Russia Today's coverage of Euromaidan

As I was writing this response to the forum about Euromaidan, the clashes on the 18th of February 2014 erupted. As there should be a cut off point for analysing this 'winter of discontent' in Ukraine, I will concentrate on the events as they unfolded until the 21st of February 2014. I approach the issue of Euromaidan from a Media and Cultural studies perspective. After a brief insight on how Euromaidan is seen in Russia, I will analyse how Russia's soft power tool – a multi-language Russian-based TV network called *Russia Today* (RT) — constructs a narrative of Euromaidan. I will do that by looking at RT's reports on Euromaidan available online. As M. Simonyan, an editor-in-chief, said, RT is set to combine a 'professional format' of the BBC, CNN and Euronews and to 'reflect Russia's opinion of the world' and present a 'more balanced picture' of Russia (RIA Novosti, 2005). It is hypothesized that there might be discrepancies in the coverage of Euromaidan, as RT needs to combine principles of an international broadcaster targeting a global audience with the need to reflect Russia's stance and improve Russia's image aboard.

At the beginning of December 2013 Vladimir Putin defined Euromaidan as a *'pogrom'* (riot) (RBK, 2013). This is particularly interesting, as in Russian context the term 'pogrom' is often used in relation to Jewish pogroms in 19th and early 20th century. Recently the Russian state has appropriated the term to deal with inter-ethnic clashes in Russia such as the pogrom in Biryulevo (Weiss, 2013). By using this terminology, a pro-democratic and pro-European demonstration is conflated with the persecution of an ethnic (or a religious) group. Thus, the demonstrations are reduced to a nationalist-driven dispute or a case of 'irrational' civic disobedience. This representation not only simplifies the case but also promotes a certain 'understanding' of it. By doing this, the state addressed several concerns. First of all, it reduces the possibility of 'contamination' or a spread of the pro-democratic sentiment to Russia. Secondly, the framing of the event within familiar lines (inter-ethnic tension) ensures continuity of a national stance on cohesion, implies the ultranationalist issues are commonplace (i.e., affect other states as well) and indicates a certain success of the Russian state in addressing the issue (before it 'gets' out of control' like in Ukraine). Finally, it allows the application of a wider 'extremism' framework to normalise the situation.

By foregrounding an ethnic (nationalist sentiment) rather than a civic (rights, etc.) dimension, the Russian state is able to associate Euromaidan with the actions of the nationalist and even far-right groups (neo-fascism) and eventually to bring it under broader extremisms umbrella. We observed similar trends while exploring representations of Islam in Europe, which is now more and more frequently dealt with under a wider security agenda (Flood, et. al, 2012). The present equation of a public protest with the radical (potentially extremist or terrorist?) movement by Russian authorities has had the following repercussions. It is used to introduce broader and more stringent legislation under the auspices of national security and stability. At the end of January the head of the Duma's security committee proposed an introduction of a new nation-specific legislation presupposing criminal charge for rehabilitation of Nazism (fascism) (Galimova, 2014). Then, an 'extremism' label is used to justify stricter control over new media; e.g. some blog posts on Russian Live Journal were blocked (Roskomnadzor, 2014). Finally, this change of rhetoric imposes a new understanding of Euromaidan (and legitimizes stringent measures in dealing with it). So, the term

'extremism' and 'anti-terror-operation' were used by Ukrainian authorities to justify the attempt to clamp down on the protest after the 18th of February 2014 (Ukraine crisis, 2014).

This analysis of RT's coverage reflects only some aspects of and shifts in representations of Euromaidan. I analyse 19 stories, which are retrieved under the keyword of 'Euromaidan' (from 24/11/2013 to 21/02/2014). After a brief overview of the stories' headlines, I will identify a number of recurring themes (including the labelling of Euromaidan, portrayal of the West, Ukraine and the protesters). This is will be followed by a more close reading of several news items, which help highlight some inconsistencies in reporting as well as clarify the framing of Euromaidan by RT.

