Songs of the Donbas War: Shifting Identities
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1. War Songs and Narrative Identities

1.1. Demons on the doorstep

Demons come at night, we learn from the song. Rather unusually, they don't emerge from the depth of the woods or from the dark mouth of a cave. Apparently, they have mastered the human means of transportation and drove into town from the motorway.

We don't get their precise description – no fangs or claws, or burning eyes. However, the details we are given are unsettling. One of the demons, for instance, "grew up among his friends at the slaughterhouse[1]", ominously warns the song. We learn that his "movements are slow and skilled" – perhaps, well suited for butchering? (Liniia Mannerheima 2018)

The bleak video-sequence sweeps through an abandoned-looking war-battered settlement in Ukrainian Donbas, not far from the unrecognized but heavily militarized border between Ukraine and the territories of the self-proclaimed republics, DNR and LNR. This might be where demons engage in their chilling activities: "They burn down your primary school, then put up a cross on the [night club's] dance floor", intones a tense, almost hoarse voice (Ibid). By now, the demons justly start to seem almost unmistakably human.

Who exactly are these demons? Considering Zhadan's political convictions, one would guess that they are the fighters of the DNR/LNR militia or Russian troops present in the region without Russia's acknowledgement. If so, then what is the role of the Ukrainian soldiers on the other side of the front line? Are they, perhaps, the angels – battling the forces of darkness? Or, considering that the enemy "demons" are described as rather human after all ('the demon's heart is bloody and warm' (Ibid)), is this a chilling reminder that war has a terrible power to turn almost anyone into an inhumane monster?

These are complex questions, and the song does not provide easy answers. Still, it succeeds in transporting us one step deeper into the heart of the conflict – the place where demons look like humans and humans act increasingly like demons. It's the

[1] All the translations in this article are mine, unless otherwise noted.

place where the difference between 'us' and 'them' can be a matter of life and death, and hence othering often becomes a survival strategy.

The space of war suggests a rather more rigid addition to the Baumanian world of liquid identities[2]. During war time, being a clear-cut piece of a puzzle smoothly filling out a pre-defined shape is often a more tempting option than questioning the whole jigsaw mentality. In this context, looking at songs like the one above can give us a unique chance to better understand the world of war and its complex identity dynamics.

1.2. Objectives and methodology

In this paper, my goal is to examine the war songs about the War in Donbas, exploring how these songs reflect the identity shifts in the communities that create, perform and consume them. For the purpose of this inquiry, my key focus is on the textual material and the close reading of the lyrics. However, where necessary, I also account for the musical and visual elements of the songs.

My research sample includes contemporary songs about the War in Donbas created since its beginning in 2014. I examine both popular songs produced by the established professional artists and the songs written and performed by amateur singers-songwriters. These songs come from both sides of the front line – from Ukraine itself, from its occupied territories of the self-proclaimed republics of the DNR and LNR, and from Russia.

The focus of my research is on the issues of identity as reflected in war songs. Importantly, I am not interested in just one particular type of identities out of those often studied in the context of armed conflict, such as ethnic or cultural ones. Instead, I look at my material to identify which identities really matter in the War in Donbas, and at how, or in what terms, people generally prefer (or are forced) to identify themselves in this context. My focus points are the 'us' and 'them' of these songs, the notion of the friend and the enemy, of the group one belongs to (the in-group) and the adversary group (the out-group). I am interested in what the songs can tell us about the ways people ascribe and adopt identities, as well as discard and reject them.

1.3. Defining identity

I understand identities as processual, highly changeable, with often porous boundaries and prone to hybridity. In the past several decades, the scholars have largely agreed that identities need to be spoken of as fluid and changeable, the word itself denoting complex webs of influences, perceptions and relations rather than easy-to-pin-down things-in-the-world. This seems to be particularly true in the contemporary context, of which Zygmunt Bauman writes: "Perhaps instead of talking about identities, inherited

[2] Clearly, Bauman's understanding of 'liquid identities' is negatively coloured, for he sees them as contributing to the increasing precarity of most people's condition in modern societies. However, the rigid system of pre-defined identities imposed by war, arguably, further intensifies confusion and uncertainty experienced by people in liquid modernity, as the rigid identities do not so much substitute the liquid identities, as they create an extra referential layer on top of them, resulting in unsettling and difficult-to-navigate overlaps.

or acquired, it would be more in keeping with the realities of the globalizing world to speak of *identification,* a never-ending, always incomplete, unfinished and open-ended activity in which we all, by necessity or by choice, are engaged" (Bauman 2001: 129). Bauman sees this liquidity as treacherous, deepening the state of precarity and uncertainty in which many people dwell in our modern era.

Some academics even claim that so flexibly understood the term 'identity' renders itself essentially useless for the scholarly inquiry. Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper famously suggested so in 2000 in their article bearing a rather self-explanatory title *Beyond Identity*. However, in suggesting the possible alternatives to 'identity', Brubaker and Cooper paradoxically revitalized the term thanks to the scrupulous analysis of its various aspects and uses. In my research, I take into account the fact that identity has many facets: it has to do with self-identification and self-determination, as well as with being identified in a certain way by others, or with what Brubaker and Cooper term as 'groupness' – a sense of belonging.

I am also conscious that one and the same person or group of people not only can have, but also inevitably end up having multiple identities. Despite relating to the different aspects of people's lives (for instance, gender, occupation, ethnicity etc.), these many identities co-existing within one person or group are never entirely separate, rather existing in a constant flux, often combining, re-combining and overlapping. Depending on the context we will self-identify or be identified by the others very differently in different situations, or else one particular identity we have will come to overshadow all the rest, depending on the context.

