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# “Fraternal” nations and challenges to sovereignty in Ukraine:

## The politics of linguistic and religious ties

### ABSTRACT

Vladimir Putin’s recent assertions that Russian “compatriots” were suffering in Ukraine contributed to a rapid escalation of instability and violence in this borderland country that defines the margins of Europe and the edge of Eurasia. After 23 years of independence, Ukraine retains significant regional diversity and strong local identities. At the same time, social differences understood in terms of ethnicity, language choice, and religious affiliation have become less defined, as Ukrainians have embraced fluid linguistic and religious practices that defy easy characterization. On the basis of long-term fieldwork in Ukraine, I argue that “non-accommodating bilingualism” and “ambient faith” characterize everyday linguistic and religious practices in this postcolonial, post-Soviet-socialist space. This flexibility is adaptive domestically. Paradoxically, it contributes to the vulnerability of Ukrainian sovereignty when polarizing, politicized categories based on supposedly identifiable cultural attributes inject a spurious precision into everyday practices with the aim of redefining state sovereignty. [*language, religion, nationalism, colonial, borderland, Ukraine, Russia*]

**T**he crisis in Ukraine stems from being forced to choose. It began when Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich and his governing circle of oligarchic partners decided to privilege maintaining good relations with Russia by entering into the Eurasian Customs Union overtaking the initial steps toward a trade agreement with the European Union. The decision not to sign the EU Association Agreement on November 21, 2013, set in motion consequences that continue to test geopolitical alliances. After several hundred years of political union with Russia and a mere 23 years of independence, as far as the most vocal segment of the population was concerned, the future of the country was decidedly European, not Russian.

Immediately following this decision, massive demonstrations broke out on the Euromaidan, as Kyiv’s central square became known. Throngs of outraged citizens braved freezing temperatures and riot police to express their unequivocal condemnation of the decision (see Figures 1 and 2). These protests were remarkable in the tactics they employed: They were deliberately leaderless, steadfastly nonviolent, and heavily reliant on social media to create a counterdiscourse to what was reported on official Russian television. With hundreds of thousands of demonstrators amassed on the streets, many bused in from around the country, more and more government buildings were taken over by protesters. Yanukovich responded by ordering the square cleared on February 20, 2014, resulting in the death of over 100 people, the second such resort to violence to silence protesters that yielded dead bodies. Worldwide condemnation was swift, but the anger of Ukrainians was harsher still. Yanukovich fled in the night to the safety of a provincial Russian city, the grounds of his personal compound were open to the public as a “Museum of Corruption,” and an interim government was quickly formed, headed by an ordained Baptist minister (Snyder 2014).

From there, events escalated even more rapidly and dramatically. Russian president Vladimir Putin began to subvert international law by projecting a fixed identity and minority status onto some residents of Ukraine, alleging persecution, and using disinformation to do so. He asserted his



**Figure 1.** Protesters on the barricades on the edge of the Maidan in Kyiv near the government district. Special forces are stationed in the park. January 31, 2014. Photo by Oksana Iurkova.

moral obligation to defend compatriots (*sootechestvenniki*), meaning Russians and Russian speakers in Ukraine against suffering. He cited Article 61 of the Russian Constitution, which states that “the Russian Federation shall guarantee its citizens protection and patronage abroad” (Garant Internet 2001), and the internationally recognized “Responsibility to Protect” norm as the legal justifications to do so.<sup>1</sup> This pretext served to perpetuate the crypto-colonialism that has characterized the “fraternal” relationship between Russia and Ukraine. It ratcheted up the price for “independent” statehood to include social instability, crushing economic dependence on Russian energy reserves, and compromised autonomy in an effort to remove the “post” from the political expression “post-Soviet space.”<sup>2</sup>

The Crimean peninsula was occupied by what some Ukrainians called “little green men,” meaning alien, uniformed, masked, armed soldiers with no identifying insignia, but presumably Russian (Yurchak 2014). In short order, Crimea was annexed to Russia via a referendum in March 2014 and the boundaries of Ukrainian statehood redrawn. As I write in early May 2014, in several other

Ukrainian cities, “pro-Russian activists” have clashed with Ukrainian forces, resulting in more casualties and popular vigils for the dead. More than 40,000 Russian troops stand poised on the Russo-Ukrainian border to protect those Putin calls “sootechestvenniki,” or “compatriots,” in a region he refers to as “Novorossia,” meaning “New Russia,” a name given to southeastern Ukraine when it was seized from the Ottoman Empire in the late 18th century and incorporated into the Russian Empire.

What can ethnographic research tell us about who these “Russian compatriots” in Ukraine might be? Drawing on over 20 years of fieldwork in several regions of the country, here I explore how linguistic preferences and religious affiliations have become malleable since the fall of the USSR in 1991. Should this recent conflict provoke sharp distinctions in language preferences and religious choices based on rigid criteria defining categories that are legible to outside states, tensions and tempers could flare. We know from anthropological research on the Yugoslav wars that the violence in that case was the most extraordinary in heterogeneous regions, which made the “forced unmixing of



**Figure 2.** Buses were used by both the protesters and the government to block roadways leading to the Maidan. January 21, 2014. Photo by Oksana Iurkova.

peoples” the most brutal (Hayden 1996:783). Here I show how fictions of minority status and fictions of discrimination could lead to very real violence. I trace the emergence of adaptive, blended practices concerning language and religion since 1991, suggesting that the homogenization of such a heterodox population could be extremely difficult. I conclude by noting what this crisis reveals about enduring forms of postimperial colonialism and the fragility of state sovereignty.