As this is an unfolding event, most of the headlines deal with the dynamic of the protest: they highlight its scope and the type of confrontation. Euromaidan progresses from 'scuffles' (24/11) to 'clashes' (01/12) and then it gained a wider support as 'thousands of protesters keep vigil' (02/12). The cause of the protest in headlines appeared twice: as 'shelving of EU trade deal' (24/11) and as a 'pro-EU protest' (01/12). The actors mentioned in headlines include international involvement (the West, EU, US) (11/12; 18/01; 24/01), Ukrainian authorities (one story refers to the Ukrainian president, 30/11 and two stories deal with the deliberation between Ukrainian government and the opposition (23/01, 18/02)) and the Russian establishment (Putin's Q&A, 18.12; Lavrov's statement (21/01); Russia 'blasts' PACE (30/01)). So, on the surface of it we have an equal number of stories dealing with various forces involved in the case. However, the reports deal with variety of issues and the headline does not necessarily reflect key positions featured in the story. Although only three headlines directly refer to a Russian pro-governmental stance, there are other stories reflecting Russia's official viewpoint (e.g. Lavrov urged the West not to interfere, 01/12). Similarly, the Western actors are consistently mentioned throughout. Protesters are also featured in the headlines. However, only in three cases they are named as a group, in other instances they are referred indirectly (clashes, 01/12; mass protest, 07/12). There is also a gradual escalation of the label: Ukrainians protest (24/11), protesters (19/01) and rioters (26/01). 'Rioters' is presumably 'pogromshchiki', which has very different connotations from protestors ('protestuiushchie').

After this brief overview of the headlines, I will turn to the analysis of metaphors surrounding Euromaidan. Having a global audience in mind, RT uses the notions which 'acquired currency' worldwide. So, the protest is referred to as Euromaidan. *Euro-* is the first part of the label and it is connected with the aspiration of the Ukrainian nation for a pro-European course. Similarly to other international broadcasters (e.g. BBC) RT attempts to provide some insights into public support (or rather a lack of it!) for European integration in Ukraine (30/11). Next, Euro*maidan* is also metaphor of freedom and democracy. Maidan stands for square. It refers us back to the times when *veche* (direct democracy of the people) would gather on the main square and decide about the most important political, economic and social matters. T. Snyder picked on the same point of historically grounded deliberative nature of Maidan. According to him Maidan as the place embodies what 'Greek word *agora* means in English' (Snyder, 2014). As a result, Euromaidan as a notion and a physical space brings together a long history of pro-democratic developments and the public politics of today. For domestic purposes Russian authorities translate Maidan as 'the square' and refer to

it without capitalisation (Zaiavlenie, 2014). It reduces the riots to a specific geographic location silencing both parts of *Euro-maidan* phenomenon. RT does not explicate cultural representations behind Euromaidan. However, by using the dubbed version of the protest inadvertently gives credibility to the protest.

At the same time, RT runs into a dilemma of how to reconcile various understanding of the event as they are framed by Russian authorities. RT quotes Putin using the term 'pogrom' (02/12). According to him the protest have nothing to do with the EU, but it is an attempt by the opposition to undermine the legitimate government. However, the state line does not seem to be consistent. At a later stage (18/12), Putin acknowledges the pro-EU leaning of younger cohort of Ukrainians who want to adopt the EU standards and stresses that it is about internal Ukrainian politics. These two statements are intrinsically contradictory. As a result, RT broadcast them as they are, as it is extremely difficult to merge or reconcile them. Although the dynamic of the protest is traced, its causes are presented in a simplified way. As RT restates the protests' trigger (the decline to sign the Association Agreement by Yanukovich) quite frequently, it shifts the focus away from other factors. Even though, for instance, the protest's slogans of '*Revolution*' and '*Down with the gang*' are mentioned (19/01), they are not discussed as causes contributing to Euromaidan (the one of Ukrainian regime's corruption). When in the same report, RT cites Klichko describing the authorities' actions as a war against Ukrainian citizens and likening Yanukovich to Ceausescu or Kaddafi (19/01) the TV network does not offer any clarification for such a strong statement. And as the police ruthlessness is downplayed (see below), it impedes explication of changes in Euromaidan's agenda (to also campaign against police brutality, for human rights, etc.). While parallels can be drawn between the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan (similarity of tactics (e.g. tents on Maidan), a bottom-up movement, an unfinished process of nation-building in Ukraine), RT's reports prefer to exclude the notion of the Orange Revolution and discourage positive links between the events of 2004 and 2014. In two instances when RT has to bring this notion up, it is either mentioned as 'a *so-called* Orange revolution' (21/02) or in regard with pro-governmental rally in Crimea where 'the activists are carrying Ukrainian flags and placards saying, "*Ukraine is not Maidan*!" "*No to Orange Coup*"' (07/12).

