THE MAGIC SPELL OF REVANCHISM: GEOPOLITICAL VISIONS IN POST-SOVET SPECULATIVE FICTION (FANTASTIKA)

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Abstract. The various genres of speculative fiction elaborate models for aesthetic “re-enchantment” of the world, in which the role of programmatically irrational and fantastic elements ranges from the uncanny menace to the aesthetic ideal. While in the Western fiction the literary tropes of time travel, monsters or sorcery function as the elements of the unreal “secondary world” and thus construct a distance between the fantastic and the mundane, contemporary Russophone authors exploit the generic conventions of fantasy or science fiction in order to suggest a continuity between fiction and reality. Focusing on geopolitical and social modeling in post-Soviet speculative fiction, the paper claims that the images of the Other, the archaic communal structures and the transformations of historical time provide here an aesthetic ground for a large patriotic consensus of a community united by common resentment.

Key words: speculative fiction, modernization, Eurasianism, time travels, monsters, aestheticization, estrangement, geopolitics.
1. Why literature matters

Literary texts model social and political realities in a way that is fundamentally constituted by aesthetic form.

Although this axiomatic statement already establishes a link between literature, politics, and ideology, we still must try to further clarify the basic concepts of "form" and "model." As functional abstractions, models represent and visualize more complex objects and processes (they are models “of” something). Conversely, as ideals and prescriptions for future production, experiment, regulation, and evaluation, they also bring about the elaboration of new objects—in other words, they are models “for” something (cf. Mahr, 2004).

The aesthetic modelling of reality in literary texts deploys its epistemological potential in two directions. With the help of fictional formats that defuse the pragmatic compulsion towards decision-making (fictionality) or open up new fields of application by way of virtual testing (simulation), aesthetic modelling provides a space for epistemological negotiations. Secondly, its representational practices are highly relevant for the epistemic design of non-aesthetic and non-literary discourses (genesis and transfer of terminology, heuristic metaphors, and rhetoric). For more information on literary modelling see the web-portal of the Muenster Research Training Group "Literary Form": https://www.uni-muenster.de/GRKLitForm/en/Profil/Forschung/index.html

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literature develops into an area of systematic and dogmatically unfettered search for ideals of social and political order. Thus, beyond the well-known function of social criticism, literary artifacts manifest specific forms of pragmatics by staging the narratives that justify political practices or accompany them rhetorically.

In the context of literary aesthetics, the idea of modelling is of particular importance for the formation and establishment of literary genres. At the same time, in terms of both poetics and politics, the understanding of genres as key categories for the classification of literary texts constantly revolves around the notion of modernity (Wiemann, 2008: 41). However, even within the genres, which are commonly defined as modern or post-modern, one frequently comes across a variety of fantastic, counterfactual or surreal forms, which openly contradict the common presuppositions of modernity as a historical and cultural phenomenon.

If, following Max Weber, we describe our reality of modernized, bureaucratic, secularized society as disenchanted (in German: entzaubert), then a number of literary genres, ranging from magical realism to fantasy, aim at playful, literary re-enchantment of the world and therefore represent a strong antimodernist gesture in the midst of contemporary culture. While pointing to “natural” restrictions of the objective, rational perception of the world and often questioning rationality as such, fantastic elements of literary texts normally aim at sharpening the reader’s awareness to the limitations of the customary approach towards reality, thus potentially enabling a new look on social, political and cultural problems of the “real” world. Therefore, the importance of fiction is not restricted to the genres,
which realistically “describe” or “reflect” the world, but also refers to texts which transfer the social and political phenomena to the realms of the uncanny, the grotesque and the fantastic.

In a way, the existence of fantastic tendencies within the modern genres of literature highlights the ideological ambivalence of literary forms as such. No literary genre is intrinsically pro-democratic or pro-authoritarian, rational or irrational, modern or archaic. At the same time neither form of literature allows for the author’s unlimited creativity; on the contrary, a literary form establishes an effective framework of what can be said and how it should be said.

A technical concept of form (Burdorf, 2001: 2) requires that authors employ those aesthetic devices best suited to realizing the intended effects of their respective texts, picking the most appropriate form on the basis of an informed choice from all relevant traditions and developing it experimentally and creatively. Against this backdrop, the circulation of mass literature which openly advocates archaization and de-modernization of the (post-Soviet) societies requires a closer look as to its genre specifics and the models of reality that it proposes. While the reasons for the choice of topics and forms may belong to the sphere of context, the process of aesthetic modelling of anti-modern realities can be traced in the texts and therefore remains a legitimate object of literary analysis.

In this paper I am going to address the problem of how and to what extent the anti-democratic, imperial and ultimately antimodernist narratives of the post-Soviet era are influenced by the aesthetics and generic conventions of literary works that English scholarship addresses as
“speculative fiction” and that in Slavic cultures are commonly known as *fantastika / fantasyka*.

2. “The Literature of Free People”

Fantastika is here an umbrella term for a large variety of different literary genres, such as science-fiction, fantasy, gothic fiction, alternative or counterfactual history, etc. While the term fantastic is not frequently used in the Anglophone studies (the same is true for German term Phantastik or French littérature fantastique), in the post-Soviet cultures, it is firmly anchored both in literary studies and in everyday usage.

Apart from the formal specifics, the term fantastika refers to a kind of literature which (1) aims at commercial success and therefore at a mass audience, (2) relies heavily on marketing infrastructure and performative events (e.g. festivals and game conventions) and finally (3) addresses largely the same subculture (fandom).

In a way, the success of fantastika as literary discourse and of fandom as an organized subculture unites the European East and West. However, in our discussion, we must also account for the specific Soviet tradition of speculative writing. While any sort of literature dealing seriously with the supernatural (be it gothic novels or magical realism) was rejected by Soviet censors, the Soviet era was the golden age of a specific speculative genre—science fiction. Despite the limitations set up by state censorship, Soviet sci-fi writers were numerous, prolific, and innovative. One of the notable common grounds shared by the genre of science fiction and the Soviet
state was their preoccupation with futurology (future studies): the communist idea of economic and political planning, the ideologically marked obsession with “scientific prevision” (научное предвидение) and, finally, the rapid development of systems science—all that found its literary and aesthetic counterpart in science fiction writing. Although most of the Soviet writers portrayed the future Earth optimistically (i.e., as a communist utopia) and therefore tended to place post-apocalyptic and dystopian plots outside the known world, the settings of their “fantastic” texts occasionally bore allusion of the real world and could serve as a criticism of contemporary society.

One of the most significant inventions of Soviet science fiction, which exhibits both its zeal for progress and the critical reflection of the modernizing drive, is the trope of the progressor—an agent of a highly developed civilization secretly planted into a repressive and backward society. The concept of the progressor appears in late Soviet times in the texts of Arkadii and Boris Strugatskii. The idea of progressorism is to facilitate the development of primitive civilizations and to diminish casualties, inflicted by historical processes or inevitable crises. As the progressors are aware of possible side-effects of their activities, they try not to interfere with the natural course of “alien” history, but to help or alleviate the suffering of select representatives of the alien society—mainly intellectuals and their loved ones. According to Mark Lipovetsky (2016, 29f), the progressor trope primarily offers the intelligentsia reader an identification not with a “colonized subject,” but with a “colonizer,” a bearer of progress to the passive and backward community of “natives.” While
ethically and aesthetically legitimizing the practices of colonial subordination, the progressor also presents a form of imaginary self-identification for liberals who opposed the communist regime in the 1980s and who confronted the authoritarian, nationalist, and neo-imperialist tendencies that emerged in late Soviet and post-Soviet politics (ibid.)

In its ambivalence the trope of progressor exemplifies the dual nature of the science-fiction scene, which, paradoxically, was both loyal to the Soviet state and had acquired a strong flair of non-conformism, manifested in its self-proclaimed motto as “the literature of free people” („литература свободных людей“). This freedom was obviously not ideological, but first and foremost aesthetic—freedom to use and produce a literary form, which was different from officially imposed socialist realism.

No doubt, these aesthetic liberties were functioning only within the broader regulatory boundaries of Soviet literary production. Thus, the major part of Soviet speculative fiction (fantastika) was classified as “literature for children and youth” (“для старшего и среднего школьного возраста”), which made it possible for the official critics to treat the genre as a sort of modern fairy-tales or entertaining adventure stories. More importantly, such classification implied the publication of literary works by selected publishing houses (e.g., “Detskaia literatura”, “Molodaia Gvardiia”, “Veselka/Raduga”, “Molod’”) and journals (“Tekhnika molodezhi”, “Khimiya i Zhizn”, “Iunost’”); finally, the readership and the growing subculture were organized in the network of literary clubs («клубы любителей фантастики», КЛФ) under the guidance of the Komsomol and ultimately under the
careful surveillance of the KGB. All these factors undoubtedly contributed to a particular in-group mentality of the readers and fostered the perception of fantastika as a single whole, despite the variety of different subgenres, literary forms and aesthetic tendencies within its larger discursive framework.

After the fall of state censorship in the late 1980s, which allowed publishing numerous translations of Western books and films that had not been released in the USSR, the popularity of traditional science fiction was in decline, and fantasy, with its distinctive Western (i.e., British and American) features became the new trend-setting genre. Marina Galina, a science fiction author and careful observer of the contemporary Russian literary scene, summarizes the late Soviet readership’s acquaintance with fantasy as an experience of an almost divine revelation (Galina, 2015):

And then people had found out that there was such a thing as fantasy and—my goodness!—this was a totally different world, where one could become an elf or a goblin. That was a world one could dive into, like one dives into a religion, a world, where one could stay and live.

[И вот люди узнали, что есть фэнтези — и, Боже мой, это какой-то другой мир, и в этом другом мире можно побывать эльфом или гоблином, можно уходить в этот мир, как в религию, жить там.]

