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Left divergence, Right convergence

**Anarchists, Marxists, and nationalist polarization in
the Ukrainian conflict, 2013–2014**

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Abstract

The article traces nationalist polarization and divergence within the Ukrainian new left in response to the Maidan and Anti-Maidan protests in 2013–2014, and the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine. The ideological left-wing groups in the protests were too weak to push forward any independent progressive agenda. Instead of moving the respective campaigns to the left, they were increasingly converging with the right themselves and degraded into marginal supporters of either pro-Ukrainian or pro-Russian camps in the conflict. The liberal and libertarian left supported the Maidan movement on the basis of abstract self-organization, liberal values and anti-authoritarianism. In contrast, the Marxist-Leninists attempted to seize political opportunities from supporting more plebeian and decentralized Anti-Maidan protests and reacting to the far-right threat after the Maidan victory. They deluded themselves that Russian nationalists were not as reactionary as their Ukrainian counterparts and that the world-system crisis allowed them to exploit Russian anti-American politics for progressive purposes.

Introduction

Recent discussions around left-wing convergence (e.g. Prichard & Worth, 2016; Prichard, Kinna, Pinta, & Berry, 2017) have paid surprisingly little attention to the question of internationalism, arguably one of the most basic unifying positions for most branches of the left. Moreover, left unity was expected to be an important factor in resisting the escalation of nationalist and imperialist conflicts. Yet left internationalism has failed too often and sometimes with disastrous consequences as exemplified by a classic case of left support for the imperialist powers in the World War I. Discussion of potential left convergence must, therefore, take into account the potential of exacerbating great powers conflicts. Indeed, it is not ob-

vious that the left will be able to present an internationalist position instead of converging with nationalist movements and imperialist powers. This article raises this question by analysing nationalist polarization among Ukrainian anarchists and Marxists in response to the Maidan and Anti-Maidan protests in 2013–2014, and the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine.

The protests, change of government and the armed conflict in Ukraine since the fall of 2013 posed a difficult problem for Ukrainian and international left as well as for progressive academics. The so-called EuroMaidan or simply Maidan¹ protests, which after their repression turned into an uprising against the corrupt president Viktor Yanukovich, were triggered by the government's decision to postpone the signing of the treaty on Ukraine's EU association. The main part of the treaty was the agreement on a deep and comprehensive free trade area (DCFTA) between Ukraine and the EU. These kinds of agreements that benefit richer countries at the poorer countries' expense used to be a typical target of left criticism. At the same time, the right-wing opposition parties were the political representatives of Maidan movement; a large number of protesters shared anti-Communist attitudes; the neoliberal Western-funded NGOs were working on its publicity and Ukrainian radical nationalists were among the most active participants, especially in the violent protest stage (de Ploeg, 2017; Ishchenko, 2014a, 2016a). The overthrow of Yanukovich provoked Russia's annexation of Crimea and a mass Anti-Maidan counter-mobilization in southern and eastern Ukrainian cities where pro-Russian attitudes were widespread and Maidan did not have the majority support.

¹ 'Maidan' literally means the central square of the city. Since 1990 Kiev's central square was the starting spot for several mass campaigns ending in a change of the government. Because of this, 'maidan' acquired a meaning of a large anti-governmental protest campaign usually with nationalist-liberal pro-Western agenda.

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Although the left – particularly the Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU) and *Borotba* (‘Struggle’) organization – were active in Anti-Maidan protests, the local elites and Russian right-wing nationalists had played the major role. The latter led the separatist uprising in Donbass (Shekhovtsov, 2017) – the region in the east of Ukraine dominated by heavy Soviet-time industry and with a large proportion of ethnic Russian population – which was allegedly instigated but undoubtedly supported by the Russian government (Robinson, 2016).

At the time of writing the low-intensity conflict is still ongoing in Ukraine between the two sides, both of them problematic from an internationalist left perspective. Western-dependent hybrid neopatrimonial regime in Ukraine (Matsiyevsky, 2018), that has been radicalizing neoliberal and nationalist policies, institutionalizing anti-Communism and curtailing political freedoms (Chemerys, 2016; Ishchenko, 2018a),² on the one side, against the puppet-states of Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics (DPR and LPR) that are lacking political pluralism, incapable of pursuing progressive policies, violating civil rights and are overwhelmingly dependent on Russia, on the other side (Malyarenko & Wolff, 2018).

Both Maidan and Anti-Maidan movements combined some progressive elements and mass grassroots mobilization with the political hegemony of various kinds of right-wingers, an active role of rivalling Ukrainian and Russian nationalists and some influence on competing foreign powers.³ But the Ukrainian left

² At least up until president Petro Poroshenko’s devastating defeat in 2019 elections. Rhetoric of the new president Volodymyr Zelenskyi is less nationalist and polarizing, yet the direction of his policies is still not clear at the moment of writing.

³ For extended analysis of the events in Ukraine in 2013–2014, from leftist perspectives, and their historical, political economy, and international contexts see, especially, de Ploeg (2017); Ishchenko (2014a, 2015); Ishchenko & Yurchenko (2019); Yurchenko (2018).

failed to present a politically relevant alternative to destructive Maidan/ Anti-Maidan polarization. Instead, most of the Ukrainian left joined either one or another movement, usually without any significant impact on the course of events. Most of the liberal and libertarian left supported the Maidan movement, while the left coming from Marxist tradition typically supported the Anti-Maidan. Moreover, many Ukrainian leftists were diving more and more into the logic of nationalist polarization. Instead of moving their respective campaigns to the left, they were increasingly moving to the right themselves and despite superficial adherence to internationalism, they degraded into marginal supporters of either pro-Ukrainian or pro-Russian camps in the conflict. Some of the left went so far as to support militaristic and repressive actions on their side of the conflict and even joined the war to fight alongside respective radical nationalists against former comrades.

The article traces how the Ukrainian new left movement – actively cooperating with each other before 2014 – diverged with the start of Maidan protests and converged with the opposing nationalist camps. The ‘new left’ used to be a heterogeneous but regularly cooperating network of organizations, labour and student unions, proto-parties and informal initiatives of a variety of ideological currents that included anarchists, revolutionary Marxists, the left-liberal, and the social democrats. I am focusing on the ‘new’ part of the Ukrainian left instead of KPU because among them the ideological arguments were taken more seriously and appeals to anarchism or Marxism mattered in actual politics much more than for the KPU. Furthermore, the postmodern, anti-communist, or anti-imperialist sources of these arguments have a wider relevance for understanding the recent convergence of some parts of the international left with right-wing camps.

