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Understanding ZRADA

12–15 minutes

Trying to explain ZRADA to Western observers is difficult. It is much like how explaining *sovok* to Western observers is difficult; this is not a coincidence, mind you, because both *sovok* and ZRADA have a lot in common.

Sovok, Russian for ‘dustpan’, is more than a pejorative name for the Soviet Union; much rather, it is a complex social phenomenon that stems from the realities Soviet citizens were forced to live in – namely, the reality of a state capitalist machine that does not care about you in the slightest. A core tenet of *sovok* is that, since the state does not care about you, you’re not particularly obliged to care about the state in turn. At the same time, the state is obliged to provide you with your basic necessities (Soviet Union had a full employment policy in place). If you get them, it’s not enough, because the state owes you more; if you don’t, well, what did you expect, it’s the state, it doesn’t care about you!

Nowhere it is mentioned that a *sovok* has to owe something to the state. After all, the state is an inexorable, uncaring system that gives too little. And if it gives so little, how can it expect much in return?

Moreover, since the state doesn’t give a *sovok* enough, a *sovok* always seeks to better himself at the state’s expense. The popular maxim in the 1970s Soviet Union is roughly as follows:

“From factory, take home every single nail
You are the boss ’round here, not guest or slave!”

This was by no means limited to nails: everyone brought home anything they could, connected with their trade. My family is no less guilty of this: my grandmother worked in a canteen for Communist Party bigwigs. Needless to say, fancy food was always on the table. Stuff like caviar wasn’t easy to get by in the Soviet Union.

Add the guaranteed full employment and wages, supplement with permanent shortages of essential goods, and you’ll have the picture of a textbook *sovok*. A *sovok*‘s mindset can be summarized as thus: he fears the state, he doesn’t trust the state, yet he is firmly convinced the state owes him everything, while he doesn’t owe the state anything; and whenever the state fails to provide what a *sovok* wants, he feels free to reimburse himself at the state’s expense. It is, in essence, a twisted mixture of paternalism and parasitism, born out from Soviet Union’s era of stagnation, which has neatly survived the Perestroika, the collapse of the Soviet Union and Russia’s soaring oil prices. It is ubiquitous not only in Russia, but in its closest neighbors – particularly Belarus and Ukraine.

How is sovok related to ZRADA, though? Here’s how: ZRADA is born of a similar reality – an enormous and uncaring state towering over your daily life. Many Ukrainians are also of a *sovok* mindset, and conversely *sovok* acquired the telltale characteristics of ZRADA. A *sovok* fears and hates the state, the government, the system; he distrusts them, yet he feels entitled to the various services the state is obliged to provide. With one distinction.

A *sovok* doesn’t get what he feels the state owes him (i.e.

everything), shrugs and says “Told you so, you can’t trust the establishment to give what it owes us”. A ZRADA person, however, considers the same to be no less short of a betrayal.

Indeed, ‘zrada’ means ‘betrayal’ in Ukrainian. And where the *sovok* simply hates and mistrusts, ZRADA sees betrayal.

Both will eagerly start crying about how the state owes them right the next instant. But where a *sovok* shrugs and goes on with his (varyingly miserable) life, a ZRADA person considers himself betrayed.

This goes beyond material wants. Both a sovok and a ZRADA person hate and distrust the state. But a ZRADA person doesn’t simply hate and distrust. He sees betrayal. Whenever something goes wrong, no matter what, the people responsible must be the worst kind of traitor. A sovok perceives the establishment as an inexorable, uncaring machine. A ZRADA person perceives the establishment as a conspiracy of traitors.

The reasons for this are readily apparent in Ukrainian history. Indeed, most of Ukraine’s history, from the Cossack days to the present, is permeated by ZRADA so much one can smell its adrenaline-rich aroma, and hear a thousand manly Cossack voices shouting “ZRADA!!!” at the top of their lungs before falling silent.

The chief reason is that Ukrainians never had their own statehood for much of their recorded history. Modern Ukraine was constantly ruled by, fought over or vied for by one foreign power or another, with its population afforded little say in how they were ruled. In essence, Ukrainians were ruled by a government which, while not necessarily malevolent, they perceived as alien and hostile.

The other reason is what some people might have called

‘rugged individualism’. The name ‘Ukraine’ by itself may be translated as ‘borderland’ or ‘frontier’; because that is what Ukraine invariably was. Modern Central Ukraine was the southern frontier of both the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Russian Empire. Even West Ukraine, now considered the most Westernalized part of Ukraine, was an easternmost frontier of either Austria-Hungary or Poland again. Life on the frontier is hardly easy; the wide expanse of the Dnieper steppes or the rugged conditions of the Carpathian mountains also meant life on the frontier was sparse. With an uncaring foreign power sitting on them, people became inclined to fending for themselves any way they could; and while a peasant had few such opportunities, there were other, considerably freer social classes who could pursue greater ambition.

The celebrated Zaporizzhian Cossacks started out as private armies for ambitious nobles, then in service to Poland. The celebrated Zaporizzhian Sich often fell prey to the individual ambition of Cossack commanders; one may say the democratic decision-making process of the Sich rose out of the necessity to balance this individual ambitions. In the end, individual ambition was what sparked Hetman Khmelnitsky’s rebellion and the creation of the Hetmanate. Ambition was what drove the Hetmanate into civil war after Khmelnitsky’s death. And, in the end, ambition was what broke the Cossackdom, as Cossack chiefs decided their ambition was best furthered by serving Russia. The Sich was tolerated until Russia’s southern border expanded to the Pontic steppe and the Crimea; after that, the last remnants of the old Cossack systems were swept away.