Next, a significant amount of coverage is devoted to the issue of 'Western involvement'. There are direct accusations that the West is managing ('*directing*') the protest (e.g. 30/01), 'interfering' (30/01 and 30/11) or that the West fuels bloodshed as they express support for Euromaidan (24/01). There are talks about Western hypocrisy (as they would not tolerate the same behaviour back home or 'double standards' (21/01)) and that the West is 'politically aggressive' to Russia (Lavrov, 18/02). It is also obvious in the choice of experts (a professor (02/12) supporting an anti-Western sentiment) or choice of words (e.g. presenting the US/EU as weak and indecisive in the headline 'muddling and meddling', 12/11). Then, there is a trivialisation of matters: a ridiculing representation of US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs V. Nuland distributing cakes to the police on Maidan with the help of a photo and a cartoon with the wording 'come to the dark side' (11/12). On the whole, an anti-Western sentiment is ranging from anti-Americanism to an anti-European one (often embracing the EU or particular European states (e.g. Sweden, Poland, etc.)). RT seems to 'turn a blind eye' on the principle of balance here and target audiences who have a natural predisposition to be suspicious of the US and the West (or –

those who 'Question More' to quote the RT tagline).

The representation of Ukraine is quite often done in a passive voice, which both downplays the agency of and illuminates the 'suffering' of the country (which is 'gripped by unrest' (18/02) and 'embattled' by the conflict). The voices of authorities are present (both in direct and indirect speech), but their standing is dubious (e.g. 'Yanukovich signed into law a bunch of "controversial" bills' (18/01)). Then, the above-mentioned anti-western sentiment, which is framed as 'the battlefield of the West over Ukraine', denies the agency of Ukraine even further. In turn, the opposition is gradually presented as unable to control the protest movement (23/01 when they were 'booed' and called 'liars', and not unified, 26/01). The framing also suggests certain post-imperial aspirations of Russia, especially as the label of Ukraine as a fraternal country (18/12) is used. However, there should be further analysis of the reports to draw a more nuanced set of representation of the country's establishment.

RT acknowledges the spread of the protests to other parts of Ukraine in several reports (24/11, 23/01, 26/01). On the one hand, RT tries to adhere to objective and unbiased reporting by providing information about it. On the other hand, by providing a partial (the spread is framed as involving western Ukraine and 'several cities across Ukraine') and fragmented account of the issue it undermines its own reporting. It can be compared with the BBC account of the same issue, which included an insight into the history of Ukraine and illustrated the spread of protest on a map highlighting various factors (language issues, etc.). This is not to say that BBC reporting on west/east divide in Ukraine simplified matters. So, Applebaum (2014) has drawn attention to the media's 'recycling' of stereotypes of a 'torn' Ukrainian identity and the country 'split' in two parts (a pro-Western only Ukrainian speaking western Ukraine and a pro-Russian east of the country). However, further analysis goes beyond this forum discussion.