I start by reviewing the arguments from left-leaning scholars that either Maidan, or Anti-Maidan were left or at least progressive movements. I contribute to the debate by showing that the ideological left-wing groups in Maidan and Anti-Maidan protests were too

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weak and marginal to push forward any independent progressive agenda in order to challenge right-wing hegemony in the movements. Rather, they tended to converge with nationalist camps. After reviewing the state of the new left movement before the start of Maidan protests I focus on the diverging participation of liberal/libertarian left groups in Maidan and a Marxist-Leninist group *Borotba* in Anti-Maidan movements respectively in the period of intensive mobilizations between November 2013 and May 2014. Basing on ethnographic evidence, the activists' publications of that period and their recent self-reflections⁴ I analyse actions and immediate motivations of the new left intervening into the massive yet contradictory movements under right-wing hegemony. In the last section, I focus on the later ideological development in the period of left marginalization after 2014 and analyse further right-wing convergence in the most elaborate attempts to theorize an anarchist position in defense of post-Maidan Ukraine against Russia and pro-Russian separatists, and on the other side – a Marxist position in defense of the separatist 'people's republics' against the Ukrainian government and Western imperialism.

Were Maidan or anti-Maidan left movements?

Despite the most heated polemics being focused on the 'dark side' of the movements – the role of the radical nationalists and foreign interference – the 'left', progressive elements were also regularly emphasized by engaged academics from both sides as a means to justify solidarity with respective movements for the Western liberal-progressive or radical left publics.

⁴ I also draw on my earlier research (Ishchenko, 2011a, 2011b, 2016b, 2017) together with my personal participation in the movement since 2001 and multiple discussions with the activists.

Timothy Snyder's writings are, perhaps, the most prominent example of an argument for a 'leftist' Maidan. '[T]he revolution in Ukraine [Maidan] came from the Left. Its enemy was an authoritarian kleptocrat, and its central program was social justice and the rule of law,' he argued (Snyder, 2014). As the story goes, Maidan also united people of different ethnic origins, while the language cleavage, prominent for Ukrainian politics, was allegedly irrelevant in the movement. Most importantly, large scale self-organization and grassroots initiatives independent of the right-wing opposition political parties created a 'gift economy' and a 'spontaneous welfare state' in the Maidan camp in Kiev, exemplified with extensive crowdfunding by regular citizens to support numerous everyday needs of the protesters (Snyder, 2018, ch. 4). 'For Katia Mishchenko, a young leftist, this was the communist dream fulfilled: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need"', cites Marci Shore (2018, pp. 44-45) in another enthusiastic account of the Maidan camp relying on conversations with a rather narrow group of young and mostly liberal intellectuals.

A case for a 'left' or at least a progressive Anti-Maidan movement was built on different arguments. Boris Kagarlitsky, perhaps, the most prominent author on this side of the debate, notes that the regional political cleavage in Ukraine originates not only from cultural differences but also from economic and, therefore, class structure (2016, pp. 515-516). Most of the Soviet heavy industry and industrial proletariat was concentrated in the south-eastern regions of Ukraine. The DCFTA agreement with the EU threatened industries that were still mostly working for Russian export and, therefore, workers' jobs. Hence, the stronger articulation of working-class socio-economic grievances was in Anti-Maidan rather than in Maidan. Mirroring Snyder's arguments about 'multicultural' Maidan, some authors supporting Anti-Maidan argued that ethnicity was allegedly not important in the latter movement, as it was the regional Donbass identity that always

American authoritarians in the East. It is also noteworthy that divisions in the left polemics around different cases often correlate with each other (e.g. positions on Ukrainian conflict and on Syrian war) pointing to a possible major re-alignment within the left.

Today, some of Ukrainian new left are converging back on a 'non-campist' position critical of both sides of the conflict and their foreign supporters. The failure of authoritarian nationalist consolidation of Petro Poroshenko's regime after 2019 elections may open political opportunities for a new internationalist left. However, these primarily intellectual initiatives, small media and NGOs are yet to make gains in the social mobilizations that could resist nationalist polarization and put forward common class interests of the oppressed. Furthermore, they are yet to find progressive solutions to allegedly 'false' issues of national identity and geopolitical alignment that became so real and easy to exploit by competing and mutually reinforcing nationalists and rivalling great powers.

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opportunities by supporting the more plebeian and decentralized Anti-Maidan protests and reacting to the far-right threat after the Maidan victory. In the course of events *Borotba* activists had to delude themselves into thinking that Russian nationalists were not as reactionary as Ukrainian nationalists and that the world-system crisis would allow exploiting Russian anti-Western politics for progressive purposes rather than the opposite. In the process of the Maidan/Anti-Maidan polarization the heterogeneous but mutually cooperating 'new left' milieu greatly diverged from each other, converging with respective nationalist camps as their minor supporters.

Since the start of the global economic crisis in 2007–2008 radical mass movements and uprisings have been spreading around the globe together with enthusiastic anticipations among the left. However, many of the recent protest waves produced very little progressive developments, some had disastrous consequences for the people in their respective countries (e.g. Syria and Libya). The Ukrainian conflict is another case that warns against wishful thinking and uncritical support of movements even if with significant self-organized elements and working-class base but without prospects for any independent left politics under the overwhelming predominance of the hegemonic nationalist, religious, or neoliberal right-wingers.

Besides, the analysis of pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian theoretical rationalizations developed by Ukrainian (ex-)left activists contributes to understanding the convergence of some parts of the left with right-wing camps, failing to produce an internationalist class alternative at the time of a growing great power rivalry and tensions within the global neoliberal order. Appeals to the necessity of defending liberal values against conservative nationalist encroachment, or to stand by the workers against the neoliberal establishment, or to support the rising BRICS powers against US unipolar world are recurrent in the recent cases of siding with neoliberal candidates against right-wing populists in the West or with anti-

prevailed over Ukrainian or Russian identities and that it already contained a strong internationalist element (Clarke, 2016, p. 538). Moreover, the 'antifascist' rhetoric and references to the WWII victory were prevalent in Anti-Maidan, mainly in response to the prominence of Ukrainian radical nationalists in Maidan protests. In contrast to Maidan's anti-Communism, Soviet symbolism was welcome in Anti-Maidan, opening opportunities for leftist political intervention. In the end, according to Kagarlitsky, it was primarily because of the elitism of progressive middle-class intellectuals towards 'the real working class – crude, muddle headed, and devoid of political correctness' (2016, p. 520) that the movement was left to Russian nationalist or simply adventurist leaders.

