

**UKRAINE**

**IN HISTORIES**

**AND STORIES**

**ESSAYS BY UKRAINIAN INTELLECTUALS**



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• Hrytsak • Ploky • Andrukhovych • Kurkov • Yermolenko  
• Bondar • Karpa • Shyyan • Kebuladze • Denysenko •  
Rafeenko • Aliev • Hnatiuk • Finberg • Portnov • Shelest •

# UKRAINE

## IN HISTORIES AND STORIES

ESSAYS BY UKRAINIAN INTELLECTUALS

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This book is a collection of texts by contemporary Ukrainian intellectuals: writers, historians, philosophers, political analysts, opinion leaders. The texts have been written for the international audience. The collection combines reflections on Ukraine's history (or histories, in plural), and analysis of the present, conceptual ideas and life stories. The book presents a multi-faceted image of Ukrainian memory and reality: from the Holodomor to Maidan, from Russian aggression to cultural diversity, from the depth of the past to the complexity of the present.

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*Peter Pomerantsev*

## PREFACE

One of the curiosities with Ukraine is that no one really knows where it is. For many, not least Vladimir Putin, it's an extension of neo-Tsarist Russia. For others, it's another Central European state, a proto-Poland of frustrated blood and language nationalism which just needs the chance to build strong state institutions to express its essence. A leading group of Ukrainian sociologists, the Nestor Group, argues that Ukrainians' value system rejects both the Russian model of paternalistic deification of authority and the language-and-bureaucracy-makes-a-state logic of Central Europe. Instead, Ukrainians lean towards horizontal civil society bonds, family and church and small business, which puts Ukraine in the same bracket as southern, Mediterranean countries such as Italy or Greece. Writing in 1977, the Russian language writing, Soviet Ukrainian raised, Austro-Hungarian-inspired, British citizen Igor Pomerantsev seemed to anticipate the sociologists, describing Ukraine as part of 'a greater Mediterranean':

*Strips of light  
in a room.  
Daytime.*

*July.  
Kiev.  
The lightest strip  
breathes alongside  
on the divan.  
On a map for fingers  
Kiev  
is somewhere near  
Alexandria.*

Ukraine seduces and confuses because parts of all these identities, more journeys than identities, exist simultaneously and form their own type of meanings. Russian identity here is not like Russian in Russia; Eastern European not like Poland; Mediterranean not quite the same Mediterranean as Sicily or Greece, and if it's Alexandria, it's the half hallucinated one of Lawrence Durrell. Of course this polyphony has confused Western writers and commentators who want to see things in simple, straight lines. But Ukraine resists straight lines – it's a space that breaks all the old, limited models of identity. Its casual bilingualism makes a mockery of the Herderian idea that language makes a nation. It's a space where Muslims and Jews have traditionally helped each other out. Where nationalism can be associated with the most liberal democracy (as well as the more predicable fascism), while multiculturalism can be used to pursue Empire. It's a country where very different stories of the past play out simultaneously, but where the question of what Europe means is now contested most fiercely and existentially. It is, in this sense, at the avant-garde of the present. While other, supposedly more developed countries have nervous breakdowns about how to balance their identity with the fluctuations and instabilities of globalization, Ukraine has been negotiating the paradoxes of being a non-linear nation for much longer.

This makes the writers and thinkers who come out of this creative flux such a vital reading. One of the great failures of the literary and

media classes in what was once known as the West has been the inability to find Ukrainian voices to talk about the Ukrainian experience. Thank goodness there have been a few exceptional Western academics to help out, but it's high time for the Ukrainian experience to be related by Ukrainians. Though of course, what makes Ukraine so exciting is the definition of Ukraine in a state of becoming. This is something I've experienced first hand.





Andriy Kulakov

## INTRODUCTION

# Tabula rasa, or How to Find A Ukrainian Terra Incognita

For many people, Ukraine is still a *terra incognita*. It remains an unknown land even for Ukrainians themselves, and even more so for our close or distant neighbors. This situation persists despite the fact that tragic and heart-racing developments that took place in recent years brought Ukraine to the forefront of the world's attention. It is still an unknown land, geographically, historically, as well as mentally and culturally. Ukrainians themselves often find it difficult to understand what is happening to them, and what the reasons are for their defeats and victories. They are groping around for their singularity, their complex identity in a huge mass of fragments from different eras, states, ethnicities, religions, and feelings about the world. However, Ukrainians also feel their otherness, their distinctiveness. They're trying to think about this and to analyze it, but sometimes they simply forget, as they plunge headlong into the tumult of their daily problems.

