



Ukraine and Russian neo-imperialism. The divergent break

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BOOK REVIEW

Ukraine and Russian neo-imperialism. The divergent break, by Ostop Kushnir, Lanham, MD, Lexington Books, 2018, 203 pp., £60.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-4985-5863-1

Without any doubt, Ostop Kushnir's *Ukraine and Russian Neo-Imperialism. The Divergent Break* constitutes a highly recommended contribution to academia and provides a forum for discussion on the crucial themes regarding the tense and uncertain state of affairs between the two "neighbourly" Eastern European countries. To a certain extent, this outstanding monograph re-examines anew the interstate relations of Russia and Ukraine by scrutinising socio-political development and evolution of culture-related phenomena that both countries have historically gone through.

Thanks to his methodology, Kushnir's monograph juxtaposes the multi-layered structure of the Ukrainian and Russian political cultures in order to highlight commonalities and differences *in between*. In confronting the two poles of reference, Kushnir explicitly takes the Ukrainian side without impinging on his unbiased analysis. As the subtitle explicitly states, Ukraine is understood as a "divergent break" whose manifestation and geopolitical legitimisation confronts the "brotherly" neighbour and its typically (post-)/Soviet *modus operandi*. In doing so, Kushnir borrows a large number of interpretations and recollects historical experiences in order to evaluate their impacts on the contemporary political cultures of both Nations.

Between the first and second chapter, Kushnir sheds lights on Russia's political culture through the pictorial definition of the "Russian bunker identity" (17). Similar to other historians and experts, Kushnir alike enriches such idea by disentangling hidden features of always-present strong authority and messianic mission that such Russian-ness has historically maintained in order to protect and influence its geographical areas of influence (*Russski Zemlia*) and counterweight the West. In this instance, however, the historical evolution of the "bunker identity" does not only show a geopolitically inclusive and culturally defensive aspect, which has so far taken roots by either conquering peoples and their neighbouring territories or supervising them. Kushnir manages also to explain how Russian-ness has paradoxically had a culturally flexible aspect grounded in the need to absorb new lands and govern them.

Because of this, the post-1991 geopolitical role that Moscow began to play across the post-Communist orbit explains why the "Russian brand" continues to virtually stand behind every turmoil in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. For the author, indeed, the presence of a strong leadership either totalitarian, or theocratic or even Communist, has always been a "must" for Russia and its people (24). Since the reign of the Emperor Nicholas I Romanov (1825–1855) up to the contemporary Putin's idea of the Russian Federation as a "besieged fortress", Russian-ness has culturally intertwined three always-present and independent pillars of religious Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationhood. This Triad has historically impeded Russia to "return to Europe" and allowed its political culture to manage a policy of controlled Westernisation alongside its neighbouring regions.

From this point of view, the 1917 October Revolution meant nothing but a bitter regularity (50) where being "Russian" means to be Orthodox and Communist as long as strong leaders were able to respect Moscow's sacred messianic duty in the Eastern Orthodox world. By using Catherine the Great's philosophy to defend borders by extending them (75), Kushnir tracks a historical continuum of the rationale behind the Russian imperialism, which has internationally regained relevancy after the (1) 2017 economic stagnation, (2) the US discontent for

the War on Terror, (3) the EU raise of nationalisms and (4) the failure of the Arab Spring revolutions. In few words, Kushnir's description lies in the phenomenon of *caesaropapism* that explains the nature of the Russian *sistema* (e.g. *Russkiy* community) grounded on Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationhood, and it unravels all symbols of the Russian structure of thinking that operates among people's behaviour and influences them more than science and philosophy.

