolt itself was renamed as The Revolution of Dignity (Bolin and Ståhlberg 2023b: 19-23, 2022a; Orlova 2016).

In the aftermath of the revolution, Russia had already in February annexed Crimea and during spring backed (or even instigated) a militant insurgency in Donbas. Ukraine was now fighting a war in the eastern parts of the country. Russia was unquestionably the enemy. Strangely enough, life in Kyiv, only some 600 kilometres from the war front, went on almost as usual. The debris on the Independence square, reminding of the troublesome situation, were eventually removed. Apart from that colonel holding daily press briefings at 1 p.m. in Hotel Ukraine (later relocated to Ukrainian House, also close to the Maidan), we experienced very few military activities when visiting Kyiv through the years of its low scale war. Even security at government ministries remained remarkably relaxed. No one seemed to be suspicious about those foreigners who walked in unannounced and asked for an interview with a state official.

Neither did we see or hear many dissident voices, critical about the revolution. Though the people we met often talked about those Ukrainians that had been, or still were, loyal to the fallen regime and ‘duped’ by Russian propaganda, they were remarkably invisible. We never witnessed any confrontations between Ukrainian patriots and Russian loyalists on the streets of Kyiv. Among professionals, activists in voluntary organisations, and other citizens of Kyiv who we met, no one seemed to take a pro-Russian standpoint. Not even people who claimed that they were ethnic Russians, hesitated to, or withdrew from their support, of the revolution. The enemy seemed to be far away, and the domestic non-patriots were nowhere to be seen. The only times that we noticed some suspicion, were when some of our acquaintances occasionally pointed towards a car with plates showing that the driver belonged to Donetsk or Luhansk, places in which people were regarded as particularly vulnerable to Russian propaganda (see Gentile 2015).

Still, the ‘the Russians’ had a ghostly presence, poisoning almost every subject at hand – from politics and crime, to culture and history. This ‘presence’ of the enemy was of course very real, in the sense of an imminent threat of violence from a potent military aggressor. But the genuine danger was also tainted by a kind of cultural familiarity with ‘the Russians’, which strangely enough made the enemy less frightening. People who we spoke to in Kyiv during those perilous times could explain that the problem was that the rest of the world did not comprehend Putin. Ukrainians however, were not afraid because they did understand Russia very well.

In a completely different historical and geographical context, Ashis Nandy (1983) has theorised “the intimate enemy” as a prominent feature of colonialism. He argues that colonialism has two forms, the first is the violent conquering of territory and bodies, the second is a colonisation of minds. Writing on colonial India, he claims that “the modern West” became a psychological category, impregnating everything and structuring colonised minds. In this form it also survived the demise of empires. It is however, a legacy of colonialism that eventually strikes back. The freedom struggle in India was almost exclusively led by men with thorough British education, fluent in English and often with very Anglophone manners (Khilnani 1997). The colonisation of minds turned out to be an asset, as much as an obstacle. “Let us not forget”, writes Nandy, “that the most violent denunciation of the

West produced by Frantz Fanon is written in the elegant style of a Jean-Paul Sartre” (Nandy 1983: xii). Thus, the intimacy with colonial culture becomes a powerful resource in the fight against colonialism.

Nandy’s prime example is of course Gandhi whose success in fighting the British relied heavily on his close knowledge of the enemy. “After all, Gandhi himself said that he had borrowed his idea of non-violence not from the sacred texts of India but from the Sermon on the Mount” (ibid.: 51). Importantly, this ability is internal to the colonised mind and, as Nandy formulates the colonial legacy, “India does incorporate the West” (ibid.: 75). Neither Gandhi nor Fanon tried to be perfectly non-colonial in their thinking – that would have been an impossible burden, restricting their mode of acting. Their response towards colonialism had to be shaped by what it responded to. Furthermore, the intimacy with the enemy has double advantages. You can comprehend the antagonist but also respond and act in a manner that the adversary understands. Colonialism of the mind “includes codes that both the rulers and the ruled can share” (ibid.: 2).

Ukraine and Russia have a relation that one may say is structured by a colonial legacy (see Törnquist-Plewa and Yurchuk 2019).⁶ From this perspective Russia is the former colonial power which now with military means, wants to restore a lost political domination and incorporate Ukraine using its military might. However, thinking in line with Ashis Nandy, the second form of colonialism, the “colonization of the mind”, still prevails. In this sense, the Russian mode of thinking is already incorporated in Ukraine. This is “the intimate enemy” that could very well be a resource in the fight against the aggressor.