However, we, Ukrainians, try to be hospitable and kind. We have invited others to our unknown land in order to explore it together, and to understand specific Ukrainian traits together. Why? Because the view of a stranger can fine-tune new optics, and that becomes helpful in our attempts to figure out who we are and where we are going.

It is natural that when we invite guests, we first of all offer our optics and our glasses. We want to show things we are proud of, things we respect or which cause us pain and bleeding. We present our guests with an entire collection of our own glasses, and unfold a map on which we have marked out our routes. We understand that these glasses can be – and most likely must be – put aside, or that our guests will insert their own lenses, and that they will stipple their own routes, and draw their own outlines of our landscapes.

This collection of stories and essays is our welcoming package of glasses and maps, an invitation to a journey. Yet, this package also contains something else. Each journey, even to a *terra incognita*, cannot start from scratch, and the traveler's mind is not a *tabula rasa*. Certain expectations are already written on this *tabula*, as are longings, fears and anticipation of new experiences and interesting things. This *tabula* might also contain drawings of scary chimeric dragons, and of incomprehensible native people from whom you know not what to expect: a welcoming plate of *borscht* or a warning spear. There you can meet rivers of milk and flourishing oases, or uninviting deserts, bare rocks and unfriendly winds. These preconceptions and pre-impressions about the territory, which a traveler ventures to explore, present the whole spectrum of feelings with which he or she can start a journey. Now and again he or she can take this tablet of his/her mind, take a map out of their bag, and compare the drawings on her or his *tabula* of consciousness with the outlines on the *orbis terrarum tabula*.

It is through this book that we want to share our mental maps of our lands with our guest travelers, so that they get a better understanding of the land to which they are going, feel good before their journey and are ready for surprises. Perhaps not all terrains are depicted, and the scale is sometimes imperfect, but for a traveler it is still better than nothing. We are offering a roadmap and hints on where to stop for rest and to regain one's strength. We would like to give our glasses to our guests so that they can better see our villages, the ruins



of castles, wooden domes of churches, factory pipes, vast rapeseed and sunflower fields, glass boxes of IT-towns, the gates of universities and libraries as well as cozy bars. With the help of the instruments we present in this collection, travelers will get a better vision of the ruins of old empires, destroyed destinies, shell casings from bullets shot at invaders, and the sprouts of a new nation that sometimes go around in a vicious circle, wander out of its way, but make every effort to move on to a better destiny, still smiling and laughing at funny jokes that its people generate in amounts larger than its GDP per capita.

The authors of this book are writers, poets, historians, philosophers, journalists and political analysts. They try to think about the past and design a future. They deconstruct stereotypes and look for new prospects. They set new paradigms and invent new tools. They try to sew together the fractures and look for common points. They show that Ukraine is not only about *salo* [pork fat – Ed.], football player Shevchenko, boxer Klitschko, Chornobyl or Maidan. It is not just about corruption, war, and internally displaced persons. It is not only about Cossacks, *hopak* dance and *vyshyvanka* embroidered shirts. They reveal that Ukraine is also about avant-garde painter Malevich, writer Gogol, Austro-Hungarian emperor Franz Joseph, one of the “fathers” of the Russian autocracy Theophanes Prokopovich, Communist poet Mykola Khvylioviy, old-style wandering philosopher Hryhorii Skovoroda, Jewish German-speaking poet Paul Celan and many others. Ukraine is not just a pre-modern rural traditional culture, but also an urbanized technological society. Ukraine is not just about shadow schemes and oligarchs, but also modern electronic state services and transparent public procurements. Ukraine is also a country of IT, hi-tech, fashion and advertising industries.

One of the authors in this collection, historian Yaroslav Hrytsak, once quoted the saying: “In Western Europe, nations are created by politicians, in Eastern Europe they are created by poets”. Our collection is yet further evidence of this, and that is precisely why we selected these people as our guides. We asked them to write about

Ukraine as if they were talking to a foreigner, and trying to share those mental maps and glasses with a foreigner.

We are glad to present this traveler's toolkit to you, and invite you on a journey to explore a *terra incognita* Ukraine.