### Encounters with difference

Ethnography exposes how daily interactions can be carriers of the political. A viable, sustainable political future for all states is predicated on engaging the cultural differences of citizens without effacing them. Encounters with difference, when politicized and mapped onto international law, can have serious consequences for state sovereignty, which, it turns out, is far more conditional and dependent on larger state alliances than some national leaders might think.<sup>3</sup> This is especially true in a fragile new state in an old bor-

derland region that has been pummeled with violence over the course of the last century.

At points in the past, the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Russian Empires controlled parts of what is today Ukraine, and this history has yielded significant regional diversity grounded in strong local identities (Richardson 2008; Szmagalska-Follis 2008; Uehling 2004; Veidlinger 2013; Wanner 1998).<sup>4</sup> Despite multiple attempts to establish an independent Ukrainian state, colonial subjugation to multiple ruling entities became the norm. It reached its apex in the 20th century when historian Kate Brown (2004) argued that, as part of the USSR, Soviet Ukraine was transformed from an ethnic borderland mosaic into the Soviet heartland. Documenting this transformational process prompted Timothy Snyder (2010) to refer to the western borderland region of the USSR as the “bloodlands.” Anthropologists have also studied Ukraine as a borderland (Hann 1998; Szmagalska-Follis 2008; Wanner 2011; Zhurzhenko 2010). Caught between the twin political projects of socialism and national socialism, both of which resorted to unprecedented violence, the loss of life and tumultuous change that Ukrainians have witnessed in the 20th century

is truly staggering: two world wars, two revolutions, a five-year civil war, a famine that killed three to four million, Stalinist repressions, and, eventually, the collapse of the Soviet state and aspects of the Soviet way of life.

When a colony becomes an independent state, whose responsibility is it to protect whom? Who determines if a certain population is in danger? The breakup of the USSR in 1991 left approximately 25 million ethnic Russians and millions more Russian speakers, or “compatriots” (sootechestvenniki), living outside Russia, the greatest number and concentration of whom are in eastern and southern Ukraine. The official definition of a sootechestvennik living outside the Russian Federation is very broad. It includes any person

having made a free choice in favor of a spiritual, cultural and legal connection with the Russian Federation and who descends in a direct line from relatives who have lived on the territory of the Russian Federation, including citizens of the USSR, citizens of states created from the former USSR having received citizenship from those states, and individuals without citizenship. [Federal Migration Service of Russia 2014, my translation]

In essence, the category of “sootechestvennik” is a mechanism that proposes to give individuals the means to parlay feelings of “cultural intimacy” into the systems and symbols of state authority to which they are subject. When compatriots live in geographic concentration, the principle of protecting them introduces the possibility of converting regions of another country into zones of diminished sovereignty.

Sootechestvenniki in Ukraine are receiving the “protection and patronage” the Russian constitution guarantees them regardless of whether they want or need it and irrespective of the fact that they live in another sovereign state. The basis of Russian intervention in Ukraine—official and unofficial—trades on an assumption that compatriots are as easily identifiable as the “atrocities” that are befalling them. The “spiritual and cultural connections” that mark compatriots as such refer primarily to religion and language, which could, indeed, serve as vehicles by which the rights of a group are systematically violated. Yet it is unclear how this is occurring in Ukraine, even as claims to protect compatriots abroad are used to generate legitimacy in the “homeland.”

### The language of compatriots

Not all Russian speakers in Ukraine consider themselves Russian “compatriots.” Tatiana is a 40-year-old biologist who lives in Kharkiv, an eastern Ukrainian city very close to the Russian border. She was born into a Russian-speaking Ukrainian family in Soviet Moldavia in a region that has since become Transnistria, a Russian protectorate, where

her father still lives. Her sisters are Russian citizens and live in Russia. With emotion bordering on indignation, she writes, “I am a Russian-speaking Ukrainian. And I don’t need ANY protection!!!! There is no discrimination against Russian speakers in Ukraine and never has been . . . Even with close relatives in Russia, there is no way someone could use me as an example of a compatriot!”<sup>5</sup> She teaches in Russian at the Ukrainian university where she works and publishes her research in both Russian and Ukrainian. She speaks with her son in Russian but expects that he will be educated in Ukrainian. In short, she is a Ukrainian who uses whichever language she wants to whenever she wants to.

Asking a Russian speaker since the crisis began if he or she is a Russian “compatriot” generates such an emphatic response because communication practices in Ukraine are dominated by what Laada Bilaniuk (2005) has called “non-accommodating bilingualism.” This means that a person uses a “language of preference” regardless of the language spoken by his or her conversation partners. The assumption is that everyone is at least passively bilingual because exposure to both Russian and Ukrainian is so constant.

Two of my closest friends in Kyiv, largely a Russian-speaking city, illustrate the “language of preference” phenomenon. Svita grew up speaking Russian with her parents, who spoke Russian with their parents. When she married a man from a Ukrainian-speaking family, they moved in with her parents but made their family language Ukrainian. Ukrainian has since become Svita’s language of preference, and she speaks it on the streets, at work, and at home with all her family members. Her parents continued to speak with each other and to Svita’s family in Russian, even though Svita’s family usually respond in Ukrainian. The speakers in this household use their respective languages of preference throughout their daily lives, regardless of who is speaking to whom and largely regardless of context, only dipping into the other language for affect and emphasis.

Nina, by contrast, organizes her language of preference by person, categorizing people in her mind as either “Russian speaking” or “Ukrainian speaking.” In a group setting, she effortlessly shifts back and forth between the two languages according to whom she is speaking. I met Nina through a mutual Russian-speaking friend, and to this day she speaks to me exclusively in Russian. But Nina speaks Ukrainian with her mother and her daughter, which is their language of preference, so that is the language that I speak with them too. For the first few years, I would respond to each of them in their language of preference. At times, during intergenerational conversations, switching became complicated and fatiguing. After a while, I began to do just what most Ukrainians do: I chose one language and stuck to it.