Other scholars have theorised the sometimes-close understanding that exists between violent adversaries. Arjun Appadurai (1996:155) argues that the most horrible violence in the contemporary world seems to occur “between actors who know, or thought they knew, one another.” In a world in which large-scale identities are increasingly created and transformed by modern states, enemies might be intimate though categories may be uncertain, and relations distorted. Thus, Appadurai claims, violence is often linked to a sense of treachery. To know the enemy is therefore also a means to reveal betrayal.

Nils Bubandt (2009) argues, further on, that cultural intimacy makes it possible for adversaries to see things “from the enemy’s point of view.” This requires a form of “hostile empathy”, distinct from how empathy is usually understood as a base for social cohesion, altruism, or a capacity for sympathy. Bubandt claims that “hostile empathy” may be employed to deceive or fool the enemy. When sharing cultural codes with your adversary, you may for example construct “truthful fakes” or mischievous messages. You may also be caught up in a rather intricate battle of meaning management.

The song contest

One such occasion, when it became increasingly clear that Russians and Ukrainians were rather close enemies took place some years after the Euromaidan revolution. Furthermore, it evolved around an event which is usually not connected to violent aggression between states; rather the opposite. Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) is one of the world’s largest events of ‘light’ TV-entertainment. It does sometimes have political dimensions but rarely on the

⁶ To apply a postcolonial perspective on Ukraine-Russian relations is of course not undisputed. Törnquist-Plewa and Yurchuk (2019) summarise the discussion.

same scale as when Ukraine hosted the event in Kyiv during the first two weeks of May 2017. This time Eurovision was arranged during a state of war, both in the sense of a military conflict in the eastern part of the country, and in the middle of an information war between Ukraine and Russia. The song contest came to be utilised by both sides of the conflict, not always in a way that was obvious to understand for anyone except the two enemies. Not least, the presence of the Russians was felt, despite their physical absence during the contest in Kyiv. This is, of course, only one of many situations when Ukraine and Russia clashed on various ‘banal’ issues during the years that preceded the full-scale invasion of 2022. But I believe it deserves some closer attention.

However, the origins of it lay in the year before the contest was arranged in Kyiv; in the preceding year, 2016, the ESC final took place in Stockholm and the Ukrainian singer Susana Jamaladinova, with the artist name Jamala, entered the stage as act number 21. Dressed in a dark blue gown and with a haunted expression in her voice and on her face, she started to sing: “When strangers are coming, they come to your house. They kill you all and say: We are not guilty, not guilty”. When the jury and the viewers had cast their vote, the Ukrainian song ended up as the winner, much to the surprise of ESC-expertise.

Jamala is an ethnic Tatar from Crimea. The song was titled ‘1944’ referring to the year when Crimean Tatars was deported to Siberia by Josef Stalin. However, it was not far-fetched to understand the lyrics as also referring to the Russian annexation of Crimea two years earlier. Russia had of course, reacted with allegations that the song violated ESC’s non-political policy which stated that “[n]o lyrics, speeches, gestures of a political or similar nature shall be permitted during the ESC” (<https://eurovision.tv/about/rules>). The European Broadcasting Union (EBU) had however, reviewed the song and allowed it to contest.

The Ukrainian artist did not just beat the anticipated favourite, the Russian artist Sergei Lazarev, but also ensured that the following year’s Eurovision would be held in Ukraine. Russian authorities and public commentators apparently did not take this lightly. According to reports in European mass media, Russian officials were annoyed, dismissing the Ukrainian victory as unfair, illegitimate, and forming part of a general demonisation of Russia. The state controlled Russian TV channel RT (broadcasting in English) ran a story titled “Eurovision Song Contest funded by TV license fee system that criminalizes poor people” (The Telegraph. 2016).

For Ukraine, this was also a victory whose importance extended far beyond the sphere of popular TV-entertainment. When Jamala returned to Kyiv in triumph, she was welcomed by the president Petro Poroshenko who presented her with an award as Honorary Artist of Ukraine, assuring that her victory would contribute to the quicker return of Crimea to Ukraine. “Virtually, the entire world has risen in support of Ukraine”, said the president according to news reports (for example, Kyiv Post, May 16, 2016). It was clear that ESC, this mega event of light entertainment, had become part of an ‘information war’. This role would continue throughout the year leading up to the 2017 ESC final.