This book has eight sections. Each contains two texts, essays or interviews, written by, or taken with, Ukrainian prominent intellectuals: writers, historians, philosophers, political analysts or journalists. The name of each section is in plural, as we believe that plurality is one of the key words that help to understand Ukraine's past and present.

The first section, *Histories*, contains texts by historians: a “brief but global” history of Ukraine written by Yaroslav Hrytsak, one of Ukraine's best known historians and public intellectuals, and an interview with Serhii Plokhyy (world-renowned historian and the head of the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute) about the origins of Ukraine, its relation to medieval Rus' and the role of Cossacks in the development of its modern character.

The second section, *Identities*, contains an interview with a prominent Ukrainian writer, Yuri Andrukhovych, one of the creators of modern Ukrainian literature, and an essay penned by another prominent (and the best known globally) Ukrainian writer, Andriy Kurkov. One important thing to remember here: Andrukhovych writes his books in Ukrainian, while Kurkov writes mainly in Russian.

The *Archetypes* section explores the fundamentals of Ukrainian history and its present, an attempt to think about the basic things, which define our emotions, actions and reactions. Read an essay here by writer Andriy Bondar about Ukrainian “incompleteness”, and the reflections of philosopher Volodymyr Yermolenko (this book's editor) about the steppe, empire and cruelty.

The section *Stories* contains two essays by Ukrainian writers, Irena Karpa and Haska Shyyan. Start with them if you want to know more about lifestyles, diversities, family stories, the experiences of foreigners, pains and joys of Ukrainian life, both in the past and the here and now. This is perhaps the most “personal” part of the book.

The section *Motherlands* explores the difficult relations of an individual with her/his Soviet and post-Soviet motherlands. It contains an essay by the writer and lawyer Larysa Denysenko on how difficult it is to be a majority for a nation that throughout its history used to be a minority. It also contains a text by the Ukrainian-Georgian philosopher Vakhtang Kebuladze on how important it was to gain a motherland after the collapse of the Soviet Union and during the Maidans of the 2000s and 2010s.

The section *Pains* targets the most painful topics today: Crimea and Donbas. It contains an essay by Volodymyr Rafeenko, a Ukrainian writer from Donetsk, who was forced to leave his native city after Russian aggression in Spring 2014. Rafeenko wrote most of his books in Russian, but published his first book in Ukrainian this year. This section also contains an interview with Alim Aliev, a Crimean Tatar activist and the head of Crimean House (a cultural centre in Kyiv) about Crimean Tatar identities and the pains of Stalin’s deportation and Putin’s annexation. Both Rafeenko and Aliev are unable to return to their native land. Remember: since 2014 Ukraine has taken in up to 1.4 million internally displaced persons from Crimea and Donbas.

In the section *Relations* we try to look at relations between Ukraine and Poland, and between Ukrainians and Jews. This section contains an interview with Ola Hnatiuk, a prominent Polish-Ukrainian scholar, and an interview with Leonid Finberg, one of the leading figures of Ukrainian Jewish studies. This is only the beginning – and we hope that in our next publications we will look closely at the relations of Ukrainians with Hungarians, Romanians, Russians, Belarusians, Lithuanians, Turks, Germans, Bulgarians, Greeks, and many others.

(You can ask why the “Relations” section in this book does not contain an article about Russians. But you will see that every single essay touches upon the “Russian question”. It is so omnipresent that it would be difficult to prepare a comprehensive separate text on it).

Finally, the section *Stereotypes* aims to analyze the clichés that often exist in the international arena about Ukraine. Historian Andriy Portnov, professor at the European University Viadrina, reflects on the major stereotypes that exist about Ukraine in Germany. Ukrainian expert in conflict studies Hanna Shelest gives her reflections on Ukraine’s “insecure security”, as well as the most widespread myths surrounding Crimea, Donbas and Russian aggression.

This book is not a collection of answers, but rather a mapmaking endeavor. We hope it gives you some instruments for comprehension, and some elements of the picture. But the final picture will, of course, be yours.

