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# World War II 2.0: Digital Memory of Fascism in Russia in the Aftermath of Euromaidan in Ukraine

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**Abstract:** The events in Ukraine in 2013–2014 will have long-lasting ramifications for the future of international security being in essence the end of a post Cold War order. While the scale of Russia’s involvement in Ukraine is still debated, the discursive construction of Ukrainian crisis in Russian media undeniably draws heavily on the World War II narrative of fascism. Representing Euromaidan participants as being on the ‘wrong side of history’ helps bolster an existential threat frame that resonates extremely well on the Post-Soviet space. This paper explores the digital memory of fascism on Russian social media in the aftermath of Euromaidan in Ukraine by analysing debates on Russian segments of social networks, such as Twitter, Livejournal.com and Vkontakte.com.

**Keywords:** Russia, Ukraine, fascism, social network analysis, securitization

## Introduction

The use of fascism/Nazism as a marker for the Other is hardly a unique phenomenon. Scores of pundits and politicians used this analogy to describe their opponents as ‘Hitlers’ with Barack Obama, Angela Merkel, Saddam Hussein, and Slobodan Milosevic being on the receiving end<sup>1</sup>. The fact of the matter is that the fight against fascism in the Western world is a kind of mobilizing narrative<sup>2</sup> that helps pinpointing the right and wrong.

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1 See, for example, how several conservative politicians in the US compared President Obama to Hitler [http://www.salon.com/2015/01/13/7\\_conservatives\\_who\\_have\\_compared\\_obama\\_to\\_hitler/](http://www.salon.com/2015/01/13/7_conservatives_who_have_compared_obama_to_hitler/) (accessed 3 February 2014); or how the Greeks protested against austerity holding up posters with Angela Merkel with toothbrush moustache: <http://www.dw.de/merkel-as-hitler/a-16753456> (Accessed 3 February 2014). President George Bush said on, Oct. 15, 1990 that in case of Saddam Hussein one is dealing with ‘Hitler revisited’ [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/gulf/script\\_a.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/gulf/script_a.html) (Accessed 3 February 2014). President Clinton evoked the Hitler comparison to Slobodan Milosevic in order to justify the NATO operation in former Yugoslavia <http://edition.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/time/1999/03/29/hitler.html> (Accessed 3 February 2014).

2 Subotic, forthcoming.

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However, World War II is remembered differently in Russia. Even in its name it is referred to as the 'Great Patriotic War', which commemorates not just the defeat of fascism,<sup>3</sup> but also survival of the nation in the face of extinction. Great Patriotic War was probably the most important heroic and unifying event in the recent Russian history and is now actively used in nation-building efforts.<sup>4</sup> Hitler and Nazi Germany represent an almost universal symbol for an existential threat in Russian collective memory and they are often used to show who is 'on the wrong side of history', thus representing the quintessential example of 'usable past.'

The events in Ukraine have become a sort of a litmus test for the mainstream Russian media. In times of the Ukrainian crisis Russian 'memory entrepreneurs' resorted to a powerful collective memory reference. Apart from calling the people on Maidan 'fascists' (an evocation of collective memory existential threat), mainstream Russian media make a connection between both the US and EU as aggressors and fascists – a very common Soviet technique, especially popular in Soviet-era caricatures and rhetoric. Moreover, government-sponsored discourse on fascism is visibly present on social networks, which suggests that the majority of Russian 'netizens' agree with the government's point of view.

This paper explores discourses of fascism during the crisis in Ukraine by analyzing debates on Russian segments of social networks, such as Twitter, Livejournal.com and Vkontakte.com.<sup>5</sup> The reason I am analyzing social networks is because the 'battle for the hearts in minds' was fought also on the Internet, leading to the popularization of the Internet meme 'sofa warriors' ('divannye voiska') engaged in the 'battle for the truth'. First, I will briefly outline my theoretical approach that builds on securitization theory and memory studies, focusing on the importance of the discourse embeddedness. Then I will present the evidence from the Russian language social networks and finally reflect on the (mis)use of the memory of fascism in foreign and domestic politics.