Just as we create, adopt, drop, change, fake and ascribe identities as individuals, we engage in similar processes as groups. This complex interplay of group and individual dentities often becomes particularly poignant in the times of war, when identifying or being identified with certain groups gains particular importance: "If one's survival and access to precious, scarce resources depends on one's own standing and that of one's referent group, they are apt to loom large in the imagination" (Payne 2015: 57)

1.4. Identity, imagination, narrative

It is no accident that Payne speaks of 'imagination' when describing how people feel about belonging to groups. The process of developing and presenting a certain identity goes far beyond objectively sharing certain traits with a certain group of people: it is always a process with a tangible subjective component. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that we are by no means indifferent to the groups we belong to.

Tajfel and Turner insightfully point out emotional involvement as a key aspect of social identity. This comes across particularly acutely in their definition of a social group as "a collection of individuals who consider themselves to be the members of the same social category, *share some emotional involvement in this common definition of themselves*, and achieve some degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group and of their membership of it" (Tajfel, Turner 1979: 40; my italics). Moreover, beyond a particular individual associating specific emotions with belonging to a group, a group as a whole develops certain patterns of emotional involvement with its environment that often shape its behavior (Payne 2015: 65).

The individual and group levels of identity are connected and can be bridged in a number of ways. The most effective of these ways, naturally, utilize the emotional aspect of identity and belonging. One such way – probably among the most common – is construction of narratives. With groups, just as with individuals, narrative identities provide ways of coherent ordering of their shared experience and creating some sort of shared perspective on it, including, in many cases, a uniform emotional response. The links between individual and group narrative identities are exceptionally strong, and it is hardly possible to draw a clear line between the two. In her seminal 1994 article Margaret Sommers, while distinguishing between 'ontological' narratives (stories used by people to interpret their lives) and 'public' narratives (stories developed and used by groups), nonetheless emphasizes that "ontological narratives are, above all, social and interpersonal" (618).

Moreover, many thinkers see identity and narrative not only as commonly linked, but as being, in fact, inseparably connected. To many, the very nature of human identity seems to be narrative-based, the threads of narrative holding together the multiple experiences and characteristics and tying them into a single whole. Paul Ricoeur calls this unity a "discordant concordance" (Ricoeur 1991: 78). According to him, any knowledge of self is necessarily an interpretation, and as such it never happens directly, but rather occurs through mediation of various cultural symbols, including the production of a narrative. Such narrative, in Ricoeur's understanding, is a blend of history (actual experiences that occurred) and fiction (a certain ordering of these experiences into a coherent story). Engaging with its past in such manner, "the subject can be both the writer and reader of his own life" (Crowley 2003: 3).

Although this approach has been contested (probably most famously by Galen Strawson who claimed that people largely fall within one of the two categories – those with narrative perception of their lives and those with the non-narrative one, or diachronics and episodics respectively (Strawson 2004: 430)), these claims seem to have been successfully rebuked by the researchers demonstrating that at least some extent of narrative unity in perception of one's identity is essential for a human being to retain their agency and be able to flourish (MacKenzie, Poltera 2010: 33).

1.5. Songs

For groups, as well as for individuals, cultural symbols play a crucial role in gaining what Ricoeur describes as self-knowledge. Among these symbols, songs have a special place. In "Imagined Communities" Benedict Anderson already recognizes particular importance of poetry and song for the creation of what he calls a 'contemporaneous community' – a community in which a particular shared perception of time makes it possible for groups of people to imagine themselves as nations. In Anderson's view, such experiences as singing the national anthem together "provide occasions for unisonality, for the echoed physical realization of the imagined community" (132).

"Songs, then, act as an emotional and narrative blueprint, as an affective medium that helps to convert feelings into recognizable stories and gestures" (Oushakine 2011: 272). The songs have ability to channel individual emotions into something that can be easily accessed, comprehended and related to on the group level, as well as ensuring effective communication of emotions already shared by a group. Writing about what

he defines as 'affective management of history' in contemporary Russia, in which music and song play an important role, Serguei Oushakine stresses that the goal of large public memorial displays is "not to match a symbol with its content, possibly forgotten or even unknown. The goal is to link remembering people together, to provide them with social space and symbolic tools that could help to make such linkage tangible" (Oushakine 2013: 275).

One way to describe this coherence achieved is to understand it as construction of narratives. Indeed, songs can play a crucial role in establishing, re-actualizing, altering and dismantling narrative identities in individuals and groups. As Simon Frith put it, "Music constructs our sense of identity through the direct experiences it offers of the body, time and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives." (Frith 1996: 124). Through creating music, playing it or simply listening to it the latter, Frith insists is an equally performative act), individuals are able to 'try on' different identities. These identities, though, do not come prefabricated: on the contrary, they are shaped through music itself, among other cultural forms (111). According to Frith, "the question we should be asking is not what does popular music reveal about the people who play and use it but how does it create them as a people, as a web of identities?" (121)

For Frith, music is simultaneously ethical and aesthetical, social and individual, and this enables it to build narratives that relate to life. In songs, in particular, music achieves this goal by combining together the musical element and the textual element – i.e. the lyrics. However, it is important to understand that even unaccompanied by lyrics, instrumental music is able to tell stories and convey narratives. Many theorists – excluding, perhaps, the formalist school of musicology insisting that instrumental music is self-referential – agree that music, in a variety of ways and to a variety of degrees, can be considered representational and refer to things in the outside world (see, for example, Treitler 1997 and Walton 1997). This ability, of course, is further developed in songs, where different means of conveying meaning – text, music and image – are brought together in a communicative act.

