

How to Interpret Ukraine's Turmoil

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Титушки: Ukrainian thugs for hire

As I've been reading the news and blogs on events in Ukraine, I came across quite a few words that I didn't understand. So I thought a little primer on Ukraine news might be useful.

But as I began to compile my primer, it turned out to have a lot of Russian nouns, slang and otherwise, used to insult people in Ukraine. So with apologies:

Евромайдан: Euromaidan. Although майдан (maidan) is a square, the word евромайдан refers to street protests over then-President Viktor Yanukovich's decision not to sign a trade agreement with the EU.

Титушки: Thugs for hire. These are the tough guys in tracksuits who act as agents provocateurs. The name comes from Vadym Titushko, a mixed martial artist who was part

of a group that beat up some journalists in 2013. During the Kiev demonstrations the titushki were believed to have been brought in by the government to instigate violence.

Степан Бандера: Stepan Bandera, a leader of the Ukrainian nationalist movement. He is admired by some as a fierce protector and advocate of Ukrainians and their state; he is reviled by others as a Nazi collaborator and violent opponent of everyone he considered a threat to Ukraine, including Russians, Poles, and Jews.

Бандеровцы: Banderists, used to describe the actual historical followers of Bandera and anyone who is perceived as a Ukrainian nationalist. In the latter sense, today бандеровцы is a synonym for fascist, anti-Russian, nationalist Ukrainian scum. Кто поддерживает нацистов на бандеромайданах и призывает к фашистским бунтам, тому в Россию дороги нет. (Whoever supports Nazis at Bandera-Maidan demonstrations and calls for fascist regime change is not welcome in Russia). Here бандеро- is used as a play on евро- in евромайдан (Euromaidan).

Кукраина: derogatory term for Ukraine, apparently a mix of Украина (Ukraine) and куркуль (Ukrainian kulaks or rich peasants; slang for a rich, greedy person). Used in phrases such as Кукраины уже два дня как нет (That stupid Ukraine hasn't existed for two days).

Западенец: Western Ukrainian. Used to mean anti-Russian, nationalist, fascist Ukrainians who live in the western part of the country. Западенцы — они всегда были хитрюгами (Those Ukrainian nationalists in the west have always been sneaky devils.)

Хохол: slang for Ukrainian, sometimes derogatory or condescending. In today's political rhetoric it seems to be used to describe a "bad Ukrainian," i.e., a Ukrainian who doesn't support Russia and Russian political positions. Since there isn't a slang word for Ukrainians in English, it's hard to translate. Всех хохлов с демократической Украины, геть. (All you dumb Ukrainians — get out of democratic Ukraine)!

Молодчики: goons, thugs. Although in some literary contexts молодчик can just be a young man, in contemporary usage молодчик is a guy looking for trouble, a guy who is part of a criminal organization, or a guy who is part of a right-wing, reactionary, criminal group. Фашистские or националистические молодчики (fascist or nationalist goons) were code words for anti-Soviet, fascist youth. The Russian Foreign Ministry statement included the term воинствующие молодчики (aggressive young thugs) grouped with боевики из ультраправых националистических организаций (armed fighters from ultra-right-wing, nationalist organizations) to describe Ukrainian demonstrators.

I'm not sure how this rhetoric is going to win the hearts and minds of Russia's Ukrainian neighbors. Remember: ласковый телёнок двух маток сосёт (you get more flies with honey, literally "a friendly calf nurses on two cows").

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