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3 In Soviet and post-Soviet collective memory the term 'fascism' is more common than 'Nazism' to describe the totalitarian regime in Germany. Given that NSDAP was at least in the name 'socialist' Soviet authorities were wary of the confusion it could have created for the general populace, hence, Great Patriotic War official military reports referred to the invading troops as '*nemetsko-fashistskie zakhvatchiki*' (German-fascist aggressors). In contemporary Russia the terms 'fascism' and 'Nazism' are used interchangeably, with a significant preference to the former.

4 Gudkov 2005.

5 Social Network data was scraped between May and June 2014 by online-platformScraperWiki.com.

## **Securitization Framework**

One may wonder why the memory of fascism features so prominently in the Russian official discourse on the events in Ukraine. I argue that this is because the memory of fascism contains a very ‘usable’ feature of an existential threat narrative that easily sets in motion an extremely emotional reaction to the discursive construction that features the said threat. Consequently, it is necessary to analyse the situation in Ukraine and its representation in Russian media in terms of discourses of security.

The Copenhagen School’s securitization approach helps us to understand the issues of constructing security in democratic regimes.<sup>6</sup> The portrayal of a phenomenon as an existential threat (securitization move) should help the government to bypass the democratic institutions (if any) for the adoption of emergency measures to combat the existential threat. An important condition for the success of securitization is the support of public opinion, which is supposed to accept the iteration of a phenomenon as a security issue.<sup>7</sup>

There is a broad academic discussion regarding securitization success<sup>8</sup> that includes ‘felicity conditions’ (facilitating conditions) for the process. For example, Guzzini’s dispositional condition<sup>9</sup> can be compared with Stritzel’s ‘embeddedness’, as they both argue that a successful securitizing move must resonate with existing discourses and practices, i.e. the discursive construction of reality, while the ‘positional power of the agent’ is consistent with Wæver’s concept and reflects the hierarchal ‘grammar’ of the securitization argument.

Wæver argues that successful securitization processes have three felicity conditions: (1) the grammar or plot of security, (2) the social capital (authority) of the enunciator, and (3) conditions related to the threat,<sup>10</sup> but Balzacq adds a fourth felicity condition: (4) conditions related to the audience of securitization.<sup>11</sup> However, this discussion did not lead to the development of indicators that can actually prove that a particular phenomenon is perceived as securitized by the audience. Moreover, there is a limited number of studies<sup>12</sup> that analyze the way security practices can prove the existing process of securitization, and still concentrate on the securitizing actor. Most importantly, scholars concur that securitization is only successful when it resonates with existing identity constructions.

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6 Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998.

7 Stritzel 2007; Balzacq, 2011.

8 Wæver 2000; Vuori 2008; Stritzel 2007; 2011; Balzacq 2005; 2011.

9 Guzzini 2011.

10 cf. Wæver 2000, 252–253.

11 cf. Balzacq 2005.

12 Bourbeau 2011.

One of the main problems of securitization consists in the question of ‘who can speak security to whom’ – referring to the ‘social capital’ or ‘positional power’ of the security speaker. There is also certain hierarchal division between the securitizing agent, who is in a superior position to securitize a phenomenon, and an audience that is supposed to accept the discursive representation of a phenomenon as a threat. Leonard and Kaunert<sup>13</sup> argue that the Copenhagen School’s position on audience is contradictory, because on the one hand the audience is assigned an important role on the grounds of securitization being an intersubjective process, while on the other hand Buzan and Wæver posit that it is the securitizing actor that decides whether an issue should be handled as an existential threat. Thus, the audience’s acceptance and support for extraordinary measures were not sufficiently theorized and operationalized.