It is perhaps because of their powerful communicative and community-building potential that songs gain special importance in times of war. Among the multitude of functions war songs perform (such as providing an account, real or imagined, of the events on the battlefield; promoting the interests of one or several of the parties involved in the conflict; provoking a particular emotional response in a listener – be it a positive one towards the in-group or the negative one towards the out-group; constructing a shared vision of a particular group's past and/or future etc.), almost all, in one way or the other, serve the purpose of tying the community of listeners more closely together through shared knowledge, emotions, experience or intentions. The War in Donbas and its songs are no exception.

2. Identity and othering in the songs of the War in Donbas

2.1. Othering as an optics

One of the key contrasts that become obvious as a result of closely studying a broad variety of Donbas war songs is that they employ several distinctly different strategies

of othering, which, in turn, has a noticeable impact on the kinds of identities they end up mapping, promoting and/or condemning.

Despite the negative connotations commonly associated in the past few decades with the very term 'othering' thanks to the increasing influence of postcolonial studies and research into other previously discriminated groups, the process of othering itself is, of course, not a sinister strategy devised and applied solely with the purpose of subjugation. In fact, it is one of the very basics of our social existence and is a necessary prerequisite for any identities to emerge. In 1979, Tajfel and Turner spoke of the three key components of the process of group identity formation: *categorization*, or envisioning the society as divided into various groups based on various attributes; *identification*, or defining oneself as belonging to a certain group (or groups), but not others; and, finally, *comparison* between one's own group (what is commonly known as an 'in-group') and those on the outside (the 'out-group'). Othering, therefore, is an essential step towards formation of any kind of identity.

In my research, I have identified the two most common strategies of othering employed in the songs of the War in Donbas. The terms I coined for them are ***circumstantialist othering*** and ***essentialist othering***. I also use these very terms to describe the two respective groups of songs I have examined, calling them the ***circumstantialist songs*** and the ***essentialist songs***, depending on the type of othering they employ. Certainly, as we will see, particular songs display more traits characteristic for a specific group than the others. Besides, there is a relatively small number of war songs that are hard to place in either group as they do not use the categories of 'us' and 'them' or any comparable constructs. Overwhelmingly, however, the absolute majority of songs from my extensive sample can be quite firmly placed within one of the two categories above.

Below, I will examine in-depth each of the major types of othering identified, demonstrating how these are reflected in the lyrics, music and, wherever available, visuals of particular songs. Furthermore, I will determine what types of songs more commonly employ each strategy (as there are indeed specific groups of songs that tend to be more closely associated with either othering approach). Finally, I will look at what identities these songs represent and help to construct. For a comprehensive comparative table of the two types of the Donbas war songs based on their approach to othering please see Appendix 1, although most of the features highlighted in the table will be closely examined below.

When discussing different strategies of othering, I will be focusing on the understanding of the 'us' and 'them' of the songs. The 'we'/'us'/'our' pronouns in the songs mostly refer to the in-group, which is the group the song author or performer identifies with and which is perceived as friendly[3]. The 'they'/'them'/'their' pronouns in the songs predominantly refer to the out-group, which is in some way contrasted to the in-group and is seen as hostile. I am interested in the way the dividing line is drawn between the two groups, as well as in the manner in which either group is perceived as a single whole with a particular set of traits tying it together.

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[3] One common exception, though, would be the songs including fragments of direct speech ascribed to the enemy (out-group), such as in Orest Liutyi's 'Rosiian v Donbase net' (*sic*) (Orest Liutyi 2016)

2.2. Circumstantialist othering

Circumstantialist othering is the first of the two major types of othering strategies I have observed in the songs of the War in Donbas. As the name of this type of othering indicates, such an approach relies on specific *circumstances*, not the innately inherent traits as a basis of dividing 'us' and 'them', the in-group and the out-group.

In these songs, the enemy is first and foremost identified as an invader, and the very action of invasion and infringement upon the country's territorial whole is seen as an act of aggression requiring response and thus decisively dividing the two groups. The divide is action-based, and the definition of 'enemy' is equated with the group which initiates and/or undertakes this action. Ukrainian singer-songwriter Boris Sevastianov from Kharkiv describes the enemy as guided by this action-based motto: 'We will conquer, we will take over ['otozhmëm' – **I.S.**], we will hold a referendum' (the latter referring to the much-disputed 2014 referendum in Crimea, the results of which were widely seen as falsified by the Russian authorities) (Sevast'ianov 2014).

In this type of songs, the in-group presents itself as unfairly wronged, which is a common strategy for most war songs, as there is, perhaps, not a single party in war that would want to be seen as engaging in the war without substantial justification (readily provided by the self-defensive stance). The in-group of circumstantialist songs sees itself as powered by the need to defend its interests, as well as the need to restore justice by repelling an unjust infringement upon its sovereignty.

Importantly, the 'we' of these songs largely comes across as inherently diverse, but united by the common purpose. For instance, in the Ukrainian songs falling within this category there is often an emphasis on people of different regions and different social groups, as well as the speakers of different languages, brought together by the need to repel the enemy: "They want to divide us into East and West, but they cannot break our will! (...) We will unite the whole country [Ukraine – **I.S.**], we will not give them our motherland" (Tkachuk 2014). The band Haidamaky deconstructs the derogatory term of 'ukrop,' adopting it as a word of pride to describe the Ukrainian identity in times of the War in Donbas. In the eponymous song, the band lists people of different genders and from different age groups performing various social roles, but invariably supporting the Ukrainian cause in the war: "Ukrop is a small boy (...), a young schoolgirl (...), a gentle mother (...), a strict father (...), an old grandma (...), a white-haired grandpa" (Haidamaky 2015). Similarly, in terms of the use of language, circumstantialist Ukrainian songs seem to be accepting of the linguistic variety within the in-group. The issue of linguistic difference is either demonstratively de-problematized in popular songs, some of which use both Ukrainian and Russian in different parts of the piece (e.g. *Vstavay* by hip-hop artist Yarmak, or *Zemlia* by Riffmaster and Sashko Polozhynskyi), or not even perceived as potentially problematic in the fist place – this being particularly true for Ukrainian soldiers' songs, where, for example, in a Russian-language song a letter from a child written in Ukrainian or a direct quote of a Ukrainian-speaking fellow soldier will be quoted in the original and seamlessly integrated into the Russian narrative of the song (in *Pozyvnoi Sëma Aeroport* and *On vykhodil s-pod Ilovaiska* respectively).