To a certain extent, a look beneath the political culture of Russia through the prism of strong leadership (e.g. *caesaropapism*) is useful to open up its "bunker identity" and shed light on features of what Kushnir refers to contemporary Russia's neo-imperialism. Kushnir argues that the recent events that occurred in Ukraine have accordingly come to pose threats to the core of the Eastern Orthodox world in which Russia has always recognised itself as cultural and geopolitical pivot due to a historical tradition. The latter, for the author, is historical consequence of the alloy between the mediaeval legacy enriched with unique (pan)-Slavism doctrine. Therefore, the maturation of the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine as well as the 2014 annexation of Crimea are consequential of the Russian reaction to an externally West-influenced protest and anti-Russian sentiment that in Ukraine rocketed during the three latest requests for change in the post-1991 Ukraine, in the 2003–2004 Orange Revolution, and lastly in the 2013–2014 Euromaidan protest. More likely, attempts to distance Ukraine's political culture from Russian-ness meant a potential erosion of Russia-oriented and Russia-centred geopolitical order. Thus, Kushnir sees the revitalisation of the "*geostrategy of revanche*" against Ukraine as a typically (post)Soviet Russia's *modus operandi* aimed at contrasting Ukraine's decision to become a fully-fledged partner of the West.

However, what recently happened in Ukraine has definitely left room for a series of cultural discussions on the potential identification of the Ukrainian Nation as "divergent break". Although Kushnir's position is here explicitly "Ukrainian", the author himself does not undermine the concerns regarding the so-called "Other Ukraine" – namely, Huntington's cultural demarcation between the "Western" and "Eastern" side of the country. Unsurprisingly for the author, such division has clearly manifested itself on a national level by also mobilising the Russia-oriented "Eastern Slavic" nationalism.

While Kiev's desire to return to Europe was partially aimed at filling the Ukrainian non-historical national-building experience that Russia had historically vacuumed in order to seize control of its intellectuals, local institutions and citizenry, the *divergent breakup* has put Ukraine at a crossroad. In other words, the recent events have brought Ukraine to face its own history and polarised anew the cultural spectrum of its political culture. For instance, contributions to Ukrainian nationhood has always had supporters of a decentralised federal State (e.g. Mykhailo Drahomanov), anti-federalists campaigning for an "Independent Ukraine" (e.g. Mykola Mikonovsky) or even nationalists (e.g. Dmytro Dontsov) supporting a "Ukraine for Ukrainians" and portraying Moscow as an arch-rival accordingly. On the one hand, as Kushnir notes (156–158), all of these have revitalised the contemporary Ukrainian political culture by underlining a day-present variety of opinions that have historically dichotomised Ukraine and Russia on a cultural level. On the other hand, however, such difference has paradoxically given to the Russian Federation the new chance to expand itself within the *de jure* Ukrainian territory and even continue to incorporate other regions into its socio-cultural sphere of influence.

From the third to the fifth chapter, Kushnir investigates not only the dichotomy of political cultures of Ukraine and Russian, but he also pays attention to the internal dichotomy between Ukraine and the "Other Ukraine". Although this double distinction cannot legitimise a return to the profoundly apathetic Communist and colonial Ukraine, the *divergent breakup* Kushnir refers to, finds its historical explanation in the Cossack-style political tradition that has never ceased to influence the Ukrainian environment. Nowadays, such Cossack tradition reflects the "real"

Ukrainian political culture after the overwhelmingly Russia-oriented cultural influence. As Kushnir points out (167), this Cossack tradition was about to be back, and, sooner or later, the differences between divergent Ukraine and its other centrally Russia-oriented culture would finally lead the country to a political maturation inspired by democratic principles. Similarly, Kushnir seems also to have anticipated the recent schism in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate for which the Ukrainian Parliament has allowed to change its name due to the increase of tensions in interstate relations. In this instance, Kushnir interprets as “not uncommon” the recent religious disputes within post-Soviet Ukraine since the post-1991 Ukrainian Orthodox Church has begun to reflect moral and civil values of Ukrainians (133–134). Beyond the current extremely political autocephalous action of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church there could be, following Kushnir’s perspective, a yet another distinction between the two “brotherly” countries. In fact, while the phenomenon of religious Orthodoxy has always been part of the Russian Triad composed of Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationhood, the latter could not completely influenced the whole Ukrainian religious context. In opposition to the Russia-centred religious monopoly within the Eastern Orthodox world, Ukraine has always stood for a secular division of power while boosting ideas of decentralisation and social acceptance of Western principles with regard to human rights and dignity.

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