In the case of the Ukrainian crisis the same process follows almost a standard scheme: the phenomenon (in this case, the Euromaidan in Ukraine) has been designed as an existential threat (fascism) to the Russian-speaking population (referent object), for the protection of which emergency measures were necessary (deployment of Russian troops in Crimea). Although there are certain difficulties in tracing the mechanisms of securitization in Russia’s political institutions, it is nevertheless possible to establish the audience’s acceptance of a securitization move by discourse re-articulation and public support for the leadership. Consequently, by monitoring discursive constructions on the audience level it is possible to trace the acceptance of the proposed official discursive constructions of a phenomenon.

If one takes the case of Crimea as an example the following mechanism is discernible: the Russian government constructs the threat of fascism in Ukraine as an existential to the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine and sends troops as an extraordinary measure to defend the referent object. In this case President Putin’s increased rating can be understood as ‘audience acceptance’, while reference to fascism is a fulfillment of the ‘embeddedness’ condition. At the same time, Russian government and state-sponsored mass media possess ‘positional power’ in order to enunciate the ‘grammar plot of security’ fulfilling the remaining felicity conditions.

Collective memory thus plays an important role in the success of securitization move. It is the collective memory of fascism that provides an emotional response to the frame of ‘fascism’, which especially in the Russian collective memory is associated with an existential threat. Collective memory guarantees subsequent support for extraordinary measures aimed at combating the existential threat. In the securitization framework, this condition is called ‘embeddedness of discourse’. In the following section I will discuss the notion of collective memory in more detail.

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13 Leonard and Kaunert 2011, 58.

## Collective Memory

Collective memory is a ‘shared pool of information held in the memories of two or more members of a group’,<sup>14</sup> but Halbwachs defined memory in a more static way, whereas modern research points out its more dynamic nature<sup>15</sup> or as van Dijk puts it, ‘memory has become an interesting amalgamation of preservation and creation,’<sup>16</sup> pointing out the constant process of memory mediation. So, in a sense, collective memory is an intrinsic part of a national and individual identity because it is a part of who we are and how we want to see ourselves. Moreover, it also follows the logic of self-inflation, and by default, negative stereotyping of the others, i.e. it is the same logic that works in social identity theory. Another interesting point consists in the constructivist nature of memory: it depends on social interaction and confirmation.<sup>17</sup>

The audience that is supposed to participate and co-create memory<sup>18</sup> through mass media<sup>19</sup> and especially new media<sup>20</sup> plays a key role in the process of memory mediation, but there is another role left to play – the one for memory entrepreneurs, who ‘are convinced that they have a sacred mission and ... put equivalency between memory that they defend and the truth.’<sup>21</sup> Memory entrepreneurs can be compared with securitizing actors in a securitization framework, because they are using specific memories for immediate purposes in political games,<sup>22</sup> but they are able to influence the next generation through directing education, popular culture, and historiography.<sup>23</sup>

In the Russian case a lot of efforts of state memory entrepreneurs are aimed at reviving the memory of Great Patriotic War in collective memory.<sup>24</sup> For starters, the designation ‘Second World War’ is hardly used in Russia, being instead replaced with the title ‘Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945.’ This is in part explained by the attempt to gloss over the period of cooperation between Nazi Germany and Soviet Union that took place between 1939 and 1941.<sup>25</sup> There have been several swings of the post-1991 conceptualizations of

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14 Halbwachs 1950.

15 Winter 2006.

16 van Dijk 2007, 173.

17 Assmann 2006, Rutten *et al.* 2013.

18 Garde-Hansen *et al* 2009.

19 Erll and Rigney 2009.

20 Huyssen 2003.

21 Pollak 1993, 30, author’s translation.

22 Mink and Neumayer 2007.

23 Oushakine 2013.

24 Etkind 2013; Gudkov 2005; Zhurzhenko 2007.

25 Especially when it comes to Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, Soviet Union’s invasion of Poland in 1939, invasion of Finland in 1940 etc. See for more details Kucherenko 2011.

the Great Patriotic War in Russia that reflected the political situation in the country,<sup>26</sup> but most scholars indicate a renewed interest in bringing out the heroic past.<sup>27</sup> To quote Lev Gudkov:

