The Culture War in Ukraine: the struggle against global pluralism[1]

A guerra da cultura na Ucrânia: a luta contra o pluralismo global

João Ferreira Dias
Investigador Integrado Doutorado
Centro de Estudos Internacionais, ISCTE, no Grupo Instituições, Governação e Relações Internacionais. Investigador Associado do Centro de História da Universidade de Lisboa.
Email: jbfds@iscte-iul.pt
ORCID: 0000-0001-9056-8510
DOI: https://doi.org/10.34628/1ecr-9k56

Abstract: The war in Ukraine posed new challenges to the geopolitical order and derogated Fukuyama's classical proposal of the *end of history*. Fukuyama recently recognised the existence of a new struggle based on antagonistic political-social models between a *globalist left* and a *nativist right* concerning migration, refugees, race, gender, and pluralism. This represents a *culture war*, considering the post-material dimension of the ideologies in confront. The article explores the circumstance of a *culture war* in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict that, despite the secondary relevance, unveils a struggle against the «western way of life», i.e., the globalist model based on pluralism and minorities' fundamental rights.
Keywords: Russia-Ukraine conflict; Culture war; Fundamental rights.

Resumo: A guerra na Ucrânia lançou novos desafios no plano da geopolítica, derrogando a clássica proposta teórica de Fukuyama de "fim da história". O mesmo autor reconhece, em trabalho recente, a existência de uma nova batalha assente em modelos político--sociais antagónicos, entre uma esquerda globalista e uma direita nativista, em matérias como migração, refugiados, raça, género e pluralismo. Considerando a dimensão pós--material das ideologias em confronto, a presente tensão configura as chamadas "guerras culturais". O artigo explora o conflito militar entre a Rússia e a Ucrânia a partir de um prisma de "guerra cultural". Não obstante a dimensão secundária desta natureza de conflito, o mesmo revela a existência de um combate ao dito "modo de vida ocidental", i.e., um modelo globalista baseado no pluralismo e nos direitos fundamentais das minorias.
Palavras-chave: Conflito Rússia-Ucrânia; Guerra cultural; Direitos fundamentais.

Introduction

The post-Berlin wall world was lived in the belief of the victory of Liberal-Democracy and with that in the «end of history» (Fukuyama, 1992). The ages of suspicion, military conflict and polarisation would be left behind, giving room to the age of diplomacy and liberal-democratic values. This enthusiastic perspective of intellectual elites failed to consider the social shreds of evidence coming slowly in that period, following the deindustrialisation of Europe in the face of global capitalism with the reallocation of production in Asia. The 1990s brought an increase in European integration, producing rejection or scepticism in different countries (v.g., Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2002) in opposition to the «euro enthusiasm» (Kopechy & Mudde, 2002). However, this is a soft tension, presenting slow effects on political systems considering the massive impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. If Trump's election or Brexit revealed the failure of Fukuyama's prediction, indicating the existence of a permanent imagined class conflict between the corrupt elite and the «good people» as part of the populism strategy (v.g., Taggart, 2000; Mudde, 2004), events taking part in Ukraine confirms that «Kantian peace» is no longer the paradigm in International Relations.

The text approaches the ongoing war in Ukraine via the idea of a *culture war*. The first section addresses the conceptualisation of *culture war* amid the struggle between the *globalist left* and the *nativist right*. After that, it is discussed the effect of a culture war on fundamental rights and then stresses the Russian culture war against the Liberal-Democracy.

1. Culture Wars: what is it all about?

Borrowed from the German dispute between Bismarck and the Catholic Church in the 19th century (*kulturkampf*), the concept of culture war(s) became part of public political grammar stating a great divide between – what may be called – a *globalist left* and a *nativist right*. To understand the idea of a culture war, it is necessary to start by stressing this great divide. The Portuguese sociologist, José Pedro Zúquete, studied the so-called European identitarians (2018). His previous book with Charles Lindholm (2010) outlines the pano-

rama of opposition, from left to right, to the "capitalist globalisation", emphasising the defence of local identities. The 2008 crisis is a significant historical milestone that accelerated the dissolution of the broad consensus on the added value of globalisation, bringing out the voices of protest, amplifying them and giving them ground for dissemination. Zúquete's further work (2018) follows his previous path, presenting the struggle of the European «alt-right» in the shield of European native identities against what they claim to be the wishes of an elite that uses globalisation for the integration and homogenisation of societies, expansion of markets and democracy, thus generating a perverse universalism at the expense of erasing the ethnocultural differences inherent in the various societies. In their understanding, the *identitarians* stand up for the right of the European peoples to continue to exist as a «bioculture». The nationalist discourse, hostile to foreigners - above all in the guarantee of cultural and identity unity - is shared by various extreme-right movements and is not exclusive to any party or movement.