**Andriy Kulakov,**

*Conceived book idea and project leader*



**STEPPE** **HISTORY** **FRONTIER**  
**COSSACKS**  
**POLAND** **RUSSIA**  
**HITLER** **JEW**  
**WEST** **STALIN** **HOLODOMOR**  
**CRIMEA** **SOVIET UNION**  
**VIKINGS** **BANDERA**  
**WORLD WARS**  
**RUS'** **BLACK SOIL**



# HISTORIES

**Ukraine: A Brief but Global History  
of Ukrainian Bread,**

*by Yaroslav Hrytsak*

**Rus', Cossacks and Ukraine's Identity,**

*Interview with Serhii Plokyh*





## Ukraine: A Brief but Global History of Ukrainian Bread

In the 20th century historians have discovered time. This is most likely one of the greatest ever discoveries of historical science. I don't mean astronomical time here, measured with clocks and calendars. I mean historical time. It has its own rhythms and dynamics, which do not coincide with the course of astronomical time.

Historical time runs much slower, and this is why it is more difficult to notice. It is like an underflow that cannot be seen with the naked eye – yet, it determines, to a large extent, what happens on the surface of developments and phenomena. In order to see it, one has to dive deeper than events in history and try to see the long-term factors unfolding during centuries or millennia. Historians call it *la longue durée* – long duration. And they are urging us to use it more actively if we want to understand the world, and even more so if we want to change it. Because whatever we say about the past, the past does matter. It is like gravity, which we have to take into consideration when we construct our aerial devices of the future.

🗨️ **The *longue durée* of Ukrainian lands is defined by the fact that approximately 40% of their area is covered by fertile black soil called *chornozem*.** 🗨️

If we take only agricultural and arable land, this share is even higher (54% and 58%, respectively). Such proportion can hardly be found in other countries around the world. In terms of area, Ukrainian black soil can be compared perhaps to individual American states and Canadian provinces, but it is unparalleled in its depth (up to 1.5 meters).

Black soil is a part of the belt stretching from Siberia and Ural Mountains through the Volga region, Kuban, and Don, going through the majority of Ukrainian lands right up to the River Dniester, leaving behind Crimea in the south and forests in the north, and then continuing as a narrow strip along the Danube through Romania, Moldova, Hungary, Serbia, and Bulgaria.

Black soil was and remains a factor that has a profound impact on Ukrainian history. In particular, this is basically the key reason for deep-rooted and durable farming on our lands. In pre-literate times, this was the land of well-developed agricultural civilization, which was named Trypillian by archeologists (based on the name of the territory where the respective relics were found – Trypillia village).

During the literate period, the first mention about this land was left by Herodotus. In his *History* he devoted an entire volume to describing Scythia, the Black Sea steppe. The population of that steppe, a belligerent nomadic tribe of the Scythians, managed to do the same as ancient Greeks: to repel an attack by a large Persian army led by Darius. When writing about the Scythians, Herodotus also described farming tribes living to the north of them – the ploughing Scythians. We do not know for sure who these tribes were. However, the Scythian steppe cut their lands from the grain markets of Antiquity. It is assumed that only after the Scythians disappeared did farming become the main type of production, and pushed animal husbandry and nomadism into the background.

The situation described by Herodotus illustrates one of the main features of local history up to the late 18th century – a fight between agrarian people and nomadic tribes for control over the black soil's

wealth. The black soil belt coincided in the main with the large steppe that started in Manchuria and Mongolia and stretched right across the entire Eurasian Continent to the south of the forest zone up to the Pannonian Plain (contemporary Hungary). That steppe served as an arterial highway for nomadic tribes travelling from East to West. Some of them appeared and disappeared without trace. Others were able to find shelter in their newly-found homeland, giving their own name to it – like Bulgaria or Hungary. But in every case they were going through the territory of contemporary Ukraine and leaving their trace on it.

In the interaction between agricultural and nomadic people, the general formula is simple: it predominately implied military confrontation, and nomadic tribes had an advantage in that confrontation. Their very way of life was closely related to war. In order to survive, they were forced to move constantly in search of new pastures. Those pastures were seldom unoccupied – therefore, to get control over them, they had to knock out or to push out the people already living there. Accordingly, martial arts were mastered at an early age in nomadic tribes. For settled agrarian people agriculture, on the contrary, left neither time nor possibilities for the art of war.

The nomads had another great advantage on their side. They had a huge number of horses. Horses were like armored vehicles of the steppe. With them, nomads were able to cover large distances, appear and disappear rapidly, whereas horse meat, blood and milk could satisfy hunger and thirst during long marches.