...Only when war-time experience is appropriately shaped and consolidated, when it has become technically reproducible, when it is inscribed into, or at least correlated with the collective framework of events past and present, does it become [...] historical 'memory'. Without such mechanisms (and a purposeful media policy) that specially maintain, organize, and stage 'memory' and its rituals, without making a performance out of the war theme, even such a significant past rapidly disintegrates and vanishes...<sup>28</sup>

Gudkov's analysis shows that a state memory policy is extremely important in shaping collective memory: state broadcasts of particular 'patriotic' films and programmes, mass commemorative events that usually involve school children and similar events that create a sense of a religious ceremony<sup>29</sup> and belonging to a group. Moreover, Gudkov points to another category relevant to the present study – memory events defined as 'a re-discovery of the past that creates a rupture with its accepted cultural meaning'.<sup>30</sup> In this case a memory event implies an agency that is absent from the definition, but for the present study a memory event can be interpreted as a category similar to securitizing move, where memory policy takes place through contextual mobilization.

Digital memory is the epitome of collective memory because it is the digital arena where the mediation of memory takes place, or actively stored memory. It is impossible to conceive of an important 'offline' event that would not have its ripple effect in the digital space. Even the events that took place in the past are actively renegotiated and mediated online in a sort of a public space.<sup>31</sup> One of the drawbacks of digital memory is the fact that it is 'more vulnerable to manipulation, but its potential to be rediscovered in future times is very much reduced in comparison with the materiality of its hard-copy predecessors',<sup>32</sup> but on the other hand it represents an enormous opportunity to follow a more comprehensive process of memory construction, as the attempts of memory entrepreneurs in this case are met with active participation of web users.

An important reason to study digital discourse in Russia is the fact that Russian authorities have spent an enormous amount of money to regulate and infiltrate the

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26 Tumarkin 1994.

27 Krylova 2004, Oushakine 2013.

28 Gudkov 2005, 6

29 cf. Assmann 2011

30 Etkind 2013, 178.

31 One of the most active attempts to study this process of memory re-negotiation is Memory at War Project [www.memoryatwar.org](http://www.memoryatwar.org).

32 Hoskins 2012, 102.

Russian blogosphere.<sup>33</sup> The amount of financing that went into paying for pro-Kremlin commentators and bloggers shows that the Kremlin considers online public sphere an important battlefield. A common reservation would include the fact that digital memory does not really have a collective because it is transnational. In the Russian case, however, this limitation can be easily overcome because of the language: the Russian language segment of the Internet is predominantly used by the citizens of the former USSR.<sup>34</sup> The fact that the collective is restricted to Russian-speakers does not mean that the collective memory is uniform. On the contrary, post-Soviet space represents rather a “memory battlefield”, where numerous versions of memory clash and mediate, with the events in Ukraine being one of its examples. In the following I will analyse the discourse and semiotics of the media commentary in Russian social networks pertaining to the events in Ukraine. The monitoring was carried out in May and June 2014, i.e. in the aftermath of Euromaidan and annexation of Crimea.

### **Digital Reactions to the Events in Ukraine**

Most Russians are familiar with the Great Patriotic War through literature and film<sup>35</sup> and in its mythologized version that started to take root under secretary general L. Brezhnev<sup>36</sup> with the help of military parades, numerous cinematic works about the war that continue to be created in contemporary Russia as well. Almost all cities have monuments, such as the Unknown Soldier, or the Eternal Flame Monument, etc. According to Konradova and Ryleva, monuments to the Great Patriotic War ‘exist in the form of formulas that belong to the conventional language of historical memory’<sup>37</sup> and cannot be easily excised from it. Thus, the memory of the Great Patriotic War pervades the every day life of Russian citizens, with Nazi Germany embodying the ultimate evil. That is why comparisons between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany are so painful to most Russians: the Soviet Union was seen as fighting on the good side and could not do any wrong, and even Soviet internal political repressions were not supposed to be taken into consideration.<sup>38</sup>

The memory of the Great Patriotic War in Russia is gradually taking on the traits of the myth: there are even several legislative initiatives that prohibit criticism of the Great Patriotic War and even questioning of the actions of the Red Army.<sup>39</sup> It is not surprising that one of the main tools for constructing an existential threat of Euromaidan was the use of the figure of Stepan Bandera (‘Banderovites’ as the Euromaidan supporters were often called), who in the Soviet and Russian historiography is clearly regarded as an accomplice

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33 Gazeta.ru 2012.