Armed engagement with the enemy is perceived as something the in-group has no choice but to do, and whereas there is pride taken in being able to regain own territories or withstand the offensive, there is rarely any gloating involved with regards to enemy's defeats. Remarkably, circumstantialist songs rarely, if ever, specify what their interaction with the out-group would be in the post-conflict setting: there is no vision of the post-war future including the wartime enemy in any manner of role – even as defeated and humiliated. Instead, the underlying intention seems to be to disengage as much as possible from the out-group, and, following the conflict's resolution, to focus solely and primarily on the in-group's interests.

The out-group is seen as manipulated by its leaders who are perceived as the instigators of war and aggression. This, again, is not uncommon in the context of contemporary wars, and, as we will see, essentialist songs share this vision with regards to their opponents. However, circumstantialist songs place unparalleled emphasis on media manipulation within the out-group. This is particularly true to Ukrainian material (which constitutes the overwhelming majority of circumstantialist songs) referring to the power of Russian-controlled media narratives in the self-proclaimed republics, as well as within Russia itself. The media is seen as playing the decisive role in war, providing the very framework for it: "Our [war-time] Ukraine is just like a Russian soap opera, where there is no knowing how it will end and who has produced it" (Askold feat. Dionisieva 2014). There are also ample references to "lies and hatred of newspaper lines" (Riffmaster feat. Sashko Polozhynskyi 2015). This, however, is in some instances combined with the criticism of domestic media: "There are things Odin Plius Odin [a popular Ukrainian channel – **I.S.**] will not broadcast," a Ukrainian fighter bitterly remarks in his song (Semishkin 2016). The music videos for Ukrainian circumstantialist songs – particularly those non-professionally or semi-professionally produced – almost inevitably feature fragments of particularly outrageous Russian news reports, the images of infamous TV presenter Dmitrii Kiselëv being among particular favourites.

We find the circumstantialist approach to othering used in the overwhelming majority of war songs produced by the Ukrainian side of the conflict. It is symptomatic that in 2018 Ukrainian Armed Forces have adopted the modernized version of the 1932 anthem of Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) as its official marching song. Despite its recent popularity with the contemporary Ukrainian right-wing forces which display largely essentialist tendencies, the song itself is a classic example of a circumstantialist piece, as illustrated by its very first lines describing the emergence of resistance *in response* to aggression: 'We were born on a great hour, from the flames of war (…) – We were brought up in pain over Ukraine's fate' (Ukrainian Army Anthem 2017). The circumstantialist approach can also be observed in a small number of songs created in the DNR and LNR; however, as a rule, they display hybrid properties, demonstrating both characteristic circumstantialist traits and those typical for essentialist material[4].

2.3. Essentialist othering

[4] One of the few exceptions is the song *Ukraina* by Shum 027 and Koshka, which interprets the conflict in a distinctly circumstantialist manner. "You [Ukraine – **I.S.**] are attacking your brother [Donbas – **I.S.**], like Cain attacked Abel," claims the song, proceeding to present the ensuing war as an act of self-defense on behalf of the population of Donbas (Shum 027 feat. Koshka 2015).

The second type of othering commonly displayed in the songs about the War in Donbas is in many ways contrasting to circumstantialist approach described above. I call it *essentialist othering* due to the fact that it identifies ‘the other’ as in some way intrinsically different from the in-group. This difference is perceived and presented as something essential, characterizing the very core or nature of the other’s being. The overwhelming majority of songs created in the DNR/LNR fall under this category, as well as many Russian songs about Donbas and a number of Ukrainian ones.

The essential trait creating the ultimate difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is presented as decidedly non-neutral. The core characteristic in question is understood and judged in moral and ethical terms, and when compared to the in-group, is ultimately equated to the difference between good and evil. The unconditionally ‘evil’ nature of the enemy provides a convenient vehicle for confirming the ‘goodness’ of the in-group and justifying its actions. Moreover, due to the conflict being presented as the battle between good and evil, it enables the in-group to assume a messianic position and to colour its message in a universalist didactic manner which is almost never seen in the songs adhering to the circumstantialist othering approach. The words ‘dark’ or ‘evil’ do appear in circumstantialist songs, where they most commonly characterize the situation of war itself or, occasionally, the leadership of the outgroup (for instance, in Ukrainian circumstantialist songs, Vladimir Putin is often labelled as evil). However, these traits are almost never interpreted as characterizing the whole population or even all the fighters of the enemy army.

Interestingly, in essentialist songs, this decisive essential difference between ‘them’ and ‘us’ is difficult to pin down in concrete terms. Whereas in the circumstantialist songs the enemy is identified very straightforwardly as someone who is conducting – and especially directing – acts of aggression, the essentialist material can be remarkably vague as to what makes the enemy into such. One would expect that with the level of demonization directed at the out-group in essentialist songs, these ‘devils,’ ‘murderers,’ ‘moral degenerates’ etc. would at least be made easy to identify. Certainly, there are political and ideological labels that help to single out the enemy, but upon closer analysis many of these turn out to be mere simulacra: floating signifiers without the signified – or, more accurately, with an almost inexhaustible range of substitutable signified. For instance, Russian essentialist songs regularly describe the enemy as ‘fascists,’ however, upon closer examination of the meaning of the term, it proves to be highly vague and devoid of any concrete signified. The fascists are largely understood as broadly right-wing (which, however, excludes any Russian right-wing ideologies) and, most certainly, anti-Russian[5].