Personal ambition is probably what explains a large number of Ukrainians among Polish and Russian nobility. Many registered Cossack chiefs were granted noble status, and most of

Hetmanate's power structure enjoyed one, too. Even after the Hetmanate's autonomies were revoked by the imperial government, the scions of these Ukrainian nobles went on to serve the Russian Empire. Ultimately, they would lead it to some of its greatest triumphs.

Personal ambition and infighting was what failed Ukraine's first bid for independence, and it is what has been failing it, time and again, until now. Personal gain is judged against the common good, and the common good loses in the end. And when common good lost, Ukraine ultimately lost time and again.

This is something that might give a chap a complex. For centuries, ordinary Ukrainians viewed themselves as unjustly oppressed by a foreign power, and saw every single bid for their independence fail due to someone's unchecked ambitions. When given the chance, these ordinary Ukrainians would similarly follow the urge to look out for themselves, as opposed to a common good, thus causing these nation-building attempts to fail time and again. The end result left Ukrainians with a naturally-ingrained paranoia to go hand in hand with their rugged individualism. And with every single failure, this paranoia drove them to chalk these failures not to their own misdeeds or faults, but rather to someone else's doings. To traitors, sellouts and conspirators.

The end result was ZRADA.

Life after the Soviet Union infused Ukrainians with a similar *sovok* mindset. This mindset then intertwined with the genetic memory of past failures and futile resistance, thus creating the modern brand of ZRADA. To a ZRADA person, everything goes wrong, and everything that does go wrong is the result of someone else's working to that end – in short, traitors and

sellouts. At the same time, the ZRADA person seeks to further his own ends, and sees himself as entitled to them. When he doesn't get them, it is someone else selling him down the river. In short, it is ZRADA.

A more traditional variant of ZRADA wants nothing more but to have nothing to do with the establishment; however, the establishment, being an alien and uncaring system, would have none of that. A successful modern-day Ukrainian self-made man is someone who loudly says he doesn't need government or the state, yet starts pitching fits when the state starts dabbling in his business. He then usually gives bribes and, right afterwards, pitches another fit at how the traitors in the government and the security services and the tax office and whoever else robbed him of his hard-earned money. It is never his fault, it is someone else's fault. And this someone else is definitely a traitor and a sellout!

Of course, even these rugged Ukrainian individualists feel they are entitled to low taxes, low household gas prices, good infrastructure and ultimately a pension. Whenever they don't get any of this, it constitutes betrayal; yet they never once stop to consider that to be entitled to something, they have to give something in return.

Thus *sovok*, a phenomenon born out of a Soviet citizen's daily experience with the Soviet system, entwines with ZRADA, a phenomenon born out of a Ukrainian's strive for personal gain at the expense of the common good. Both these phenomena are ultimately united by their inherent infantilism: where a *sovok* feels entitled, a ZRADA person constantly shifts the blame, both without any logical reason.

Naturally, ZRADA, stemming from unchecked personal

ambition, goes hand in hand with politics, and as Ukrainian politicians share the same mindset as ordinary Ukrainians do, it inevitably leads to ZRADA. Government does something? ZRADA! Government doesn't do anything? ZRADA! Exchange rate goes up? ZRADA! Exchange rate goes down? ZRADA! Whenever something happens, someone feels it's wrong; and rather than employ logical thinking and get to the bottom of the matter, this someone arbitrarily decides some perceived traitors and sellouts are to blame. ZRADA!

In post-Maidan Ukraine, ZRADA has been particularly proliferated – so much, in fact, that national discourse nowadays is an endless cycle of one ZRADA or other. The reason here is that Ukrainians, by and large, were shocked by the events of the revolution (a bloody revolution is something this country hadn't seen in a lifetime), Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war – and they didn't get over this shock. Naturally, their first knee-jerk reaction is to blame someone else. Contrary to what some may believe, modern ZRADA didn't start with Poroshenko and his chocolate factory. Ukrainian national paranoia reigned supreme during Maidan – everyone feared that Maidan would be crushed, that it would amount to nothing, that people would lose interest or that the then-opposition would sell Maidan down the river. Naturally, this led to ZRADA. When Yanukovych fled and the country found itself with Russian troops in the Crimea, Ukrainians knew someone was to blame. And they decided to blame someone else. And when the war started, it didn't start out successful. Guess who was to blame?

Naturally, certain interest groups started using this country-wide shock and paranoia to further their own personal gains – as it had happened countless times during Ukraine's history. Military losses are used as proof to undermine the government (already

not particularly trusted) for one reason or another. Competing political parties vying for power, subsidies, votes and Cabinet seats stir up ZRADA to further their ends. And the fact that Ukrainians were repeatedly cheated throughout their history does not help.

Modern Ukrainian discourse cannot be understood without ZRADA; but what must be understood is that ZRADA is inherently illogical and emotional. It's centuries of failures and a deeply-ingrained urge to look out for one's own self speaking out, amplified by the shock and the difficulties of times Ukrainians find themselves in.

Time and again, however, this very phenomenon paved the way to Ukraine's many failures, directly causing ZRADA to flourish today. In the end of 2015, Ukraine once again stands on a threshold of a new cycle that so often repeated itself.

A cycle that may yet be broken.