34 Rutten *et al.* 2013.

35 Afanas'yeva and Merkushev 2005.

36 Gudkov 2005.

37 Konradova and Ryleva 2005.

38 For a broader discussion see Etkind 2013.

39 BBC Russian 2013.

of fascism.<sup>40</sup> The fact that the former Ukrainian President V. Yushchenko awarded Stepan Bandera a posthumous title of Hero of Ukraine in 2010 created an outrage among various human rights groups in Russia.<sup>41</sup> Even though the title was eventually revoked, it left a lasting impression in Russia and Russian media documented the participation of pro-Bandera groups in Euromaidan extensively.

According to the data provided by Integrum World Wide, a service that monitors all Cyrillic mass media, in January 2014 of the term 'fascism' almost reached the level of June and May, i.e. months that feature a traditional spike in mentioning of fascism due to the celebration of Victory Day and commemoration of the beginning of the Great Patriotic War.<sup>42</sup> Another surge of 'fascism' also occurred in March, that is, at the time of Crimea annexation and April-May, that is, the armed conflict between pro-Russian supporters and official Kyiv. In fact, variations in the frequency of use of the term 'fascism' can help trace the dynamics of the conflict in Ukraine, as calls for Russian military involvement in Ukraine correlates with bursts of 'fascism' usage frequency.

As in most cases, even the word usage already indicates, which side the speaker supports. The pro-Russian military units in South-Eastern Ukraine call themselves '*opolchency*' (militia-men) – the term that is also used by the Russian media. Discursively, this term is the associated not only with the Second World War and popular resistance to fascism, but it also makes a reference to the militia of Minin and Pozharsky in the 17th century Russia who fought against a Polish-Lithuanian invasion. This kind of 'memory model'<sup>43</sup> creates a positive image of people who are fighting against foreign invaders.

Another reference to the struggle against fascism was the hijacking of the George's ribbon by pro-Russian paramilitary groups in the South-East Ukraine. George's ribbon is the black and orange ribbon that used to be a part of St. George's medal in Tsarist Russia and then became one of the visual symbols for the victory in the Great Patriotic War due to its usage in the Medal 'For the Victory Over Germany in the Great Patriotic War 1941–1945'. This ribbon was actively used as a part of self-identification with anti-fascism and 'anti-banderovism'. Thus, a discursive string of logic was created: a person who wears the ribbon is not only a supporter of pro-Russian forces in Ukraine, she is also against fascism and, consequently, the current government in Ukraine.

In Cyrillic segments of LiveJournal.com the coverage of the Ukrainian conflict was a source of discord among bloggers. A mere mentioning of the word 'Ukraine' frequently catapulted a post to the top-rated blog posts of the day due to the significant amount of viewers and commentators with up to 700–900 comments (with a typical LiveJournal top post garnering around 250 comments). LiveJournal.com represents a large pallet of

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40 Fredheim, Howanitz, and Makhortykh 2014.

41 Narvselius 2012.

42 Author's Integrum World Wide monitoring.

43 Etkind 2013.



opinions on the Ukrainian crisis, from accusing the Russian government of invading a neighbouring country and calling the leadership in self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk republics ‘Colorados’<sup>44</sup> to overwhelming support of ‘reunification with Crimea’ and ‘Novorossia’ with a heavy dose of anti-Western conspiracy theories.

What is interesting is that among 10 top LiveJournal.com Cyrillic bloggers<sup>45</sup> only one of them, ‘lj colonelcassad’, seems to promulgate the fascist discourse online. The rest of the popular bloggers seem to have a much more neutral position on the crisis, and even a pro-Ukrainian one. Discourse of fascism nevertheless can be found frequently among the commentaries to Ukraine-related posts on LiveJournal.com.