In fact, this aversion to anti-Russianness helps us to define the closest trait we can equate to goodness in the Russian essentialist songs. Goodness is Russianness: not merely as an ethnic or national characteristic, but as a complex symbolic construct incorporating a variety of elements. In her song *Russkii Marsh* (The Russian March), Russian singer-songwriter Zhanna Bichevskaia outlines an array of features perceived as the essential components of Russianness: from adherence to Russian Orthodox

[5] It would be very interesting to see Andreas Umland’s excellent 2005 comparative analysis of the concept of fascism in Russia and in the West updated to include the developments in the Russian use (or misuse) of the concept over the past decade (Umland 2005).

Christian beliefs ("Russians march carrying the flag with the Saviour's image upfront"), to military might ("…through the multitude of defeated enemies"), to moral superiority ("…with hearts of highest quality"), to courage ("…without fear of bullets or wounds"), to resilience ("gathering all those not wiped out in war"), to defiance ("Russians spit on the rule of americas and europes "), to the vision of own messianic role ("Russians march and call upon all Slavs") (Bichevskaya 2016). With Russianness (=goodness) being understood this broadly, it is very easy to label as evil any individual or group displaying a variation or, indeed, expressing disagreement with any of the 'inherently Russian' traits. In the context of the War in Donbas, this issue becomes particularly pertinent due to the fact that Ukrainians are widely seen by the opposing parties as inherently Russian (or at least as 'brothers' of Russia), and so their insistence on conducting a separate existence and cultivating a separate identity is seen as not merely a rejection, but a betrayal of Russianness (which, then, automatically, makes them into anti-Christian, morally deficient, cowardly etc.). If Russianness is good, a-Russianness in any form becomes anti-Russian, and thus evil.

The tendencies displayed in Ukrainian essentialist songs largely mirror those described in the Russian example. Ukrainianness becomes more than an ethnic or national characteristic, but includes cultural and linguistic elements, emphasizes spiritual and religious components[6] and postulates inherent moral superiority (honour and bravery are seen as inherently Ukrainian). The main differences that can be observed between the Ukrainian and Russian essentialist material include the absence (or extreme rarity) of expansionist claims, as well as the lack of desire to ultimately claim the out-group as part of one's in-group. The enemy, similarly, tends to be characterized via symbolic constructs: for instance, Russians are often referred to as 'moskals' and supporters of Russian politics regardless of their ethnonational identification as 'vatnyks.' These terms, however, tend to be more concrete than 'fascists' in its Russian use. The closest Russian analogues of 'moskal' in the present context are 'ukr' and 'ukrop.' All these are ethnic slurs, carrying with them multiple negative connotations associated with particular group.

The perceived essential 'evilness' of the out-group also makes it possible to justify an alarming level of violence and aggression symbolically aimed at the enemy. While a fair number of songs employing circumstantialist othering retain a position of reluctant engagement and display a sentiment bordering on indifference beyond the required level of resistance, in the 'essentialist' songs we see an entirely different approach.

The image of the enemy itself is amplified and thoroughly dehumanized. For this, either or both of the two strategies is usually employed: most commonly, the enemy group is described in an overly generic manner as half-abstract (but potent) evil, without any specifics given; sometimes, though, the focus is shifted, reversely, towards very particular imaginary displays of sadistic violence ascribed to specific individuals within the enemy group. An example of the latter can be found in the song *Vstavai*

[6] It should be noted that Ukrainian essentialist material is usually vaguer in its religious stance, emphasizing faith and God, but rarely specifying further. This might be due to the fact that Ukraine includes not only Ukrainian Orthodox community, but also a Russian Orthodox and a Greek Catholic Christian ones.

Donbass (Rise, Donbas) – "Mom, just like in 1941, demons have come to us from the West. They shoot into our wives and mothers, they burn people alive" (Kuba 2014), as well as in multiple songs by the singer-songwriter Vladimir Sosedov[7] – "They [Ukrainian soldiers – **I.S.**] came and broke the door. They have cut father with the knife, down to his feet, and have tied my mother and my brother to the concrete block with barbed wire" (Sosedov 2015). It is worth mentioning that many of the non-Ukrainian songs featuring the most blood-curdling descriptions of violence are created by people who know about the conflict largely or solely from the media reports and circulating rumours. Ukrainian essentialist songs largely tend to adhere to the strategy of generalization: there are few, if any, Ukrainian songs containing graphic descriptions of violence (perhaps, due to relatively low levels of state propaganda in Ukraine compared to neighbouring Russia, as well as different means of propaganda utilized). All in all, both strategies – that of extreme generalization and that of relishing the gory details – do the job of dehumanizing the out-group, which in turn provides ample justification and prepares fertile ground for the next step: a call for, or a description of, the violent response and the restoration of the status quo.

2.4. Comparative aspects

2.4.1. Desired conflict resolution and perception of time

The yearning for the restoration of a status-quo situation is an impulse shared by both the circumstantialist songs and the essentialist ones. Understandably, their vision of what the status quo is completely different. Interestingly, however, this difference is expressed not only in expecting a certain party to prevail in the conflict, but also in the scale of the timeframe applied.