Still, despite the enormous Western influence, it was exactly the genre of fantasy and the newly organized fandom of the 1990s, which in

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2 All translations from the Russian are my own (O.Z.)
their core preserved the continuity of the Soviet literary discourse and Soviet cultural space. The possible reasons for this are twofold: first, speculative fiction aimed at entertainment and commercial success; therefore, it could survive the transition to market economy and adapt to the new realities of the commercialized publishing system. Secondly, the fans and consumers of speculative fiction were already associated institutionally and could be easily approached as a target group (at least in terms of marketing and advertising). Thus, among other Soviet subcultures, the fandom was one of the few which not just survived, but also managed to grow bigger. Fantastika beyond the newly drawn national borders and supposedly beyond politics was “naturally” written in the Russian language, although a large part of modern post-Soviet speculative fiction is produced in Ukraine, especially in its unofficial “sci-fi capital,” Kharkiv. Most Ukrainian and Belarusian authors of fantastika, however, write in Russian and usually publish their books via Russian publishing houses (AST, Azbuka, Eksmo-Iauza), which gives them access to a broad Russophone audience of the post-Soviet countries.³

³ While the author’s “belonging” to a national community and a corresponding national literary scene is often an object of deliberate “construction” (both by the critics and the author himself), one significant factor affecting this overall sense of belonging remains the choice of a publishing house. Thus, in Ukraine, there are a number of renowned authors, who despite writing in Russian publish their books in Ukraine and are widely perceived as part of Ukrainian literary discourse (e.g., Andrei Kurkov, Boris Hersonskii, Aleksandr Kabanov). On the contrary, in the sphere of fantasy fiction one comes across the highly successful duo of Maryna and Serhii Diachenko, who early on began to rely on Russian publishing houses and, increasingly, on a Russian audience. The Diachechkos occasionally write in Ukrainian and borrow extensively from the works of Ukrainian classics (such as Lesya Ukrainka and Mykhailo Kotsyubyns’kyi). Hence they produce a kind of fantastic imaginary, which is deeply rooted in the Ukrainian literary tradition (from romantics to magic realism)—yet despite all these factors, their works remain an integral part of the Moscow-centered literary scene and a corresponding
Starting from the early 1990s the modified and westernized literary discourse of fantastika will successfully withstand and reject the new post-imperial situation. Moreover, in the turn of the century, it will eventually come up with new revanchist and imperial narratives that rely predominantly on the literary models, rhetoric devices and images provided by the best-selling works of contemporary Anglophone speculative fiction. This seemingly paradoxical situation may appear less surprising, if we take into account that, alongside with Western fantasy, the post-Soviet readership of the early 1990s was introduced into what German literary scholar Niels Werber (2005, 227–229) calls “pre-1945 bio- and geopolitical modes of thinking,” i.e. the descriptive and analytical models of the classic geopolitics of the interwar period, as unfolded in the works of Halford Mackinder, Friedrich Ratzel, Karl Haushofer, Carl Schmitt, and others. These models, in turn, were then enhanced by the tremendous success of Tolkien’s “Lord of the Rings.”

3. The Middle Earth of Eurasia

Despite their emphasized fictitiousness and the programmatic “irreality” of fantasy forms as such, Tolkien’s novels (but also their adaptations in movies or computer games) convey a certain political knowledge of racial and civilizational incompatibility: first of all, races are different not only in terms of skin color but also in moral worth and political integrity. The races are either hereditarily good and wise like Elves or genetically evil and cultural tradition, to which the texts of Maryna and Serhii Diachenko contribute with a commercialized form of Ukrainian ethnographic exoticism.
dumb like Orcs, and therefore they make “natural-born” enemies. This worldview already turns the Other into an enemy and a threatening figure that is against “us” simply because he is not one of “us.” Thus, in “Lord of the Rings” the absolute and insurmountable hate between Elves and Ores is not outlined as a consequence of political decision-making but is both essential and existential: warfare is their “natural” destiny and peace between them is always just a temporary “respite” to gain new strength for the upcoming battles.

In the universe of “Lord of the Rings,” the racial Othering is being emphasized by spatial connotations. The respective realms of Tolkien’s Middle Earth (pretty Shire, proud Gondor, beautiful Imladris, and terrible Mordor) mirror the racial differences of their inhabitants, as these regions have been molded through years of control in such a deep way that they should be counted as important parts of the political and military power of Middle earth’s races. Space and nature are politicized to a degree that transforms “natural borders” like rivers or mountains into a living periphery of the society, thus making it possible to understand society as a living organism or political body (Werber, 2005: 228)."
In fact, fantasy books like “Lord of the Rings” provide an aesthetic and narrative framework for one of the basic models of classic German Geopolitik, which goes back to an essay that Carl Schmitt published in 1939 under the bulky title “The Ordering of Great Spaces by International Law and the Ban on Interventions by Foreign Powers” (in German: “Völkerrechtliche Großraumordnung mit Interventionsverbot für raumfremde Mächte”). One of Schmitt’s central arguments is the assumption that politics must submit to the imperatives inherent “in the order of continental spaces” (Großraumordnung), i.e., the organization of countries into large territorial blocs or empires under the guidance and political control of a number of hegemonic “core states” (Kernstaat). The “core states” shall have a free hand within the subordinate geographical space and should, therefore, have a right to organize this space both economically and politically, while at the same time refraining from all interference into the areas of other “core states.” While Schmitt draws the geopolitical borders of the different orders and powers alongside the cultural boundaries (thus making a “culture” into an essentialized factor of separation between human communities), he also defines his “greater region” as an empire (Reich).

distinguished by the same “totality”, which rejects any neutral position as well as any moral or legal boundaries for the annihilation of the enemy. The Orcs must be killed in the same numbers as they are produced by Sauron. The fact that the Orcs are being massacred even when on the battlefield they turn into a fleeing, wounded, or surrendering enemy, casts no dark shadow on Tolkien’s protagonists. The classical ius belli of sovereign states that defines the enemy as an honest foe is programmatically abandoned here in the favour of the biopolitical image of the absolute Other, which deserves neither mercy nor respect.
Although Schmitt’s geopolitical vistas unequivocally refer to the practices of imperial domination, their primary significance resides in their peace-keeping function. Schmitt holds that a ban on the inference from alien (“raumfremd”) powers is the only alternative to worldwide warfare and to the mutual extermination of the “greater regions”. As Niels Werber (2005) persuasively shows, this is Tolkien’s option as well.\(^5\) In “Lord of the Rings” the breach of the interference ban by Sauron and his Orc armies and their invasion into the realms of the West culminates in an unlimited war, in which all parties are heading for the extermination of “the other”, while looking forward to the “final battle” – the “war to end all wars”.\(^6\)

Carl Schmitt’s Großraumordnung, as a unit for describing and conceptualizing world politics, found its second life in the notion of “political orbits” coined by Walter Lippmann and, later, in the “cultural zones” of Samuel Huntington, in which those respected researchers

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\(^{5}\) This, of course, does not mean that Tolkien explicitly or deliberately advocates the assumptions of German geopolitics or provides a fictional background for actual history and politics. Tolkien himself states in the foreword to the second edition of his “Lord of the Rings” (published in 1965) that the events in the book by no means correspond to political theories or real historical events and he expresses his annoyance over such interpretations of his writings. Yet this response already illustrates the fact that the author’s intentions do not reflect the impact and the reception of a literary text as a cultural phenomenon with political implications; on the contrary, the range of interpretations of Tolkien’s work shows that writing and creator are unrelated, thus providing a perfect illustration of Roland Barthes idea of “the death of the author.”

\(^{6}\) The notion of “interference” appears extremely problematic when it comes to its concrete manifestations in the contemporary world. While for Schmitt (as well as for Tolkien) the prohibited “interference” means a direct act of military aggression, in today’s globalized world of mutual informational interdependence and interconnectedness the political interference may have a broad range of possible realizations (not to mention the popular slogans of ”hybrid warfare”). Consider for example the scandalous “punk-prayer” of the Russian band “Pussy Riot,” which has been publicly branded as an interference of the “hostile” Western aesthetics into the “sacred” sphere of the Russian Orthodox faith.
ultimately divided the entire globe. But the most inconspicuous niche for the “obsolete” or “taboo” discourses of the prewar geopolitics remained fantasy fiction, where under the guise of entertainment these discourses could address the suppressed or rather unconscious geopolitical anxieties of the readership.

From this perspective, the unholy alliance between post-Soviet speculative writing and Russian geopolitical theories—above all the Eurasian doctrine—appears somewhat predetermined, if not inevitable. Eurasianism can be broadly defined as an ideology which affirms that Russia and its “margins” occupy a median position between Europe and Asia and that Russia should specifically highlight its Asian features. Eurasianism rejects the view that Russia is situated on the periphery of Europe, and on the contrary, interprets the country’s geographic location in the “heart” of the Eurasian continent—a gigantic middle world between Occident and Orient.

The Eurasian doctrine revolves around the narrative of an irresolvable conflict between a thalassocratic i.e. sea-borne, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, market, individualistic civilization, and a continental civilization embodied by Russia based on an authoritarian government turned towards tradition and the collectivist mindset. The theoretical presuppositions of Eurasianism, yet again, were largely inspired by German Geopolitik of the interwar time. Their most notable common features are (1) a rejection of “Atlanticist” (British-American) domination, considered disastrous for the rest of mankind; (2) the idea that the central geographical position of the Eurasian space naturally and inevitably entails an imperial form of political
organization, and that any secession is destined to fail, leaving newly independent states no choice but to revert to a unified authoritarian entity; and (3) a belief that a living culture (bios) takes possession of a landscape in such a way that geographical space and human culture form a symbiosis (a permanent living community). Thus, within the theoretical framework of Eurasian doctrine, bios, and nomos, the fundamental notions of early twentieth-century political science, fuse in the same way as they do in Tolkien’s novels and the writings of his countless epigones.

Eurasianism has its origins in the Russian émigré community in the 1920s when it was considered an innovative theory, and many highly reputed scholars contributed to the development of its concepts (among them Nikolai Trubetskoi, Roman Jakobson, Petr Savitskii). However, due to internal conflicts and splits by 1930 the Eurasianists had ceased publishing their periodical and as a movement had quickly faded from the Russian scene. Their thoughts seemed almost forgotten for many decades until in the 1990s the Eurasian doctrine made a spectacular return into Russian academic and political discourse, where it was eagerly and uncritically adopted as “forgotten national heritage.” One of the key roles in the Renaissance of Eurasianism was played by Lev Gumilev (1912-1992), whose works and ideas served as a bridge between the Russian scholars of the interwar time and the up-and-coming radical ideologists of the post-Soviet Russia (e.g., Aleksandr Dugin).

Gumilev’s main theory of “ethnogenesis,” attempts to explain the nature of ethnicity and the rise and fall of civilizations throughout history. Gumilev viewed ethnic groups as biological organisms (and therefore as a
part of the biosphere), which come into being through mutations resulting from the irradiation of solar energy to the Earth’s surface. This energy, which Gumilev called passionarnost’, is then absorbed by certain individuals, creating passionarii—uniquely dynamic persons, who adopt supernatural behavioral patterns and the readiness for greater self-sacrifice. “Charged” with the cosmic energy, passionarii are ultimately capable of influencing the very course of world history (Bassin, 2016: 58f; Wojnar, 2012: 9–12). Despite this seemingly fantastic, if not bizarre, nature of Gumilev’s theory, his passionarnost’ has received a high official endorsement in recent years – president Putin himself invoked the concept of passionarnost’ in one of his yearly addresses to the state Duma (Putin, 2012).

