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Dehumanizing political others: a discursive-material perspective

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ABSTRACT

In his recent book *The Discursive-Material Knot*, [Carpentier, N. (2017). *The discursive-material Knot: Cyprus in conflict and community media participation*. New York: Peter Lang]. Nico Carpentier identifies three nodal points of antagonistic discourse: the need for destruction of the enemy, homogenization of the self as opposed to the enemy, and the radical difference of the enemy. The latter appears when the self and the other are thought to be irreconcilably at odds, and the enemy is presented as inferior. In the more extreme cases, this radical othering leads to a dehumanization and demonization of the other, which makes the destruction of the enemy easier. Using post-Maidan social confrontation within Ukraine and its Facebook discussions as a case study, this paper analyzes how exactly the radical othering and subsequent dehumanization of the enemy is discursively structured, and describe the conditions under which such extreme manifestations of conflict could be eliminated with the ultimate goal of transforming antagonistic into agonistic discourse.

Introduction

Drawing on the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Nico Carpentier (2017) in his book *The Discursive-Material Knot (DMK)* identifies 'three nodal points' that 'can be distinguished in the antagonistic discourse: 1/the need for destruction of the enemy, 2/the radical difference and distance from the enemy, combined with (and supported by) a process of 3/homogenization of the self' (p. 172).[1] Homogenization manifests itself when the diversity of actors is obliterated to the extent that anybody who dares problematize total homogenization is branded a 'traitor.' The radical difference between self and enemy appears when the two are thought to be irreconcilably at odds, and this dichotomy is constructed as not neutral but in hierarchical terms: The enemy is presented as inferior, the self as superior. In the more extreme cases, 'this radical othering leads to a dehumanization and demonization of the other, denying even the most basic features of humanity' (Carpentier, 2017, p. 172). This makes the destruction of the enemy easier and even necessary.

According to Carpentier (2017), to transform antagonism into agonism – that is, to stop seeing opponents as enemies and instead begin seeing them as adversaries whose difference is taken as legitimate – it is necessary to re-articulate the nodal points of antagonistic discourse and re-create a common symbolic space among the conflicting participants in a political process. To re-establish 'conflictual togetherness,' as Carpentier (2017, p. 178) puts it, the structural balance needs to be restored so that the involved actors are no longer positioned hierarchically. It is also necessary to move away from dichotomization, making the solid, impermeable frontiers between the self and the opponent more porous, in order to activate a diversity of positions – a precondition for agonism to emerge.

In this paper, using post-Maidan social confrontation within Ukraine as a case study, I analyze how exactly the radical othering and subsequent dehumanization of the enemy was discursively structured, and describe the conditions under which such extreme manifestations of conflict could be eliminated with the ultimate goal of transforming antagonistic into agonistic discourse. Along with Carpentier's model of the Discursive-Material Knot (2017), I draw on the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and its later elaborations by Laclau (2005, 2014) and Mouffe (2009, 2013). In what follows, after presenting the context of the Ukrainian conflict, I will discuss briefly each of these theories, then my research methods and results.

Context

The Ukrainian conflict discussed in this paper traces its origin to November 21, 2013, when 'Euromaidan' protesters gathered on the Maidan, the main square of Kyiv, to express their disapproval of President Victor Yanukovych for refusing to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union. The events that followed are well-documented: the dispersal of demonstrators by police, the outbreak of violent clashes, the dismissal of the acting president, the annexation of Crimea by Russia, and an anti-Maidan insurgency in the east of Ukraine with the further deployment of Russian troops in the region (Yekelchuk, 2015).[2]

In the articulations of Euromaidan activists, the agreement with the European Union represented an attempt to escape from the corrupted system of the Yanukovych government and achieve a more democratic condition (Áslund, 2014). In contrast, the Russia-led Eurasian Customs Union signified historical regression for Euromaidan activists, many of whom saw in Russia an authoritarian system of government incommensurable with the ideas of civilization and progress (Sakwa, 2015). Before and after the revolution, several polls were conducted by different research institutes asking respondents to choose between joining the EU or joining the Eurasian Customs Union led by Russia; all of them showed that regional differences were very sharp. The farther east one looked, the stronger and more unified a rejection of the Maidan with its European agenda one would find (KIIS, 2014). Starting in late February of 2014, demonstrations protesting the 'coup d'état' took place in Ukraine's eastern and some southern regions. Many of these gatherings were held under Russian national banners, although, according to the Kiev International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), only about 12 percent of people living in the 'separatist' regions of Donetsk and Luhansk 'definitely agreed' in April 2014 that their regions 'should secede from Ukraine and join Russia' (KIIS, 2014).

April of 2014 was when the protests escalated into an armed insurgency backed by Russia. Not only did Russia provide the rebels with weapons, but it also supported them

with Russian troops (Wilson, 2014) – which is why the insurgency is usually referred to as 'the Russian invasion.' However, what is often lost in representing the Ukrainian crisis exclusively through this frame is that 45.3 percent of the people living in Donetsk and 55.1 percent in Luhansk justified the armed resistance against the new Kyiv government on the grounds that 'during the revolution, the protesters in Kyiv and western regions did the same' and 'there was no other means to attract the center's attention to the problems of the regions' (ZN,UA, 2014). In other words, what is usually left without attention is that the roots of the insurgency were local, despite its co-opting by Russia for its own geopolitical interests.