Just as in dinner-table conversations at my friends’ houses, talk-based media is almost like a ping-pong match with two languages bouncing back and forth between hosts

and guests (Bilaniuk 2010). I know for a fact that all eight people in Svita's and Nina's households are perfectly able to speak two languages, but they simply choose not to. Yet, when a Ukrainian or Russian news anchor interviews a person on the street and the interviewee answers in the other language, it is not entirely clear whether the respondent is unable or unwilling to speak the interviewer's language. Two languages are used even in formal situations, such as televised presidential addresses. Ukraine's second president, Leonid Kuchma, used to read his speeches in Ukrainian and then respond to journalists' questions in Russian. He acknowledged the status of the Ukrainian language by giving his speech in Ukrainian but lacked the ability to spontaneously respond to complex questions in that language. So he switched to Russian without skipping a beat.

In the Soviet Union in certain contexts, choosing Ukrainian as a preferred language constituted a statement against Soviet power. In the 1990s, again depending on the context, speaking Ukrainian could be understood as a conscious choice to show support for Ukrainian statehood. Russian, on the other hand, has historically been the language of social mobility. Its use remains so widespread today in many regions of Ukraine that, beyond marking one as an urban person, it carries negligible political valence. Over time, it has become entirely acceptable in a variety of contexts, public and private, formal and informal, to simply not accommodate the linguistic preferences of one's speech partner. As a result, language choice, until this crisis, had become significantly less politicized and no longer reliably signaled a person's position on a political spectrum of compliance with or opposition to state authorities and their respective ideologies.

Another measure reveals the degree of willingness, regionally and over time, to accommodate the linguistic choices of others. I conducted the research for my first book from 1992 to 1997, spending a total of almost three years in Ukraine (Wanner 1998). It took me to Lviv, in western Ukraine, to Kyiv, the capital in central Ukraine, and to Kharkiv, a city in eastern Ukraine 30 miles from the Russian border. In those early years of statehood, given the strong regional and local identities in the country, many of which straddle Ukrainian state borders, there was considerable concern that a Ukrainian national identity derived primarily from shared citizenship was too weak to support an independent state. At that time, I began an experiment, which I continue today, of speaking the nonpredominant language on public transportation to gauge the reaction of other passengers. In the early 1990s, when I would speak Ukrainian in Kharkiv, all heads would turn; in Kyiv, people were mostly indifferent when I spoke Ukrainian; and in Lviv, no one blinked when I spoke Russian.

Over the years, as trolleybuses became *marshrutki*, or minivans, the reactions changed as well. In 2010 in Kharkiv, no one reacted when I spoke Ukrainian, and some even responded with pleasantries in Ukrainian. As recently as September 2013, when I was in Kyiv, people in stores, at the market, and on public transportation would even engage me in conversation in Ukrainian—a far cry from the low point in 1995 when a waiter in a café responded to my request (in Ukrainian) for coffee by shouting, “Girl, speak normally!” In contrast, in 2012 in the western Ukrainian city of Chernivtsi, there was still no reaction when I spoke Russian in a variety of contexts—without apologizing and without even asking first if the other person spoke Russian. One could intermittently hear Russian in the corridors of the university, in shops, and on the streets, although the predominant language in Chernivtsi is Ukrainian.

Research in schools reveals a similar sliding scale of language preferences. (Fournier 2012; Polese 2010; Wanner 1998:79–90). In 1991 in predominantly Russian-speaking regions, only a handful of schools taught in Ukrainian. Now in those same regions written educational materials (textbooks, curricula, documents, etc.) are in Ukrainian but oral communication, both formal instruction and informal conversation, remains largely in Russian. Ukrainian might be the state language, but there is little pressure to comply with its implementation. Abel Polese refers to this localized, improvisational style of educational design that this element of language choice has produced as “national standardization with a human face” (2010:58).

Both language of preference and the ability to accommodate were demonstrated in the late 1990s when I did research on the restructuring of the coal industry and its effects on poverty in and around Luhansk and Donetsk, two large urban centers where pro-Russian separatists are particularly visible today. I visited coal mines, collective farms, soccer matches, and villages, all unlikely tourist destinations. People would routinely—and mistakenly—assume that I was a member of the Ukrainian diaspora; why else would a foreigner turn up at such places? They would address me in Ukrainian as Pani Katryn, or Miss Catherine. Although I could sometimes hear their mistakes in Ukrainian or their reliance on *surzhyk*, a dialect blend of Ukrainian and Russian, people were consistently willing to speak to me in Ukrainian. Almost always, though, once tipped off that I also spoke Russian, they would switch to Russian and not another word of Ukrainian would be heard. Yet because first name and patronymic would be the polite form of address in Russian, and, as a foreigner, I do not use a patronymic, many continued to address me as Pani Katryn. So, in my experience, even on the heels of the collapse of the USSR and even in this Russified region known as the “cradle of the proletariat” that produced Stakhanovite workers and other heroes of labor from the depths of the coal mines, the

conventions of Ukrainian polite forms of address could be heard.