Throughout most of his life, Gumilev was denied this high level of recognition. The scholar, son of the renowned poets Nikolai Gumilev and Anna Akhmatova, spent fourteen years of his life in Stalinist prison and labor camps; after being released in 1956, he remained officially outcast and professionally shunned. His teachings were never fully approved by either his professional colleagues or the political authorities, most of his writings circulated only in the form of samizdat. It was only in the late 1980s, when Lev Gumilev came to attract broad publicity, galvanizing the readership with the themes of ethnic vitalism, cosmic energetics, and the genetic element of ethnic life. While claiming to propose an objective scientific approach to heatedly debated questions about the imperatives for Russia’s national development, Gumilev skillfully mixed natural science with history, geography, and ethnography. No less unique was the style of
his publications, in which the phraseology of natural sciences was saturated with figurative images, literary tropes and apodictic statements, thus providing a significant source of inspiration for post-Soviet fantasists not only regarding topics but also in terms of language and narrative forms.

More importantly, this source of inspiration became fully available in the 1990s, i.e., precisely at the time when the Russian book-market was literally flooded by Western fantasy, of which “Lord of the Rings” was definitely the most spectacular and long-lasting success. From now on the popularity of both discourses (the fantastic and the geopolitical one) were on the rise, so that naturally many authors made attempts to combine them.

4. Literary World-Making as Geopolitical Reasoning

The chief element of speculative fiction, which provides space for (geo)political reasoning, is world-building. Developing an imaginary setting with coherent qualities such as history, geography, cultures, and ecology is a crucial task for many science fiction and fantasy writers. Literary world-building, as a modelling process, often involves the creation of maps, artifacts, a backstory and living species for the world. To be sure, the plot, the fable, the development of characters—all that are important factors for assessing the quality and the success of all kinds of speculative fiction, but in the center of the narrative the readers always find a fictional universe and thus a fictional geopolitical reality, which they explore through reading, but also performatively (e.g., through roleplay or reenactment).
In general, literary heroes and their narrative environment incite various forms of reader response. Hans Robert Jauss, one of the theorists of the Constance school of reception aesthetics, introduces a new understanding of the term “catharsis” in order to define the projection of the reading self onto the fictive self, which is presented in a literary work. Far beyond its original meaning of “tragic purification,” catharsis designates here aesthetic experience as the result of the communicative efficacy of literary texts (Jauss, 1982, 92–111 and 152–89). In the case of speculative genres, such aesthetic experience is enhanced by a variety of performative and ludic forms of interaction with literary narratives (e.g., video and online games), which provide a number of ways for readers’ identification with the characters and the plot.

However, unlike the critics, who tend to establish a direct link between the political visions of speculative fiction and the extra-literary reality of the readers, I would like to emphasize the number and the importance of specific devices, which produce an effect of distance and defamiliarization: these are, for instance, quasi-medieval settings and magic (in the genre of fantasy) or teleportation and interstellar journeys (in science fiction). Being an integral part of speculative genres, the fantastic elements significantly contribute to an estrangement (German: Verfremdung, Russian: ostranenie) of their political subtexts. In general, estrangement is a device, which hinders the readership from simply identifying itself with the characters of the story and with its setting, thus creating worlds that feel too far removed from the world in which we live. Obviously, the defamiliarizing effects of fantasy are the most important
reason, why all over the globe the readers and viewers of Tolkien’s mythopoeia are able to enjoy the pleasures of stories based on soil, blood, and racial annihilation without the smallest amount of a bad conscience.

In the theoretical essay “On Fairy Stories,” Tolkien highlights the programmatic importance of distancing effects when he defines fantasy as occurring entirely in a separate “secondary world” (Tolkien, 1981: 216). This does not mean, however, that the two worlds cannot be connected with each other: readers may live in the primary world, but as the plot unfolds, they may realize that a secondary, fantastic world is all around them, previously unfamiliar and unseen. This is especially true for post-Soviet fantasy, which unlike its Western counterpart, often deliberately tries to bridge the gap between the real and the fantastic and it does so mostly by means of geopolitical and social modelling.

The post-Soviet speculative texts with obvious geopolitical allusions are typically characterized by conflating elements of the Eurasian doctrine with the formal conventions of the fantasy genre and aspects of the gothic aesthetics. This merger can be traced back to the publication of Pavel Krusanov’s novel “An Angel’s Bite” ("Укус ангела") in 1999. While a large portion of the story deals with magic, mystical and esoteric experiences, the novel also belongs to the genre of counterfactual history (i.e., a genre, in which one or more historical events occur differently than in the historical record). In the world of “An Angel’s Bite,” the crucial historical moment is the Russian revolution of 1917, which did not happen; thus, the Russian monarchy not only subsisted down to the present times, but it managed to fulfil its long-standing dreams of conquering Eastern Europe.
and the Balkans. In the novel, the reader witnesses the ascent to power of the demonic and enigmatic protagonist Ivan Nekitaev (literally: “non-Chinese”), son of a Russian officer and a Chinese woman, who becomes emperor of Russia and, allied with China, launches on an endless war of aggression against the Western states—a war, which accompanied by macabre atrocities and violence, threatens to bring about the end of the world.

Arguably, “An Angel’s Bite” shows the failure of an empire as a politically structured living space. This leads to the assumption that Krusanov did not write his book with the sole purpose of promoting Eurasianist imperialism. In fact, the author thoroughly explores the philosophical and aesthetic limits of empire as a concept, but this exploration leaves no space for any forms of ethical or legal judgment. In Krusanov’s novel, peace is secured not by international law or by universally applied norms and values, but by the balance of regional powers. Obviously, by trying to conquer Western Europe, Russia is not only into a geopolitical zero-sum game with the West at large; it also disregards Schmitt’s ban on interventions in foreign “Great Spaces” and pushes the world on the verge of the apocalypse. Still, in the context of the novel this scenario appears both acceptable and legitimate, simply because the Eurasian Empire led by Russia is described as the sacred Last Kingdom; its fall would consummate the end of humanity’s cultural and spiritual history (Krusanov 1999, 188). Hence the destruction of the rest of the world, as

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7 In Russian original: “Россия — третья часть света материка Евразия, она — то самое Последнее Царство, падение которого будет означать конец духовной истории человечества.”
collateral damage in this struggle, would make no big difference anyway.
Or to say it in Vladimir Putin's words: “Why do we need a world without
Russia?”

A much more optimistic scenario is drafted by two other highly
successful writers, Viacheslav Rybakov and Igor’ Alimov, who at the
beginning of the 2000s launched a series titled “There Are No Bad People.
A Eurasian Symphony” (Плохих людей нет. Евразийская симфония)—
a semi-parodistic homage to Robert van Gulik (1910–1967) and his novels
about the adventures of Judge Dee. Like “An Angle’s Bite,” the “Eurasian
Symphony” series is also an “alternative history” in which Russia and China
have formed an enormous united empire. This time, the crucial event that
never occurred is the Mongol invasion. Instead, the Golden Horde (Орда)
concluded an equal alliance with medieval Russian principalities (Русь),
which, subsequently joined by China, developed into a united Eurasian
state called Ordus’ (Ордусь).

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8 Quoted from an interview for a Russian documentary “The World Order 2018,”
(“Миропорядок 2018”), produced and aired by the TV channel “Russia-1”; this particular
statement was Putin’s comment on Russia’s nuclear doctrine, see also:
https://www.rt.com/news/420715-putin-world-russia-nuclear/ (accessed on March 27,
2018).
In the series, the proximity between the fantastic and the mundane is achieved mostly by means of metafiction. In the foreword to the opening novel of the series the publisher claims that the original text of the “Eurasian Symphony” was written by a Dutch Orientalist, Khol’m van Zaichik (Хольм ван Зайчик), in Chinese. Van Zaichik (and not the duo of Rybakov and Alimov) is also a person, who is referred to as an author on the book cover. The foreword, written by the book’s alleged translators, even gives details of van Zaichik’s turbulent life—according to the foreword he served as a Dutch diplomat, while working as a spy for the Soviet Union. Thus the reader of the series is invited to accept two levels of fictitiousness: the level of the fictive author and his biography, which is settled in our political reality of the 20th century with real countries like the USSR and the Netherlands, and the reality of his novels, which are
alternative histories with entirely different political reality full of mystics and mythology. However, throughout the text, this division is constantly broken, and two realities appear closely intertwined and sometimes impossible to distinguish. This impossibility allows for integrating the fantastic elements into the realm of the mundane. Moreover, by placing the real historical events in the unreal, “secondary” world, the story shifts the limits of what can be said or imagined: the imaginary elements range from depicting the dissolution of the Soviet Union as a foreign conspiracy, up to the denial of the Holocaust.  

The protagonist of the series is a gentle Russian intellectual, who (similar to his prototype, Judge Dee) is working in the judicial system (“department for ethical control”). Together with his Chinese partner, he copes with difficult investigations, following the plotlines of ironic and entertaining detective stories. For example, in the first volume, “The Case of a Greedy Barbarian” (Дело жадного варвара, 2000), an American billionaire, reminiscent of George Soros,10 conspires to steal rare artifacts of the Ordussian cultural heritage. The second book entitled “The Case of the Independent Dervishes” (Дело незалежных дервишей, 2001) depicts a plot involving the independence movement of the Aslaniv people, which in the

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9 In the short story “Agar’, Agar’!...” (Агарь, Агарь!..), published in the literary magazine “Neva” (2004, No. 10), the Holocaust is “imagined” as a result of conspiracy launched by American economic elite, in order to provoke the Jewish exodus from Europe to America, where the arriving Jewish labor force was supposed to give a new momentum to a stagnating US economy. The full text of the story is available here: [http://magazines.russ.ru/neva/2004/10](http://magazines.russ.ru/neva/2004/10) (retrieved on March 27, 2018).

10 In the book the billionaire is referred to as “Hammer Tsores” (Russian: Хаммер Цорес). The name of his henchman, Landsbergis (Ландсбергис), who is supposed to steal the treasures, is a direct reference to Vytautas Landsbergis—the first head of state of Lithuania after its independence from the Soviet Union.
course of the events is being suppressed by the imperial forces. Interestingly enough, the word “independent” in the title of the novel is not Russian, but a Russified Ukrainian word (“nezaleznyi”). Indeed, in terms of language and culture, the peripheral province of Aslaniv offers a peculiar mixture of Ukraine and Chechnya, while the province’s quest for national sovereignty is described both as a geopolitical anomaly and a conspiracy of ruthless local elites.