These arguments for progressiveness of either Maidan or Anti-Maidan are exaggerated and ultimately very weak. For example, the self-organization of Maidan camps was not unique in scale when comparing to other contemporary uprisings or Occupy-style campaigns (see Feigenbaum, Frenzel, & McCurdy, 2013). Maidan camps lacked inclusive deliberation on a significant scale, while grassroots initiatives co-existed with hierarchical strategic decision-making by the right-wing opposition parties and 'civil society' leaders whose critical contribution to maintaining expensive camping infrastructure for three months is often underestimated (Ishchenko, 2015, p. 154, 2018b). On the other hand, the working-class base of Anti-Maidan protests is as exaggerated by Kagarlitsky as Snyder's fetishization of self-organization in Maidan. The participation of the working class was massive in the Maidan protests (despite probably fewer industrial workers), but labour unions played an equally marginal role in both campaigns.

Yet even if the arguments were all factually correct, neither self-organization, nor working-class base on their own do not make any movement left-wing or even progressive. Civil society and self-organization were also crucial elements of fascist and even genocidal movements (Mann, 2005; Riley, 2010) and the working-class is a major base for contemporary right-wing populist movements too

(Kalb & Halmi, 2011). Facing the fact of reactionary developments in Ukraine under the governmental control and in the separatist republics since 2014, both pro-Maidan and anti-Maidan authors surprisingly rely on the same argument – blaming Russia. For Snyder (2018) the Russian military interventions in Crimea and Donbass hindered progressive development of Maidan’s ‘democratic revolution’, while for Kagarlitsky (2016) Russia aborted the Anti-Maidan ‘workers uprising’ in order to prevent further escalation with the West.

In the following discussion, I show that both the Maidan and Anti-Maidan protests initially lacked any political agent capable of left-wing articulation of social injustice and grievances, and of organizing progressive elements in the respective movements into political action that would be independent of the dominant right-wing forces. This was the missing ingredient for any meaningful attempts to challenge right-wing hegemony within the respective movements.

Ukrainian new left before Maidan

The new left in Ukraine has been emerging since the *perestroika* years in parallel and in opposition to the Communist party of the Soviet Union and to the Communist-successor parties later. KPU used to be the major one among such successors until it was banned in 2015. It tended to be culturally conservative and uncritical towards Russian nationalism. Like many other Ukrainian parties, KPU effectively sold MP offices to opportunistic business people and likely received support from oligarchs. Since 2006, it was a minor partner in the coalitions led by the right-wing oligarchic Party of Regions of ex-president Viktor Yanukovich. KPU leadership’s politics in 2014 were very inconsistent, combining radical anti-Maidan rhetoric with lack of real resistance

Conclusions

The lack of progressive developments in Ukraine or in separatist republics of Donbass since 2014, anticipated by the cheerleaders of Maidan and Anti-Maidan protests, are not only the result of external ‘counter-revolutionary’ interventions but primarily of the political structure and hegemonic ideologies of the respective movements. Neither the progressive elements in Maidan nor in AntiMaidan protests ever constituted themselves into independent political agents capable of challenging the hegemonic right-wing forces in both movements. The new left groups were too weak, unable to contribute any crucial resources for success of the movements and (especially in Kiev Maidan) lacking coordination and strategic vision to articulate social injustice grievances in an egalitarian progressive agenda, unite self-organized initiatives in Maidan or fragmented working class in Anti-Maidan for politically autonomous action. Instead, the left adapted to the hegemonic rightwing discourses and followed the logic of nationalist polarization instead of proposing an internationalist class alternative to it.

The article traced nationalist polarization dynamics within the Ukrainian new left. After choosing to support the Maidan movement the liberal and libertarian left were only able to find a small common denominator on the basis of abstract self-organization, liberal values, and anti-authoritarianism. At the same time, it made the liberal and libertarian left less capable of resisting the polarization dynamics when the Anti-Maidan protests started; it structured their denial of any progressive elements in the counter-movement. Some of the anarchist groups rationalized continuing support for more and more problematic developments of the post-Maidan regime in Ukraine in the form of the ‘bourgeois revolution’ theory, anticipating progressive Ukraine’s modernization from closer integration into global capitalism and essentializing Russian conservatism. In contrast, the Marxist-Leninist *Borotba* organization attempted to seize political

ploited by the reactionary states challenging US hegemony rather than otherwise.

Both in the form of the 'bourgeois revolution' narrative or in the form of the world-system crisis, these are theorizations of the left convergence with right-wing pro-Ukrainian or pro-Russian camps. Alignment with the transnational capital or with Russian anti-American politics was supposed to help 'modernize' Ukraine either to the 'progressive' global capitalism future, or to defend Soviet modernization achievements from colonizing integration as a poor periphery of the EU. Ukrainian anarchists and Marxists had to silence internationalism, construct sophisticated explanations why Russian nationalists are less dangerous than Ukrainian nationalists or why Western states and capital are more progressive than Russian, interiorize propaganda myths of competing nationalist and imperialist camps. Both *AWU/Nihilist* and *Borotba* politics were detrimental not only for the prospects of independent left in Ukraine but also for the groups themselves. *AWU* has been losing activists, particularly, because of the leadership's position, perceived by many as implicitly 'nationalist' and 'militarist', and at the moment of writing is not an active organization anymore, while *Nihilist* functions only as a media team. Some of the leaders have renounced any left or even anarchist identity (Wolodarskij, 2015), which is indeed hardly compatible with cheerleading for globalized capitalism. Meanwhile, *Borotba* became better known and visible, yet at the same time associated with the separatists. Facing repressions, the organization stopped any public activity in Ukraine. The key activists emigrated also not finding themselves in the enclosed politics of the DPR/LPR outside of educational activities.¹²

¹² For example, educational Marxist-feminist club *Avrora* organised by ex-*Borotba* activists in Donetsk.

and disbandment of local party organizations that supported the separatist uprising.⁵

Yet, the new left failed to build any alternative organization that would be relevant in national-scale politics. The whole field hardly united more than 1000 activists around the country at any point in time. Most of the groups were very fragile and did not survive more than a few years, frequently splitting and re-uniting in a different configuration. The causes for this were largely the same as for the general weakness of post-Soviet civil society. The latter paradoxically combined a large number of small local dispersed grassroots initiatives and usually split off from them predominantly oligarchic-controlled political parties and NGOs financially dependent on Western foundations (Ishchenko, 2011a, pp. 372–375, 2017, pp. 216–218). But for the new left the generally unfavourable conditions of Ukrainian civil society were even more aggravated by KPU's domination in the left movement, exploiting pro-Soviet attitudes of a segment of Ukrainian society, the strong anti-Communism of Ukrainian intelligentsia, cultural conservatism of the majority of Ukrainians, the new left's inability to rely on the national identity-driven mobilization (like Ukrainian nationalists) or to benefit from generous support from Western donors (like liberal NGOs) (Ishchenko, 2011b, 2018a).

