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Guest post: the west's double standards towards Ukraine

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By Taras Kuzio of the University of Alberta

During the course of the four-month long Euromaidan, I have been interviewed nearly 100 times by radio, television and print media from across the globe. Those interviews have revealed three deeply ingrained myths about Ukraine.

These myths are an outgrowth of three factors: Russo-centric biases in the foreign media, which, as in Soviet times, still cover the entire former USSR from Moscow; Russia-focused academic studies on Eurasia, which I remember only too well from my university days in Britain; and the opinions of former Soviet, now Russian left-wing fellow travellers much loved by journalists.

Much western reporting has been objective about the Euromaidan and the Russian invasion of the Crimea. Nevertheless, western surprise at coming to terms with Ukrainian and Russian presidents Viktor Yanukovich and Vladimir Putin tells us a lot about its wishful thinking regarding violent autocrats.

The first common myth is taken straight from Putin's propaganda machine: that Ukraine is an 'artificial' country whose borders are illegitimate. Putin has long conflated Russian speakers with ethnic Russians. At the April 2008 Nato summit, he said eastern and southern Ukraine had been 'given' to Ukraine and the country could easily disintegrate.

Ukraine is regionally divided along linguistic, rather than ethnic, lines but the manner in which this is portrayed is strange. One journalist from a leading Italian newspaper asked me about Ukraine's divisions and to her surprise I responded that Italy (a country I know very well from my Italian mother and frequent visits) was far more divided. Italy recently celebrated 150 years of independence and unity while Ukraine has been independent for less than a quarter of a century.

There are countless other examples of regionally divided countries – Belgium, Spain, Slovakia, Romania, Estonia, Canada. One hears the Russian language more in Riga than in Kiev, while English dominates Cardiff, Edinburgh and Dublin, the capital cities of Wales, Scotland and Ireland. The majority of the school children in Kiev attend Ukrainian-language schools and Russian is widely spoken.

A second myth is that far-right groups such as Right Sector and Svoboda (Freedom) are 'fascists' funded by the US and that they led the Euromaidan and now dictate to parliament and the new government. This myth revived traditional Soviet ideological tirades characterising Ukrainian dissidents of all persuasions as 'bourgeois nationalists' funded by western intelligence agencies.

The far right was always a small fringe in the Euromaidan protests, dominating

self-defence units but not the opposition leadership or the mass protests that have numbered upwards of a million people. The influence of a new group, Right Sector, is exaggerated; it has less than 200 members throughout Ukraine. More importantly, the Euromaidan was driven by average citizens – the middle class, people working in small and medium-sized businesses, students and civic activists.

Of the four opposition leaders, only one – Svoboda party leader Oleh Tyahnybok – is a nationalist. In contrast with his counterparts in European countries, where such nationalist populists are highly popular, Tyahnybok is not popular and could never win the presidency. It took two decades from Ukraine's independence for a nationalist party to enter parliament, showing that such parties are less popular than they are in Austria, the Netherlands, France, Switzerland, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and all the Scandinavian countries.

This myth is especially galling since Putin has fanned the flames of nationalism in Russia, leading to an explosion of anti-Semitism and racism and the growth of a mass skinhead movement. Skinheads, by the way, are not to be seen on the Euromaidan.

The third myth concerns corruption. That Ukraine is a highly corrupt country is beyond doubt; anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International ranks it as the worst in Europe.

Nevertheless, there are two sides to corruption: those who steal (various Ukrainian state officials and oligarchs) and those who manage the money and take it in payment for goods and services (EU member states and their offshore zones). Although some EU member states have begun investigating the assets of senior Ukrainian officials, until now there has been a noticeable disconnect between western condemnation of corruption in Ukraine and the welcoming of this corrupt money in London, Vienna, Monaco, Cyprus, the Virgin Islands and elsewhere. EU members Latvia and Cyprus have long been money launderers for Ukrainian and Russian capital.

The acceptance of billions of dollars into London from Ukraine, routinely described as corrupt, is a reflection of double standards that has reduced the EU's commitment to 'European values' in the eyes of Putin and Yanukovich. The shock and awe of western journalists and citizens at the sumptuous palaces that Yanukovich built ignores the fact that the companies that owned them were registered in Britain.

Indeed, as seen during the Crimean crisis, British foreign policy has been constrained by its fondness for Eurasian capital. Britain has refused to follow the US, where there is stronger due diligence on inflows of capital, in adopting a Magnitsky Act to target with sanctions Russian officials who have abused human rights. A leaked British document showed that it has been reluctant to pursue targeted sanctions against Russian and Ukrainian officials and oligarchs.

Oligarch Rinat Akhmetov and gas tycoon Dmytro Firtash together with the president's eldest son Oleksandr received a significant portion of government tenders during Yanukovich's four-year misrule. Yet, although Yanukovich and 28 of his officials have been targeted for asset investigations, this has not been widened to these two oligarchs who have long lived, worked and played in London.

Western reporting on Ukraine, while on the whole good, has revealed its own inner biases and myths about Ukraine. Often without realising it, at times western journalists have echoed the *dezinformatsiya* coming out of Moscow.

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