This non-accommodating bilingualism and fluid choice of language poses particularly acute challenges to sociologists and demographers who rely on fixed, unambiguous categories to conduct survey research. Categories, such as “mother tongue” (*ridna mova*), inherited from the Soviet era, have been mercilessly criticized, as have “first language” and “native language” because of the inaccurate findings they produce. When I conduct interviews and do not know the person’s language of preference in advance, I nearly always ask in two languages which language the respondent prefers: “Iak vam zruchno? Ukrain’ska mova,” then changing to Russian, “ili vy predpochitaete govorit’ po-russki?” [Is Ukrainian convenient for you or do you prefer to speak Russian?].

After 23 years of language policies targeting day care centers and universities as bookends of Ukrainian-language instruction, a new generation has arisen that is comfortable in both languages such that non-accommodation has become a norm. Even the people I know in Ukraine who consider themselves culturally and linguistically Russian, the very “compatriots” Putin refers to, send their children to Ukrainian-language schools without blinking. It is obvious to them which language their children should be educated in. It is equally obvious to them that their children will speak flawless, nonaccented Russian, although, not having been educated in Russian, they might lack writing skills. A cultural identity and state identity are simultaneously respected and embraced. As sure as they are Russians, they are also citizens of Ukraine.<sup>6</sup> It is political provocation that turns them into Russian compatriots. In response, some Maidan protesters wore signs self-declaring as “Russian-speaking nationalists” specifically to mark themselves as noncompatriots. The protests, if anything, dismissed language politics in favor of “real” issues, such as the corruption of the judiciary, the casual disregard for the law, and massive accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few.

The use of the term *compatriot* risks making language preference a proxy for a political preference. Politicizing languages by emplacing them within a crypto-colonial hierarchy catering to an imperial power could have pronounced political ramifications. On the one hand, the regional use of Ukrainian could become entrenched if speaking Ukrainian becomes a means to access Europeanness or to distance oneself from what might be perceived as Putin’s revival of Great Russian chauvinism. On the other hand, should the Russian media’s version of pro-Ukrainian activists as Russophobic fascists gain even more traction, then language could, once again, become a key means by which Ukrainians are Russified and Ukrainian claims to sovereignty are weakened. In sum, this crisis risks destroying the fluid acceptance of linguistic preferences and the high levels of bilingualism that have been achieved so far. The versatil-

ity of language choice makes it difficult to identify a Russian compatriot in terms of language. Paradoxically, it also leaves the Ukrainian state vulnerable to human-rights-based calls for national self-determination and separatism that can be used to undermine its sovereignty.

### Orthodoxy as ambient faith

Perilous delineations are also brewing in terms of religious allegiances. The religious landscape is far more complex and diverse in Ukraine than it is in Russia.<sup>7</sup> Although both countries share a common Orthodox tradition, the situation is reminiscent of George Bernard Shaw’s insight that “England and America are two countries separated by a common language.” As a faith tradition, Orthodoxy is organized on a nation-state model, with state churches serving a particular nation, yielding a Russian Orthodox Church, Greek Orthodox Church, Serbian Orthodox Church, and so on. As a result, there is far less tension than elsewhere between categories of the religious and the secular as modes of being and modes of governing. This lack of tension, driven by an inherited sense of religious identity and a historically public role for religion, is perhaps why scholars who have theoretically engaged secularization most incisively have bypassed consideration of Eastern Christian societies (Asad 2003; Casanova 2006).<sup>8</sup>

Currently, there are four Eastern Christian churches in Ukraine claiming to be national churches. First, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) is what the Orthodox churches affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church call themselves in Ukraine. Second, a schism to produce a Ukrainian church led to the creation in 1992 of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP). Third, the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC) was created in 1921, also as part of a struggle for Ukrainian statehood, but was forcibly disbanded in the 1930s although it thrived in diaspora communities before returning to Ukraine in 1990. As breakaway, schismatic churches, neither the UOC-KP nor the UAOC is canonically recognized. Fourth, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) is a hybrid denomination, created in the 16th century when part of Ukraine was under Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth rule. It has a Byzantine tradition and liturgy but recognizes papal authority. When western Ukraine was annexed to the USSR during World War II, fearing Vatican interference, Stalin outlawed the UGCC, disbanding its five million adherents into other religious communities. The differences among these groups have little to do with issues of belief or practice. Rather, they hinge on the different authority figures each recognizes and the spatial dimensions of their communities (“Russian World,” Ukrainian nation-state, Ukrainians plus diasporic communities, and western Ukrainians plus diasporic communities, respectively).

Statistics on religious affiliation are notoriously inaccurate. Nonetheless, to give a sense of the dimensions of these jurisdictions, I note that 50.4 percent of the population is allied with the UOC-Kyiv Patriarchate, which, as of 2011, had 4,504 registered religious entities (churches, monasteries, associations, etc.); 26 percent claim allegiance to the UOC-Moscow Patriarchate, which has 12,251 entities; 7 percent with the Autocephalous Orthodox Church, with 1,227; and 8 percent with the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, which has 3,825 registered organizations (Index Mundi 2013; Religious Information Service of Ukraine 2012). The most recently created breakaway Orthodox Church, the UOC-KP, has the greatest number of supporters, although it has far fewer churches than the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine, or UOC-MP. Since 1991, each Ukrainian president has had to grapple with demands to unify the three Orthodox Churches into one. Such attempts have met with vigorous resistance from the Russian Orthodox Church and have ultimately failed.

Russian Orthodox clergy refer to their flock as the “Russian World,” an imperial reference to Orthodoxy uniting Great Russia, Little Russia, and White Russia, as Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus were called in the Russian Empire. Religiosity among Orthodox believers has historically been more robust in southern agricultural Ukraine than in Russia. Should the various Orthodox Churches in Ukraine unite into one and become independent from Moscow, given the number of church properties, amount of donations, and the number of clergy from Ukraine, this could have very significant ramifications for the Russian Church.