Although, as mentioned earlier, the vast majority of people living in the territories controlled by the rebels were against the 'coup d'état' but not in favor of joining Russia, the new Kyiv government labeled the whole of the anti-Maidan movement 'separatist' and later as 'terrorists' (Baysha, 2017). In April 2014, an 'anti-terrorist' military operation (ATO) was launched; from its onset until May 15, 2017, a total of 10,090 combatants and civilians were killed, while at least 23,966 were wounded (UN News, 2017). Hundreds of thousands have been internally displaced or have fled the country. Today, five years after the Maidan, Ukraine is still split into two conflicting camps – the supporters and opponents of the Maidan and ATO that followed – and this split goes across all Ukraine, not only its southeastern regions. It is still normal for the citizens of Ukraine on opposite sides of the Maidan to hurl insults at each other such as 'koloradi' (singular: 'kolorad')[3], 'kastryulegoloviye' (singular: 'kastryulegoloviy')[4], 'skakuni' (singular 'skakun')[5], and 'vatnik' (singular: 'vatnik')[6] – all neologisms that came to life during the Maidan (Korrespondnet, 2014).

As early as August 2014, the BBC observed that 'internet memes that appeared during the crisis in Ukraine are firmly established in everyday language' (Karpyak, 2014). 'It is impossible to imagine any discussion on politics without them,' *Komsomolskaya Pravda* echoed, noting also that 'the majority of these words have derogatory shades' (Lyabina, 2014). These derogatory terms became 'ingrained in mass media, social networks, and people's heads,' Channel 24 (2015) asserted a year later, counting more than 30 such linguistic creations. Media outlets covered the Maidan's many neologisms, including those listed here, in 2014 and 2015; however, as my research shows, many of these terms are still actively used today, four years after the revolution and the announcement of the ATO.

Theoretical background

Discourse theory by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe

According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), no collective identity is a given; all of them emerge through articulatory practices. No group identity can be fixed in place forever. Rather, all discursive boundaries between 'us' and 'them' are partial, precarious, and unstable, although 'the impossibility of an ultimate fixity of meaning implies that there have to be partial fixations – otherwise, the very flow of differences would be impossible' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 112). Any meaning (or identity) that has been partially fixed can be re-articulated at any time, since the field of discursivity (the discursive reservoir of signifying elements in which any struggle for meaning is taking place) offers unlimited possibilities for alternative articulations, which makes any hermetic or ultimate discursive closure impossible. In the view of Laclau and Mouffe, it is precisely this impossibility of fixing meanings forever that allows hegemonic practices to be understood as 'an

exemplary form of political articulation which involves linking together different identities into a common project' (Howarth, 1998, p. 279). Politics become hegemonic if two main conditions are met: the presence of antagonistic collectives and the instability of the frontiers separating them.

Since social relations are seen now as discursively constructed, the classical 'thought/ reality' dichotomy in the theorizing of Laclau and Mouffe no longer appears relevant. Synonymy, metonymy, metaphor, and other rhetorical devices come to be seen as 'part of the primary terrain itself in which the social is constructed' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 110). In his later works, Laclau asserts that 'hegemony means the passage from metonymy to metaphor, from a "contiguous" starting point to its consolidation in "analogy"' (2014, p. 22). The culmination of this tropological movement, in Laclau's view, is always the moment of synecdoche, when a democratic demand of one particular sector of the population is accepted by the new collective identity – when a part comes to represent the whole.

In other words, in Laclau's conceptualization, a collective identity emerges when a demand of one popular sector assumes a hegemonic representation of the demands of other sectors united equivalentially. According to Laclau, such totalization is simultaneously impossible and necessary: It is impossible since no ultimate fixing of its meaning can be achieved, and it is necessary because without some kind of closure – precarious and partial as it must be – no collective identity can be established. At the same time, a particular popular demand that assumes a hegemonic / synecdochic representation of the chain of all other demands united equivalentially 'becomes something of the order of an *empty* signifier, its own particularity embodying an unachievable fullness' (Laclau, 2005, p. 71). In other words, the signifier is not completely 'empty' because it signifies what, strictly speaking, it is not: an impossible totality of various struggles united equivalentially. Laclau thus presents hegemony as a structural game in which the struggle between the universal and the particular is permanently played out. Laclau's method of analyzing hegemonic formations can be used, therefore, 'as a neutral conceptual tool for accounting for every ideological formation' (Žižek, 2000, p. 229) regardless of political content, where 'the form will always be the same: the (impossible) struggle for totality' (Wenman, 2003, p. 591). This makes his method suitable for analyzing how democratic struggles breed anti-democratic tendencies that result in totalitarian closures.