Memory of fascism is also actively employed in visuals pertaining to the Ukrainian crisis. One of the most popular tools of signifying one’s position in social networks is to decorate their avatars with George’s ribbon or to use the ribbon on photographs and posters. Another visual narrative is to equate integration with the EU with Third Reich occupation (see illustration below).



*Source: Republic of New Russia, Antimaidan Group in social network ‘VKontakte’ [http://vk.com/the\\_republic\\_of\\_new\\_russia](http://vk.com/the_republic_of_new_russia) (Accessed 20 August 2014).*

44 George’s ribbon that is frequently used to symbolize Russia’s victory over fascism resembles the colours of Colorado potato pest beetles, hence the pro-Ukrainian derision of Russia’s supporters as ‘Colorados’.

45 LiveJournal.com Cyrillic blog rating <http://www.livejournal.com/ratings/users?country=cyr> (Accessed 20 August 2014).

The example above, styled as a ‘demotivator’ poster,<sup>46</sup> shows an actual photograph of German prisoners of war led by Soviet soldiers in Kyiv titled ‘Marsh of Euro integrators in Kyiv in 1944. A natural finale for every forced European integration’ makes a discursive connection to the Nazi attempt to conquer the Soviet Union. Moreover, it underlines the forced nature of EU integration and equates it with the Russian narrative of fascism: EU’s need for *Lebensraum*, subjugation of neighbouring countries and atrocities committed to civilians.

One of the common narratives includes a combination of conspiracy theories with fascist discourse and was mostly based on the assumption that the US is trying to undermine regimes around the world to install an American-friendly leader. Some nationalists groups in fact compared the war in Ukraine to the Balkan wars of the 90s. A typical example can be found below:



*The caption reads ‘Russians! I appeal now to all Russians, inhabitants of Ukraine and Belarus are considered Russian in the Balkans. Look at us and remember that they will do the same to you, when you grow apart and show them your weakness. The West, this mad dog will gnaw at your throat... Brothers, remember the fate of Yugoslavia! Don’t let them do the same to you...’*

**Source:** Vkontakte Group ‘Russia is us! Putin is our leader!’ [http://vk.com/putin\\_is\\_our\\_leader](http://vk.com/putin_is_our_leader) (Accessed 18 August 2014).

The poster above creates a parallel between the wars in Former Yugoslavia and potential discord among ‘Russians’, where the West is supposed to take advantage of popular unrest.

<sup>46</sup> Golikov and Kalashnikova 2010.

Given the breakup of Soviet Union is considered as ‘the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the XX century’<sup>47</sup> and is associated with the loss of great power status in Russia, fears of further disintegration of the country are echoed in the fate of Yugoslavia. The emphasized words ‘Russians’, ‘the same’ and ‘brothers’ indicate an even closer connection between the Balkans and Russia, both ethnically and politically.

This kind of rhetoric was already employed by the pro-Kremlin youth movement ‘Nashi’ after the Orange revolution in Ukraine,<sup>48</sup> but reached a new level during the Ukrainian crisis. During several demonstrations in Moscow that called on Russian military intervention in Eastern Ukraine, people carried posters like ‘Fuehrer Obama, get you bloody hands off Novorossia’ (see below) or referred to Washington as ‘Fascington’. Caricatures of Obama with Hitler’s toothbrush moustache were also rampant on the social media even before the events in Ukraine. This narrative, however, was most likely ‘borrowed’ by Russian bloggers from ‘birthers’ in the US.



