RACE, MEDIA, AND POSTCOLONIALITY: UKRAINE BETWEEN NATIONALISM AND COSMOPOLITANISM [1]


In response to Orientalist discourses that portray Ukraine as a backward country mired in narrow-minded nationalism, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia, a trend in the Ukrainian media constructs Ukrainians as global subjects by asserting ethnic and racial diversity as part of Ukrainian identity, staking a claim to cosmopolitanism and equality with what are perceived as “advanced” nations. The visibility of people of color in Ukrainian media and public performances is multivalent. It can be understood as a postcolonial effort to construct Ukraine as a modern and enlightened country, deserving of support and membership in Europe. It can also be seen as a commodification of blackness, and part of an effort to market Ukrainianness as a desirable brand. While blackness works as a symbol of modernity, racial discrimination and discourses equating Africanness with backwardness are also present. I analyze these conflicting discourses, in particular relating to events that brought race in Ukraine to the forefront of media attention, including the 2012 Eurovision competition, the 2012 European soccer championships, and the 2013-2014 Euromaidan protests. I also examine the discursive processes through which the links between race and Ukrainianness are constructed and contested on the televised singing competition Holos Kraiiny, Ukraine's analogue of The Voice. I argue that blackness and Ukrainianness mutually constitute each other in these cultural products, as people navigate the conflicting terrains of xenophobia and desires for cosmopolitan modernity.

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