For these reasons, it would be a mistake to understand religious divisions as a Yugoslavia-like Orthodox–Catholic split.<sup>9</sup> The most acute disputes are among Orthodox, some of whom are enjoined to Moscow and others emphatically not. Clergy of all persuasions were visible on the Maidan and present during the Orange Revolution in 2004, clearly supporting the protesters against state power. Clergy allied with the Russian Orthodox Church were absent during the 2004 Orange Revolution, but some actively supported the protesters on the Maidan, suggesting the start of fractures in a pro-state position. However, if the model of a state church serving a particular nation triumphs in Ukraine, as it has in Russia, the winner-take-all outcome is likely to diminish religious pluralism and could lead to a particular group with an approved political orientation being given monopoly status and a definitive role in public life. This prospect is why virtually all religious minorities, especially Jews, favor remaining part of Ukraine.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, the essential difference between Orthodoxy in Russia and Ukraine is the role that religion has come to play in public life. Russia has become a confessional state and Ukraine has not.

Much is at stake for the Orthodox Church in this conflict. In a speech to the Russian Duma on March 19, 2014, Vladimir Putin laments the “suffering” of “compatriots” in the “near abroad” and claims, “we are not simply close

neighbours but, as I have said many times already, we are one people. Kiev is the mother of Russian cities. Ancient Rus is our common source and we cannot live without each other.”<sup>11</sup> Russia’s “special calling” is to unite Eastern Slavs as “fraternal” nations under a common Orthodox tradition, which, according to Putin, has “predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilization and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus.”<sup>12</sup> In this way, Putin posits the perimeters of the Russian World as a template for political boundaries and as a connection to Orthodoxy that justifies compatriot status. (See Figure 3.)

Just as language could become a proxy for political orientation, so could religion. The high levels of bilingualism and rapid code switching find their counterpart in attitudes toward Orthodoxy, which practice indexes more accurately than affiliation to a particular religious institution. Orthodoxy, like the Russian language, formidably ties Russia and Ukraine into a common cultural space and informs an understanding of the two as “fraternal nations.” That said, and despite the various Orthodox jurisdictions, unmixing religious practices will be as messy as unmixing linguistic ones.

Orthodoxy has a prominent presence in both Ukraine and Russia to the extent that I have called it an “ambient faith” (Wanner 2014a). In doing so, I have taken inspiration from Matthew Engelke (2012), who provides a compelling analysis of the attempts of the Bible Society of England and Wales to enact an ambient faith in response to secularism. This society’s goal is to subtly infuse the background ambience of certain public sites with Christian principles such that they rise to the fore in the consciousness and interiority of urban residents, thereby making public and private domains interpenetrate. Engelke’s framing of an “ambience of faith” that slips into and among public and private and political and religious domains alike offers a compelling alternative to public religion (Casanova 1994) or civil religion (Luke 1987:108).

In Ukraine, Orthodoxy functions as an ambient faith alongside secularism and not as a direct challenge to it. Ambient faith is created through affective practices in shared sensual and aesthetic environments that inform sociality, belonging, and the rhythms of social and political life by shaping the way one lives and breathes, thinks and intuitively acts and reacts. Although it permeates public life, ambient faith is not a public or a civil religion, but it can create political inclinations that can be mobilized at any time. Ambient faith is valuable to statecraft and governance precisely because of the affective experiences faith offers that can fundamentally shape political judgment and reason. It is capable of existing alongside secularism and atheism because it does not appeal to transcendent truths, other than the reality of its own enduring existence, nor does it require institutional affirmation, although it benefits from it.

Ambient faith springs from the historical role of Orthodoxy as a fundamental pillar of the state and nation—regardless of how both concepts have been



**Figure 3.** Crowds of protesters gathered in front of St. Michael's Cathedral, one of Kyiv's largest Orthodox cathedrals, February 2014. The monastery doubled as a refuge and later as a makeshift hospital for protesters trying to escape government forces. Photo by Oksana Iurkova.

understood—and is manifest in the “symphonic relationship” between church and state (*simfonia*). Because Orthodoxy articulates a social and political mode of belonging, there has never been the sharp differentiation of political and religious spheres that characterizes the post-Enlightenment normative version of modern governance. Religion has come to penetrate public and private domains alike, making the implementation of secularism as a political principle, even during the Soviet period, incomplete at best (Wanner 2012:7–23). This means that ambient faith makes unmixing Orthodoxy from public life akin to unmixing Ukrainians from Russian compatriots.

In a similar vein, Vlad Naumescu (2006:4) asserts that there is an “Orthodox imaginary” among the western Ukrainians he studied that allows believers to minimize and transcend confessional boundaries among “national” churches by imagining them into one. This professed unity has emerged thanks to extensive jurisdictional switching, frequent intermarriage, and the growing visibility of non-traditional faith groups. Naumescu seems to suggest that the Orthodox imaginary is an adaptive strategy Ukrainians have devised to grapple with institutionalized religion as they would like it to be (unitary, ambient, and depoliticized), rather than how it is (divided; competing for believers, money, and state privileges; and increasingly used as a pawn in geopolitical struggles).