As Zúquete states, the intellectual origin of the *identitarians* is traced back to the 1960's French *Nouvelle Droite*, opposing themselves to the hegemony of the western liberal capitalism (2018, p. 7). Having Alain de Benoist as the prominent figure, this *Nouvelle Droite* was critical of a universalistic pretension of modernity. Benoist argued that Marxism and liberalism postulate supranational values so that in the face of regional integration inherent to globalisation, the French thinker railed against the effect of erasing local singularities. Benoist thinking was responsible for the division inside the *Nouvelle Droite*, giving room to the emergence of the *identitarians* in the 1980s since Benoist's critical of the biological European identity argument. 2001 Guillaume Faye's book, *Pourquoi nous combattons. Manifeste de la Résistance européenne* played a vital role in affirming the *identitarians* movement. Although Faye's ideas were not new, being present in his friend and *compagnon de route* Pierre Vial's texts in the *Terre et Peuple* magazine, the mentioned book summarises the *identitarians*' ideas: the urgency of the defence of the biological and cultural European identity, in a fight for resistance. The difference between Benoist's and Vial-

Fayes' ideas is found in Benoist's refusal of xenophobic narratives, opposing himself to the idea of European biological identity, emphasising the cultural paradigm.

Ad summam, the 1980s well-fair crisis was responsible for the renewal of the so-called *far-right* in a period of deindustrialisation and the consequent unemployment and waves of migration of Muslims from the north of Africa and the Middle East. This migratory process led Renaud Camus (2010) to launch the theory of great replacement (*le grand remplacement*), referring to a demographic risk affecting the native European population. This theory would establish Islam as the enemy since Islam holds a vocation for expansionism that is inherently a threat to the understanding of the *identitarians*. A danger that European elites of a globalist bent refused to recognise, owing to a European self-flagellating tendency. The belief in the great substitution is an essential mark of the *identitarians*. It can be found in Alexander Markovics, leader of the Austrian *identitarians*, words: "In 50 or 100 years, there will be no more original European peoples as we know them" (Zúquete, 2018, p. 152). A significant part of the *identitarians* does not use the "ethnic, biological and racist discourse of white suprematists, but that of the defence of European culture against Islam pointed out as a vehicle of values irreconcilable with those of modern Western civilisation, civic, secular and liberal" (Marchi & Bruno, 2016, p. 42).

The previous paragraphs gave the context of identitarian grammar. To be clear: the identitarians are a European movement of what can be classified as *the radical right* whose ideas are expressed in defence of European cultural and sometimes biological identity against the threat of Islam and a great replacement caused by the massive migration of Muslim peoples to Europe and the gap of natality between the migrants and natives. These ideas can also be found in conservative parties not necessarily identified as radical right. A significant example is the Portuguese democratic-Christian party CDS-PP (see Zúquete, 2022, p. 159-180).

To mention a great divide, it is necessary to present it in the western context, the reason why it is stated between a *globalist left* and a *nativist right*. The identitarians, as previously mentioned, are in a struggle against an elite

compromised with global capitalism. In that sense, they are part of a wider circuit of populism broadly studied that places politics as an opposition between the "good people" and the "corrupt elite" (Taggart, Mude, *op. cit.*). The great divide is on the parallel of populism as a strategy or a way of doing politics. It is related to opposed perspectives on globalism. After the theory of the «end of history», Fukuyama (2018) affirms the existence of polarisation between *the left* and *the right* that sets apart from the classic disputes of economic and material content, focusing, on the one hand, on the defence of issues linked to ethnic and sexual identities, migrant and refugee rights, and on the other in the protection of patriotic-nationalist values, which do not disregard factors such as race, ethnicity and religion.