The political allusions are all too evident here, although they are usually narrated in an ironic or even humoristic mode, making it often impossible to tell whether these political implications are a form of sincere support or subtle ridicule. Similarly to Krusanov’s novel, “Eurasian Symphony” applies an ironic mode of narration both as a formal “package” for an explicitly conservative, revanchist agenda and as a particular technique of estrangement, which confronts the readership with a certain “anxiety of belief.” By contrast, the fictive Eurasian Empire as such is described with a clear affirmative stance and has signs of totalitarian utopia. On the one hand, it is a polity, where hundreds of nationalities and dozens of religious confessions peacefully coexist, but on the other hand, this coexistence is guaranteed by an authoritarian government, an enormous bureaucratic apparatus, and a refined surveillance system.

An allegoric figure behind these political visions is Aleksandr Nevskii (1221–1263), a medieval ruler of the Russian principalities of Novgorod and Vladimir, who is also one of the key characters in the historiographic schemes of Lev Gumilev. In Russian popular culture, Aleksandr rose to legendary status on account of his (fictionally exaggerated) military
exploits against Sweden and the Teutonic Order while agreeing to pay tribute to the Mongol Khans of the mighty Golden Horde. Naturally, this “geopolitical orientation” has been a constant source of inspiration for the proponents of the Eurasian doctrine. Lev Gumilev (2001, 482) claims that Aleksandr Nevskii was welcomed by the Horde not as a vassal, but as an ally, and even fraternized with the Great Khan’s son, Sartaq (the future ruler of the Horde). While Gumilev fails to provide any reliable sources to confirm this story, the legend of Aleksandr’s friendship with Sartaq is fully adopted by the authors of the “Eurasian Symphony” and provides the founding myth of the united Ordussian state.

According to Gumilev, by stopping European knights and merchants Aleksandr Nevskii sheltered the north-western regions of Rus’ (i.e., the future Russia) from European influences like the Latin Christianity or the anthropocentric culture of the Renaissance, thus preserving Russia’s civilizational uniqueness and cultural independence (Gumilev 2001, 111 and passim, Gumilev 2002, 159-160). In “Eurasian Symphony” a reader witnesses the hyperbolized realization of this geopolitical utopia. For example, the capital of Ordus’, Aleksandriia Nevskaia, represents a

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11 Interestingly enough, this view on the historic role of Aleksandr Nevskii received a remarkable illustration in December 2008, when Aleksandr was voted the greatest Russian in the “Name of Russia” television poll. Since Aleksandr is also a canonized saint of the Russian Orthodox Church, his candidacy in the TV show was promoted by Metropolit Kirill (who would be elected the Patriarch of Moscow 2 months later, on 1 February 2009). In his speech, Kirill highlighted Aleksandr’s role as a ruler, who successfully defended Russian “national identity and cultural code” (национальную идентичность и культурный код) from western influences. Paradoxically, already in this short phrase, Kirill makes use of 4 Latin words and not a single Russian one. The video with Kirill’s speech is available under: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Frz-WQ4HjFE (Имя России: Митрополит Кирилл о Александре Невском – accessed on 4 April 2018).
particularly “orientalized” version of St. Petersburg and is a profoundly Asiatic megalopolis. Furthermore, on the book cover of the first instalment of the series, the Bronze Horseman – an equestrian statue of Peter the Great in the Senate Square in St. Petersburg – is substituted by a strikingly similar statue of Aleksandr Nevskii. Thus the notorious “westernizer” Peter is literally replaced by a historical figure who supposedly directed the course of Russian history eastwards.

Left: Aleksandr Nevskii monument. Right: The map of the “flourishing Ordus”

In “An Angel’s Bite” Aleksandr Nevskii plays a somewhat different role: he appears in a strange and tumultuous dream of the novel’s protagonist, Ivan Nekitaev. In this dream, the archangel Gabriel bites Aleksandr in his Adam’s apple (Krusanov 1999, 80). If there is any common knowledge about angels in fiction, then it is that angels normally do not bite. In fact, this allegoric
scene offers a fusion of vampirism and Gumilev's idea of passionarnost': the angel in Krusanov's novel obviously resembles a vampire, while being marked by the bite of the vampire means here the mixed blessing of staying beyond good and evil as a ruler destined to decide about life and death of the ordinary humans.

Despite the ironic self-reflection and various devices of estrangement, in terms of geopolitical reasoning both “An Angel’s Bite” and “Eurasian symphony” manage to provide an aestheticized literary framework for some of the central postulates of Eurasianism: 1) Territory is power. The empire can only be conceived of as indefinite expansion. 2) The enlargement of the empire is felt as a natural movement carved in Russian history, just like its tropism toward autocracy. Especially a very detailed and well-elaborated world of the “Eurasian Symphony”, with a number of maps and artefacts (e.g., the passport of Ordussian citizen), was key to the success of the series, ultimately manifested in the hallmark of the fictive universe of Ordus’ as “a country you’d love to live in” (страна, где хочется жить—van Zaichik 2005, 5).

Fictionalized Eurasianism reached its climax in a very specific literary project titled “Etnogenez” (Ethnogenesis, Russian: Этногенез). Launched by the media expert and “political technologist” Konstantin Rykov, “Etnogenez” boasts to be commercially the most successful literary project in the post-Soviet history of Russian literature. According to the project’s web-page, already by 2011 no fewer than 3 million copies of “Etnogenez” were in circulation.12 While the “project” character of literary production

with a team of writers developing and exploiting the same fictive universe
is by no means untypical for speculative genres, the sheer scope of the
“Etnogenez” project is astonishing. Between 2009 and 2015 more than a
dozen authors have produced a cycle of 60 novels that creates a fictional
history of the universe, from millions of years BCE to the (Russian-
dominated) far future. The books, which fall into several different
subgenres, are loosely bound together by Gumilev’s theory of ethogenesis
and, oddly enough, by his own lineage. In fact, most of the protagonists of
the series are the direct descendants of Lev Gumilev. While in real life
Gumilev had no children, “Etnogenez” creates a fictional Gumilev dynasty,
including a son Andrei, a daughter-in-law Eva, and numerous descendants
of his granddaughter Marusia, who inhabit the distant future.

Gumilev’s concept of passionarnost’ runs through the entire series
and is perceived as a vital key to the mystery of the rise and fall of nations.
Although Gumilev himself maintained that passionarnost’ originated out of
the energy from distant cosmic bodies, “Etnogenez” takes a different view,
placing this cosmic energy in magical artifacts scattered all over the
universe. Thus the readers of the novels are invited to follow the exploits
of protagonists, who are entangled in time-traveling, interstellar voyages,
and political conspiracies while trying to gain access to those mysterious
artifacts and to obtain different superpowers. Moreover, the hunt for
artifacts “liberates” the characters of the novels from traditional moral
categories. Not only the Gumilevs, but also historical figures like Hitler,
Genghis Khan, and Stalin are all depicted neutrally, as mere instruments of
history, motivated and controlled by supernatural objects. Similarly to the
authors of the “Eurasian Symphony” the “Etnogenez” project capitalizes on the idea that nobody is purely evil or good. This demonstratively neutral stance towards all ideologies and political practices (including those of utmost brutality), effectively shows that Konstantin Rykov’s literary undertaking is not merely a commercial enterprise with entertainment appeal, but a project with a clear propagandistic dimension.

In their detailed analysis of “Etnogenez” project Mark Bassin and Irina Kotkina (2016, 57) conclude that the common subtext of the novels “draws heavily on tropes and discourses relating specifically to the cultural politics of the current regime and to the zeitgeist of Putin’s Russia in general.” With its positivist scientific perspective and clear orientation towards a teenage audience, the project shows some parallels to the works of Soviet science fiction authors. Despite these superficial similarities the “Etnogenez” project effectively accomplishes a process that Bassin and Kotkina (2016: 65) have defined as a counterrevolution in Russian science fiction:

   Completely abandoning any irony or multidimensionality, it reverts to the more simplistic and unnuanced tradition of “serious literature” intended to be taken entirely at face value. Without any pretense of ambivalence or ambiguity, it thrusts official government discourses uncritically into the very center of what in the USSR had been a detached and potentially quasi-dissident genre.

   The explicit “patriotic” pedigree of the series is based on a fictionalized Eurasianism, placing the themes and tropes of this geopolitical doctrine within the popular and recognizable framework of
Western fantasy. Unsurprisingly, the cornerstone of this literary edifice is the biologization of ethnicity, which reduces complex social and political problems to the simple prospects of a “biological threat,” thus creating the image of a community surrounded and endangered by enemies. While the sense of threat captivates the emotions of the reading audience and creates a feeling of patriotic solidarity, the texts of “Etnogenez” also stage a geopolitical struggle with the implication that there can be no common moral or legal ground between different nations and civilizations since the right of the strongest will always prevail.

Furthermore, “Etnogenez” provides a strong implication that not all human beings are biologically equal. While the protagonists of the novels often represent different nations and civilizations, the members of the Gumilev family are described as bearers of the high-value extraterrestrial, alien genes. On the contrary, the other human communities, the so-called biomasses, have a less valuable genetic makeup (ibid: 59).

Apart from literary texts, the project disseminates its central themes and images through computer games, audio podcasts, and web-platforms for fandom discussions. The browser-based games voina.ru and especially maidan.ru, launched in 2015 (where the players’ goal is to tear apart the territory of Ukraine), establish direct links to real political events. Besides, the ludic forms represent here more than just a prolonged version of literature: across all the literary works of the series, the plots are designed to resemble a computer game in which the principal task of the protagonist is to move from start to finish, acquiring as many magic artifacts as possible. Thus the gargantuan dimensions of “Etnogenez” disguise the fact
that its literary universe only superficially seems to be vast and filled with diverse characters—on the contrary, it remains rather linear and simple. With Bassin and Kotkina (2016: 68) one can argue that “the plot’s development is not driven by the thrill of the unknown, a sense of adventure, or any genuine fascination with technological progress. This is science fiction whose purpose is not scientific and intellectual but, rather, exclusively ideological and commercial.”

5. A Social Code of Conduct

While the books with obvious Eurasianist subtexts address the post-Soviet readers’ longing for a just and stable geopolitical order, other texts, which are set in a more realistic environment, capitalize on the loss of democracy and of the rule of law within a single society or a national community.