Circumstantialist songs tend to focus more on the immediate precursors to the conflict, identifying the outbreak of the war as the turning point and, consequently, seeing the return to the pre-war condition (perhaps, with some improvements, such as the lessened influence of a political adversary) as a desired outcome and as a status-quo situation. Contrarily, the essentialist songs usually tend to view things within a much broader and less definite timeframe. The immediate pre-war situation is often perceived as already unbalanced (in most cases, not in favour of the in-group), and so restoring the status quo means not merely returning to the pre-war state, but reverting the situation to a more desirable (often semi-imaginary) reference point in the past.

[7] When dealing with the DNR and LNR material, it can be extremely difficult to identify where a certain performer or author of the lyrics comes from. This is the case with Vladimir Sosedov, who might or might not be Russian. His web page on the popular Russian poetry resource stihi.ru, as well as several other web pages he curates, including his YouTube channel, do not identify his location. This is quite common in the context of the DNR and LNR separatist movements being presented as grassroots ones, whereas Russia's role is carefully cultivated as that of a mere political ally of the self-proclaimed republics (under the premise of supporting their struggle for independence), not the conflict's instigator and its direct participant. In the cultural context, this means that a lot of propaganda material coming from Russia is presented as local. Doubtlessly, though, as our preliminary findings indicate, a lot of songs about Donbas, including some of the most violent and emotional ones, are created outside this region – many of them in Russia, where the War in Donbas has become a media staple.

Whichever party in the conflict employs the essentialist approach in the songs, it usually hearkens back to its (real or imaginary) time of particular political strength and influence in the larger region as a reference point and a status-quo state of things. Thus, for instance, Ukrainian essentialist songs will often refer to the strength of the Cossack state as something that needs to be symbolically recreated in modern Ukraine. The song *Povstanets* by Ukrainian performers Komu Vnyz and Arsenii Bilodub is characteristic in this respect, as it constructs an overarching historical narrative, connecting the images of Ukrainian fighters against the oppressors across different eras (this is also typical for the metahistorical view characterizing essentialist songs): from the Cossack leader, to the Haidamak rebel, to UPA fighter, to contemporary Ukrainian soldier fighting in Donbas (Komu Vnyz 2015). Such metahistorical approach is similarly present in the way the enemy is characterized. For instance, it is common to have the essentialist songs refer to all of the Ukrainian soldiers or, indeed, the Ukrainian government as 'Banderovtsy' – that is the followers of Stepan Bandera, the controversial head of the Ukrainian pro-independence movement in the mid-20th century, regardless of their sentiment towards Bandera himself or, indeed, the nationalist agenda.

It is worth mentioning, however, that Ukrainian essentialist material rarely, if ever, postulates the in-groups desire to dominate the broader region, while this is certainly almost always the case with the DNR/LNR and Russian essentialist songs. While the former seem to be focused on self-sufficiency and independent status of the in-group, the latter displays a heavy trend for the in-group envisioning itself as the dominant power in the region. In her *Russkii Marsh* Zhanna Bichevskaia summarizes and replicates the vision of the official Russian propaganda narratives, also repeatedly reproduced in the essentialist war songs: "The Russians are coming to remind the Russians who they are. (…) The Russians are coming to protect not just the Russians. (…) The Russians are coming to help our beloved army" (Bichevskaia 2016). DNR/LNR songs, in particular, will often refer to the historically vague or unfounded symbolic entities (essentially, simulacra) of Velikaia Rus' (Great Rus') and Russkii Mir (Russian World) as the vision of the desired balance of power to be restored: "Russian World is awaiting its heroes, Novorossiia! Fate is giving you your chance, Novorossiia! (…) Russia is forever with you, [and] you will soon come back home, glorious Donbass, Russian Donbass" (Kontrrevolutsiia 2015).

As already indicated above, Russian essentialist songs tend to have a messianic tone. Russia, in them, is often perceived as the leader of the Slav world with a mission to unite the Slavs (or at least the Eastern Slavs, perceived as essentially Russian) within the megaregional entity of the new Rus' (still replicating the Russian identity, albeit on a different scale). The narrative of reabsorption is particularly powerful: for example, the absolute majority of DNR/LNR songs, even those promoting a separate regional identity for Donbas, necessarily mention Russia, speak of Donbas identity as a Russian identity and prophesize the inevitable return of Donbas (and in some cases, - of Ukraine as a whole) to the bosom of Russia: "Kharkov, Odessa and Kherson will rise: yet again, we are one with Russia. Never again will the fascist style be in fashion on the yellow fields of Ukraine" (Pesnia Opolchentsev Donbassa 2015). The vagueness in the definition of the enemy, discussed in more detail in the paragraph 2.3, serves the narrative of reabsorption well and plays an important communicative purpose. By

describing the enemy in broad terms, such narrative provides enough flexibility for someone belonging to the out-group to choose sides: identifying either with the messianic Russia or with the 'fascist junta'. Drawing a more concrete line between 'us' and 'them' would make recruiting 'them' to identify as 'us' impossible. Contrastingly, circumstantialist songs (most of them Ukrainian) can afford to draw a clear action-based distinction between the in-group and the out-group, as they don't harbour an intention to assimilate any of the out-group's member: on the contrary, the impulse is to disengage from the out-group as much as possible.

2.4.2. Leadership and authority

A similarity exists between the way both 'circumstantialist' and 'essentialist' songs present the out-group (the enemy) as being confused and manipulated by the political leadership. However, despite this general outward similarity, there are two key differences in how the role of political leadership is perceived in these two major types of songs.

The first distinction lies in the attitude to the official leadership or higher authority. The circumstantialist songs place no trust in those. Their narrative seems to move in the world where unity occurs on the grassroots level within the communities, and this is also how agency is channelled. Moreover, whenever the mentions of higher-ranked political figures – remarkably, not just the enemy ones, but the domestic ones as well – do occur, such mentions are almost inevitably treated sceptically and critically. Such an attitude, for instance, is characteristic – albeit to a different degree – both for the mentions of Vladimir Putin and of 'Porokh', the Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, in the songs of Ukrainian fighters in Donbas[8]. Conversely, most of the essentialist songs, partly due to their didactic messianic tone seem almost obliged to promote their official leadership while condemning the leaders of the enemy.