It is necessary to consider Fukuyama's proposal in a detailed manner. For the author, western societies faced significant changes in the last decades, with the transference of manufacturing from the United States and Europe to East Asia, the progressive entrance of women into the labour market, and low-skilled workers found themselves replaced by machines. The 2008 crisis increased the insecurity and put liberal democracy at stake, legitimating a change in many countries shifting to more conservative and authoritarian regimes. For Fukuyama, those changes emphasised identity politics (s.p.[2]). If in the 20th century, the left was embracing workers' rights, welfare programs and redistributive policies, and the right was interested in reducing the size of government and promoting the private sector, now the left is involved in the interests of marginalised groups (ethnic minorities, immigrants, refugees, women, LGBT). The right is engaged in traditional patriotic identity. As the author refers, this right's appeal is not new in non-democratic countries, such as Putin's Russia.

For Fukuyama, resentment over indignities plays an essential role in democratic countries,

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2   Although this essay was published in a journal; I only had access to the online version available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/americas/2018-08-14/against-identity-politics-tribalism-francis-fukuyama?check_logged_in=1&utm_medium=promo_email&utm_source=lo_flows&utm_campaign=registered_user_welcome&utm_term=email_1&utm_content=20220518>.

such as the Black Lives Matter movement, the sexual harassment and assault suffered by women and the rights of transgender people. Thus, identities – national, sexual, ethnic, gender, otherwise – became the touchstone of western societies, generating the so-called culture wars. At the core of globalisation, societies experienced drastic economic and social changes, becoming diverse, multicultural realities, dividing into "ever-narrower identities, threatening the possibility of deliberation and collective action by society as a whole" (*ibidem*). Secondly, the invisibility and the disaffection came to the political field to operate as resentment against the *globalism* and the *globalists* – the *post-material left* engaged in the previous minorities' agenda rather than in a broader sense of solidarity and equality. Those globalists "pervert" the nationalist ideal by holding a sense of cosmopolitan citizenship (Linklater, 1998) or global citizenship (Tully *et al.*, 2014). In the face of this cosmopolitan global citizenship, which understands people as part of humankind more than belonging to a State and a 'Nation', there is the *nativist right*. For Fukuyama, these nationalists "tell the disaffected that they always been core members of a great nation and that foreigners, immigrants, and elites have been conspiring to hold them down" (*ibidem*). Those narratives are well-studied in the spread of populism (v.g. Taggart, 2000; Mudde, 2004; Moffitt, 2020). Thus, the last decades brought a different type of activism, moving from a demand for equal treatment to a request for a specific treatment for every separate entity from mainstream society: disabled, native Americans, LGBT people, immigrants, transgender people, racialised groups of each ethnic-racial markers. In Fukuyama's words, marginalised groups increasingly demanded not only that laws and institutions treat them as equal to dominant groups but also that the broader society recognises and even celebrate the intrinsic differences that set them apart (*ibidem*).

Consequently, multiculturalism shifted from a diversity category to a label of diverse, separated cultures once invisible. Thereby, from multiculturalism "about large cultural groups, such as French-speaking Canadians, or Muslim immigrants, or African Americans" the society moves to a melting pot of "a society fragmented into many small groups with

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distinct experiences, as well as groups defined by the intersection of different forms of discrimination, such as women of color, whose lives could not be understood through the lens of either race or gender alone." (*ibidem*). The effect of this kind of politics is double-folded: on the one hand, we have more concrete, efficient and proportional politics and laws, considering the needs of once invisible and marginalised groups; on the other hand, by focusing on those groups, society faces a fragmentation in such diverse *micro identities* (named in socianthropological disciplines as *clusters*) that produces consequences in the idea of *common ground*, in the social contract model of society. On a political level, it is the promoter of a sense of being left behind in the white working class that led to Trump's election and Brexit (Mondon & Winter, 2018). As

Fukuyama put it, "perhaps the worst thing about identity politics as currently practised by the left is that it has stimulated the rise of identity politics on the right. This is due in no small part to the left's embrace of political correctness, a social norm that prohibits people from publicly expressing their beliefs or opinions without fearing moral opprobrium" (*ibidem*).

The notion that it is forbidden to talk without offending anyone in many ways and the victimising of the white majority (a phenomenon called *white fragility*; see v.g. DiAngelo, 2018) gave room to nationalist speeches. The *great divide* is out there. As Fukuyama says, "In both the United States and Europe, that debate is currently polarised. The right seeks to cut off immigration altogether and would like to send immigrants back to their countries of origin; the left asserts a virtually unlimited obligation on the part of liberal democracies to accept all immigrants." (*ibidem*). There is a gap in the middle where social consensus is brought.