By the time Maidan protests erupted, the most important organization on the Marxist side of the new left was *Borotba* ('Struggle'). It had developed from radical wings of KPU-affiliated organizations, aspiring to build a new radical left party which would unite all revolutionary Marxist-Leninists regardless of their specific tendency – Stalinist, Trotskyist, Maoist etc. A much smaller 'Left Opposition' (LO) group united some former Trotskyist activists and left-liberal intellectuals. The Visual Culture Research Center (VCRC) was an important hub for left and liberal

⁵ See more on KPU and for the general mapping of Ukrainian left movement on the eve of Maidan events in Ishchenko (2016b, in press).

intellectuals, cultural events, and was politically and ideologically close to the Polish liberal magazine *Krytyka Polityczna*, but was not a political organization. On the anarchist side the most important organization was the *Priama Diya* ('Direct Action') student union. In 2009–2010, it was able to lead rather numerous and successful student mobilizations (Ishchenko, 2017), although by the end of 2013 it had become less active. Unlike the diverse and amorphous left-libertarian 'Direct Action', the Autonomous Workers' Union (AWU) was the most ideologically coherent anarchist organization, aspiring to build an anarcho-syndicalist union. But it is worth mentioning that it was more successful in promoting culturally liberal agenda within the new left rather than in labour organizing.

Despite all the conflicts, ideological and tactical differences, these groups usually perceived each other as parts of the same 'genuine' left field and in opposition to the bureaucratic, 'Stalinist', 'soldout' 'old left' parties. They frequently cooperated and intersected with each other in protest campaigns and public discussions. Also, despite the diversity of new left initiatives, they converged in their strong opposition to both Ukrainian and Russian nationalism.⁶

In 2004 the future activist core of *Borotba* split with KPU because of a perceived surrender of KPU to a pro-Russian position and support for an oligarchic candidate Viktor Yanukovych during the so-called Orange revolution. The liberal and libertarian left were primarily hostile to the culturally conservative tendencies among both Ukrainian and Russian nationalists, as well as within old left parties. In 2013 the AWU consistently denied any libera-

⁶ The only exception was the 'Autonomous Resistance' (*Avtonomnyi Opir*) organization, which originated in the extreme right milieu but completely transformed itself into a kind of left anti-authoritarian Ukrainian nationalism and used to be the most important group close to the 'new left' in the largest western Ukrainian city of Lviv. Noteworthy, cooperation with the 'Autonomous Resistance' used to be a very controversial issue among the new left before Maidan.

abandoned by owners because of war. However, any strategic anti-neoliberal transformations lack both economic basis and any significant progressive political force to push them forward. At the end, Shapinov himself is forced to acknowledge that '[O]f course, this policy is not socialist. But it leaves room for the left, the communists, to participate in such a movement under their own banner, with their own ideas and slogans, without abandoning their own views and program' (Shapinov, 2015a). Indeed, the pro-separatist left would not be allowed to pursue political activity in Ukraine but the tightly controlled regimes of separatist 'people's republics' did not allow any political opposition at all, while even loyal Communist left activities were reduced to ritualistic and cultural actions (Ishchenko, 2016b, pp. 90–91). At the start of the conflict Shapinov forecasted that 'the very logic of the struggle pushes the leaders of the DPR and LPR toward anti-oligarchic, if not anti-capitalist, politics' (Shapinov, 2014a), yet these hopes have evidently stayed unfulfilled so far.

The theoretical sources of this position are a specific interpretation of Lenin's imperialism theory influenced by Wallerstein's world-systems analysis. Shapinov argues that the global order today is not built on rival imperialisms any more like before the First World War. It is a US-led hierarchical system, which is now falling apart because some states (particularly, Russia) or transnational formations aspire to challenge the order while others are resisting them to maintain the status quo. During the crisis progressive movements may benefit from support by anti-American rivals that may not necessarily be progressive. Here Shapinov places Donbass separatists alongside Irish republicans (assisted by Germans), Spanish republicans, and Rojava Kurds. However, he fails to compare the balance of internal progressive forces in DPR and LPR vs external support with these iconic examples. The case of Donbass revolt rather proves that the left and progressive movements, now much weaker than in the XX century, are much more likely to be ex-

and reminding orientalist ‘clash of civilizations’ arguments.¹¹ While regularly attacking Russian imperialism, *Nihilist* texts often basically dismissed the problem of Western imperialism and US-dependence of post-Maidan Ukraine as hardly anything more than a Russian propaganda conspiracy theory that provided a common ground of ‘anti-imperialism’ for the ‘authoritarian’ left convergence with pro-Russian far right. It is particularly noteworthy that any discussion of capitalism’s crisis reaching the limits was lacking from the *Nihilist*’s writings. The whole ‘modernizing’ agenda in alliance with transnational capital for Ukraine could only be based on the assumption of a progressive development potential in the capitalist system. Moreover, any defense of national sovereignty and the state role in the economy could be interpreted as a concession to reactionaries.

The very opposite assumption of a critical capitalist crisis was crucial for *Borotba*’s Marxist theorization of support for the pro-Russian camp. A programmatic article ‘Marxism and the war in Donbass’ by *Borotba*’s ideological leader Viktor Shapinov (2015a) provides a good example. He argues that ‘antifascist’, ‘internationalist’, ‘anti-oligarchic’ rhetoric as well as ‘anti-neoliberal policies’ of DPR and LPR prove that they are a progressive side in the war in contrast to post-Maidan Ukrainian government. Yet, his arguments are weak and prone to demagogy. The Donbass separatists’ ‘antifascism’ and ‘internationalism’ targets Ukrainian nationalism yet is usually blind to Russian nationalism. The criticism of oligarchs is an empty signifier in Ukrainian politics that is exploited even by prominent Ukrainian oligarchs themselves (Oleksiyenko, 2015). The only examples of ‘anti-neoliberalism’ Shapinov provides are the ‘tentative steps’ to nationalization of the property of some pro-Ukrainian oligarchs or even of the property

¹¹ A very telling example are typical accusations of Ukrainian radical nationalists for allegedly professing ‘Russian world’ ideology only because Ukrainian far right are also conservative, sexist, and illiberal like Russian government, e.g. (AK19, 2018; Mrachnik, 2018).