The social aspect is probably best illustrated by the texts, which deal with monsters and different non-humans. To be sure, Russian-language authors have neither invented a new genre nor have they created a new aesthetic canon in which the monsters replace humans. However, in some crucial aspects, most post-Soviet non-humans are entirely different from the hobbits and the dragons of Tolkien’s mythopoeia as well as from the non-human characters of other speculative genres. The highly popular cult novels—Sergei Lukianenko’s “Watch” series—serve as examples. The first novel of the series, “The Night Watch” (“Ночной Дозор”), was published in Russia by AST publishing house in 1998 and was made into a film in 2004. The computer game with the same title was released in Russia in 2005. The success of the original novel and the movie adaptation inspired
Lukianenko to write a series of five more novels with the final book “The Sixth Watch” (“Шестой дозор”) being published in 2014.

Despite some fantastic elements and creatures, in all the novels of the series, the plot unfolds in contemporary Moscow, while offering a set of strikingly realistic characters and scenes from everyday life. Average men on the street, cops and gangsters, clerks and administrators—all of them convey the atmosphere of recognizable “primary” world, while providing a background for painstakingly portrayed positive heroes, with whom the reader may fully identify on account of the realistic setting and of the first person narration (Khapaeva, 2009: 373-374). Yet beneath the surface of the daily routine, the novels unveil a hidden magical realm of the Twilight (Сумерки), which can be approached only by a small group of people with supernatural abilities. These individuals are literally referred to as “Others” (Иные) and may appear in text as magicians, vampires, witches or
werewolves. The Others are divided into two rivaling casts: the keepers of light and the army of darkness. Despite a seemingly clear-cut line between the Light and the Dark the methods and goals of two opposing camps are explicitly compared and judged to be the same (Lukianenko, 2006: 45). Thus at the heart of the plot, the reader is confronted with a remarkable equality of good and evil. While morality is considered an irrelevant atavism and as something that can influence the hero's life in the most negative way (Khapaeva, 2009: 377), cynicism and moral flexibility are, instead, valued as signs of maturity and true freedom. As the protagonist of “The Night Watch” apodictically concludes: “The more morality, the more misfortune” (Lukianenko, 2006: 44).

Such attitudes towards morality cannot be reduced to the difference between fiction and reality. With Dina Khapaeva (2009) one may argue that, if we remove the vampires, werewolves, and witches from these narratives and substitute them with cops, gangsters, and their victims, if we parenthesize the witchcraft and the magic, the story would not differ much from a pale description of everyday post-Soviet life.

Regarding the narrative functioning of the supernatural and uncanny elements, “Night Watch” exhibits a tendency drastically different from the Western literary tradition of the fantastic. In the West, most speculative genres usually assert the sharp contrast and juxtaposition between the fantastic and the mundane. Especially the characters of Western gothic and neo-gothic fiction are so disturbed by the uncanny breaking into their lives that they doubt their own sanity and often fail to return to the world of the mundane. Starting from Horace Walpole’s “The Castle of Otranto” (1764) up
to Ann Rice’s “Interview with the Vampire” (1976), gothic aesthetics creates a narrative setting where the fantastic does not just infiltrate the reality of the characters, but ultimately destroys it (and consequently substitutes it with a new, entirely different reality). At the same time, the characters of “Night Watch” easily adapt to the fantastic creeping into their lives and do not exhibit significant disturbance. Furthermore, they normally treat the fantastic in the same way as they deal with the mundane, blending the boundaries between the two realms. This attitude is characteristic for the Western fantasy, where the heroes may occasionally encounter orcs or dragons as a part of their daily routine and magic is witnessed and wielded without a shrug; but, as Tolkien puts it, fantasy plots unfold in an entirely new, unfamiliar, “secondary world” and not in the heart of a modern city like Moscow.

By downplaying the estrangement effects, the novels of the “Watch” series create a situation, in which the norms and rules of the fantastic world of the Twilight constitute an applicable and, in fact, the only functional code of conduct for the real world: “Life against death, love against hate, and force against force, because force is above morality. It’s that simple” (Lukianenko, 2006: 75). Thus the entire gothic aesthetics of the series celebrates the farewell from the society based on values and legal norms: the casts of vampires and other nonhumans, who follow the archaic principles of clan loyalty and the rule of force, appear far superior to the humans and their society organized by moral and legal judgement. It is the nonhuman “supercommunity” which presupposes the arrival of the nonhuman superhero.
As a specific genre convention of fantasy and gothic fiction, the superiority of the nonhumans is by no means a post-Soviet or Russian invention. Indeed, in the contemporary Western literature and pop-culture the supernatural creatures, like vampires, represent a compelling aesthetic ideal—in terms of intelligence, artistic talent or physical abilities they shine brighter than ordinary human characters. Still, post-Soviet speculative fiction, while maintaining this post-anthropocentric canon and capitalizing on it, eagerly introduces new perspectives and narrative frameworks, which allow the authors to address the hopes and problems of their societies created by the fall of the Soviet Union and the turbulent change of the political and economic systems. Thus being portrayed as the community of the Others in Lukianenko’s “Watch” series, the vampires and other non-humans no longer offer an updated, “gothicized” version of a Byronic hero (a lonely and enigmatic outcast from the era of Romanticism), instead they provide an aesthetic sanctioning for archaic forms of social interaction and, more importantly, offer a model of a society, which is organized neither by the established institutions, such as the police, school or government (which in the novels are all realistically portrayed as dysfunctional), nor by moral or legal reasoning (which is totally and programmatically rejected). What keeps the non-human society together is a precarious balance between the informal clans and corporations, who are fighting for power and resources (literally—human resources), but who are also willing to keep their struggle to a limited scale in order to prevent mutual annihilation.

Inherent in Lukianenko’s novels and typical for the entire genre, the idea of a balance of powers provides an aestheticized alternative to liberal
concepts of tolerance and the rule of law. When the forces of the Light and the Dark take to battle and realize they are equally strong, they decide to make a truce. The forces of light establish the Night Watch, an organization preoccupied with policing the actions of the Dark Others, and the forces of darkness, in turn, found the Day Watch for supervising the actions of their “light” counterparts. The Day Watch and the Night Watch monitor each other to make sure this truce holds. But the compromise reached by two opposing clans remains situational—it is justified not in terms of universal values but in terms of the personal relations between the heads of the clans. The rigid hierarchies of two communities, their internal subdivision into “races” with higher and lower status, finally, the peculiar way of decision-making, which transfers the power of political and moral judgement solely into the hands of the leader (while other members of the community are expected to respond with blind loyalty)—all these motives valorize the informal practices of social and political interaction, which are all but unfamiliar to the post-Soviet politics and society. Being placed in the fantastic setting, they receive both a higher aesthetic value and a social relevance, which are testified by huge print runs of Lukianenko’s novels.

While vampires offer an example of undeniably positive othering in contemporary pop-culture, on the opposite side of the aesthetic spectrum one comes across its negative counterpart manifested in the figure of a brain-dead, flesh-eating zombie. According to Kim Paffenroth (2006: 13), zombies are fully and literally apocalyptic: more than any other monster they signal the end of the world as we know it. Starting from George Romero’s seminal film “Night of the Living Dead” (1968) a “zombie
“apocalypse” represents a particular scenario of the breakdown of modern society, caused by a widespread rise of hostile species united in an assault on human civilization.

This assault has no political grounds whatsoever. While the theories about the origins of zombies vary significantly, ranging from voodoo sorcery to a pandemic spread of a virus, a zombie infestation is typically conceptualized as a sort of plague and not as a result of conscious decision-making (of which traditional zombies are not capable of). Nevertheless, the narrative of a zombie apocalypse offers a strong political metaphor, which historically refers to the turbulent social landscape of the United States in the 1960s when the originators of this genre, like Romero’s film, were first created (Clute, 1999: 1048). Similarly, for the post-Soviet societies, the trope of zombie apocalypse provides a narrative framework for the stories about an unexpected and unstoppable transformation of the society, in which one’s neighbor suddenly turns into a hostile and aggressive “other.”

In the context of the turbulent post-Soviet political changes of the recent years (most importantly, the ideological divisions caused by the so-called “Ukrainian crisis”), the powerful metaphor of “zombification” (Russian: зомбирование; Ukrainian: зомбування) epitomizes a supposedly devastating impact of the media and, above all, TV propaganda on human psyche and consciousness. An informationally “zombified” person ceases to be a valid interlocutor and cannot be engaged in a meaningful exchange of

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13 In the post-Soviet fiction the trope of “zombification” can be traced back to Viktor Pelevin’s early essay “Zombifikatsiia. Opyt sravnitel’noi antropologii” (“The Zombification, or Comparative Anthropology”, 1990).
arguments. Naturally, since 2014 the metaphor of “zombification” was equally applied both to the supporters of the Euromaidan and the participants of the Antimaidan rallies.

Sergei Lukianenko, an active commentator of the political events in Russia and Ukraine, reacted to these newly drawn ideological frontlines in his recent novel “Kvazi” (2016). The plot of the novel unfolds in the year 2027. Since a mysterious catastrophe that took place ten years before, humans live side by side with resurrected dead, who, however, managed to overcome their initial condition as zombies, turning into smart and unemotional “quasi-people”—the kvazis. The story focusses on Moscow policeman Denis Simonov, whose wife and son were once killed by the undead, but who now tries to uncover a conspiracy aimed at destroying the fragile peace between the humans and the kvazis. In order to succeed, Denis must learn to control his grief and his desire for vengeance; he must cooperate with some of the kvazis, thus learning to view former enemies as partners. In the novel, this mutual understanding remains on a very limited scale and is constantly overshadowed by an atmosphere of suspicion—after all, who would trust a former brain-eating monster? Against this background, an idea of separation, non-interference, and balance of power, indeed, seems to be a much more realistic alternative (Skorkin, 2016).

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14 Original Russian title: "КВАЗИ."
More importantly, the novel hints at a possible application of this model to the division between the pro-European, liberal strata of the contemporary post-Soviet societies, and their Soviet nostalgic, conservative counterparts. In fact, the subtext of “Kvazi” offers a single political allusion to this ideological split: eventually, the reader learns how humans desperately try to survive the zombie apocalypse behind the walls of the war museum near Moscow, where their only shelter are the old Soviet T-34 tanks; or how those few, who actually survived, decide to abandon modern technologies like radio and computers in order to guard themselves against a possible “zombification.” While the society of the humans tries to preserve its identity by turning back into the new archaic, the kvazis are, by contrast, presented as a bunch of highly rational, technologically advanced, bicycle riding vegetarians. Thus, the true horror vision of Lukianenko’s
novel can be reduced to a simple question: what if the future of the world belongs to a society of liberal “quasi-humans”?

