Discussing Ukraine's Euromaidan with Serhii Plokhii

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MARTA DYCZOK, APR 13 2016

This is an excerpt from *Ukraine's Euromaidan: Broadcasting through Information Wars with Hromadske Radio* by Marta Dyczok

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Harvard Professor Serhii Plohkii is this year's winner of the prestigious Lionel Gelber Prize for the world's best non-fiction book in English on foreign affairs, for *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union* (Oneworld Publications 2015). He holds the Mykhailo Hrushevs'kyi Chair of Ukrainian History at Harvard University and is also Director of the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute.

Marta Dyczok: In this award winning book you completely reframe our vision of the end of the Cold War and the last days of the Soviet Union by moving away from the American triumphalist narrative and focus on tensions between Gorbachev and Yelstin – and propose that the relationship between Ukraine and Russia and events in Ukraine and the Republics were perhaps more important, or as important, in the collapse of the Soviet Union. To what degree do the events of 1991 cast a shadow, or perhaps help us understand what's been happening in Ukraine in the years 2013-2014?

Serhii Plokhii: I'm moving from the mythology of the end of the Cold War that is present not only in the United States but also in Russia, because it's the same myth about America wiping the Soviet Union off the map of the world that is shared by many in Washington and in Moscow. Except that in Washington this is treated as a positive thing and in Moscow this is the source of resentment. In President Putin's speech on the annexation of the Crimea in March 2014 he was directly referring to the humiliation of 1991 and the alleged robbery of Russia as a result of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. So in that sense I'm trying to work against this dominant narrative both in the United States and in Russia.

By focusing on Ukraine and Russia instead of Washington and Bush and Gorbachev, what we get is actually a better perspective on the fall of the Soviet Union. Because a lot of what was happening was happening in the relations between the Republics. And second, we get a better perspective on relations between Russia and Ukraine. And a lot of issues, a lot of problems that came to the fore in the course of the last year, they were already there, the seeds of them were already there, back in 1991. It was in late August of 1991 that the spokesman for the Russian President Yeltsin, Pavel Vashchanov, first voiced these claims – Russian claims for Crimea, for eastern Ukraine, the Donets'k region in particular and also to some regions of Kazakhstan. It was also in the fall of 1991 that the decision was made in Moscow, around Yeltsin, that the empire, in the form that it had existed, in the form of the Soviet Union, was too expensive an enterprise for Russia, that Russia should focus on itself, use its oil and gas resources to rebuild itself and then, it was said, that the Republics would come back one way or another, twenty years later. And from that point of view, what is happening today is not just an invention of Mr. Putin but we see the roots of that kind of thinking in the entourage of President Yeltsin as early as 1991.

Marta Dyczok: Regarding the title of your book, *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union* . Some people have been commenting that the behavior of Russian President Putin is imperialist, or neo-imperialist. Was it really the

last empire? Or is this just a new form of empire that we're seeing?

Serhii Plokhii: What I do in the book is I explain what I mean when I use the term empire, because there are many ways of using this term, its broad enough. And what I say is that I look at the Soviet Union as the last classic empire of the modern era of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, and put the collapse of the Soviet Union into the context of the disintegration of other empires, starting with Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, the French Empire, the British Empire, the Portuguese Empire. And from that point of view it transformed itself in the form of the Soviet Union but it was a continuation of that classic empire of the 18th and 19th century.

What we see now is not really an attempt to re-create the Soviet Union, not an attempt to recreate the Russian Empire on the part of Putin. Russia is looking for a more effective and cheaper way of dominating the area and dominating the space, through using, of course, its military, but also through using its culture, and language, and through using economic power, economic muscle, that it has. So in terms of the classic empire, it's kind of a post-imperial mode of behavior, but again, Russia is not the only country that has been trying to do that, it didn't invent that. But that's already a different understanding of imperialism than the one that existed in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Marta Dyczok: Every empire needs some sort of legitimization, a narrative, a historical myth. What is the role of history, historical memory, the historian, in the construction of this new identity, this new empire, or if you will neo-empire, that the Russian president is promoting? What is the role of the historian here?

Serhii Plokhii: The role of the historian first of all is to look beyond the discourse that exists today, to look really what the New Russia or Novorossiya meant, what the declaration of the Donets'k Republic in 1917-1918 really meant. But the role of the historian is also to understand the roots, and in the roots maybe we will be able to better understand today, and maybe tomorrow as well.

When I look at the discourse used today by Russia in this Russian-Ukrainian really war today, the roots go back to the Imperial Russia of pre-1917. New Russia, *Novorossiya*, is just one of many examples of that. But it's also the emphasis on language, culture, and religion, emphasis on Orthodoxy, that's something that certainly didn't exist during Soviet times. And it's the denial, on a certain level, the right of the Ukrainians, or little Russians, or Belarussians, to exist as a separate nation, something that was characteristic of the official Russian discourse before 1917. And it is coming back. If the Soviet experiment, or the Soviet nationality policy at least rhetorically recognized Ukrainians and Belarussians as separate nations, now Putin repeats again and again that as far as he is concerned, Russians and Ukrainians constitute the same people. And this is really hearkening back to, going back to the official imperial discourse before 1917. So understanding, looking at the *longue durée* process, going beyond the headlines in the newspapers, this is the role of the historian but also of intellectuals in general in today's society, the way to contribute towards resolving the current crisis.

About the author:

Marta Dyczok is Associate Professor at the Departments of History and Political Science, Western University, Fellow at the University of Toronto's Centre for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies (CERES), Munk School of Global Affairs, Adjunct Professor at the National University of the Kyiv Mohyla Academy. She was a Shklar Research Fellow at the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute (2011) and a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars in Washington DC (2005-2006). Her latest book is *Ukraine's Euromaidan*. Previous books include: *Media, Democracy and Freedom. The Post Communist Experience* (co-edited with Oxana Gaman-Golutvina, 2009), *The Grand Alliance and Ukrainian Refugees* (2000), and *Ukraine: Change Without Movement, Movement Without Change* (2000). Her doctorate is from Oxford University and she researches media, memory, migration, and history.