Importantly, this was not the first time that Ukraine hosted the Eurovision Song Contest. The singer Ruslana won the competition in 2004 with her song Wild Dances, thus the following year the event was arranged in Kyiv for the first time. That arrangement coincided with another crucial event in Ukraine: the political protests that eventually overthrew a government, an experience that came to be known as The Orange Revolution. When ESC was hosted in Kyiv at that time, the new government was also eager to use the

event to make a political statement about its break from a previously Russia-friendly stance and regime (Jordan 2015). In a sense the song contest formed a part of that revolution as well as political events that were to come. The former ESC-winner Ruslana became actively involved also in the Maidan revolution in 2014. A second Eurovision in Kyiv was almost like history was repeating itself. From the Ukrainian perspective, political revolutions and popular music belong together.

Almost immediately after Jamala had returned to Ukraine after her victory in Stockholm, several issues became topical, and rumours started to circulate in international media. The first were the financial implications: the ESC usually involves substantial economic obligations from the national broadcasting company as well as from the state budget and the host city. Were Ukrainian authorities able to cover the cost of arranging the next Eurovision at this point of time when the country was engaged in a war and the domestic economy in a ruined state? While this certainly was not an unreasonable question, authorities and organisers in Ukraine promptly denied that there was any doubt that they could host the competition. Still, rumours were circulating in Russian and European media that EBU was secretly planning for an alternative location if Ukraine could not shoulder the costs, and that even Moscow could be a possible host city for the relocation of the event. This also became one of the first instances when Russia was accused of interfering in the arrangement by spreading ‘fake news’.

The Ukrainian voluntary organisation StopFake, dedicated to debunking false information about Ukraine, reported numerous instances when Russian media had published stories that they were able to identify as fakes. Yevhen Fedchenko, director of the school of journalism at Mohyla Academy in Kyiv and one of the founders of StopFake, claimed that this was all part of a Russian strategy to discredit Ukraine: “We had, I would say, almost every week one fake news on Eurovision”. On their web page StopFake debunked ‘faked’ stories claiming for example that Ukrainian citizens would have to pay for Eurovision through additions to their electricity bills, that stray dogs were being killed on the streets of Kyiv, and homeless people forcefully being moved out from the city.

The double bind

The main Russian intervention in the forthcoming event was however, not with a fake story. But it was an action that Ukrainian authorities would rather obviously interpret as a deliberate provocation; it was designed to create some stir into the Eurovision arrangement. Initially Russia had threatened to boycott the contest as a protest against what they regarded as Ukraine’s politicisation of the event, and not send any artist to Kyiv. But suddenly in March 2017, the Russian State controlled broadcaster Channel One, presented their selection of an artist who would represent the country in Kyiv. It was a young female singer, Yuliya Samoilova, who uses a wheelchair because of a neuromuscular disorder. The catch was that Samoilova was banned from visiting Ukraine. She had in 2015 performed in Crimea, thus violating Ukrainian laws by entering the occupied territory illegally. Ukrainian authorities were facing a dilemma: whether to ignore her earlier crime and grant her special permission to participate in the contest, or to uphold the ban and appear very harsh towards a disabled girl. The Ukraine authorities chose to be hard and refused permission for Samoilova to participate in the event. This move did upset EBU, which tried to force Ukraine into allowing the Russian artist to perform in Kiev, but without success. Instead, Ukraine gave Russia

the option to compete with their artist by video link from Moscow. Russia rejected that possibility. Apparently it was more important to make Ukraine look bad, than to compete in a song contest.

There is something peculiar about this incident. By selecting Samoilova for the Kiev ESC, Russia had communicated two contradictory messages simultaneously: on one level, they said “we want to participate” in the song contest (we have selected an artist), on another level, “we do not want to participate” (we have selected an artist who you obviously cannot accept). Furthermore, the context of the proposition was such that it was impossible for Ukraine to avoid making the choice of whether to accept Samoilova or not. They were confronted with a choice when it did not matter what the decision would be, because in either case they would stand to lose. It is exactly the kind of dilemmas that the anthropologist Gregory Bateson has described and made famous with the concept of “the double bind” (1972). Bateson elaborated on this idea in his writing on schizophrenia, in collaboration with psychologists in the 1950s. The concept has since then drifted into common parlance, mostly as describing impossible choices that an individual may confront. A main point in Bateson’s theory is however, that the situation he describes is social. It only occurs between subjects who have an intense relation of vital importance. It is a relation between subjects who share a common code of understanding and are trying to find an appropriate response in each situation. The contradictive communication that unfolds has nothing to do with misunderstanding. The double bind can only occur between subjects who comprehend each other very well. They may however, be close, though nursing ‘hostile empathy’.