6. The Thinning of the World and the Rise of the Empire

As we discuss different social and geopolitical models, we should also address the ways in which speculative fiction deals with the notion of time and how it treats the related concepts of “past” and “modernization.”

Ilya Kukulin (2018: 232) summarizes the most essential changes in the post-Soviet evaluation of the past as follows:

In Stalin’s time, the present was regarded and represented as the highest point of history, a point of breakthrough to the “shining future”. In today’s Russia, the present, while not considered less valuable, is not considered more valuable than the past; thus, the encounter between present and past turns into an endless mise-en-abyme, where each new action appears as a symbolic re-enactment of the past.

The valorization of the past is hardly a new trend in the post-Soviet space. In “The Future of Nostalgia” Svetlana Boym registered that in Russia, already “in the mid-1990s [...] the word old became popular and commercially viable, promoting more goods than the word new” (Boym, 2001: 65). Following Kukulin, one may conclude, however, that nostalgia of the 1990s gradually turned from a widely accessible good into an object of performative re-enactment with political implications.
While the scenarios of such re-enactment may vary considerably, their possible ideological messages are defined by the inherent qualities of nostalgia as an aesthetic resource, of which Boym distinguishes two main types: the restorative and the reflective. While restorative nostalgia attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home (nóstos), its reflective counterpart thrives in the longing itself (álgos) and delays the homecoming. Furthermore, restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth or tradition, while reflective nostalgia, on the contrary, dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity (Boym, 2001).

In the field of literature, the re-enactment of the past acquires some additional qualities, when nostalgia fuses with the uncanny, thus producing an aesthetic trend, which Alexander Etkind (2009, 2013) defines as “magical historicism.” In contrast to the historical novel, magical historicism doesn’t try to imitate the past, but rather struggles with history. The visible outcomes of this struggle are narratives, in which the past is perceived as an “exotic and unexplored terrain, still pregnant with unborn alternatives and imminent miracles“ (Etkind 2009: 656). This is exemplified in the novels of Vladimir Sorokin, Viktor Pelevin, Dmitriy Bykov and Vladimir Sharov. Although in their works “the historical past unfolds into a cyclical narrative that obscures the present rather than explains it” (Etkind, 2013: 236), this kind of speculative fiction still relies predominantly on reflective nostalgia. In the texts of these best-known Russian authors the re-enactment of the past normally lacks any apological undertone and
functions rather as a counter-narrative to a pro-authoritarian nostalgic discourse.\textsuperscript{15}

By contrast, the following lines will address those narratives, in which the resource of nostalgia is being applied solely and exclusively for restorative (or even utterly revanchist) purposes. Again, the post-Soviet fantastika follows here some of the basic conventions of Western fantasy—especially its reliance on a distinct structural device which the relevant scholars use to call thinning.

The term “thinning” refers to the weakening of some aspect of the world or character which then enables the story to be structured as a recovery fable (Clute, 1999: 942). The classic way in which fantasy uses this device is to present a world in some form of decline, while the reversal or slowdown of that decline becomes the object of the plot. This narrative structure is characteristic for much of Tolkien’s prose, for the novels of C.S. Lewis about Narnia, but also for recent commercial productions like the HBO-series "Game of Thrones," based on the novels by George Martin.

Naturally, in the post-Soviet narratives, the motives of lost glory, of cultural degradation, and of a declining world receive very specific connotations. No matter which genre of the post-Soviet speculative writing we focus on, each of them will provide examples of alternative historical

\textsuperscript{15} Another important example of the "reflective" counter-narrative to the Kremlin’s hegemonic discourse on history is the work of Boris Akunin, who, as summarised by Anne Liebig (2018), turns the popular genre of crime fiction into an impressive countercultural device for challenging the neo-imperialistic trends in Russia’s official politics and culture. Having chosen one of the major eras for Putinist nostalgic myth-making as the backdrop for his work, i.e. the late Imperial period, Akunin not only unveils some of contemporary Russia’s most pressing nostalgia issues, but also invites his readers to participate in a discussion of these (Liebig, 2018: 6).
concepts, which necessarily and inevitably evoke the motif of the fallen empire: this is true for the remnants of Soviet science-fiction (e.g., Viacheslav Rybakovs “Gravilët Cesarevich”, 1992), heroic fantasy (e.g., Iurii Nikitins series “Troe iz Lesa”, 1993–2003) as well as for the so-called Slavic fantasy (e.g., “Volkodav” series by Mariia Semenova, published between 1995 and 2014).

Contemporary Russophone authors apply the model of a recovery fable not only in fantasy (with its inherently retrospective and nostalgic undertone), but also in the typically futuristic genres, like science fiction and space opera (a subgenre, which combines space warfare with melodramatic adventures or travelogues). One of the most telling examples of this tendency is provided by the work of Nikolay (Nik) Perumov—an author who started his literary carrier in the 1990s with homages to Tolkien’s Middle Earth. Perumov’s fantasy books were a huge success: according to his personal website, more than 4 million copies have been published in the 1990s. However, already in the 2000s, Perumov switches to the genre of space opera and to outspokenly “patriotic” themes and motives. His masterpiece is the series of novels titled “The Empire above all” (“Империя превыше всего”), published between 2002 and 2004, which tells the story of a Russian “space soldier” and a patriot, who tries to stop the ongoing civil war and thus to prevent the collapse of the Empire. The giant imperial state is in danger because some unspecified insurgents have infected its inhabitants with the ideas of absolute freedom and independence and, by doing so, inspired an uprising against imperial rule.

Although the Empire is described as a German-dominated Fourth Reich, with a corresponding military entourage and totalitarian ideology (yet without racism and concentration camps), for the Russian protagonist this state appears a far lesser evil than the hordes of “liberal” rebels. The last resort of the loyalist imperial forces is the planet called New Crimea (Новый Крым), from where they launch an attempt to reconquer the territories of the Empire. Thus the Crimea and the city of Sevastopol turn into a sacred place and a symbolic “bridgehead” for the recovery fable.

Although the ultimate goal of such literary modelling is an image of Russian imperial state or a Russian-dominated world, the literary works, which provide this kind of imaginary settings, are not exclusively the products of Russian literary scene. In fact, a large part of the revanchist fiction is being produced outside Russia, mostly in the former Soviet republics and here first and foremost in Ukraine. The novels of Aleksandr Zorich provide a good illustration of this particular kind of prose.

Aleksandr Zorich's "War is for Tomorrow" series
Aleksandr Zorich is a collective pen name of the two writers: Iana Botsman and Dmitrii Gordevskii, who until 2004 both worked as assistant professors at the Philosophy Department of the Kharkiv National University. In their literary work, the duo relies predominantly on the largest Moscow publishing houses, like EKSMO and AST. Zorich’s most significant success was the trilogy “War is for Tomorrow” (“Завтра война”), published between 2003 and 2006 in the genre of space opera.

In the trilogy, Zorich presents an image of the future, in which Russia ends up dominating the entire outer space. The reader follows the adventures of the spaceship pilot Aleksandr Pushkin, who fights aliens in the name of Mother Russia. What sounds like a sarcastic parody is, in fact, a seriously narrated story about Russia’s struggle to control the population of its extraterrestrial colonies, who, for their part, are either too mean or too stupid to fully understand the pleasures of imperial rule. One of the key concepts provided by Zorich (2003, 2004) is the notion of “retrospective evolution” – a term borrowed from the works of Isaac Asimov but placed in a slightly different context. While in his “Foundation” series Asimov applies this term to describe the technological degradation of stellar colonies that lost their connection with the metropolis, Zorich emphasizes social and cultural dimension of “retrospective evolution” by modelling human communities in which culture, religion, language, or the customs of the past are being revived without any visible political preconditions and, more importantly, without being coupled with technological degradation or backwardness. For example, the planet Khosrov experiences the revival of
the Zoroastrian tradition and turns into a futuristic replica of Zoroastrian Persia, while one of the Russian colonies “reactivates” the customs and traditions of the pre-Christian Rus’.

The departure from the modernizing impetus of former Soviet science fiction is completed most clearly and extensively in one of Sergei Lukianenko’s early projects—his space opera “Stars are Cold Toys” (“Звезды холодные игрушки,” 1997) and the subsequent novel “Star Shadow” (“Звёздная тень,” 1998).

Lukianenko’s dilogy represents a science fiction narrative with a strong revanchist subtext. In the novel, the people of the Earth discovered the technology for interstellar voyages only to find out that the universe had already been divided between different alien races, which are technologically far more advanced than the human late starters. So humankind is forced to cooperate with a conglomerate of non-humanoid races, known as the Conclave. Races of the Conclave are divided into the Strong, and the Weak—the former are ancient, powerful civilizations and the real rulers of the universe. Although the Conclave needs humankind for specific auxiliary tasks, the humans, as one of the weak races, are trapped in their specializations and their minor role within the Conclave. This situation changes dramatically when the scientist Andrei Khrumov—a great patriot of humanity, biased against the strong races—comes up with the plan of conquering a desperately needed living space for the people of the Earth. He then unleashes an epic interstellar war, which ultimately ends with the admittance of humanity into the Conclave as one of the strong races.
Lukianenko’s space opera unequivocally addresses the desire of his Russian readership to be accepted as an equal part of the “first world”, but more importantly, his text also mocks the communist utopia carefully constructed by Arkadii and Boris Strugatskii in their book “Noon: 22nd Century” (“Полдень. XXII век”) first published in 1961. Lukianenko transforms this futuristic Noon universe into a dystopian world of the so-called Geometers—a perfectly planned system of square and round planets, populated by hierarchically organized societies. The hyperbolized rationality of the Geometers is illustrated by the fact that their communities don’t have families: instead, children are brought up by professional Mentors, who help them to socialize, but also suppress their personalities.

“Stars are Cold Toys” and “Star Shadow” by Sergei Lukianenko

Finally, one of the key innovations of Lukianenko is the figure of “regressor” who, unlike the progressors featured by the Strugatskii duo,
downgrades the level of technological development of alien races and civilizations, thus making them vulnerable for colonization or a peaceful take-over. The typical sci-fi setting and the rhetoric of thinning are being applied here to address the horror vision of former Soviet citizens confronted with the technological superiority of the West (Lukianenko, 2007: 12):

From the point of view of inhabitants of the Motherland, we are entirely wrong. And we’ll be downgraded—so quietly and insensibly that we won’t even notice that. Cosmodromes will become empty, factories will stop—for instance, to rescue the wrecked ecology. Then Geometers will help us with their Mentors—the best in the world. For example, they will introduce our future generations to high knowledge. Or they will apply their bioengineering, beating our diseases, our excessive emotionality as well as our aggressiveness. [...] As a result, the Earth will become a new Motherland for those, who will be unable to understand this word properly.