tionist agenda in Ukrainian nationalism and some AWU activists regarded post-Soviet Ukraine as a sub-imperialist state (Gorbach, 2014). Many new left activists perceived Ukraine’s geopolitical orientation between EU/NATO and Russia as a false problem. Like the status of the Russian language in Ukraine, the memory of conflicts between nationalists and communists, or other issues that were provoking deeply opposing attitudes between mostly Ukrainian-speaking western/central regions and mostly Russian-speaking eastern/ southern regions, it was argued that these issues were exploited by the Ukrainian elite in order to split Ukrainian working people from the West and from the East of the country and to distract them from their common social-economic exploitation by the ruling class.⁷

However, confronted with escalating nationalist and imperialist conflict in 2014 the Ukrainian new left succumbed to nationalist polarization. As I am showing below, almost all of the new left groups mentioned above supported Maidan protests. Later, many of their activists took a hostile position towards Anti-Maidan and supported the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) against the separatist uprising in Donbass. However, *Borotba* distanced themselves from the Maidan uprising and later actively joined Anti-Maidan protests and eventually supported the pro-Russian separatists. Their anti-nationalist position proved to be superficial and lacking a serious analysis of the national, identity, and geopolitical problems of Ukrainian society. Without substantive left internationalist answers to the very real, even if divisive issues, many ultimately accepted right-wing hegemonic explanations.

⁷ See analysis of Ukrainian new left discussions on nationalism-related issues during various campaigns in Ishchenko (2011a, 2011b, 2017).

Maidan protests and the new left

For many pro-Maidan left-wing activists the economic criticism of the DCFTA treaty with the EU had not been articulated before the protests erupted. The question of EU integration had never been a focus of the Ukrainian new left discussions and polemics, with the exception of some sporadic and inconsequential articles (Gorbach, 2009). Among the new left groups only *Borotba* had published an extended critical analysis of the EU association agreement before the Maidan protests erupted and had organized a small campaign against the treaty (Kirichuk, 2013).⁸ Moreover, the majority of the new left active in 2013 joined the movement on the wave of disappointment with the ‘Orange revolution’ (late 2000s) and were thus too young to have participated in the global justice movement of the early 2000s, and lacked familiarity with the left criticism of free trade and neoliberal integration projects. They were simply not prepared and largely ignorant of the debates on the DCFTA with the EU and the Customs Union with Russia.⁹

At the same time, the left had no realistic prospects of shifting Maidan towards a more progressive agenda or to get any other significant political achievements. The problems started with the scale of the protests: millions of people in various forms participated in Maidan through different activities, while the new left were merely groups of a few dozen activists in the largest cities. The three main opposition parties – the right-wing oligarchic ‘Fatherland’, UDAR and the far right Svoboda – were crucial in sus-

⁸ The main points of criticism by the Anti-Maidan left were related to the immediate consequences for Ukrainian workers, futility of integration into the crisis-burdened EU, and the destruction of the economic basis for independent development. Analysis of the DCFTA consequences for Ukraine’s economy in 2016 largely confirmed these predictions (Kravchuk, 2016).

⁹ A group of Marxist economists started to publish a serious critical analysis of the EU association agreement with Ukraine but only since 2015 when the issue had been already decided (Kravchuk, 2015, 2016; Kravchuk, Popovych, Knottnerus, & van Heijningen, 2016).

in Ukrainian society, such as the reform that cuts free medical services in state clinics (Zadiraka, 2017b).

There are three main sources of this position. Firstly, the idea that bourgeois revolutions are allegedly still possible and even progressive in the twenty-first century is an uncritical application of Soviet Marxist-Leninist templates about linear sequence of social formations. It is paradoxical for anarchists but understandable in post-Soviet context with little knowledge about the advances and discussions in Western Marxist theory of the twentieth century. A *Nihilist* author even proposed to analyse the USSR as a ‘feudal-absolutist socialism’ (Kutnii, 2017), implicitly suggesting that people who reside in contemporary Ukraine had been living under fundamentally the same formation at least since mediaeval Kievan Rus and which was challenged only by the ‘bourgeois revolution’ in 2014.

Secondly, anarchist anti-Bolshevism helped to interpret nationalist and imperialist conflict in Ukraine in terms of ‘revolution’ and ‘counter-revolution’ denying any progressive meaning in defense of Soviet achievements or symbolism spread among Donbass separatists (Shiitman, 2015a).

The final source is the postmodernist turn of the left to the politics of identity, reconciling symbolic emancipation of the minorities with the unchallenged basis of the globalizing neoliberal capitalism. The agenda-setting article titled ‘Cosmopolitanism against the Russian World’ by Alexander Wolodarskij (Shiitman, 2015b) firmly takes the side of progressive globalization against the conservative Russian nationalist project. Indeed, within the ‘bourgeois revolution’ narrative about Ukrainian conflict, (neo)liberals and the global capital are not the enemies of the left. Instead, they are allies against the local conservative reactionaries. A recurring interpretation of the conflict in Ukraine appeared in the texts of *Nihilist* authors, claiming it as a conflict of values – of the progressive Western world against reactionary Russian world – essentializing conservatism up to anti-Russian xenophobia

the convergence of parts of the left with right-wing camps in the growing great power rivalry between the Western states and Russia.

The anarchist theorization was most systematically expounded in the 'Program of the revolution's first day' document prepared by the Autonomous Workers' Union (2016) and the writings on *Nihilist* (nihilist.li), a website of 'anarchists and anti-authoritarian radical left' close to the AWU. Maidan was presented as a revolution against the tightly interconnected classes of state bureaucracy and grand bourgeoisie (notorious post-Soviet 'oligarchs'). They parasitically extracted Ukraine's resources in the form of 'corruption rent' that was syphoned to offshore accounts and property abroad without productive reinvestment into the Ukrainian economy. On the political level this parasitic structure was supported and defended by the competing clientelist networks ('clans') built around every other 'oligarch'. Maidan prevented Yanukovich's 'Family' clan from monopolizing power and allegedly restored bourgeois pluralism. However, the 'counter-revolutionary' intervention of the Russian regime, which is close to 'fascist' and supports 'clerical-conservative' and 'totalitarian nationalist' reaction in Donbass, precluded from fully accomplishing the 'bourgeois revolution' in Ukraine (Zadiraka, 2017a). The new Ukrainian revolution's tasks are to continue what the Maidan failed to achieve: the ultimate dismantling of the Ukrainian state as a base for big capital accumulation. The deepening of the revolution is supposed to lead to a decentralized system of self-government with a dominant socialized (but not state-owned) economy that is cohabiting with small private producers (AWU, 2016). In practice the *Nihilist*'s support for radical cuts to the 'hypercentralized' state – allegedly the major obstacle on the way to Ukraine's 'modernization' – without challenging capitalism first (Zadiraka, 2014) turned into support for neoliberal reforms of post-Maidan government including the most unpopular ones