A projection of an imagined unity that allows believers to separate their own institutional commitments from the political orientations of those institutions nonetheless has limits. There is a difference between an ambient faith, which exists independent of institutional differences, and an imagined unity, which does not allow for differences and thereby radically transforms their meaning. The “Orthodox imaginary” that Naumescu posits is, after all, a local version of the “Russian World,” which could also be considered an Orthodox imaginary.<sup>13</sup>

Although individuals do, indeed, shift among different jurisdictions with great ease, the same is not true for clergy or property. Institutions are not as flexible as individuals. After the UAOC and UGCC churches were outlawed, property and some clergy went to the Russian Orthodox Church. After 1991, however, many clergy reaffiliated back and, after very contentious disputes, property was also transferred back, revealing the limits of an imagined unity. Ambient faith is not anchored in a specific institution, although it draws on the Orthodox tradition. Thus, even without an imaginary, it overrides institutional divisions and, as I discuss below, engages the majority of the Ukrainian population, who are, in fact, not churchgoers and not believers. In the same breath, ambient faith offers “a spiritual connection” to Russia and allows a compatriot status to be claimed and to be assigned.

## Syncretic secularism

Just as standard categories, such as “native language” and “first language,” are inadequate to understand linguistic practices in Ukraine, ambient faith yields new concepts beyond “believer,” “atheist,” and “affiliation” to understand the role of religion in Ukrainian society and the extent of “mixing.” For those who do not attend religious services, and this refers to the overwhelming majority of the Ukrainian population, ambient faith results from syncretic secularism, a blending of belief, doubt, and nonbelief with the desire to belong and the refusal to be coerced by institutions. Syncretic secularism meshes seemingly opposed inclinations and desires in novel reconceptualizations of religiosity. This phenomenon has become apparent to me in fieldwork conducted since 2009 because I have studiously avoided asking about religion (*relihiia*). Rather, I focus on faith-based practices, however they are understood.

Syncretic secularism in the form of ambient faith has become a mode of being and a mode of belonging that continues to influence how faith is lived as opposed to how religion is practiced. The amorphousness and multiplicities of allegiances reflected in syncretic secular practices are compounded by a wariness of institutions and an entrenched suspicion of individuals in positions of authority. The syncretic secular aspects of ambient faith also have a significant impact on the political power of religiosity, expanding the ways the political and the religious can be melded together to greater effect.

Here I note several phrases that are conversationally in use to describe attitudes toward ambient faith: Orthodox atheists; atheists with traditions; and nonbelieving, nonatheist sympathizers. This spectrum of attitudes reflects a syncretic secular blending of nonbelief and faith, abstention and practice, and a guarded distance and active attachment, all of which contribute to making Orthodoxy an ambient faith.

“Orthodox atheist” is a concept popularized by Belarusian president Lukashenka, who declared himself an “Orthodox communist,” meaning avowedly atheist but still loyal to the Orthodox Church, to distinguish himself from atheists who are antagonistic toward the Church. “Orthodox atheism” is epitomized by Vladimir, a middle-aged man from Donetsk.<sup>14</sup> He professes to be antitheistic and is entirely nonpracticing. Yet he considers himself to have been “raised in Slavic culture,” which he essentially understands as religion in a vernacular cultural form, and this is why he is receptive to the manifestations of ambient faith. For example, he has no objection to the influence the Orthodox Church has on politics in Ukraine despite the proclaimed separation of church and state. The only church that should have such influence, he insists, is the Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate, whose ability he lauds to locate Ukraine within a trinity of Russians, Ukraini-

ans, and Belarusians. His allegiance to the Russian Orthodox Church rests on its contribution to Slavic history, its cultural achievements as well as, in his view, its beneficial and instrumental use in politics today. In other words, his endorsement of the church has nothing to do with religion per se and rests on its ability to place him within the Russian World.

The phrase “atheists with traditions” emerged quite recently and refers to people who do not believe in any kind of higher power but who want to belong and be part of something greater than themselves. For example, atheists with traditions come to church to have Easter baskets of food blessed by the priest, have their children baptized, or request a priest to seal the grave of a relative as part of a funeral service. Gutted of belief in the supernatural, for atheists with traditions, Orthodox practices mark time in a meaningful way and connect them to their ancestors as well as to their neighbors as they celebrate Easter, Christmas, baptisms, and marriages and commemorate death with “traditions” that are familiar and shared. The permeation of public life with ambient faith combines with a sense of inherited religious identity that ethnic parentage automatically bequeaths such that atheists with traditions can engage in these practices as nonbelievers and still feel that they are authentically their own. They might be atheists but their nationality also makes them Orthodox, which gives them traditions that they avail themselves of on their own terms.<sup>15</sup>

Expanding slightly the scope of institutional commitment, Volodymyr, a 33-year-old computer programmer from Lutsk, western Ukraine, referred to himself and others as “nonbelieving, nonatheist sympathizers” (*prikhil'nyky neviruiuchii ne ateisti*). This phrase points to a sense of emotional involvement in religiosity and spiritual matters by expressing support but still carries a wavering commitment to both belief and nonbelief. Volodymyr has “traditions” and goes to church, say, to light a candle when in need of comfort, but he does not attend formal services. In other words, he practices some form of faith but exclusively on his own terms and in an improvised fashion. He explains, “I don’t know how many nonbelievers there are in Ukraine . . . But there’s a difference between nonbelievers and those who have doubts. Like me, people don’t know if there is a god or not . . . I think there are a lot of nonbelieving, nonatheist sympathizers like me going to church in Ukraine.”<sup>16</sup> His religiosity melds what might seem to others, but not to him, opposing notions of belief and nonbelief and belonging and nonaffiliation into one.

Until now, ambient faith born of syncretic secular tendencies has made for few conflicts concerning religion, but that could change if political confrontations begin to involve disputes over the sacred. In trying to track endorsement of one Orthodox jurisdiction over others by inquiring into religious affiliation—“Iaka u vas vira?”—I have usually

received a response of “prostō Pravoslavnie” (simply Orthodox). Even a firm commitment to faith is often accompanied by a negligible commitment to a particular religious group. Individual believers skirt selecting a particular jurisdiction until a life-cycle ritual arises. Often the choice is clear, but the reasons to select one are few.