Of course, not all communication between Ukraine and Russia involved a double bind situation. But during the song contest, there were several PR initiatives from the Ukrainian organisers with double coded meaning; one for an innocent international audience and one mischievously crafted for ‘the enemy’. One example was a promotional video for the song contest. It showed a young girl singing a catchy song while dancing through picturesque Ukrainian landscapes and streets of Kyiv, while large, patterned beads (from the official logo) were rolling or carried around. It was trivial and there was nothing remarkable about this film. Except for one thing. In the last scene, the girl is on a boat on the Black Sea. For a few seconds, she is looking up and waving her hand towards an impressive castle built on a high cliff, overlooking the sea. For people in Ukraine and Russia that building is immediately recognisable. It is called the Swallows Nest and located in Crimea, occupied by Russia since 2014. For those who are familiar with the scenery, the title of the song is definitely not banal: We won’t give up.

Another example: On a hill above the river Dnieper in central Kyiv stands a large steel monument in the form of an arc. During ESC the arc was painted in rainbow colours and named “the arc of diversity”, apparently as a tribute to gay fans of the song contest. The arc was captured on photos by many foreign visitors and these images came to be widely circulated on social media. The arc “became almost viral”, claimed one of the creators of this campaign enthusiastically. However, probably only a few foreign visitors noticed that the rainbow arc contained another message, not at all related to the song contest. The original name of the monument is The People’s Friendship Arch. It was built in 1982 commemorating the 60th anniversary of the USSR and the brotherhood of Russia and Ukraine. Converting this monument into a gay symbol was an intentional provocation directed toward Russia, not known for its tolerance in HBTQ issues. What it also did, was to

provoke some Ukrainian politicians who shared a similar attitude towards ‘gay propaganda’ as the Kremlin. The painting of the rainbow had to be halted before it was fully completed, and was subsequently removed after the contest (replaced with a painted crack in the arc).

The other within

One may ask, why this kind of obsession with infuriating the enemy. There are several examples of similarly creative provocations, especially since the invasion of 2022. A well-known campaign is the issuing of official stamps commemorating moments of the war that have been particularly embarrassing for Russia, such as the sinking of the Russian warship *Moskva*, and the bombing of the Kerch bridge to Crimea. These communicative initiatives are mischievous, in a way that seems to go beyond a strictly strategic use of propaganda, employed for its effect in a war situation. Instead, they have clearly “affective” dimensions (Eder 2016) and are related to the past colonial experiences of Ukraine.

Particularly sensitive are various remnants of the Soviet Union that are still found in Ukraine. The work of removing symbolic monuments of the past empire goes by the name of ‘decommunization’. Since independence these symbols of communist times have been the focus of much controversy: whether they should be allowed to remain, or be destroyed (Oliinyk and Kuzio 2021). These symbols consist not only of physical monuments, constructions, and street names but also of commemorating celebrations (for example, the end of “the great patriotic war”) and even holidays (such as the orthodox Christmas) that people have been used to participate in and have an emotional attachment toward. Cleaning out remnants of the past is not unproblematic. But even in the middle of a violent war, these symbolic actions seem to be prioritised by Ukrainian authorities. Since the full-scale attack, the official Christmas Day has been changed from January 7 (celebrated by Russian Orthodoxy) to December 25, and the Soviet emblem has been replaced by a Ukrainian trident on the huge Motherland monument in Kyiv.

The People’s Friendship Arch that was painted in rainbow colours during the song contest, is an example of the monuments that stand as the symbolic residue of a former empire; it came to play a creative role during the tumultuous period preceding the full-scale invasion. The ruined nuclear plant in Chernobyl, that I mentioned in the introduction to this essay, is another construction with symbolic connotations (as well as the residual radiation) that the independent nation must deal with in some way, though in this case, it is difficult to reconvert, destruct, or even assign a symbolic role in the ongoing war. A ruined nuclear plant would not easily lend itself for creative forms of symbolic provocations.

However, as an analogy, Chernobyl is helpful for summarising the point I have tried to make in this essay. The ruined nuclear plant stands as a disturbing heritage from the period of Soviet Russia, within an excluded zone some 100 kilometres north of Kyiv. The zone also contains the abandoned city of Pripyat, once a model town and a triumph of Soviet urban planning but now a decaying time capsule of Soviet life (it was however, possible to visit and it did attract a small stream of ‘dark tourism’ before the full-scale invasion).