In this paper, I refer to Laclau's ideas on how hegemony is established to analyze the formation of totalitarian discursive closures within the Ukrainian social field as represented by networking on Facebook. At the same time, I also refer to Chantal Mouffe's theory of radical / agonistic democracy, using it as a normative guide to judge the anti-democratic tendencies within the post-Maidan social field of Ukraine. Emphasizing the importance for democracy of 'a vibrant clash of democratic political positions' (2009, p. 104), Mouffe warns against the closure of democratic space and advocates for its radical openness. According to Mouffe, the political process is inconceivable without antagonism as the latter 'constitutes an ever-present possibility in politics' (2009, p. 13). However, she distinguishes between 'two forms' of antagonism:

> … antagonism proper – which takes place between enemies, that is, persons who have no symbolic space – and what I call 'agonism', which is a different mode of manifestation of

antagonism because it involves a relation not between enemies but between 'adversaries', adversaries being defined in a paradoxical way as 'friendly enemies' because they want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way. (2009, p. 13)

In Mouffe's view, the lack of democratic contestation over alternative propositions leads to the emergence of radical antagonisms (antagonisms proper) that erode the democratic public sphere by shutting down the common symbolic space necessary for communication.

According to Mouffe (2009), the stabilization of discursive closures through the establishment of solid dividing frontiers leads not only to radical antagonisms but also to the totalitarian tendencies of government. This may happen when the frontiers between 'us' and 'them' are presented not as contingent and temporary but as essential and natural – dictated by considerations of rationality or morality, for example. In Mouffe's view, without a plurality of competing forces attempting to define the common good differently, pluralist democracy is impossible; to achieve a democratic condition, a break with the tradition of universalization and homogenization of both the other and the self is required.

Carpentier's discursive-material Knot

To explain how the discursive closures discussed by Mouffe create societal divisions, I refer to Nico Carpentier's *The Discursive-Material Knot* (2017). As I mentioned in the introductory part of this paper, Carpentier identifies three nodal points that, in his view, constitute antagonistic discourse: homogenization of the self as opposed to the enemy; the radical difference of the enemy; and the need for destruction of the enemy. To allow for a richer analysis of the social, Carpentier incorporates into his model material components. By the logic of invitation and dislocation, the material participates in discursive struggles over the meanings of places, suggesting this or that particular articulation. Objects enter the social not only by assuming the role of intermediaries or mediators, but also by acting as social agents of their own and/or as the instruments of power. Any event – any material change – can dislocate discourse if the latter proves unable to attribute meaning to the former; in such cases, escaping representation, the material destabilizes discourses by pointing to their internal contradictions and their limited capacity to represent the material world. The material, as it invites particular discourses to become part of the discursive-material assemblage, also frustrates some discourses and assists others to emerge and be further developed. The material can disrupt or strengthen discursive orders; however, it is also possible that its invitation could be ignored and an alternative meaning attached to it.[7]

In Carpentier's DMK, the material appears as both constructive and destructive: It structures the social by providing or denying access to spaces, by allowing or refusing to allow bodies to move, by encouraging or discouraging particular actions and significations, by creating or destroying material and non-material (discursive) structures, and so forth. According to Carpentier, the knotted interaction of the discursive and the material can structure not only large-scale assemblages (state apparatuses, armies, markets, etc.) but also the micro-processes of the social, which are of special interest to my research. One of the simplest examples of the material's constructive potentiality at the micro level is when objects such as royal insignia, fashion accessories, and the like are used to add

symbolic value to human agency through the meanings allocated to the material. In textual representations, which this paper investigates, the knotted interaction of the discursive and the material appears as the result of *entextualization* – 'the practice(s) of (linguistic) condensation,' as Carpentier puts it (2017, p. 48).

In Carpentier's view, the expansion of discourse theory to include the material makes analysis of the social much richer: It allows 'not merely focusing on media talk, for instance, but also on the contextualized processes of discursive-ideological production and their material components' (Carpentier, 2017, p. 5). This expansion also allows otherwise invisible forces to be recognized, adding contingency to established meanings by destabilizing existing sedimentations. As Carpentier (2017) puts it, 'contingency can only be seen as incrementally increased by the interplay of all components' (p. 68). Returning to Mouffe's postulate that agonistic relations require acknowledging the possibility of subverting any sedimented meaning, the increased contingency of all the DMK components works against hermetic discursive closures, thereby boosting the likelihood of meanings being contested, and, finally, enabling the transformation of antagonism into agonism.

Research questions, design, and method

Research questions

The purpose of my study was to analyze how the derogatory neologisms discussed in the context part of this paper influenced the radicalization of Maidan-related discourses, as my review of media reports presented in the context part of the paper suggested. My research questions were as follows: What was the structure of the formation of these neologisms? How can the antagonistic discursive closures ensured by the employment of these neologisms be disrupted in order to transform the antagonism into agonism?

Research Design

To answer my questions, I analyzed discussions of the Maidan and its developments by Ukrainian users of Facebook (hereafter, F-users). By 'Ukrainian' I mean Ukrainian – and Russian-speaking F-users whose 'place of living' was identified as a city or village in Ukraine. The posts of those who did not identify their place of living as Ukrainian or whose places of living were outside of Ukraine were not analyzed.