The constant threat from the steppe prevented unification of agrarian tribes into a unified state. This was changed by other nomads who were not steppe warriors but sea and river sailors: the Vikings (or, as they were also called – the Varangians or Normans). In the 8th-13th centuries, they gained control over almost all coastal regions of Europe, from Normandy to Southern Italy. One of the main points of attraction for them was Constantinople – the capital of Byzantine Empire, the richest civilization of that time. The Vikings took control

of all lands along the entire road “from the Varangians to the Greeks” (i.e. Byzantium), and they created their own empire with its center in Kyiv. Moreover, they gave this state their own name: Rus’ (this is how the Slavic tribes called them), but they took their religion from Byzantium.

The evolution of nomadic people was once described by Arabian thinker Ibn Khaldun. First, combative nomads seize the lands taken earlier by the settled people. Subsequently, the nomads assume the habits of these settled people who, although not having martial advantages, prevail both in demography and civilization. In the end, they and their power are defeated by the new nomads – and the circle repeats itself. This scheme gives a very good description of the history of Rus’ too. It can best be seen in how the names of Rus’ princes were changing. The first two generations had Scandinavian names: the dynasty founder was Rurik (Eric), his son – Ihor (Ingvar), and Ihor’s wife – Olha (Helga). Instead, the names of the two first Christianized princes – Volodymyr and Yaroslav – were Slavic. The time of their rule (980-1019) is, at the same time, the period of the supreme greatness of Rus’. After Yaroslav’s death, Rus entered the period of feudal fragmentation and internecine wars, and in 1240 it became prey for new nomads who came from far-off Mongolia.

**🗨️ Ukrainian, Russian and, to a lesser extent, Belarusian historians, debate whose national state ancient Rus’ actually was: Russian, Ukrainian or Belarusian. This dispute is senseless. 🗨️**

In the same way you can discuss whose state the empire of Carolus Magnus was – German, French or Italian? None of these, because the idea of a national state emerges very late, in the 19th century, and it becomes the norm as late as in the 20th century. Before this time, to quote Ernest Gellner, it does not matter which language farmers speak; what matters is the wealth of the land that they cultivate (and,

respectively, the amounts of taxes or products they can pay to those who dominate over them in the social hierarchy).

In this regard, the Rus' elite were very rich, and their richness impressed their contemporaries.

 **However, the material wealth of Rus' contrasted greatly with the poverty of its spiritual culture.** 

Let me give just one example: from the moment of adoption of Christianity up to the early 17th century, the number of books circulating in the Rus' lands was the same, equal to the number of books in a library of a Byzantine monastery. Historians discuss why Rus' was so "silent". One of the reasons was its slavish dependence on Byzantine samples. Unlike Rome, which brought religion and language (Latin) to northern barbarians, Constantinople brought religion, but did not bring the language (all religious books were translated from Greek to Church Slavonic).

However, there is one more plausible reason: the Rus' elite invested so much effort into fighting the steppe that nothing was left for developing culture.

Reading books is one of the main instruments for any community to understand itself as a nation. According to an apt remark by historian Yuri Slezkine, Nations are "book-reading tribes". If there are no books, there is no nation. Consequently, ancient Rus' did not have sufficient instruments for nation-building. That is why, by definition, the Ukrainian nation (as well as the Belarusian or Russian nations) could be born only through ruination of Rus'.

Such ruination took different forms and a long time. The Mongolian conquest was not even its first act. In fact, Rus' principalities preserved quite extensive autonomy even under Mongolian rule, especially with regard to church and religion-related culture. Furthermore, unlike northern Rus' (later Russia) the lands of southern Rus' (later Belarus and Ukraine) were under the rule of the Mongols

for a much shorter time. Control of southern Rus' was grabbed by Lithuanian princes, and from the end of the 14th century, when these princes formed an alliance with Polish kings, it came under the control of the Polish Crown. Polish rule lasted a very long time on Ukrainian lands (from 14th to 18th century), much longer than the Russian rule later which asserted itself mostly after the end of the 18th century. However, if we put the zones of intensity of the Polish *Drang nach Osten* on the modern map of Ukraine, they will coincide approximately with the intensity of the spread of the Ukrainian language and Ukrainian identity. This illustrates a more general formula: destruction of Rus' and creation of Ukraine were taking place under the Polish omophorion.