A pervasive suspicion toward institutions of any kind and a guarded attitude toward anyone in a position of authority, including clergy, provide the underpinnings for an allegiance to ambient faith over Orthodox institutions. It leads people to self-identify as spiritual (*dukhovna liudina*) but not as religious. It prompts them to appeal to a *dukhovnik*, an elder or spiritual counselor, for advice, over investing in the moral authority of clergy, regardless of rank or institution.<sup>17</sup> In short, ambient faith is buttressed not only by a syncretic secular mix of belief and doubt but also by a pronounced detachment from clergy and religious institutions.

Against such affective convictions, how are Russian “compatriots” distinct from other Orthodox believers? Where might the place for “compatriots” be on the spectrum of nonbelieving, nonatheist ambient faith practitioners? How can one project discrimination on Russian Orthodox believers when so many embrace forms of faith born of syncretic secularism that draw on ambient faith? And yet it is this very ambient faith that allows Ukraine to be annexed, without a referendum, into the Russian World.

## Reconciliation

The cultural and geographic proximity of Ukrainians to Russians is such that the main question is when and on what terms the reconciliation will take place. If nothing else, this conflict has demonstrated that no state is truly sovereign, which is, in fact, the painful, “poisonous truth,” to use Veena Das’s (2008) phrase, that seems inescapable and must be addressed. The price for stability and security is dependence on larger political and economic entities and the loss of autonomy that this implies. NATO, the European Union, the Eurasian Customs Union, and the new Eastern Partnership Initiative that unites Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine are all manifestations of the need for protection that can only be secured by membership in a bloc. For states such as Ukraine, caught in a borderland buffer zone, securing such membership has been contentious. A country the size of France with 46 million people, it turns out, is only slightly less colonized and marginally less dependent now than when it was a republic of the USSR or a region of the Russian Empire. The civilizational superiority of an imperial state needs the low, folk culture of its dependent colonies to reaffirm its status as a great power.

Other regions of the Russian Empire, such as Finland, at a key pivotal moment in history, were able to transform

their position in the global hierarchy of states and cultures into recognized Europeanness and EU membership, albeit after the collapse of the USSR, all the while maintaining a nonthreatening proximity to and robust trade with Russia. It was reasonable for Ukrainians to think that a “Finlandization” of their country was possible too and that the contentiousness of betwixt and between could be parlayed into a productive bridge linking Europe and Eurasia.<sup>18</sup>

Language and religion had gradually become less politicized in Ukraine, as the practices of non-accommodating bilingualism and Orthodoxy as ambient faith illustrate. The cultivated amorphous, diffuse, and fluid nature of these everyday cultural practices are adaptive to Ukraine’s new place in the world but do not forfeit its older one. This crisis, however, is forcing a spurious precision as the nature of the political in everyday practices shifts once again. The obliteration of negligible variation has the potential to resurrect marked divisions and differences, driving a wedge not just between Russians and Ukrainians but mostly among the residents of Ukraine. On the basis of his experiences in Yugoslavia, Robert Hayden tells us that “it is this lack of congruence between the present reality of life as lived and the objectification of life as it suddenly must be lived that produces the mortal horrors of ethnic cleansing” (1996:784). Most Russian-speaking Ukrainians are not Russian compatriots, and neither are the various atheists with traditions, sympathies, and practices. What would it take to make them so? The fear of discrimination and deprivation? Once emotions of fear, resentment, and anger over humiliation come into play, they are difficult to separate from the political forces that produce them, and it becomes that much harder to prevent violence.

“Welcome to Hell” read a sign hung on a regional government building filled with explosives and occupied by a group of Soviet veterans of the Afghan War in the eastern Ukrainian city of Luhansk. These protesters were demanding increased autonomy from both Moscow and Kyiv. The profoundly colonial standing of Ukrainians—under the Russian Empire, Soviet Union, and now, for some regions, under an ostensibly independent state—endures, it seems.

Ukrainians have always identified with the Irish in their struggles with the English. One wonders if some local pro-Russian activists increasingly identify with the Northern Irish. Such a thought is not reassuring. The Troubles lasted 30 years and took the lives of 3,600 people in endless conflicts over the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. That struggle too is reminiscent of the Russian insistence on Ukraine adopting a federalist system. Federalism is often the mode of governance of choice for regionally distinct societies: witness Switzerland, Belgium, and Canada. Yet it escapes no one’s attention that Putin has successfully stripped regional governments within the Russian Federation of much of their autonomy by centralizing power in Moscow.

Regardless of the exact future contours of the Ukrainian state or the form of governance that state adopts, will it ever be possible for it to shed a colonial status? What kind of autonomy, regional or otherwise, can ever be achieved if colonial dependence simply reemerges in the hierarchical relationships among sovereign states, allowing the imperial state to mobilize its own understandings of who was and still is a compatriot? Such forms of dependence are supported by national scripts of cultural attributes that nations are expected to follow, positioning them conveniently in relation to larger political and economic blocs in such a way that the dependence becomes self-perpetuating.