taining the infrastructure of the multiple protest camps for three months and were unchallenged as political representatives of the movement in negotiations with the government. It was clear that it was precisely these parties that would take power after the overthrow of Yanukovich (Ishchenko, 2014b). Moreover, unlike the radical nationalists that played a role disproportionate to their relative numbers, the new left did not have a national party structure like *Svoboda*, well-known and represented in the parliament, with numerous local cells of ideological activists ready to participate intensely in protests across the country. Equally, they were also not able to unite into an umbrella coalition such as the Right Sector, which gained prominence during the violent escalation (Ishchenko, 2016a). While the far right were preparing for radical confrontation with the government for years before Maidan, the new left were hardly involved in any earlier violent protest actions (Ishchenko, 2016b, p. 24). In Kiev, where the main events happened, the new left participation in Maidan protests was unsystematic and only loosely coordinated between different groups (Popovych, 2015, p. 106; Salamaniuk, 2015, p. 128). Moreover, the left activists were attacked several times by the far right in the very beginning of the protests when attempting small interventions into the rallies with the message of reframing 'European values' into an egalitarian and feminist direction (Channell-Justice, 2016, pp. 118–119; Kravchuk, 2013). The crucial problems of the left political interventions into Maidan were not only the drastic disparity in resources, organizational strength, and coordination capacity between the right and the new left, but also the anti-communist attitudes and outright repression of the left which was usually tolerated by other protesters.

Nevertheless, there were three main points of convergence between liberal and libertarian new left and the Maidan protesters that both motivated the activists and which they tried to emphasize in the movement (while they were less inspiring and dubious for class-centric Marxists). Firstly, the new left hoped to articulate gender equality, minority rights and other libertarian princi-

ples under the popular frame of ‘European values’ and in contrast to the Russian government’s conservative turn (Channell-Justice, 2016, pp. 191–195), while the problematic nature of the EU and the economic consequences of the DCFTA for Ukraine were misunderstood or perceived as less important. However, there was a large gap between interpretation of ‘European values’ by left-liberal feminists and that of the majority of protesters:

Whereas feminists felt that their association of tolerance and equality with Europe was a more accurate picture of how Europeanization would look, these discourses were not part of the idea of Europe that was dominant during the protests. For most protesters, European ‘values’ meant respect for the sovereignty of the Ukrainian nation, however the nations’ citizens defined it. (Channel-Justice, 2016, p. 194)

Secondly, the important point of convergence with Maidan movement was opposition to police violence and, in particular, repressive laws against protesters and NGOs passed by the parliament with procedural violations on January 16, 2014. A systemic curtailment of political freedoms pushed previously skeptical left groups and activists to critically support the Maidan protests (AWU-Kyiv, 2014a). Even outright anti-Maidan *Borotba* condemned the laws and organized some symbolic actions against the threat of ‘civil war’, though separately from Maidan protests (Borotba, 2014a).

Last but not least, Channell-Justice’s (2016, p. 108) ethnographic study of small left-libertarian and feminist groups in Kiev Maidan protests, points out, ‘self-organization’ was central to the new left activists in Maidan. Dozens of grassroots self-organized initiatives appeared within Maidan movement: for protest mobilization, self-defense, humanitarian initiatives, education, media engagement, and many other aims. The liberal and libertarian left

any capacity to occupy an independent space in the structures of the pro-Russian puppet states. Exaggerating the ‘fascist’ danger of Ukrainian nationalism and wishful thinking about the prospects of progressive elements within the Anti-Maidan movement while downplaying the increasing Russian influence over the movement contributed further to this mistake.

‘Bourgeois revolution’ vs ‘anti-imperialism’

Since summer 2014 Ukrainian left has marginalized even more as a result of the polarized nationalist climate in the public sphere, squabbling and splits among the new left groups, political repression, intensified far-right violence. Many dropped all political activism and cooperation with left groups; many others concentrated on small-scale local activism and tried to avoid divisive and dangerous questions of Maidan and the war in Donbass. Those political groups that tried not to ignore the pressing questions and give answers to them were further converging with pro-nationalist and pro-imperialist positions rather than formulating an internationalist alternative. Below I am analysing the most elaborate ideological justifications among the new left groups in the period when it was becoming increasingly evident that Maidan did not turn into a democratic anti-authoritarian revolution but had brought to power one of the most neoliberal and nationalist governments in Europe dependent on the US support. On the other side, there had been already enough evidence that the new separatist entities in Donbass were not the workers’ states building socialism but Russian puppet-states without any progressive prospects. Despite disappointing political developments on both sides of the frontline, many of the left remained committed to the nationalist camp that they chose in 2014 and have been developing theoretical rationalizations of their position. They expose certain arguments and their ideological/theoretical sources that have some general relevance to understand

(even if critically) in defense of the separatist republics DPR and LPR (Borotba, 2014g, 2014h). *Borotba* hoped, however, not for small Russian puppet states, but for the start of democratic and social transformation of the whole Ukraine (Albu, 2014; Zelenskii, 2015). However, like other new left groups *Borotba* had neither resources, nor experience in organized violence to play any substantial role in the separatist revolt or in the emerging unrecognized states. Even if they had, they would probably follow the unenviable fate of other warlords who were killed or tightly integrated into DPR and LPR structures, while Russian government took them under strict control and closed space for any independent politics (Clarke, 2016). The organization was effectively split on the issue of unquestionable support for pro-Russian insurrection; only a few *Borotba* activists actually joined the separatist militia.