This does not mean that Polish rule facilitated the building of Ukrainian identity. On the contrary: it did everything it could to fight Ukrainian separatism. But the accession of southern Rus lands to Polish *Rzeczpospolita* meant they were open to the influences of Catholic Europe. More specifically, domestic poets, under the influence of renaissance and baroque culture, began to describe Ukraine as Biblical Palestine – a land flowing with milk and honey.

Another – probably the largest – change was connected with Columbus. The discovery of America made South American silver flow to Europe. Silver was used as the principal metal for minting coins, and its oversupply devalued them. This led to a revolution in prices and, first and foremost, of all prices for grain and other food products. The price of grain grew by 1,000% in some places!

The revolution of prices in the West in the period of 1500-1650 opened doors for the nobility of *Rzeczpospolita* to become fabulously rich. The land they owned in Rus' *voivodeships* enjoyed rich harvests. Local grain and cattle were sent via the Baltic Sea to Western Europe and sold there at a great profit.

In order to make bread production even cheaper, Polish and Polonized nobility turned peasants into their serfs, unpaid workers. From that time on, until serfdom was abolished, working on the land

became a symbol of slavery, and Ukrainian peasants were compared to prisoners on Turkish galleys or Afro-Americans on American plantations. In its turn, turning peasants into serfs led to the growth of the Zaporizhian Sich – a military Cossack organization on the border between *Rzeczpospolita* and the Crimean Khanate. Ukrainian Cossacks settled on the lands that were hardest to reach. We know about this from Byzantine manuscripts: the lands beyond the Dnipro rapids, on the former road “from the Varangians to the Greeks”, on the boundary with the “wild steppe”. They were people with backgrounds from the whole of Europe – from Scotland in the West to the Urals in the East, from Scandinavia in the North to the Peloponnese Peninsula in the South. But the majority (nearly 80%) of Cossacks came from the lands of *Rzeczpospolita*. And a large part of them were escaping from serfdom.

Cossacks introduced a new section in the general history of rivalry between settled and nomadic people. Cossacks, although they appeared from agrarian lands, were actually engaged in the same activities as nomadic people – cattle breeding and robbery. In order to defeat a stronger enemy, they learnt war skills. That is why by their appearance and habits they were difficult to differentiate from nomads. However, there was one uncrossable line between them, and this was religion. Since Biblical times, the difference between agricultural and nomadic people was expressed in an archetypal opposition between Cain and Abel. In the early Medieval era, this difference acquired a different dimension: agricultural people adopted Christianity; nomadic people adopted Islam. Therefore, robbery by Cossacks was legitimized through the religious idea: they were not simply robbing – they were doing it for the sake of their faith. Nomads did the same, like in a mirror. Crimean Tatars and their suzerain, the Ottoman Empire, tried to expand the territories of Islam. They also regularly organized campaigns against Christian lands for robbery and kidnapping of people: slaves were one of the best-sellers on Muslim markets.

“ As a result of this, the Cossacks and their lands (Ukraine) turned into a powerful symbol that captured the imagination of contemporaries and subsequent generations. ”

This symbol was based on two oppositions: freedom or slavery, and friend (Orthodox Christians) or foe (Muslims, Catholics, Hebrews). The role of the latter opposition became especially prominent when a wave of religious wars between Catholics and Protestants rolled over Western Europe in the 16th-17th centuries. A lot of Protestants found rescue in escaping to the eastern outskirts of *Rzeczpospolita*, which at that time enjoyed the glory of a state with a tolerant attitude towards religion. Protestants were persecuted by Jesuits, the striking force of the Catholic Counter-Reformation. They were able to cope with local Protestants quite easily and bring Poland back into the fold of Catholicism. However, in all of the eastern part of *Rzeczpospolita* they encountered another type of “improper” Christians – Orthodox Christians. Attempts by Jesuits to convert Rus’ people into Catholicism evoked great resistance. As in the case with Cossacks and nomads, the elite of the threatened Orthodox Christians learnt how to use the weapon of the Jesuits: education and books. The Rus’ community became the tribe that began to read and, even more so, to write books. This movement engrossed even Cossack chiefs and their children.

Involvement in the book culture became something that distinguished Ukrainian Cossacks from Russian ones, those from Yaik (Ural) or Don. Formally, they all resembled each other. They were military formations on the boundary between the agrarian and nomadic worlds. However, Ukrainian and Russian Cossacks became different precisely because Ukrainian Cossacks became a “book-reading tribe”. They did so not because they wanted to but because they were forced to do so by the circumstances. It is difficult to imagine a Yaik or Don Cossack who graduated from a college or even a university and could



read Latin. But such educated colonels were not a rarity among senior Ukrainian Cossack officers.