I collected my data using Facebook searches. The following search parameters were set: 1) Posted by: 'anyone'; 2) Tagged location: 'Ukraine'; 3) Date posted: '2014' (the year of the victory of the Maidan and ATO announcement) and '2017' (to check if the neologisms are still in use); 4) Subject: 'kastryulegoloviy,' 'kolorad,' 'skakun,' and 'vatnik' (in Ukrainian and in Russian, consecutively). Searching with these criteria, I identified 1,318 public posts in Russian and Ukrainian. Taking this number as my data universe, I employed a 'cyclical process' (Mautner, 2008, p. 35): I selected first a small corpus of posts within each of the categories, analyzed it, then used my findings to inform the next round of selections. In such a fashion, more and more material was included into my analysis in a process continuing until new data no longer brought new insights. I considered the point of 'saturation' to be reached when it became evident that new findings only reinforced previous ones. This approach also allowed me to consider theoretical adjustments: As soon as I identified the mismatch between the patterns of enemy construction in my

empirical examples and Nico Carpentier's model of antagonistic discourse (see the 'Discussion' section), I included more material to investigate whether the difference I had found was stable.

The links between the signs 'kastryulegoloviy,' 'kolorad,' 'skakun,' 'vatnik,' and other elements of the discursive field were identified through a qualitative discourse analysis, as described in the next section. When signs displaced each other metonymically (i.e. as a contingent substitution), metaphorically (i.e. as an unquestioned analogy), and, finally, synecdochically (i.e. when the most frequently used sign was asserted as a new collective identity), they were assumed to organize a chain of equivalence forming a hegemonic discourse.

Results

The construction of the Maidan

'Skakuni' (jumpers). The tradition to refer to Maidan participants as 'skakuni' (hereafter, 'jumpers') traces its origin to late November 2013, when the students protesting on the Maidan created an action of jumping while chanting, 'If you are not jumping, you are a Moskal [a derogatory term for Russians]' (Radio Liberty, 2013a). The original inspiration behind jumping as a protest performance is unclear[8], but it is important to recognize that only one small group of Maidan protesters did so – far from all of them. Despite this, in the representation of anti-Maidan F-users, the signifier 'jumpers' came to denote the impossible unity[9] of all Maidan protesters. In order to create this hegemonic representation, Maidan opponents had to entextualize the material components of the protest – the jumping bodies of the young protesters – and incorporate them into their anti-Maidan discourse. The physical actions of a group of protesters came to represent the unity of not only this jumping group, but all other Maidan participants as well.

As a result of this incorporation of the material / physical properties of the protest into its chain of equivalence uniting democratic demands and the replacement of the latter by the former, all the links between the revolution and its democratic demands that had prompted Maidan participants to protest were deactivated and made invisible. The entextualized material / physical properties of the protest were shifted to the center of representation; the protesters were cast as childish or infantile. This articulation implied that Maidan participants were not so much unable as unwilling to calm down and rationally evaluate their deeds and the likely consequences of their actions.

The tropological substitution of 'Maidan protesters' with 'jumpers' did not happen overnight. In 2014, many F-users still believed that it was possible to make the 'jumpers' behave 'responsibly.' However, the longer the confrontation went on and as the consequences of 'jumping' became more obvious for Maidan opponents, the less hope they expressed regarding the possibility of 'turning on the brains' of those who, in their view, had caused the societal mess. In time, the tendency to blame 'jumpers' for all the problems of post-Maidan Ukraine became a dominant trend of anti-Maidan F-discussions: 'Uncle Vasya [a collective image of working people] knows: previously, he had 500 dollars and electricity. Then, jumpers came. They jumped, and now he has only 235 dollars and no light.' This construction of a male F-user from Odessa clearly illustrates how the signifier 'jumpers' synecdochically came to represent not only the unity of all Maidan participants

but also the unity of those who deserved blame in the development of the post-Maidan situation.

With respect to the focus of my analysis, it is noteworthy that the signifier 'jumpers' did not dehumanize Maidan participants, who were imagined as different – infantile, childish, irresponsible – but still human. After all, the act of jumping performed by human bodies could hardly be imagined as 'inhuman.' As discussed below, dehumanization proper, as well as the extreme level of antagonism proper, appeared when the entextualized material components of discursive-and-material hybrids were de-linked from 'the human condition' or linked to it negatively.

'Kastryulegoloviye' (panheads). On January 16, 2014, the Ukrainian Parliament passed so-called 'dictatorship laws' stating that wearing helmets in public was illegal. To protest against these restrictions, some participants of the Maidan covered their heads with cookware instead of helmets. In the eyes of Maidan opponents, the performance came to signify a brainless condition or hollow idiocy, as suggested by the use of 'panhead' as an insult. 'Pans on heads or instead of heads?' – this is how Vladimir Skachko (2014), a Ukrainian journalist known for his anti-Maidan stance, derided this carnivalesque action. In order to fix this meaning – 'pots instead of heads' – Maidan opponents had to entextualize the material components of the protests and incorporate them into their discourse; the neologism 'kastryulegoloviy' (hereafter, 'panhead') appeared as a result of this hybridization. The entextualized material objects of the protest (pans) and the bodies of the protesters (heads) were discursively united to create a discursive-material unit of the protest. As in the previous example with 'jumpers,' the opponents of the Maidan borrowed the properties of the material world to socialize them, but in this case the properties were not exclusively human. The 'panhead' condition ascribed to opponents invited the meaning of 'brainlessness.'