It is by no means an accident that propaganda songs from the DNR, LNR, and, no doubt, beyond, use exclusively essentialist othering, as it enables to radically simplify the song's message thus potentially amplifying its impact. In the DNR and LNR material, this glorification of leaders is often exaggerated to absurd levels. A number of songs provide the listener with long lists of 'good' leaders, who are not merely referenced as already known, but are meticulously named – as if for the purpose of memorizing. Often, both real first and last names are given, sometimes along with their call name and military rank: "Aleksei Mozgovoi, our brigade commander, has finished his work for the Russian Donbass. (…) Our brother ataman Pasha Drëmov, the romantic of war, has finished his work. (…) Another brother, commander of battalion Arsen "Motorolla" has finished his work, has finished it for all of us" (Razum 2016). Clearly, such propaganda songs are meant to be used as a tool of promotion for the region's militia leadership. On the contrary, whenever in the circumstantialist songs the names of actual people come up, they are almost exclusively those of common soldiers or volunteers – often known in person to the author, not of the high-ranking officers or politicians. For instance, in the Ukrainian song *Pozyvnoi Sëma*

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[8] "What should we care, Seryi? Porokh said we had a ceasefire – [and yet] chanson of bullets is drumming on the railing" (Semishkin 2016)

Aeroport (Call name Sёma Aeroport) the name is that of one of the Donetsk airport's defenders (Semishkin 2016).

The glorification of figures of political and military leadership in essentialist songs differs radically from the weary indifference or, in many cases, open criticism of domestic authorities common for circumstantialist songs. The already cited song *Sёma Aeroport*, while describing the long-raging battle over Donetsk airport, also clearly expresses disdain towards domestic authorities: "Somewhere in the sky there is a plane flying by. Above our heads, the [Ukrainian] MPs [are traveling] to a resort, to Maldives, among the bathing suits and shorts, leaving below the [Donetsk] airport" (Ibid). Similarly, Ukrainian singer Sashko Polozhynskyi emphasizes that the soldiers fight not because they are told to do so by the country's leadership, but for their families and their homeland: "Yet another well-fed face [appears] on the TV, [expressing its] 'grave disappointment and deep concern'. I am not here [on the frontline – **I.S.**] for them, but for my wife and my kid, and for the land called Ukraine."

3. Conclusion: the clash of identities

The dynamics of group identities as expressed and reflected in the songs of the Donbas War offer an interesting perspective on the dynamics in the broader region, presenting a picture quite different from the traditional views on the postcolonial dynamics of the Ukrainian-Russian political relationship.

3.1. Colonial vs. post-colonial outlook

Crucially, the War in Donbas is a war waged between a former colonizer – Russia, and a former colony – Ukraine, albeit in Russia's case this involves the country rhetorically distancing itself from the conflict and employing proxies – the pro-Russian separatists from the east of Ukraine. Russia's involvement far exceeds the limits of what could be considered a neocolonial approach, which usually shuns direct physical violence[9], using the subtler, non-violent means of influence in order to relegate the decolonized groups to a shared symbolic ghetto.

It is, therefore, no surprise that the rhetoric employed in the overwhelming majority of the songs created in Russia is based on the essentialist approach to othering. This is also the case for the songs coming from the territories of the so-called DNR and LNR, de-facto controlled and occupied by Russia. The messianic tone of these songs, their message of desired re-absorption and assimilation, as well as the isolationist megaregional identity they express are consistent with the self-presentation of the metropole further channeled through its subjugated territories. This is not the postcolonial retreat into awkward apologies or the rhetoric of overt neocolonial othering, but very much a return to straightforward colonial bombast. Russia's *colonial approach* is completely in line with essentialist othering in terms of its emphasis on an inherent essential difference between them, perceived as 'naturally' resulting in the superiority/inferiority dynamics. The colonial object's only chance for redemption is presented as laying in eventual reabsorption into the colonial structure in an inferior

[9] Certainly, it is worth bearing in mind that despite this avoidance of direct physical violence, the harm caused through neo-colonialist politics – even without resorting to weapons – is often no less substantial, and in some cases perhaps even more deadly.

position, i.e. accepting a hybrid identity of a Russian still – but a lesser Russian, the subject of empire.

In this respect, it is interesting to note that the overwhelming majority of Ukrainian material (excluding that currently produced in the occupied territories) is, on the contrary, displaying all the signs of *postcolonial* desire to disengage from the former metropole. This intention is very much consistent with the circumstantial approach to othering most commonly encountered in these songs. The vision is clearly that of the absence of any shared future with the colonizer; and the violent engagement with them is largely perceived as a necessary, but thoroughly unpleasant duty – something, putting the end to which will be very welcome. Significant, in this respect, is the self-presentation and self-perception of Ukrainians as a diverse community (culturally, ethnically, linguistically), which serves as a powerful decolonizing tool, reversing the process of subalterns having often been lumped together into the supposedly uniform group.

3.2. Top-down vs. bottom-up approach

The stark difference in the way these communities see each other and themselves is likely related to the different identity-shaping dynamics prevalent in the two societies. As indicated by my research findings, top-down dynamics in shaping identities plays a prominent role in Russia. As evidenced by the songs coming from Russia and from the self-proclaimed republics de-facto under Russia's rule, which almost uniformly express unwavering respect for the rule of benevolent authorities, such complacency seems to be a prerequisite for being granted an ability to speak at all.