### **Ukrainian Cossacks became the center of modern Ukrainian identity.**

To quote Ukrainian publicist Anatolii Streliany, one could say that it is easy to write the history of Russia without Cossacks, but it is impossible to write the history of Ukraine without Cossacks. On the other hand, the Cossack phenomenon distinguished Ukrainian history from Belarusian history. Belarusian lands did not have black soil, they were not neighbors with the steppe and, therefore, they were not influenced by the factors mentioned above.

In any case, the Cossack era marked the beginning of the transformation of Rus' into Ukraine. A Cossack rebellion led by Bohdan Khmelnytsky (1648-1657) was the peak of this transformation. That rebellion fundamentally changed the geopolitical order in this part of the world. It tore off a significant part of Rus' land from the rule of the Polish Crown and made it part of the neighboring Moscow Tsardom.

Later, by the end of the 18th century, *Rzeczpospolita* ceased to exist. The Austrian, Prussian, and Russian Empires divided it between themselves. The latter emerged in the place of Moscow Tsardom but with a significant gain in the West, first and foremost at the expense of Ukrainian lands.

Ukraine's potential as the breadbasket of Europe showed its full force after the victory of the Russian Empire over the Crimean Khanate at the end of the 18th century. After the annexation of Crimea by Russia, Ukrainian lands gained access to the Black Sea. Development of local ports there and a modern transportation system paved the way to selling grain worldwide.

The newly-annexed lands became a territory of economic boom that can be compared only to California Fever. The Black Sea steppes became an object of intensive agrarian colonization. There were two

different types. The first was “top-down colonization”: it was implemented by the Russian Empire’s government, which invited those ethnic and religious groups that were especially responsive to settling on vacant lands: Jews, German Mennonites, and others. The second one was spontaneous “bottom-up colonization”, the massive movement of Ukrainian peasants from the neighboring northern lands, especially after the abolition of serfdom in the Russian Empire (1861). Since the number of Ukrainian peasants exceeded all other groups, their colonization “Ukrainized” the steppe. As a result, Ukrainian ethnic territory almost doubled during the 19th century.

 **Ukraine’s status as the breadbasket of Europe was a blessing and a curse at the same time.** 

It was a blessing because of the higher standards of living for the local population: when hunger was a regular phenomenon, it was easier to survive on fertile lands. It was a curse, however, because of the desire of near and far neighbors to conquer these lands and take them under their control in order to gain economic and political benefit from them. This is especially obvious in the so-called “short” 20th century – from 1914 to 1991.

The image of millions of tons of grain harvested on Ukrainian lands in 1913 acted as a magnet for all superpowers, which started World War I the following year. But Ukraine preserved its attractiveness after the end of the war too. It is sufficient to read the letters of Lenin or Hitler in order to see the great attention that they paid to control over Ukrainian resources. Lenin saw Ukrainian lands as a necessary condition for the victory of the worldwide proletarian revolution; Hitler needed them to build the Third Reich. The Ukrainian Famine of 1932–1933 was the most articulate evidence of the existential threat into which natural wealth can be transformed. Grain became a strategically important resource, and Ukraine had to pay the full price for its “strategic value”.

Another threat was the so-called resource trap. Countries with lots of resources develop extensively and not intensively. Why should they make the effort if nature provided everything they need so generously? Ukrainian economic historians say that from the beginning of our written history in the 9th century and right up to the end of the 19th century, the method of land cultivation did not change significantly in Ukraine. As a result, in the early 20th century three or four times more grain was harvested from the same area of much poorer lands in Moravia than in Ukraine. Moravia's agriculture had the important advantage of new agricultural machinery and mineral fertilizers.

The agrarian character of Ukrainian lands had an impact on Ukrainian national culture. On the Ukrainian national flag, for example, one can see a yellow image of a wheat field under the blue sky. Ukrainian modern culture willfully positioned itself as the peasant culture. This corresponded to reality to a large extent: after it almost lost its elite in the modern era because of Polish or Russian assimilation and acculturation, the Ukrainian nation became a peasant nation.