In the course of time, the signifier 'panhead,' linked to the idea of brainlessness, came to represent the unity of all Maidan protesters, not only those who wore cookware on their heads. 'How could these morons know what would be the outcome of their schizoid panhead Maidan?' – in the clearest possible way, this construction by a F-user from Kyiv illustrates the linking of the signifier 'panhead' to 'Maidan' so that the former assumed the representation of the latter. The 'panhead condition' of the Maidan participants was primarily about their inability to foresee the consequences of their deeds: the annexation of Crimea, the war in Donbass, a dramatic increase in utility costs, and so forth. 'If only we could charge higher utility costs only for panheads … ' – this sentiment, expressed by a F-user from Chernivtsi in 2017, was very popular among the anti-Maidan writers whose posts I analyzed.

Similar to the case of 'jumpers' discussed earlier, the tropological substitution of the signifier 'Maidan protesters' with 'panheads' did not happen instantaneously. As in the case of 'jumpers,' it took time for this substitution to become stabilized to the point of unquestioned synecdochic representation of the whole Maidan: '"Pan-headed Maidan" is not an insult – this is the real psychological state of these characters,' asserted a male F-user from Donetsk in April of 2017. A month later, his confederate from Kyiv wrote: 'What the Maidan 2013–14 gave to humanity is the term "kastryulegoloviy". For psychiatry.' In this view, which was a very typical representation of the Maidan among its opponents, 'panheads' were almost, but not quite, human: They belonged more fully to a 'panhead species' that could be 'brainwashed easily and firmly'.

What we observe in this case is the partial dehumanization of opponents explained by the non-human properties of one of the material components (pan) incorporated into the 'panhead' hybrid. However, because the other component (head) was human, it was still implied (especially at the beginning of the confrontation) that 'panheads' were able to think, albeit not always 'adequately.' In other words, total dehumanization and extreme antagonism had not yet appeared; some symbolic space for potential communication remained.

Antagonistic Closures of Anti-Maidan Discourse. Used interchangeably, signifiers similar to 'panheads' and 'jumpers' created a chain of equivalence in which the democratic demands of the revolution were deactivated or made completely invisible. As a result of these tropological substitutions, in the eyes of the millions who opposed the protests, the empty signifier 'Maidan' assumed a hegemonic representation not of various democratic demands united equivalentially but of second-order hegemonic constructions that excluded from the field of representation all meaningful political concerns. An impossible unity of mentally sick, stupid, infantile, and brainwashed Euromaidan protesters was discursively formed. Wearing weird implements and behaving in an inconceivable fashion, the 'panhead' 'jumpers' appeared to anti-Maidan F-users as a homogenized mob of brainless half-people unaware of the consequences of their deeds. The imagined pathological and/or partly dehumanized condition of this undifferentiated mass did not presuppose much possibility for meaningful communication. Instead of communication, this antagonistic presentation of the protest suggested to ignore the demands of the 'abnormal' and/or not-fully-human mass of Maidan participants, who were uniformly in need of 'treatment.' However, as stated earlier, the extreme level of antagonism proper – a total destruction of the symbolic space necessary for communication – had not yet appeared. As I show in the second part of the next section, this condition emerged only as opponents were totally dehumanized, when 'the most basic features of humanity' were denied (Carpentier, 2017, p. 172).

The construction of the anti-Maidan

The antagonistic impossibility of dialogue between anti-Maidan and pro-Maidan forces was equally conditioned by the fact that the latter also imagined their opponents in terms of half-human or completely inhuman abnormality in need of cure and/or eradication.

'Vatnik' (cotton-padded coat). Among Maidan-supporting F-users, the most common way to refer to their opponents was with the signifier 'vatnik.' This is how *Kyiv Post*, a Ukrainian newspaper, explains the meaning of the term: 'Vatnik, originally a name of a warm cotton-padded Russian jacket that is *still used sometimes in rural areas*, has a broad meaning of all people with imperial Russian ideology. Early in 2014, vatnik came into more common use in Ukraine' (Grytsenko, 2015, emphasis added). As my analysis of F-postings suggests, however, the more common use of 'vatnik' in Ukraine was conditioned by linking this signifier not only to 'people with imperial Russian ideology' but to everyone who rejected the Maidan. As the latter, in the eyes of Maidan supporters, could be explained predominantly in terms of being 'backward,' 'outdated,' and, therefore, 'pro-Russian,' the Maidan came to hegemonically represent opponents in this way.