Political correctness became a label for this *great divide* and, accordingly, for culture wars. Trump used anti-political correctness to shield his racist and sexist speeches during his campaign. The same happened in Brazil during Bolsonaro's campaign (Di Carlo & Kamradt, 2018). Both positioned themselves as culture warriors in the name of freedom of expression rather than politicians. The anti-political correctness struggle holds a long way back in contemporary history in the United States, being used by the right to face a kind of dominance of the left in the intellectual sphere, mainly in academia, with its speeches on tolerance and positive actions (c.f. Scatamburlo-D'Annibale, 2019).

Therefore, if there is a polarization in western societies, generating a great divide between a globalist left and a nativist right, concerning topics such as abortion rights, affirmative actions, LGBT rights, immigration, refugees, and nationalism *versus* global citizenship, among others, that is, eventually, the core of culture wars. According to Hunter (1991, 1996) and Wuthnow (1996), the designation of *culture wars* is related to conflicts about issues related to nonnegotiable conceptions embodied in cultural and moral spheres. As Hunter (1991) points out, the polarisation in American society presents a high risk to

democracy since each side positions itself as the owner of the truth. For him, the idea of violence underlying the concept of *culture war* should be taken seriously (1993, p. 30).

2. Fundamental Rights and Culture War

Before stressing the Russian culture war(s), it is necessary to briefly highlight the link between fundamental rights and culture wars in the face of the journal's scope.

The culture war is a label for a struggle in western societies between a leftist cosmopolitan globalist citizenship and a rightist nativist nationalism. This presents what is called here a *great divide*. Those nonconsensual positions are expressed in a social and political polarisation debated in the public sphere, mainly on social media. The themes flagged by both sides frame the core of fundamental rights: individual identity (gender and sexual identity), self-determination (abortion), and equal treatment with particular attention to the protection of fragile individuals in a logic of proportionality (gay marriage, minorities' rights, affirmative actions). However, as Fukuyama argued, the concentration on minorities' agenda in the face of economic crisis produced a sense of being left behind on historically privileged people, no longer being themselves as so. The rhetoric of white privilege (v.g. Leonardo, 2004) became problematic among low white classes, people with no *privilege* besides the non-disadvantaged of being "of colour". For them, it is hard to see themselves as privileged, especially when the narrative is coming from the intellectual elite of colour.[3]

As Turner (2018) states, the Moral Majority in the USA came with the advent of the left agenda for sexual issues and the advent of a perception of an Islamic threat. This meant a culture retreat to a more moral restriction in public policies. In Trump's election, Stanley (2018) sees the affirmation of a fascism *modus operandi*. From a more conservative/prudent perspective, one may call it an illiberal turn in America's administration. It presents consequences for the interpretation of fundamental rights. Considering sexual and gender orientation, gay marriage, abortion, and affirmative actions for racialised people, as part

of a liberal-democratic agenda, this illiberal turn affects the liberal interpretation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (articles 1, 7, 16, 18). The overturn of abortion (decision 'Roe v Wade') in the Supreme Court proves this change[4].

Thus, the illiberal turn means, at least, a compression of fundamental rights, at most the destruction of those. As pointed out in the next section, this has to do with Putin's agenda and culture wars.

3. Russian Culture War against the West

Neil Robinson's book on Russia's culture wars (2014) is essential for this work, and central arguments will be highlighted as follow. According to the author, events in 2014 proved that "Russia is in the middle of a culture war" (p. 2), a narrative brought from Putin's third presidential election in March 2012. In that year, the members of Pussy Riot were arrested and sentenced for protesting Putin. In June 2013, a law came to light against the propagation of non-traditional sexual relations to minors. Those were signs of the cultural turn drawing in Russia, based on an imagined distinctiveness of Russian civilisation to Europe.