С точки зрения обитателей Родины мы абсолютно неправильны. И нас опустят, так тихо и незаметно, что мы этого даже не заметим. Опустеют космодромы, встанут заводы — ну, например, чтобы восстановить порушенную экологию. Потом Геометры помогут нам своими, лучшими в мире, Наставниками. Например, чтобы приобщить будущие поколения к высоким знаниям. Подключат свою биоинженерию, побеждая наши болезни, а заодно и чрезмерную эмоциональность и
Replacing Marxist determinism by geopolitical constraint, Lukianenko sets a new trend in dealing with the desperately needed modernization of the post-Soviet societies and completely reassesses the idea of the “post-Soviet transition.” While the phenomenon of “regression,” as a technological and societal return to archaic stages, is still considered both a weapon and a threat, Lukianenko’s text already rejects the cult of progress typical for Soviet science fiction, thus abandoning any idea of social modernization as a possible scenario for the post-Soviet countries. As we have seen, ten years later Aleksandr Zorich (re-)introduces “retrospective evolution” as a concept with much more ambivalent historiosophic flair. Similarly, the narrative of equal partnership with the advanced societies (of the West) has gradually been outstripped by utterly revanchist plots featuring one’s own superiority and imperial domination over one’s own living space and its vicinity.

The most visible outcome of both these tendencies is a specific figure of a post-Soviet time traveler, commonly referred to as popadanets. The noun popadanets (попаданец) derives from the Russian verb popadat’ – “to get somewhere, to reach a specific place” – and marks the special case of stories about time travel, when a protagonist from our time, or from some period in the past, suddenly and accidentally founds himself in some other historical epoch from where he tries to change the course of history. A typical feature of these narratives is a combination of time travel and reincarnation, i.e., when the protagonist dies physically in his time, but his
consciousness, i.e., his “mind and soul”, are transferred into the body of some historic character of the past (e.g., into the body of the Russian tsar or of a Soviet leader). The idea of progress, which was so typical for Soviet science fiction, is not simply rejected here but is substituted for a “revanchist” utopian past, which is subsequently projected into the future (through alternative history and time traveling).

“Popadantsy”: post-Soviet time travelers

Despite a common genre originator (with a specimen in Mark Twain’s “A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court”, 1889), the revanchist post-Soviet time travels, being a specific subgenre, treat the past in a way drastically different from Western fiction, where altering the course of history is often viewed as a taboo-breaking. Ray Bradbury’s short story “A Sound of Thunder” (1952) was definitely a trend-setter with regard to time paradoxes: in this story, an accidental crushing of a pre-historic butterfly by a time-traveler leads to irrevocable changes of history.
This “informal” restriction inherent to the genre, proved especially fruitful for addressing different national traumas. Thus, in the novel “Pastwatch: The Redemption of Christopher Columbus” (1996) by Orson Scott Card, a time traveler makes Columbus head East instead of West, a change of course that helps protect the Americas from the devastating effects of European colonization. As a result, the Tlaxcalan Empire of Central America successfully underwent an industrial revolution and grew powerful enough to invade Europe, subjecting the Old World to a blood-thirsty regime of human sacrifice. Similarly, the protagonist of Stephen King's novel “11/22/63” (2011) travels back in time in order to prevent the assassination of J.F. Kennedy. He succeeds, but the resulting changes lead to a catastrophe for the entire humankind: with Kennedy in the White House the Vietnam War escalates to a full-blown nuclear apocalypse. Eventually, in both novels, the time travelers have to abandon their initial plans and set things right again.

While both authors can hardly be accused of legitimizing the atrocities of European colonial rule over Native Americans or justifying Kennedy’s assassination, their texts provide genuinely “alternative” scenarios of coming to terms with the traumas of one’s history. Being described in all its ambivalence, "a past, which never occurred" ceases to be a fetish and a resort for revisionist dreams of a traumatized national ego.17

17 In Eastern Europe, this "therapeutic" effect is usually achieved by means of alternative history (without time travels). In Ziemowit Szczerek’s "Rzeczpospolita zwycięska" [The Triumphant Republic] (2013) Poland wins the world war and becomes a new superpower, but as a militaristic and authoritarian state, it quickly turns into a threat to the entire continent. In a recent novel by Oleksandr Irvanets’ "Kharkiv-1938" (2017), Ukraine successfully defends its independence from the Bolsheviks, only to build a collectivist society (with a peculiar mixture of Marxism and ethnic nationalism) under
Needless to say, the authors of the contemporary Russophone time travels advocate an entirely different strategy of dealing with the past.

Once sent back in time, the typical Russian popadanets is usually preoccupied with saving and strengthening a metaphysical Russian statehood, which may appear in all its historical incarnations. The dominant theme and the most frequently applied historical setting is the Second World War, which resonates with the Soviet concept of the "Great Patriotic War" as the main legitimizing narrative of the Soviet Union. However, the genre openly transports the idea that the real enemy in this war was not Nazi Germany, but rather the Western democracies—Great Britain and the USA. In some novels, the USSR may even cooperate with the Third Reich.\(^{18}\) At least after the Ukrainian Orange revolution of 2004, the role of the enemy was more frequently ascribed to the Baltic states, Georgia, and Ukraine itself—the supposed “puppets of the West”.

According to the web-portal fan-book.ru., no less than 145 new books featuring the trope of popadanets have been published in Russia in 2014, followed by 66 new novels a year later (Averin, 2016). While most of these texts are rather plain and simpleminded stories with comparatively small print-runs, the sheer scope of this literary production reveals the cumulative effect of a phenomenon which goes far beyond mere

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the rule of a decadent elite. Far from justifying the German occupation of Poland or Stalinist crimes in Ukraine (and in the rest of the Soviet Union), both authors point at the limitations and dangers of an "alternative" utopian past that is promoted as a viable model for the future.

graphomania and potentially influences various other forms of popular culture. One of the most prominent examples for the genre's success is Andrei Maliukov's film “Black Hunters” (original Russian title: “Мы из будущего”, engl. transl. “We’re from the future”) which shows four 21st century treasure seekers, who dig near St. Petersburg in search of hidden medals of soldiers fallen during the war. All of a sudden, they travel in time to the Second World War and take part in the battle for Leningrad as Red Army soldiers. The film received favourable reviews from Russian critics and was also nominated for the high-ranked “MTV Movie Awards" in 2009. Trying to build on this success, already in 2010, the producers issued the sequel “Мы из будущего-2” (“We’re from the future-2”). The plot of this second movie is set in Ukraine and focusses mainly on the treacherous and bloodthirsty nature of Ukrainian nationalists, who are portrayed both as the absolute evil (e.g., they force the protagonist to execute innocent civilians) and as the ideological forerunners of the contemporary Ukrainian state.

The narratives about the upcoming war in Ukraine (written mostly between 2003 and 2010) comprise another large segment of the genre. Although the fantastic elements are here kept to their minimum, together with the stories about time travels these books belong to the series titled “voenno-istoricheskaia fantastika” (military and historical speculative fiction), which was launched in 2008 by the Moscow-based publishing house Eksmo/Iauza.

What makes this categorization surprisingly plausible is the fact that alongside with alternative history and extensive war scenarios, these books apply a rhetoric device typical in fantasy stories—thinning. In these books, the readers are witnessing the contemporary post-Soviet world in decline, a process that is manifest in growing social tensions, in the fading of cultural life, and in the slow collapse of the remnants of the Soviet heritage. Against the backdrop of this decline, the reader is confronted with the existence of dark forces, which are planning to invade this vanishing world and thus to finish it off. These forces may appear either as NATO troops or as another kind of Western conspiracy. The territory of Ukraine turns here into a battleground and the place where the recovery fable starts. The plot of those novels is usually leading the reader not just to the well-deserved victory against the foreign invaders, but also envisages the reestablishment of the new mighty Empire or a new social order as a result of this heroic fight. The imperial backlash is thus being presented as an emotional ersatz for the missing modernization.

Probably the most notable books of the series were written by two authors from Eastern Ukraine, Fëdor Berezin (from Donetsk) and Gleb
Bobrov (from Luhansk). Bobrov’s novel “The Era of the Stillborn” (“Эпоха мертворожденных,” 2008) and Berezin’s “War 2010: The Ukrainian Front” (“Война 2010: украинский фронт”) provide extensive military exploits, often with lengthy footnotes containing detailed description and performance characteristics of various kinds of weaponry.

Left: Gleb Bobrov’s “The Era of the Stillborn”. Right: Fëdor Berezin’s “War 2010: The Ukrainian Front”

Both books treat the Ukrainian state as a “deadborn” geopolitical anomaly, which shall give way for the rise of a new (Eurasian) empire—a theme, which unites them with the stories about time travels and other typically “fantastic” counterfactual histories.19

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19 Interestingly enough, alongside with Berezin, many other authors, who write predominantly in the sub-genre of “boevaia fantastika” (military speculative fiction) and have eagerly and eloquently envisaged the destruction of the Ukrainian state, are not just Ukrainian citizens, but were formerly active participants and laureates of the Kharkiv “Star-Bridge Festival” – one of the largest science fiction festivals in Eastern
While life in the USSR is being perceived here as the pre-thinning condition, the narratives of the series evolve from emotionally and nostalgically romanticizing the Soviet past towards outright resentment. Nostalgia does not mean here the intention to return or regain the lost object but instead refers to a political program which considers the Soviet past as a possible source of a new imperial patriotism (which, although predominantly Russian, is at least potentially an option for other former Soviet republics).

The Soviet past loses its historical specifics, its leftist and Marxist connotations and becomes an integral part of some broader national heritage. The genre already establishes a special understanding of the Soviet times as an era which has reached its ultimate conclusion and can be considered as a glorious chapter of history. This perspective resembles the phenomenon Georg Lukács (1971, 57-60 and passim) defined as “epic distance,” which means in our particular case that Soviet history exemplifies a high (and currently almost unreachable) ideal of righteous conduct. Thus the authors transform a comparatively well documented historical period into the myth of a Golden Age or a Classic Era.