Even though *Borotba* was more visible and active than pro-Maidan new left groups, its political impact was also ultimately insignificant, especially after the armed insurrection started. The argument about a progressive ‘workers’ uprising’ in Donbass that was gradually aborted by the Russian government seeking a compromise with the West (Clarke, 2016; Kagarlitsky, 2016) is wrong as there were little progressive developments to be aborted in the first place. In reality, it was a chance to develop a peaceful protest opposition against the post-Maidan neoliberal-nationalist government that was aborted by the armed uprising in April 2014. Though working-class socio-economic grievances were a major factor of mobilization, Anti-Maidan only developed a nationalist, not a social alternative. Like in Maidan protests before, here too the progressive elements lacked organized political representation to articulate a clear agenda for social change. The new left (*Borotba*) were too weak (especially when the initiative was seized by Russian nationalist rebels) and the old left (KPU) was too opportunistic and even ideologically incapable of doing this. *Borotba* made a suicidal political mistake of not distancing itself clearly from the separatist uprising, while also not having

had apparently emotional attraction to ‘spontaneous anarchism’ of ‘the biggest and the most radical social protest in post-Soviet Ukraine’ (AST-Kharkov, 2014). However, the self-organized initiatives did not constitute any autonomous political agent independent from the right-wing opposition during Maidan protests and had failed to institutionalize politically. As Oleg Zhuravlev argues (2015), based on in-depth interviews with a large number of regular ‘apolitical’ Maidan protesters, the latter lacked its own political language to formulate their social grievances into clear political demands and as a result could propose no alternative or a more radical programme to the narrow anti-Yanukovych and constitutional reform demands of the political opposition, the nationalist agenda promoted by the far right, or the neoliberal agenda of Western-oriented NGOs. Snyder and likeminded liberal protagonists of Maidan are right to claim that there were plenty of self-organized initiatives at the movement. However, they are clearly wrong in exaggerating their progressive political impact and ignoring their failure to institutionalize as an independent political force. This seemingly strong self-organized movement with little trust towards the opposition parties’ leaders very easily conceded power to them after Yanukovych’s escape from Kiev.

The new left could potentially propose an alternative programme for progressive elements in Maidan by articulating social justice demands. However, as a result of their own very weak resources and organizations, lack of independent strategy and independent analysis and repression from the far right, the liberal and libertarian new left did not constitute any autonomous political subject in the Maidan protests themselves. The new left rather adapted to the right-wing hegemony in the Maidan movement, often completely avoiding self-presentation as the left (Salama-niuk, 2015, p. 129). Their own activities were limited to support of humanitarian, educational, feminist and student initiatives that did not have any explicitly left-wing political agenda and in the same time did not allow systematic promotion of anything beyond

the agenda of anti-governmental and anti-police self-organization. For example, the activists of the left-libertarian 'Direct Action' student union played an important role in some of the self-organized student initiatives during the Kiev protests. They imported the idea of regular horizontal assembly from Western progressive movements and conducted their meetings in a building occupied by the protesters (Khodorivska, 2015). However, they did not transcend the (neo)liberal agenda of university autonomy and anti-corruption, and did not institutionalize the student assembly for continuous control over education policies (Slukvin, 2015, pp. 150–152). A post-Trotskyist group 'Left Opposition' formulated a 10-point left-wing economic programme and tried to propagate it among Maidan protesters, however, without any obvious success. Even in Lviv and Kharkov, where the local political conjunctures were somewhat more favourable and the left nationalists from the 'Autonomous Resistance' and anarchists from the AWU participated in a more organized way, their political achievements were limited to increased recognition, gaining some resources and connections with other activist groups, however, not shifting the protest's agenda to the left (Salamaniuk, 2015, pp. 131–133).

The new left faced a difficult dilemma about Maidan: either participate in the campaign with an alien agenda and even anti-left attitudes, or ignore the most important political events in the whole post-Soviet history of Ukraine (Salamaniuk, 2015; Viedrov, 2015). Indeed, all initiatives for a 'third camp' – both against the government and the right-wing opposition – remained marginal. However, predictable lack of any political prospects and gains for the new left from participating in the protests where the various oligarchic, radical nationalist, neoliberal right-wing organizations were so much stronger, made joining Maidan a doubtful virtue. At the same time, it carried the risk for progressive activists of turning into a 'left wing' for Ukrainian national-liberals. As I am showing below, being forced to defend their dubious choice and uneasy compromises the proMaidan left slid into justification of

real and justified counter-mobilization. The new government and the victorious pro-Maidan public were in their majority explicitly anti-communist and indulged far-right violence (Ishchenko, 2016b, pp. 84–86). Moreover, in contrast to Maidan – where the left activists and symbols were attacked, while the right-wing opposition parties were political representatives of the protests and coordinated decision-making – Anti-Maidan presented a better opportunity for leftist intervention. Not only did it lack anti-communist attitudes, but also an obvious political leadership (at least before the start of the separatist armed revolt in Donbass) and was quite decentralized, thus opening space for small new left groups. Indeed, *Borotba* tried to exploit this opportunity by organizing a systematic agitation and joining the coordination of protests in Kharkov and Odessa. In Odessa, a *Borotba* activist was nominated as a candidate for the position of city mayor from Anti-Maidan (Borotba, 2014f). *Borotba* was more active and visible in Anti-Maidan protests than any other new left groups in Maidan. In February–April, 2014 the left-wing organizations, including *Borotba* and the old left parties, were reported in 19% of the total Anti-Maidan protest events. This was still far below the activity of Russian nationalist groups (reported in almost half of Anti-Maidan protest events around the country). Yet, in certain cities like Kharkov, Nikolaiev, and Dnepropetrovsk the left activity was more intense or on a par with Russian nationalists (Ishchenko, 2016b, pp. 54–57).

Even though violent confrontations sometimes broke out between pro and anti-Maidan activists, before the beginning of April 2014, Anti-Maidan protesters generally mirrored non-violent Maidan rallies, camps, and the occupation of administrative buildings. However, the separatist armed insurrection that was started on 12 April 2014 by a group of Russian nationalist volunteers under the command of a former colonel in the Russian security service Igor 'Strelkov' Girkin, changed things drastically. Unlike the careful and opportunist KPU leadership, *Borotba* spoke openly

Besides, *Borotba* tried to articulate anti-oligarchic attitudes and socio-economic grievances of Anti-Maidan protesters as ‘anti-capitalist’ and ‘working class’ (Kirichuk, 2014; Levin, 2015, p. 117; Serhiienko, 2014; Shapinov, 2014b). Lacking systematic comparison of the class base of Maidan and Anti-Maidan protests, one may assume from the regional distribution of support a stronger presence of industrial workers in Anti-Maidan. However, they did not constitute an organized force: ‘worker activists ... acted as individuals, or as members of groups without specific relation to local workplaces’ (Clarke, 2016, p. 542). The leadership of the major confederation of independent labour unions supported Maidan and was hostile to Anti-Maidan protests.