The most important feature of 'vatnik,' the aspect that conditioned its transformation into an empty signifier used to denote the impossible unity of those protesting against

the Maidan, was its material component – *vata* (cotton). Together with Alexander Genis (2014), an American journalist of Russian origin, many pro-Maidan F-users whose opinions I analyzed imagined *vata* as a substance filling not only Russian-style clothes but also the heads of their opponents: 'In the metaphorical vatnik, not the model but material is important. Vata is not only on the spindle, it is also in ears because vatniks hear only themselves … ' (Genis, 2014). As is evident from this excerpt, its author incorporated into his discourse about vatnik-humans the entextualized material qualities of the vatnik-object: the ability of cotton to absorb sound / noise.

As a result of this incorporation, vatnik-humans appeared deaf to alternative opinions because their ears were stuffed. What 'vatniki' could absorb, according to this representation, was only 'brainwashing' by Russian propaganda. '"Vatnik-land" – this is how I call our local lads and grannies brainwashed by Dima Kiselyov [a well-known Russian propagandist]' – a male F-user, a former dweller of Donetsk who fled to Kyiv, used the term in this way to depict his fellow-citizens in 2014. In his view, which was typical for pro-Maidan F-users, no other factor but 'brainwashing' could explain people's unwillingness to support the Maidan uprising.

In contrast to 'vatniki,' pro-Maidan F-users imagined themselves as intelligent and independent in their judgments – a radical outside as compared to the 'vatnik' condition: 'You do not think as others. You look independent. You are not vatnik' (an F-user from Kyiv, 2014). Many pro-Maidan F-users whose opinions I analyzed saw themselves as no less than the holders of a 'civilized condition' that they needed to implant in 'vatnik-lands': 'The work on vatniks requires huge efforts, but this is what distinguishes civilization from barbarism' (a male F-user from Kyiv, 2014). What is easily distinguishable in this passage is the motif of the 'white man's burden' – the responsibility of European civilizers to modernize non-European barbarians. In the context of the Europeanization agenda of the Maidan, a clear trend emerged to imagine Maidan opponents as barbarians or less than human: 'These hominoids resemble humans only on the surface … . They are typical representatives of the species Homo Sovetikus Vulgaris,' Borislav Bereza, a future Parliamentary deputy, wrote in reference to millions of his anti-Maidan compatriots in May 2014. 'How to transform the vatnik into a person?' (a male F-user from Kyiv, 2014) – this was one of the most actively discussed questions by many pro-Maidan F-users whose opinions I analyzed.

What we observe in this case is not only the antagonistic destruction of shared symbolic space, as seen in the previous examples, but also an escalation in the dehumanizing of political opponents. In contrast to 'jumping' and 'heads' (a component of the 'panheads' hybrid), 'cotton' was not a property of 'the human.' Yet 'cotton' did not relate to 'the human condition' in an exclusively negative way, either, as people use cotton for the production of clothes and other useful things. As the next example shows, dehumanization proper (as well as the extreme case of antagonism) occurred when the opponents came to be linked to materiality that has an exclusively negative relation to 'the human,' as in the case of harmful bugs.

'*Koloradi*' *(potato bugs)*. While the eradication of 'vatniki' was imagined predominantly in terms of historical change through civilizational / cultural progress (the eradication of historical 'backwardness'), another signifier – 'koloradi' – which also came to denote the unity of people holding anti-Maidan views, unequivocally suggested a different type of eradication, not only symbolic but physical as well. Accordingly, the antagonistic

destruction of shared symbolic space in this instance was extreme. In April 2014, it was popular among F-users to share posters alerting to the presence of 'koloradi' in the cities of southeastern Ukraine and advocating for their extermination. This 'information campaign' was not limited only to Facebook; it was widespread:

> A current insecticide ad running on Channel 5, the station owned by Ukrainian presidential candidate Petro Poroshenko, has even raised chuckles among some Ukrainians with its promise to kill Colorado beetles 'on the spot' – although in this case, the enemy in question are the actual bugs … . (Radio Liberty, 2014b)

This piece, describing the TV campaign against 'koloradi' and its promise 'to kill Colorado beetles on the spot' appeared on the Radio Liberty website on April 28, 2014. Five days later, on May 2, 2014, a fire during street clashes between pro-Maidan and anti-Maidan forces in Odessa killed 48 'koloradi' and left more than 200 with burns and other injuries.

The tragedy happened when protesters against the Maidan were chased by radicals and sought shelter in the House of Trade Unions. There, they were attacked with Molotov cocktails, which caused the fire. According to many sources (e.g. UN OHCHR, 2014), the clashes on that day were provoked by anti-Maidan activists who started shooting at a pro-Maidan gathering in the center of Odessa. Many argue that the purpose of those throwing the 'cocktails' at the Trade Union Building was not to kill people hiding there and definitely not to burn them alive (StopFake, 2015). For those holding anti-Maidan views, however, this argument had little validity. Many of them have been confident that the mass killing was done on purpose, prompted by and in line with promises to 'kill koloradi' spread by pro-Maidan media and social networks on the eve of the tragedy. Indeed, it is quite difficult to believe it a coincidence if one follows the discussion of the tragedy by pro-Maidan F-users on the day it occurred: 'Well done, Odessa! Let all koloradi be extinguished!'; 'Exterminate Colorado bugs from Ukrainian soil!'; 'To burn all koloradi!'; 'We need to roast koloradi cockroaches with Molotov cocktails!' and so forth. The number of such postings that are still publicly visible on Facebook is impressive.