This scheme goes far beyond the domain of speculative fiction and is also present in mainstream literature. Probably the most telling example is Eduard Limonov’s (2014) poetry book titled “USSR is Our Ancient Rome” (“СССР—наш Древний Рим”). If the USSR is Rome, then the post-Soviet historical situation might be defined as the “Dark Ages”—a period, in which

Europe, which was sponsored and chaired by Arsen Avakov, the current Ukrainian minister of the Interior.
the recovery story unfolds, and the anticipation of a Renaissance appears quite natural. In this re-semantized form the Soviet past ceases to be an element of ideological choice, which previously used to be a marker for the division of political forces (pro-Soviet vs. anti-Soviet), but, on the contrary, delivers the common ground for a large patriotic consensus of a community united by collective trauma and common resentment. Naturally, this mobilized community can hardly be satisfied with a laid-back contemplation of political reality but requires action in which it can take part performatively.

7. Novorossiia: Turning Fiction into Facts

The Russian annexation of Crimea and the military onslaught on Eastern Ukraine echoed with a readiness of the Russian media and the public to accept the language and the imaginary of speculative genres as a sort of informational standard.

As a highly politicized genre the post-Soviet fantastika makes the borders between fiction and political reality blurred and permeable. Another reason for this proximity is the fact that many authors of speculative fiction, especially the Russophone writers from Ukraine (e.g., Fedor Berezin, Vladimir Sverzhin, Gleb Bobrov, Lev Vershinin, etc.), are also active political analysts and journalists, although their analytical texts are not less speculative than the fictional ones. And even political commentators, who are not active fantasy or science fiction authors, still try to build on the aura and the popularity of these genres. Consider, for instance, Anatolii Nesmiian and Boris Rozhin—two prominent Russian
bloggers and publicists, who are actively commenting on the war in
Ukraine and on the Russian involvement in Syria. Each of them has tens of
thousands of subscribers and followers in the social networks, yet as
bloggers and book authors they are best known under their pseudonyms El
Murid and Colonel Cassad, which both refer to the heroes of speculative
literature: El Murid is the protagonist of Glen Cook’s fantasy series “Dread
Empire”, while Colonel Cassad is a character from Dan Simmons’ science
fiction novel “Hyperion”. While both Nesmiian and Rozhin are political
commentators, who often make use of deadly serious stylistics, already
their pen-names are a message of belonging to a particular subculture and
in-group.

Despite the overall political and military bias of fantastika, it is still
surprising, how many writers seized the occasion to take an active part in
the war in Eastern Ukraine, grasping the chance to become the heroes of
their own stories or rather to turn those stories into self-fulfilling
prophecies. Probably, the most striking example is provided by Fedor
Berezin, who in 2014 actually made it up to Deputy Minister of Defence of
the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic.

Yet, in its most eloquent manifestation, the narrative of the new
Russian irredentism undoubtedly came from the pen of Aleksandr
Prokhanov (2014). It is worth quoting in length:

Fascism [...] rises again and is marching eastwards building
crematoriums and gas chambers in the cities of Ukraine. The new

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See the Facebook-profile of Nesmiian: www.facebook.com/El.murid.3 or the Twitter-
Account of Rozhin: https://twitter.com/colonelcassad (retrieved on 09 April 2018)
state [Novorossiia] born in the fight with the fascist beast accomplishes a vital mission: without any help from outside [...] it defends the world from fascism. The history of Novorossiia goes back to the mysterious depth of ancient Slavdom, Greek city-states, and Scythian barrows. These lands carry the primeval mystic energy which gave birth to the whole Russian world from the Black Sea to the Baltics, from the Carpathians to the Urals. The culture of Novorossiia embraces Homer and Lev Gumilev, Babel and Pushkin, Skovoroda and Vernadskii [...] The state which is being created in Eastern Ukraine, is in its spirit truly a people's state. They are children of the people's war, who fight for justice. They fight for social justice (in a country), where there will be no hierarchies, no rich and poor. They fight for a national justice (in a country), where all peoples will be equal and unified. And they also fight for divine justice, for the fight against fascism is a cosmogonic war of the forces of light against the forces of darkness, the forces of love against the forces of hatred, the forces of heaven against the forces of hell.

Фашизм [...] вновь возродился и пошел на восток, устраивая в украинских городах крематории и газовые камеры. Новое государство [Новороссия], рожденное в схватке с фашистским животным, выполняет грандиозную миссию. Одно, без внешней поддержки [...] оно защищает мир от фашизма. У государства Новороссия громадная история, которая погружает это государство в таинственные толщи древнего славянства,
греческих полисов, скифских курганов. На этих землях и на землях Крыма возникла первозданная мистическая сила, которая породила весь русский мир от Черного моря до Балтики, от Карпат до Урала. [...] Культура Новороссии — это Гомер и Лев Гумилёв, Бабель и Пушкин, Сковорода и Вернадский. [...] Государство, которое создается на Восточной Украине, народное по своему духу. Это дети народной войны, которые сражаются за справедливость. Справедливость социальную, где нет иерархии, богатых и бедных. Справедливость национальную, где все народы равны и едины. И справедливость божественную, ибо схватка с фашизмом — это космогоническая война сил света и сил тьмы, сил любви и сил ненависти, рая и ада.

Starting from its pretentious title, “Novorossiia the Fireborn” (“Новороссия — рожденная в огне”), in terms of rhetoric and tropes, this short text would already make a perfect plot for a fantasy story. First, it operates with the equally original and fictive geopolitical concepts of Novorossiia (New Russia) and the Russian World (Russkij Mir), which both comprise a half-historical, half-metaphysical space attributed to Russia. Secondly, this text constructs the image of an absolute Other (Ukrainian fascism), thus enabling the scenario of a “cosmogonic war” between Good and Evil. And finally, it envisages a social utopia, which is held worth fighting for.

Far from harmless literary speculations, the proponents of Novorossiia proved eager to constitute a new (geo)political reality with
military means, establishing the self-proclaimed separatist “republics” in Luhansk and Donetsk regions of Ukraine. Against this backdrop, the major problem with Prokhanov’s text is that it was published not in the comics’ book or a fantasy magazine, but in the reputed newspaper “Izvestiia,” in the column for “international politics.” Despite this context, the author does not even try to give a semblance of plausibility to his story about “death camps and gas chambers,” simply because due to its genre specifics this text cannot be an object of any fact-checking whatsoever. Its aim is not mimesis, but simulation, not the recognizable representation of the world, but the construction of a new, parallel reality. Being omnipresent in various media, this aestheticized, counterfactual reality captivates its consumers and is arguably capable of substituting the real world, thus making it possible to read and interpret current geopolitical conflicts through the prism of speculative fiction.

From this perspective, it is not surprising that one of the key elements in conceptualizing the war in Eastern Ukraine is the idea of time travel. A very telling example is provided by the Russian movie “14/41: The Lesson Unlearned”. Here is a quote from the synopsis\(^2\):

> This is a story of Nick, a 5th grader of Donetsk school, who stays in the classroom during the bombardment. All alone with his fear he suddenly finds the support. The most common school board becomes a portal to the past. Nick meets the same little boy but

from 1941. They both are locked in the school under fire, and both want to live, be happy and enjoy their childhood.

However, while the story unfolds the viewers learn that not only the boys are "the same," but also the forces they are actually afraid of—the military units of the German Wehrmacht from 1941 and the Ukrainian government troops from 2014 are implicitly put together and evaluated as “the same” fascists.

Furthermore, it should not be disregarded that the books with a stereotypical figure of “popadanets” are not only stories about time travel. More importantly, they are also narratives about upward social mobility and personal reincarnation from an average loser into an epic hero. This model of literary time travels was carefully applied by the Russian state-controlled media, their war journalists, and by authors like Zakhar Prilepin (2016) and Marina Akhmedova (2014)—with the aim of constructing the idealized biographies of the most renowned separatist warlords of the Donbas “republics”. These are the stories, in which a poor fellow like Arseniy Pavlov alias “Motorola,” who barely makes ends meet by working at a car wash in Russia, suddenly finds himself in Eastern Ukraine, where he becomes a renowned war commander and an unbending fighter against fascism. A story, in which a former bricklayer Pavel Drëmov receives a sort of divine revelation and turns into a brave and noble Cossack ataman fighting for the Orthodox Faith. The list can be continued...

This programmatic literary modeling transforms the designated country of Novorossiia into a fantastic Neverland, where modern arms and
modern warfare are being applied in the fight for the geopolitical utopia of a united Eurasia.

8. Final Remarks

The summary of the post-Soviet speculative fiction, which focuses exclusively on its poetization of authoritarianism, militarism and the archaic, may be criticized for the overall demonization of speculative genres developed by the post-Soviet literatures. To counter-balance this criticism, I would like to emphasize that large segments of fantastika do not contain political messages and are dedicated solely to their reader's entertainment, so that they cannot be found guilty of deliberate “formatting” of political reality. Nevertheless, the correlation between the popularity of the literary models provided by some speculative texts and their anti-democratic and antimodernist orientation is too marked to be ignored.

For any market-oriented literature, the fulfillment of their readers' expectations is crucial to their success. Thus, the simple-minded rigidity of many of the analyzed texts and genres makes them more attractive for a popular readership and significantly less attractive for intellectual elites, which is probably the reason why the current anti-liberal trends of the fantastika remained largely underestimated, if not completely unnoticed, by the academia.

Meanwhile, these trends are a significant part of the literary process (at least) in Russia; they prompt “serious” writers to address them. One may
think of Vikor Pelevin’s “Empire V” (2016), which describes modern Russia as being ruled by a cast of vampires, or Vladimir Sorokin’s “Telluriia” which—quite in line with the conventions of fantasy—describes a post-apocalyptic Europe and Asia, where alongside with technical innovations medieval and totalitarian mentalities persist and blossom. Far from valorizing this state of affairs, Pelevin’s and especially Sorokin’s prose highlight the new configurations of time and space within contemporary culture in a way that prompted Dirk Uffelmann (2017, 360f) to conclude that the new chronotope of Eurasia is eventually the retrofuture.

Without the steady impact exerted by mass literature, the crystallization of such a chronotope would hardly be possible. While addressing the desires and expectations of a mass audience, speculative fiction also provides the aesthetic form which effectively shapes these expectations (for what is beautiful cannot be wrong). The highly popular web-portal and online magazine "Laboratoriia fantastiki" (fantlab.ru) already in its name metaphorically grasps the essence of speculative writing as a laboratory, where the new literary forms are being developed and put to the test. Thus, over the last two decades Russophone speculative fiction provided the discourse setting, the aesthetic framework, and ultimately the “language” for fuzzy ideas of imperial revanchism, clan societies, and for various otherwise incompatible forms of geopolitical reasoning, placing them all together under the guise of entertainment and Western pop-culture in the middle of the post-Soviet societies.
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