The tragedy for Ukraine is that its geopolitical position gives it a pivotal role in determining the contours of Europe and Eurasia. Its position adjusts the positions of other states in these political hierarchies and alerts them that they too could be vulnerable to aggression if their Russian compatriots receive “protection and patronage.” Until now, successive Ukrainian governments have tried to harness the benefits of being a borderland, of having access to both Europe and Eurasia, just as Ukrainians have tried to be both Russian and Ukrainian speakers, both believers and doubters, joiners and nonaffiliated. One step toward the Eurasian Customs Union and away from the European Union has given others a vested interest in how Ukrainians live aspects of their everyday lives. It has provided an incentive to categorize them with spurious precision as compatriots of one state or the other. Which language will they choose to speak and which Orthodox Church will they endorse? Forcing the choices and the answers to these questions would impose a rigidity on everyday practices that reifies a fiction of minority–majority groups in confrontation. Given the reach of the former Soviet Union, Ukraine is not the first state to have its sovereignty violated. Moldova and Georgia have been forerunners. Which state will be targeted next for discrimination of compatriots? Enduring forms of postimperial subjugation suggest that some states are especially vulnerable to diminished sovereignty.

## Notes

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1. Responsibility to Protect (R2P) was developed in response to the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Should a state fail to protect its own citizens from “gross and systematic violations of human rights,” R2P gives a third-party state the “responsibility” to do so. Against the wishes of Russia, R2P legitimated international intervention to support the Kosovars’ right to national self-determination and the

creation of an independent state from Serbian territory. Putin has criticized the use of “human rights as an instrument of political pressure” and condemned its use to “intervene in the internal affairs of other countries” (President of Russia 2012, my translation).

2. Michael Herzfeld coined the term *crypto-colonialism* to depict the “curious alchemy” whereby the cost of political independence is “massive economic dependence” (2002:900–907) and the obligation to forge a national culture in keeping with foreign models, both of which ultimately hide the very colonial nature of independence.

3. See Goett 2011 for a discussion of anticitizenship technologies that have emerged from transnational governmentality and narcotics policing in Nicaragua and Chalfin 2008 for an analysis of how customs officials in Ghana, as “petty sovereigns,” impose discretionary “paralegal” technicalities of rule to regulate the flow of goods and people.

4. Most regional and local identities are place, not ethnically or linguistically, driven, which vastly complicates delineating them. Few regions have clear geographical boundaries, such as Crimea, which heightens tensions when the rhetoric turns to regions as “zones of special sovereignty” (Ong 2006:100). For a historical overview of Ukraine as a region, see Plokhy 2006. For postindependence understandings of regionalism, see Fournier 2002, Taras et al. 2004, and, most, recently Wanner 2014b.

5. Personal communication, April 30, 2014.

6. Russophone residents of the Baltic states, by contrast, were not granted automatic citizenship without knowledge of the new state language.

7. A discussion of religious minorities in Ukraine is beyond the scope of this article. Ninety-seven percent of all religious communities in Ukraine are Christian, but only half are Orthodox, reflecting the inroads evangelical groups have made since independence and the fact that Orthodox cathedrals serve large urban populations. I have discussed elsewhere the plethora of new non-Orthodox religious communities that have taken root in Ukraine since independence (Wanner 2007).

8. Talal Asad’s critique of secularism largely centers on capitalist, liberal democratic nation-states, which the Russian Empire and the USSR were not, and even some of the successor states are not.

9. As in Yugoslavia, there is also an important Muslim population in Ukraine. The Crimean Tatars, a Turkic Muslim people, have strongly supported Ukrainian statehood since 1991. They boycotted the referendum in Crimea over joining Russia.

10. Charges of anti-Semitism have become a weapon in the political arsenal of both sides in a war of disinformation, which objectifies Jews to an alarming extent and reveals how freighted the unexamined anxieties of World War II still are. Still, as the head of Vaad, the confederation of Ukrainian Jewish Organizations, makes clear, this crisis has transformed the Jews of Ukraine into Ukrainian Jews. See Mikics 2014.

11. See News Desk, Prague Post 2014 for a complete rendition of the speech in English.

12. The Russian Orthodox Church claims to have exclusive jurisdiction over Orthodox Christians living in the former USSR, except for Georgians and Armenians.

13. Writing of 19th-century Russia, Chris Chulos asserts, “Liturgical uniformity enabled the faithful to *imagine* their coreligionists were following the same traditions, something that was confirmed during visits to neighboring parishes, shrines, or wherever hierophantic essence was discovered” (2003:12). Although slow to develop a sense of nation, Russia had a strong cultural identity that was inseparable from Orthodoxy and local experience, a dynamic that was even more prominent in Ukraine.

14. Interview conducted in May 2012 in Donetsk. Unfortunately, this interview took place before there was ever discussion of

compatriots and, for this reason, I do not know if this respondent considers himself a Russian compatriot. All interviews after 2012 were conducted as part of the research project "Region, Nation and Beyond: An Interdisciplinary and Transcultural Reconsideration of Ukraine" funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

15. They might be detached from institutional practices but they are not detached from institutionalized religion in the same way as the individual "spiritualities of life" that Paul Heelas (2008:26) and others have studied.

16. Interview conducted March 1, 2013.

17. When Fran Markowitz (1993) conducted ethnographic research among Soviet Jewish émigrés to New York, she labeled them a "community in spite of themselves" to reflect the degree to which they were wary of institutional forms of Judaism as inescapably coercive.

18. See Kennan 1974 for a diplomatic interpretation of why a "Finlandization" of Russia's neighbors is a desirable and feasible political goal. A more recent interpretation of the prospect of a "Finlandization" of Ukraine is provided by Pavel K. Baev (2008). With Ukraine having such an enormous border to police and numerous neighboring countries, Baev argues, Russian worries over its Westward drift were exponentially increased after the Orange Revolution in 2004. The "wildfire" aspect of this popular uprising, and the other "color Revolutions" that took place in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, clearly constitute a challenge to the gradual crystallization of Putin's system of power.

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