The uniqueness of Russian civilisation is deeply embodied in Putin's rhetoric. For him, Russia is a «state-civilisation». By this idea, there will be no state without civilisation and vice-versa. For that, the Russian identity must be protected so it can survive. The aim of the Russian character is the Russian Christian orthodoxy and the joint of other religions in Russian territory around a common concern for the preservation of traditional moral values (p. 28-29). This survival of olden days values is at the core of Putin's speeches and agenda. The urgency lies in cultural globalisation and the western abandonment of traditional values. For Putin, globalisation brought a different kind of international tension (p. 30). For him, "many nations are revising their moral values and ethical norms, eroding ethnic traditions and differences between people and cultures. Society is now required not only to recognise everyone's right to the freedom of consciousness, political

views and privacy, but also to accept without question the equality of good and evil (…)". According to Putin, this "destruction of traditional values (…) is (…) essentially anti-democratic, since it is (…) contrary to the will of the majority" (p. 30-1).

In Putin's mind, this erosion of traditional values is particularly evident in Europe. It helps explain the urgency of invading Ukrainian territory and the long-term support of the far-right in Europe (Polyakova, 2014, 2016; Shekhovtsov, 2017). The thread of the disappearance of Russian civilisation, a process that began with the end of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, led to the "calls for new school texts, the establishment of a Military-Historical Society with the involvement of the Minister for Culture, more celebration of Russian feats of arms, including new war memorials and more prominence given to Russia's part in World War I" (p. 34), and also to the recovery of Stalin's physical and ideological fitness program (*Gotov k trudy i oborone*) in March 2014, and the persecution of the 'traitors' of the «fifth column», the liberal intelligentsia devoted to west ideas, ethno-nationalists and Russia's LGBT community.

Thus, Putin's narrative of the Ukrainian government as Nazis and «junkies» (drug addicts) is a rhetoric of legitimation of invasion and performance of culture war. While the west is corrupt and a morally decadent liberal world, Russia assumes the role of saviour of Christian and conservative traditional values. By invading Ukraine, Putin is taking back land he believes to be part of great olden Russia and rescuing it from being the "puppet of the West"[5]. Not surprisingly, Putin forced the comparison of Russia's international isolation to cancel culture, giving J. K. Rowling – author of Harry Potter – denunciations for her views on gender as an example.

Thereby, Putin's culture war is a defence of Russia's state-civilisation against the moves of globalism and liberal democracy with its checks and balances, free elections, term limitations, fundamental rights, affirmative actions, and multicultural identities. Russia is now part of western culture wars that Putin is accused of financing. Putin is the political

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3   See the work of Ferreira & Queirós (2018) concerning the emergence of Critical Race Theory in Havard School of Law.

4   Available at <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/05/02/supreme-court-abortion-draft-opinion-00029473 >, consulted on the 25th of May 2022.

5   On this topic see Nicola Heath's analysis at < https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-03-17/ukraine-russia-culture-war-putin-conservative-push/100879732>, consulted on 23th of May.

Messiah (Ferreira Dias, 2020) that will guide and inspire those who believe in a kind of alternative modernity (Eisenstadt, 1999), old-fashioned, based on traditional nationalist Christian values, with a democracy based on the majority against minorities preoccupations and a populist view of leadership, elections, and future.

Conclusion

The western world is living an intense polarisation presented here by the «great divide» concept. The division between a *globalist left* and a *nativist right* is the core of present-day culture wars: a struggle between an agenda on liberal democracy, pluralism, multiculturalism, minorities' rights and affirmative actions, abortion and female empowerment, gender and LBGT rights, and a rightist agenda that claim to defend national identities and olden days religious values against the political correctness and the right to free speeches (meaning the right to be freely racist, homophobic and sexist) and leftist corruption of moral.

As seen in the article, this great divide that helps to explain Trump's election and the Brexit, has all to say to Putin's invasion of Ukraine. Since at least his third reelection Putin put forward policies of Russia's 'state-civilisation' affirmation, close to what Triaud (1999) states as politics of memory based on dominant group ideology. Anti-LGBT laws and policies became one of the most critical struggles for Putin's affirmation of Russia's Christian nation in opposition to liberal Europe, whose sympathisers are persecuted as traitors.

Thus, culture wars are now everywhere in the West and affect political and social consensus since the ideological division is no longer based on material questions but on post-material issues: morality, social, national, and religious values. While economic insecurity may lead to class discomfort, affirmative actions for minority social clusters and a Moral Majority rise clashes. Without Trump in the White House, it seems plausible to assume that Putin sees himself as the paladin of olden days morality, the white Christian cultural mainstream, being the cultural warrior facing the thread of a such a liberal world where identities are no longer visible and the great Mother Russia, the Russia state-civilisation falls apart.

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