*The caption reads ‘Fuehrer Obama, get your bloody hands off Novorossia.’*

**Source:** Philipp Kireev, <http://www.echo.msk.ru/blog/mynameisphilipp/1338604-echo/> (Accessed 18 August 2014)

In the examples above the usability of the memory of fascism is quite clear: in the first case President Obama is called a ‘Fuehrer’ to equate him with Hitler and equate American intentions with the Third Reich’s doctrines. In the second visual Russia, identified through the statue ‘Motherland calls’ from the Stalingrad memorial complex calls on all men ‘from

47 Putin 2005.

48 Lipskiy 2007.

the Russian world' to fight the 'American-Banderite fascism now in Novorossia' to secure the future of their countries. The image of the statue was very popular on different kinds of posters that called on the Russians to fight fascism in Ukraine, in some cases it was even represented as decapitating Statue of Liberty – yet again a conflation of anti-American and anti-fascist discourse. Moreover, both the memory of fascism and conspiracy get conflated in the minds of the social network users, especially since social networks are conducive to spread of conspiracy theories.<sup>49</sup>



*Source: Screenshot from ScraperWiki.com*

As noted by M. Yakovlev,<sup>50</sup> pro-Russian commentators from Ukraine usually rally online in public groups in social networks (VKontakte, Facebook) commonly referred to as 'anti-maidan', i.e. indicating their non-alignment with the Euromaidan movement. Russians who support the separatists in the unrecognized republics of Donetsk and Luhansk are not necessarily united in 'anti-maidan' groups: a huge part of the statements in favour of Russian military involvement in Ukraine in support of the '*opolchency*' is expressed in the right-wing / nationalist groups, as well as anti-American groups, not to mention the page 'Reports from the militia of New Russia', which in September 2014, had more than 200,000 subscribers. Cartoons and posters related to the Ukrainian crisis, for the most part either play up the theme of World War II and Nazism, and/or conspiracy discourse on the role of the United States in the organization of Euromaidan.

Herein lies the controversy of the fascism memory: Russian nationalists who support the annexation of Crimea and who are supposedly fighting Ukrainian 'fascists' are not that different in their ideology with the people that they proclaim to be struggling against.

<sup>49</sup> Mocanu et al 2014.

<sup>50</sup> Yakovlev 2014.

Groups like ‘Russian National Unity’<sup>51</sup> who were normally on the fringe of the political spectrum suddenly became mainstream in their great power ambitions and support for the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The ideology of ‘Russian race superiority’<sup>52</sup> and Anti-Semitism in VKontakte groups<sup>53</sup> that at the same time support the anti-fascist battle in the East of Ukraine is in fact one of the features of the ‘sofa warriors’, who sometimes become offline pro-Russian warriors in Ukraine. Thus, ‘fascism’ in this case becomes an empty signifier<sup>54</sup> associated with the anti-Russian forces and loses its original meaning.

In order to analyse the way fascist discourse works, it is possible to scrape the data from Twitter. With the use of ScraperWiki.com,<sup>55</sup> it is possible to reveal in what context the word ‘fascism’ was used in the Cyrillic segment of Twitter (in this case, in May and June 2014). As one sees from the word cloud below, the most frequently used words with the word ‘fascism’ are related to the situation in Ukraine: ‘maidan’, ‘russianspring’, ‘genocide’, ‘propaganda’. Not surprisingly, the word ‘fascism’ seems to be used both by pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian bloggers, the difference being that pro-Russian bloggers are talking about ‘Ukrainian fascism’ and genocide committed by the Ukrainian army and pro-Ukrainian bloggers are ascribing fascism to President Putin and Russia. The above-mentioned dash of conspiracy theories is present here as well through hashtags #nato, #usa and #eu.

President Putin’s name was used both in the pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian contexts, indicating that the personification of the conflict with the personality of the Russian president on both sides. Pro-Ukrainian commentators just drew parallels with Putin as Hitler and attributed fascism to him - a technique that has long been tested in the Russian opposition discourse, where Putin is often called “Putler” and the pro-Kremlin organizations, especially ‘Nashi’ (‘Ours’), ‘Young Guard of United Russia’ – are frequently referred to as Putin-Jugend.<sup>56</sup>