It is unlikely that the quantity of songs disrupting the essentialist pattern is really as miniscule as we were able to observe or that it precisely reflects the share of population holding the views differing from the official narratives. However, it is, indeed, likely that expressing such alternative views in the Russian heavily-controlled cultural and media-space is much more complicated and problematic, which means that they might often remain unspoken. Contrastingly, most of the Ukrainian material indicates that bottom-up dynamics prevail in the identity-shaping processes in contemporary Ukraine. This conclusion can be drawn both from frequent open expressions of criticism aimed at authorities, as well as from the emphasis on the power of community recurrent in the Ukrainian songs.

3.3. Rigid identities with shifting borders vs. fluid identities

Another distinct difference yielded by my research material can be summed up as that between more fluid identities prevalent in Ukraine and more rigid identities characteristic for Russia and the territories under its de-facto control. The modifier 'more' is crucial for understanding this difference in correct terms, because, as I've already briefly mentioned in the beginning of this article, the war tends to rigidify identities within the affected communities, pushing them towards perceiving any in-between representations – those not quite belonging to 'us' or 'them,' or undermining the dominant perception of 'us' and 'them' – as suspicious and dangerous. Nonetheless, this taken into account, it still leaves us with those identities expressed in the DNR, LNR and Russian material being much more set and inflexible compared

to those represented in the Ukrainian material. However, crucially, these rigid extreme identities of an evil out-group and a good in-group have shifting borders, which means that they can readily include or exclude people from the grey space in-between depending on the choices those make (the purpose of essentialist songs, of course, is to prompt people to make the 'right' choices – that is join the in-group).

Whereas the essentialist approach to being Russian seems to make one destined to perceive things in a certain manner and behave in a certain way (thus fulfilling one's Russian 'destiny'), the circumstantialist Ukrainian identity means that while uniformity is undoubtedly demanded in one's love for one's country and one's active role in protecting its interests, many other aspects of identity (its regional, cultural, linguistic, gender components) remain open to variation. While some such variations still often do cause disagreement within the community, there is certainly a sense that these issues are open to public debate, and that, in fact, such debate is encouraged. In the Russian case, the 'Russianness' tends to not be seen at all as something up for discussion.

3.4. Reconciling the differences

As a result, it appears that the parties engaged in this war at present exist in two entirely different cultural and world-view paradigms, which not only greatly complicates the matter of ending the War in Donbas, but also puts into question the very possibility of future peaceful co-existence. As indicated by our research, whereas Ukrainian society at present tends to form more fluid identities in a bottom-up manner and to seek post-colonial disentanglement from the former metropole (Russia), Russian society is more readily characterized by rigid identities cultivated in a top-down way and tends to exercise a typical colonial view onto the neighbourly territories, including those of Ukraine. It remains to be seen, how and if these two approaches can be reconciled.

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Appendix 1. Comparative table of circumstantialist and essentialist war songs

DYNAMICS OF OTHERING	Circumstantialist songs	Essentialist songs
Basis of othering	The out-group's actions	The out-group's intrinsic traits
Vision of self (in-group)	Unfairly wronged, united by common purpose (to repel the enemy), powered by the sense of justice, inherently diverse	Unfairly wronged, united by common destiny, imbued with a historical mission, coordinated by wise leadership, inherently uniform
Vision of enemy (out-group)	Confused and manipulated; condemnation of larger population's passivity; passivity as complicity – unequivocal condemnation; people as accomplices in regime's crimes	Confused and manipulated; divided into malignant leadership ('junta') and disoriented population; malignant leadership often seen as puppets of external political actors; population's passivity as a misstep – possibility of redemption; people as victims of regime's manipulation
Desired conflict resolution	Narrative of separation: out-group withdraws, seizes claims infringing upon in-group's sovereignty, conducts its own separate non-invasive existence	Narrative of reunification: out-group realizes it diverged from pre-destined course, shows remorse, is reunited with the in-group
Impetus towards out-group	To resist out-group's attempts to sabotage sovereignty and territorial unity and prevent any further possibility of such infringement, to conduct an act of ultimate separation from the out-group	To physically destroy the malignant leadership and its supporters, re-educate and redeem broader population, reestablish them as part of in-group (absorption and assimilation)
Attitude towards authorities	Castigation of out-group's authorities, criticism or indifference towards own authorities	Glorification of own authorities, castigation of out-group's authorities

Vision of the status quo	Pre-war situation restored	Historical justice restored
Perception of time	Historical time; frequent references to concrete historical facts; focus on the recent past	Mythical (metahistorical) time; references to historical facts only as origin myths; thinking on a grand scale
Tone/intention of songs	Indignant, impassive	Didactic, messianic, aggressive
Geographical markers	Supraregional identity (multiple regional fractions within an in-group united by a common purpose and identity)	Megaregional identity (errant out-groups seen as ultimately belonging to the dominant in-group); regionality encouraged only as sub-identity within the megaregion
Cultural and linguistic markers	Emphasis on shared supra-cultural markers, acceptance of linguistic and cultural diversity within in-group	Emphasis on shared cultural and linguistic markers not only within in-group, but also between in-group and out-group
External points of reference	Few external points of reference used beyond rare examples of other groups that suffered what is perceived as a similar fate (Palestine, Libya)	Frequent use of external points of reference; a vision of a united malevolent group of external actors attempting to prevent the in-group from fulfilling its destiny
Attitude to violence	Violence justified as a means necessary to repel the enemy; described predominantly in general and symbolic terms, or humorously	Violence encouraged and often glorified as a means necessary to restore historical justice; graphic descriptions of severe violence
Use of humour	Common; often stemming from the traditional folk forms, used to mock the enemy and soften the descriptions of violence	Rare; most songs maintain an emphatically serious tone, avoid jokes