As to the representation of protesters, there are the following dimensions to it. At the start RT called its participants 'people' and included a number of photographs involving demonstrators from various demographic groups (e.g. lots of women and elderly). As the riots progressed, the imagery involving (often masked) men become more commonplace. RT talked about people covering their faces with masks and carrying sticks as early as 30/11. Then young aggressive activists/ultra-right nationalist groups (02/12) and then certain radical groups (e.g. Right sector) are mentioned. However, this dimension of Euromaidan has never been singled out. This is in a sharp contrast with domestic coverage of events in Russia where its radicalised and extremist nature is brought to the fore. While RT is careful in its stance and wording (such as linking violence to a particular groups of protesters ('most aggressive' group, 19/01), the imagery constructs a more or less homogenous picture of masked radicals ready to engage in clashes. So, in one report (22/01) RT depicts people 'drumming on burnt vehicles and empty barrels, with their 'drums of war' (and documenting it with a photo). There are further incoherencies. The portrayal of protesters and police is imbalanced. So, very few photos show the brutality of police operations. During the rapid escalation of the conflict, RT tended to report on the casualties among the police rather than the protesters (18/02, 26/01) and downplay (if mention) the facts of police brutality (24/01). When RT highlights that special forces 'largely refrained from attacking rioters' and demonstrated patience (23/01), it does so without contextualising other factors contributing to that (such as solidarity with protesters, desire not to attack their own citizens, etc.).

An attempt to finally 'give voice' to people on both sides of the conflict at a later stage (21/02) seems contrived. Despite a claim to speak to people on 'both sides of the barricades' (security forces and protesters) RT does not broadcast voices from the Special Forces. Instead there is an indirect speech by Kiev taxi drivers and a direct quotation of a priest who is ready to bless anybody, but critical of Maidan's supporters. When quoting voices 'from the other side' of the barricade RT manages to pick up mostly negative aspects (with one 'positive' statement by a medical worker who is ready to provide help to anybody irrespective of the allegiance). This selective 'reporting' pick up on a lack of 'warmth' between people as compared to the spirit of the Orange Revolution, a statement by masked protesters declaring their unwillingness to engage in a dialogue with authorities, a discussion of the potentially sponsored nature of the protest and a more extreme comment in regard to the Berkut. Even the title ('Masks off...'), while playing on 'unveiling' the true faces of parties involved in Euromaidan, focuses on the radical (i.e. covered with masks) element of the protest. In this way, few attempts for balanced reporting (such as acknowledgment of heterogeneity of people on both side of the protest) fail to work. A concluding image of an ordinary looking elderly couple drinking tea on the Maidan (from which side of the barricade?) conveys a sense of certain normality, intimacy and warmth (exactly what the opening statement of the report rejected) and conflates the matters further.

The latter image is in particular contrast with the report entitled 'fallout Kiev' (22/01) where the cityscape is described as from 'big budget Hollywood blockbusters' or 'a post-apocalyptic video game'. These metaphors echo the ones appeared online: images of barren landscapes (of previously civilised Kiev) resembled something from an apocalypse or scenes from dystopian computer games (Sobesednik, 2014). Although the images selected under this headline do not dramatically differ from the ones posted in other reports, this representational strategy foreground alterity and elicits confusing meanings. Is it a decent of a 'European' country into barbarism?!

By attempting to mimic the BBC and other broadcasters, RT runs into difficulty. By including a broader (than on national TV) range of voices, RT creates a situation when the inconsistencies became more obvious (e.g. by rebroadcasting the protesters' slogans and oppositional demands as discussed above (19/01) or by reporting about a one-off (?!) pro-governmental rally held under an odd slogan of 'We'll save Ukraine' (from whom?), 14/12). Furthermore, in its attempt for a fair and objective reporting, RT cannot control multiple readings of, for instance, images, which are used in abundance by the network. So in one of the articles with strong anti-Western sentiment (Strokan, 2013), RT's decision to open it up with a satirical image (Figure. 1) undermines its narrative.

Figure 1. A barricade at Independence Square in Kiev (Reuters / Stoyan Nenov).

This graffiti spells out an ideological contradiction inbuilt within Euromaidan and at the same time explicates how authority can be resisted via playful and ironic satirical means. It can provide a common ground for a number of dispersed individuals, which as Day (2011) said may eventually unify into a politicised community.

In light of recent events involving Crimea a further insight into representation of Euromaidan from a (Russian) soft power perspective and an in-depth comparison of the points at which RT differs from other Russian state broadcasters are required.

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