Pro-Ukrainian commentators have also used the word ‘Rashism’ (conflation of ‘Russia’ and ‘fascism’) to emphasize the aggressive intentions of Russia. Another word that is often used by ‘militia-men of Novorossia’ – is ‘*karatel*’ (punisher). This word is also borrowed from the Great Patriotic War vocabulary and was often used in combination with ‘SS’ in

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51 There is substantial evidence that Russian National Unity (Russkoe Natsionalnoe Edinstvo) and BORN (military group of Russian nationalists) are involved in military conflict in Ukraine. See for details <http://ukraine.politicalcritique.org/2015/02/ot-azova-do-donbassa-ukraynskoe-dose-born/>

52 See e. g. VKontakte group ‘We are Russians. God is with us’ [https://vk.com/slovyane\\_russ](https://vk.com/slovyane_russ) (Accessed 3 February 2014).

53 Anti-Semitic groups usually motivate the involvement in the battle for Ukraine by ‘exposing’ a ‘conspiracy’ that has taken over the ‘Jewish-fascist’ Ukrainian government, see e.g. <https://vk.com/hodos.eduard> (Accessed 3 February 2014).

54 Griffin 2006.

55 Sadly, ScraperWiki’s Twitter API access has been suspended so it is not possible to use their scraping platform anymore.

56 Lurkmore 2014.

the military reports of the Great Patriotic War and after it to describe Nazi brutalities in the occupied territories.<sup>57</sup> This usage creates additional discursive parallels with fascism.

An interesting detail is the popularity of the word 'propaganda'. This word is actually used in pro-Russian posts: the blogger usually refers to the '**Western** anti-Russian propaganda'. Most users were dismayed that Western mass media seem to translate only a Ukrainian point of view, refusing to take the pro-Russian side into consideration. Collective memory is at play here as well: the understanding of 'propaganda' in Russia is not connected to the Soviet propaganda machine, but refers to the efforts of Western media to paint Russia black in any crisis situation.

Misuse of memory in foreign and domestic politics is a problem that has been raised in several studies<sup>58</sup> and seems to feature particularly prominently in discussion surrounding Ukrainian crisis. Given that fascism has a strong connotation with atrocities against civilians, total war, i.e. existential threat, designating the opposing side as 'fascist' the enunciator legitimizes her strong rhetoric and actions to counteract this phenomenon. The large number of media commentators who articulate the fascist threat emanating from Ukraine both verbally and visually confirms that collective memory plays an extremely important role in political legitimation and mobilization in Russia.

## Conclusions

The conflict in Ukraine was framed in Russian social media predominantly as a sort of another re-installment of Great Patriotic War: the Russian are yet again fighting fascism but this time its re-incarnation in Ukraine. Given that fascism as a narrative has rather deep embeddedness in Russian collective memory as existential threat discourse, it is fairly easy to manipulate public opinion into the necessity of extraordinary measures that leads effectively to the breakdown of the post Cold War security system. Consequently, EU and NATO enlargement, Russian-American relations, and the cooperation in the UN Security Council remain contentious.

Fascism in this conflict became a symbol of a symbol of the existential threat often amounting to an empty signifier, but the one that helped shape the public opinion in an anti-Ukrainian direction. Euromaidan was mostly branded as a fascist movement and 'anti-terrorist operation' conducted by President P. Poroshenko's government in the South-East of Ukraine was represented as a war against the civilian population. One of the indicators for the public acceptance of this kind of formulation is unusually high rating of President V. Putin – up to 87 percent according to the Levada sociological service<sup>59</sup> – and the popularity of the fascist discourse on social networks. Nevertheless, it should be

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57 Maksimov, and Karyshev 1987.

58 Memory at war project, Rutten, Fedor, and Zvereva 2013.

59 Levada 2014.

noted some variability of different online audiences in May and June 2014. While Russian Twitter featured the conflict in Ukraine framed as a battle between fascist and anti-fascist movements, social networks VKontakte and LiveJournal offered a much wider range of opinions, including the more radical pro-Russian (anti-American, right-wing racist), and a more neutral or pro-Ukrainian positions.

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