As my analysis shows, the sign 'koloradi' was usually linked to such signifiers as 'terrorists,' 'katsapi' (a derogatory term to refer to Russians), '(pro-Russian) separatists,' 'traitors,' and the like. 'Great job! A hot welcome to katsapi koloradi. The same fate is awaiting all Russian terrorists!' – this is how a male F-user from Kyiv expressed his excitement regarding the people burned alive. 'Death to koloradi! Death to traitors!' echoed a female writer from Dnipro. What united these and numerous similar constructions was the empty signifier of 'koloradi' that came to denote the impossible unity of the anti-Maidan, imagined not only as against the Maidan but also against the Ukrainian condition, constituting its radical outside. By May 2, 2014, among those who supported the Maidan, the link between 'koloradi' and an anti-Ukrainian stance was sedimented to such an extent that some F-writers were absolutely confident that the majority of those who had been trapped in the burning Odessa building were not Ukrainians. 'Among those who died in Odessa, there were fifteen from Russia, ten from Transnistria, and nobody from Odessa' – this statement was shared by numerous F-users on the day of the tragedy and shortly after. Later, it became clear that all the victims held Ukrainian citizenship and all but two lived in Odessa or its region. But this discovery did not ultimately make much of a

difference: The hegemonic pro-Maidan discourse continued to present these people as harmful 'anti-Ukrainian' insects in need of extermination.

As mentioned earlier, the vicious analogy between people and harmful insects became possible because 'koloradi' bugs are linked to 'the human/Ukrainian condition' in a strictly negative sense: The potato-eating beetles are a scourge for Ukrainian farmers and can only be dealt with through extermination. Unlike other neologisms discussed earlier, the meaning of 'koloradi' remained unchangeable from the very beginning until the end: In the full corpus of opinions I analyzed, there was not a single piece that would have provided space for a more nuanced discussion of 'koloradi.' The extreme level of othering implied by this signifier with its negative link to 'the human condition' simply did not allow for this; instead, it allowed the complete destruction of the shared symbolic space necessary for communication – heralding the extreme case of 'antagonism proper' as discussed by Mouffe.

Discussion

As my analysis shows, the difference of those considered the enemy was a dominant trend in depictions of both the opponents and proponents of the Maidan. From the articulations of the members within each camp, their opponents appeared fundamentally different – an outside against which the inside was constituted. In both cases, this radical difference was constructed not in neutral terms but in a hierarchical manner: Each of the camps saw its opponents as underdeveloped or not-quite-human. In the most extreme instance, the term 'koloradi' was used to present opponents simply as insects.

Another nodal point of antagonistic discourse – *homogenization* – occurred when each camp imagined itself as a uniform collective of people who were much more developed (mentally or socially) than their opponents. However, unlike Carpentier's (2017) conceptualization of agonistic discourse, which presupposes the homogenization of only one side of the conflict (the self), the discourses of the Maidan that I have analyzed made invisible the diversity within each of the opposing camps – both Maidan supporters and opponents. The differences within each side were obliterated to the extent that the two groups of opponents came to be seen as totally homogeneous and mutually exclusive.

With respect to the case study discussed in this paper, the discovered mismatch with Carpentier's model may be explained by my exclusive focus on key signifiers expressing the idea of othering. However, a broader analysis of Maidan-related antagonistic discourses has led me to the same conclusion: While analyzing hundreds of opinions expressed by Maidan activists, I discovered the same tendency to homogenize both the self and the other (Baysha, 2018). This finding definitely invites further research to develop a more nuanced understanding of the conditions under which total homogenization of the self does and does not appear.

By articulating each other as unified forces that were radically different, both camps created the conditions for 'maximum separation' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 129). When this condition is reached, 'two societies' appear in place of one, and the confrontation between these 'societies' becomes 'fierce, total and indiscriminate' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 129). In the most extreme case of the tragedy in Odessa, this fierce confrontation resulted not only in symbolic but also physical destruction of the other. It is here that the

third nodal point of the antagonistic discourse discussed by Carpentier (2017) – the need to destroy the enemy – manifested itself clearly.

As my analysis shows, the 'radical othering' leading to a 'dehumanization and demonization of the other, denying even the most basic features of humanity' (Carpentier, 2017, p. 12) appeared when the material components of the conflict situation were entextualized and incorporated into discourses in ways that deactivated the links not only to democratic demands, rendering them totally invisible on both sides, but also to the human condition. Instead of targeting the issue of alternative projects in political terms, the antagonistic discourses discussed in this paper constructed a dichotomy of good versus evil (normal versus abnormal / sick versus healthy, etc.) that had no possible political resolution. The level of dehumanization (and thus antagonism) depended on the qualities of the material components of the discursive-material hybrids discussed in this paper: As these hybrids offered fewer positive links to 'the human condition,' they inflicted dehumanization to a greater and more damaging extent.