Both, the working class and (especially) the anti-capitalist identities were far less salient in AntiMaidan mobilization than Soviet identity – also often mentioned by *Borotba* activists themselves (Levin, 2015, p. 116; Serhiienko, 2014; Shapinov, 2015b). The ‘Soviet people’ was a political nation-building project that was supposed to transcend ethnic identities in the USSR. Soviet identity was still strong in Donbass, however, it did not necessarily mean progressive anti-capitalism. Nostalgic sentiments about the USSR were regularly combined, even before Maidan, with Russian nationalist and conservative claims and symbols: traditional patriarchal values, religious mobilization, sometimes even monarchist sympathies (Laruelle, 2016). *Borotba* also often resorted to the Soviet identity in order to criticize ‘neoliberal reforms and the general post-Soviet collapse of the economy, social welfare sphere, marketization, which so strongly affected Soviet workers’ (Levin, 2015, p. 121). Similar to the pro-Maidan left, *Borotba* adapted itself to hegemonic Anti-Maidan discourses and the dominant demands for self-determination referenda, regional autonomy, Russian language status, adding progressive interpretations only unsystematically.

However, even if Anti-Maidan was not a proletarian anti-capitalist movement and the government in Kiev was not exactly ‘fascist’, the threat for the communist (KPU and *Borotba*) left was

the new neoliberal-nationalist government and further nationalist developments in the Maidan movement after the Russian annexation of Crimea and the start of Anti-Maidan protests in southern and eastern regions. Meanwhile, the earlier divisions between Marxist-Leninist and liberal/libertarian left have deepened, which made the left weaker in confronting the nationalist polarization.

Anti-Maidan protests and the new left

In parallel to Maidan protests the pro-Yanukovych Party of Regions mobilized Anti-Maidan rallies and paid camps that were organized in a top-down way. However, after Yanukovych’s overthrow Anti-Maidan turned into a grassroots movement in major cities of mostly Russian-speaking southern and eastern regions. The movement voiced not only pro-Russian demands but also socio-economic grievances of the industrial working class (PS.Lab, 2015, pp. 94–95).¹⁰

Instead of bridging progressive elements from Maidan and Anti-Maidan movements and articulating an internationalist alternative to the nationalist polarization, most of the pro-Maidan new left ignored the demands of Anti-Maidan for social justice. Only in part was it a result of escalating violence between the two movements, which ended up hurting some of the pro-Maidan left as well. Switching power to Russian authorities or separatists threatened jobs, lifestyle and freedom of expression for creative workers that were over-represented among the new left and often employed in NGOs supported by Western donors. The class-blind, politically naive, and wishful thinking embrace of self-organization, ‘European values’, and anti-police authoritarianism in Maidan protests by the liberal and libertarian new left structured ideological justification of the opposition to AntiMaidan. A known anarchist blogger

¹⁰ According to Zhukov’s modelling (2016) economic factors were stronger predictors of separatist violence in Donbass than ethnic or cultural factors.

Alexander Wolodarskij (2014) compared Maidan to Anti-Maidan in a typically orientalist way:

If the majority of Maidan protesters had spontaneous aspirations for freedom, distrust for politicians, a kind of unreflected ‘raw’ anarchism, while in Anti-Maidan all social protest potential flowed into a reactionary channel – the slaves demanded a harder lash and shackles. At least Maidan naively desired a European carrot. Anti-Maidan hysterically demands a Eurasian stick.

Pro-Maidan left usually underestimated the grassroots component of the Anti-Maidan mobilization, emphasizing the influence of Russia and of the former ruling Party of Regions instead. Although the role of right-wing oligarchic parties and Western influence was not a reason to distance from Maidan protests before. The pro-Maidan left called the emerging DPR and LPR ‘juntas’ because many local law-enforcement joined the emerging separatist authorities and militias (AWU-Kyiv, 2014b). Yet, at the same time, pro-Maidan left supported the so-called Anti-Terrorist operation of the new Ukrainian government against the separatist rebels in Donbass. They argued that conservative values of Russian nationalists among Anti-Maidan leaders made it impossible to support the movement (Mrachnik, 2014). Yet radical Ukrainian nationalists in the violent vanguard and among political representatives of Maidan was not a reason to withdraw the left support from the movement but rather to downplay far-right significance in a typical for Ukrainian liberals way (Ishchenko, 2014c, 2018b). Socio-economic grievances were more saliently articulated by Anti-Maidan than by Maidan protesters, yet the pro-Maidan left mocked them as insufficiently radical and anti-capitalist, even drawing a parallel with the Nazis (Shiitman, 2014).

The pro-Maidan logic of the liberal and libertarian left pushed them away from the Anti-Maidan despite their typical emphasis

in the past on social-economic issues common for the East and the West of the country, despite all the geopolitical, historical and cultural cleavages. On the other hand, the Marxist supporters of Anti-Maidan from *Borotba* were unexpectedly pushed into downplaying the influence of Russia and Russian nationalists in the conflict, despite their rather strong criticism of neoliberal and imperialist Russian government before. The idea that Anti-Maidan resisted the ‘fascist *coup d’état*’ in Kiev and hopes for a progressive development of the ‘anti-capitalist’ elements in the movement justified such unholy alliance with conservative Russian nationalists, even if recognizing their harmful influence (Borotba, 2014b, 2014d, 2014e).

Fear of Ukrainian radical nationalism after Maidan’s victory was indeed a major motive for AntiMaidan protests and a separatist uprising in Donbass (Giuliano, 2018, pp. 168–169). ‘Fascist junta’ was a typical trope in Russian criticism of the new post-Maidan government in Ukraine (Gaufman, 2015), particularly referring to the inclusion of far-right representatives into the new government, its nationalist initiatives and broken constitutional procedures in the course of power transfer from expresident Yanukovich. However, the widespread ‘antifascist’ symbolism and rhetoric was not necessarily progressive in this context. The victory in WWII, a crucial element of Soviet patriotism, had been increasingly mythologized and instrumentalized to legitimate Putin’s political regime and had become an important part of a new conservative Russian nationalism. Yanukovich in Ukraine also instrumentalized ‘antifascist’ rhetoric against the opposition parties (Kuzio, 2015, p. 161). In contrast to them, *Borotba* activists compared the post-Maidan Ukraine rather with pro-American authoritarian regimes in the Third World than with Nazi Germany (Borotba, 2014c). Yet, due to *Borotba*’s relative weakness, they were not able to re-frame ‘antifascist’ rhetoric into a more adequate and progressive form, while their reiteration of the ‘fascist junta’ term – an overkill in the system of post-Soviet cultural references – played into the Russian nationalist/Soviet patriotic narrative.