Chernobyl is indeed a strange place: a toxic heritage from the times of Soviet Russia, concealed within Ukraine, impossible to forget, or neglect, and in constant need of monitoring and maintenance. It is a physically concrete analogy of ‘the other within’.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the editors of this special issue and two anonymous reviewers for *kritisk etnografi*. Their insightful comments and suggestions have greatly helped me to improve the text. This article is an outcome of the research conducted together with Göran Bolin in two projects funded by The Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies.

References

- Appadurai, A. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Armstrong, J. A. 1963. *Ukrainian Nationalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Aronczyk, M. 2013. *Branding the Nation: The Global Business of National Identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bateson, G. 1972. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology. Part III. Form and Pathology in Relationship*. San Francisco: Chandler.
- Billig, M. 1995. *Banal nationalism*. London: Sage.
- Bolin, G. and P. Ståhlberg. 2023a. Understanding the Ukrainian Informational Order in the Face of the Russian War. In *Media and the War in Ukraine* (eds) M. Pantti and M. Mortensen. New York: Peter Lang.
- Bolin, G. and P. Ståhlberg. 2023b. *Managing Meaning in Ukraine: Information, Communication and Narration since the Euromaidan Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Bolin, G. and P. Ståhlberg. 2022a. Disruption and transformation in media events theory: The case of the Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine. *Nordic Journal of Media Studies* 4(1): 99-117. <https://doi.org/10.2478/njms-2022-0006>
- Bolin, G. and P. Ståhlberg. 2022b. Nation branding vs. nation building revisited: Ukrainian information management in the face of the Russian invasion. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-022-00277-zForthc>.
- Bolin, G. and P. Ståhlberg. 2015. Mediating the Nation-State: Agency and the Media in Nation Branding Campaigns. *International Journal of Communication* 9: 19.
- Bolin, G. and P. Ståhlberg. 2010. Between Community and Commodity: Nationalism and Nation Branding. In *Communicating the Nation: National Topographies of Global Media Landscapes* (eds) A. Roosvall and I. Salovaara Moring. Göteborg, Sweden: Nordicom.
- Bubandt, N. 2009. From the enemy's point of view: Violence, Empathy, and the Ethnography of Fakes. *Cultural Anthropology* 24(3): 553–588.
- Eder, J. 2016. Affective Image Operations. In *Image Operations: Visual Media and Political Conflict* (eds) J. Eder and C. Klonk. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- Gentile, M. 2015. West oriented in the East-oriented Donbas: a political stratigraphy of geopolitical identity in Luhansk, Ukraine. *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31(3): 201-223.
- Hrushetskyi, A. 2022. Press release: *Dynamics of the population's attitude to Russia and the emotional background due to the war*: the results of a telephone survey conducted on May 13-18. Kyiv international institute of sociology. <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&cid=1112&page=1>
- Jordan, P. 2015. From Ruslana to Gaitana: Performing 'Ukrainianness' in the Eurovision Song Contest. *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 2 (1): 110–135.
- Kaneva, N. (ed.). 2012. *Branding post-communist nations. Marketizing national identities in the 'new' Europe*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Khilnani, S. 1997. *The idea of India*. Penguin Books India.
- Kuzio, T. 1998. Ukraine: Coming to terms with the soviet legacy. *The Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 14(4): 1-27.
- Kulyk, V. 2016. Language and identity in Ukraine after Euromaidan. *Thesis Eleven* 136(1): 90–106. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513616668621>

- Nandy, A. 1983. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Oliinyk, A and T. Kuzio. 2021. The Euromaidan Revolution, Reforms and Decommunisation in Ukraine. *Europe-Asia Studies* 73(5): 807-836.
- Orlova, D. 2016. EuroMaidan: Mediated Protests, Rituals and Nation-in-the-Making. In *Media Events: A Critical Contemporary Approach* (eds) B. Mitu and S. Poulakidakos. Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ståhlberg, and G. Bolin. 2016. Having a soul or choosing a face? Nation branding, identity and cosmopolitan imagination. *Social Identities* 22(3): 274-290.
- The Guardian. 2022. Ukraine restricts Russian books and music in latest step of 'derussification', June 19.
- The Telegraph. 2016. "Eurovision 2016: Furious Russia Demands Boycott of Ukraine over Jamalá's 'Anti-Kremlin' Song." 16 May. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/15/eurovision-2016-furious-russia-demands-boycott-of-ukraine-over-j/>
- Tkachenko, O. 2022. As Ukraine's culture minister, I'm asking you to boycott Tchaikovsky until this war is over. *The Guardian*, December 7.
- Törnquist-Plewa, B. and Y. Yurchuk. 2019. Memory politics in contemporary Ukraine: Reflections from the postcolonial perspective. *Memory Studies* 12(6): 699-720.