By imagining themselves as 'the healthy and normal forces of good' fighting against 'the sick and abnormal forces of evil,' the opponents revealed their lack of awareness of the antagonisms and tensions existing within each of the two imagined unities. This insistence on the opponents as homogeneous entities instead of complex webs of relations characterized by contradictions and tensions prevented each of the conflicting camps from seeing multiple possibilities for engaging with this complex social reality for the sake of positive social change envisioned in inclusive, pluralistic terms. Such a social imaginary simply fails to acknowledge the intricacy of the hegemonic struggle and the complexity of identity construction.

Conclusion

As stated in the theoretical section of this paper, in order to transform antagonism into agonism, it is necessary to re-articulate the nodal points of antagonistic discourse, re-create a common symbolic space, and re-establish 'conflictual togetherness.' One can hardly expect, however, that any re-articulation of antagonistic into agonistic discourse can take place as long as the conflicting sides are engaged in the discursive games of dehumanizing each other. As this paper demonstrates, the dehumanization of the enemy has been taking place on both sides of the conflict: However, given that after the victory of the revolution, many Maidan activists became Ministers, Parliament members, and other high-ranking officials, the political and social consequences of their discourses are clearly evident in the development of the conflict.

Proof of the interrelation between symbolic and physical violence in post-Maidan Ukraine can be found in UN reports which have regularly expressed concerns about 'increasing manifestations of intolerance' toward alternative opinions in Ukraine and legal prosecution of Ukrainian journalists based on 'the broad interpretation and application of terrorism-related provisions' (UN OHCHR, 2017). It is these 'broad interpretations' that have allowed post-Maidan authorities in Ukraine to accuse opposition journalists, bloggers, and media organizations of aiding 'separatists' and/or 'terrorists,' and of being guilty of 'parricide.'

'With the passage of time,' the most recent UN report claims, 'divisions in Ukrainian society resulting from the conflict will continue to deepen and take root' (UN OHCHR, 2017, p. 40). In order to stop this tendency, the UN advises the law enforcement agencies of Ukraine to ensure investigation of violence against those holding alternative political opinions, including the cases of enforced disappearance, incommunicado detention, and torture in which Ukrainian forces and right-wing groups have been allegedly involved (UN OHCHR, 2017, p. 41). Given that the law enforcement agencies of Ukraine are made up of former Maidan activists who also imagine the 'other Ukraine' as 'koloradi' and 'vata' (Baysha, 2018), one can hardly expect such recommendations to be implemented. Recognition is needed – and this aspect is missing from UN reports – that physical violence is highly probable when the radical othering of political opponents is taking place on the level of discourse. Without addressing the issue of symbolic violence, one can hardly put an end to its physical manifestations.

Notes

1. In discourse theory, 'nodal points' usually refer to privileged signifiers that ensure discursive stability by partially fixing meanings; in his *DMK*, however, Carpentier (2017) conceptualizes 'nodal points' not as signifiers but as their configurations (p. 172).
2. This 'context' section does not provide a discourse analysis of the situation, but rather a factual description of Maidan-related events.
3. 'Kolorad' (колорад) is a word originally denoting Colorado potato-eating insects distinctive for their bright orange-and-black stripes. Because their colors are reminiscent of the orange-and-black St. George ribbon, a symbol of Russian military glory, the term came to denote Maidan opponents.
4. 'Kastryulegoloviy' (кастрюлеголовый) is a compound word uniting 'Kastryuli' (kitchen pans) and 'golova' (head). This term was created after Maidan participants were seen wearing pots and pans on their heads to counter a law forbidding helmets at protests. The term is used to imply that Maidan supporters are 'brainless.'
5. Opponents of the Maidan have called its activists 'jumpers' (скакуны) as a way to infantilize them and suggest they are unable to foresee the consequences of their actions.
6. The original meaning of 'vatnik' (ватник) is a warm Russian jacket filled with cotton (вата). In Maidan-related discourse, the term came to denote those opposing the Maidan because their heads were presumably filled with cotton.
7. To further enrich the combination of the discursive and the material, Carpentier adds to his model the 'structure-agency' dimension, which offers a more nuanced perspective on the structural capacities of the social, both empowering and disabling in terms of agency and human freedom. As this dimension is not important to my analysis, I do not discuss it here.
8. Some observers argue that the Maidan youth borrowed this cheer from Czech soccer fans - 'Kdo neskáče, není Čech!' ('Those who do not jump are not Czechs!'); others believe that the cheer came from a carnival song from Flanders: "Al wie da ni spring is homofiel" ('Everyone who does not jump is a homosexual"); other versions also exist.
9. Hereafter, I am using the concept of 'unity' to capture the translation of Laclau and Mouffe's 'totality' into social practice. While their discussion of 'totality' is located at the ontological level, 'unity' is positioned here at the ontic one.

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