At the turn of the 20th century, approximately 90% of Ukrainians were peasants, and approximately 90% of peasants on Ukrainian lands were Ukrainians. The majority of Ukrainian civil and public figures of the modern age were either born under a thatched roof or were only one or two generations away from it. They glorified rural virtues – hard work, goodwill, and hospitality. To a large extent, they were right. The traditional agrarian society, despite its difficult living conditions, created a feeling of familial warmth and protection – unlike the modern world with its individualism and cold rationality. Yet, what Ukrainian intellectuals did not write or wrote too little about, was that the traditional society also meant patriarchal control over women and a high level of xenophobia. Young people got married not because of love but for their parents' convenience, the main reason being to preserve or multiply land belonging to the family. Marriage with an outlander, even coming from the same village, was ruled out.

Very often something that used to be an advantage in a traditional society became an obstacle for transition to a modern society. At the turn of the 20th century, a Ukrainian peasant faced a choice: to go to the city to get a job there at a factory or a mine, or to emigrate with his family to a far-away land, to America or the Far East in order to settle down on new lands and continue to live a traditional way of life. Facing this dilemma, Ukrainian peasants more frequently chose the latter. Other ethnic groups mostly went to the cities and to factories; these were mostly Russian peasants on Ukrainian lands in the Russian Empire. The choice as to where to migrate depended not so much on ethnicity but on the way a household was run. Peasants from the black soil (Ukrainian) belt wanted to move to other lands. Those who lived on poorer (Russian) soil and usually had to look for additional means of subsistence went to work in industry.

As a result, a consistent pattern developed on Ukrainian lands: the larger a settlement was, the less Ukrainian/Ukrainian-speaking it was. This was even more so the case in large cities. On the contrary, the smaller a town or village, the more often that the Ukrainian language could be heard there. This pattern was preserved even after Ukraine proclaimed its independence in 1991: the largest Ukrainian cities are mostly Russian-speaking.

Of course, the spread of the Russian language cannot be reduced to only one factor, and only to an economic reason. There were also political reasons. It would be sufficient to say that the Russian Empire twice prohibited the printing of books in Ukrainian (in 1863 and 1876). In the USSR, the printing of books in Ukrainian was not banned. Yet, if we look at the scale of book printing per person, the Ukrainians had one of the worst indicators among the people of the USSR.

 **It was believed in the Soviet Union that Communism would speak Russian – similarly as feudalism “spoke” French and capitalism “spoke” English.** 

As Khrushchev said, the sooner non-Russians learnt to speak Russian the quicker Communism would come. That is why making a good career in the USSR was possible almost exclusively in the Russian language. Instead, Ukrainian – except for a short period of Soviet “Ukrainization” in the 1920s – remained the language of the countryside and was reserved for use in the home.

However, economic factors also had an impact here. Extensive agriculture is organized in a way that the survival of every family depends on the number of “hands” it has. In such conditions, land literally had huge gravitational force – it did not let peasants leave the village. This is especially true with regard to peasant children, who were used as free labor force in the household. It leads to another pattern: traditional agricultural regions usually have a low level of education among the local population. School distracts children from labor on the land, and thus their parents consider it an unnecessary luxury. Peasants look at mental labor with suspicion and skepticism: in their eyes, it was not labor at all. There is no coincidence that two of the greatest Ukrainian poets – Taras Shevchenko and Ivan Franko – were orphans. Had their parents lived long enough to become old, these poets would have stayed in the village to work, and their contemporaries would not have known their literary talents.

Since the “village – city” axis is one of the most important in the modern world, Ukraine, according to historian Orest Subtelny, developed a dramatic antagonism: as if everything Ukrainian was not modern, and everything modern was not Ukrainian. In the eyes of city residents, Ukrainian peasants were underdeveloped, cunning or, on the contrary, stupid “pork fat eaters”. This stereotype is especially strong in contemporary Russian culture.

However, the opposition between the Ukrainian village and the Russian-speaking city was not rigid. There was a third group – assimilated Russian-speaking Ukrainians who, despite the fact they had moved to a city and lost the main elements of a traditional culture, still preserved an emotional connection with their rural

childhood or – in the case of their children – with their Ukrainian-speaking grandfathers and grandmothers with whom they spent their vacations. The existence of Russian-speaking Ukrainian nationalism in independent Ukraine is one of the most prominent manifestations of this group. As a *Los Angeles Times* correspondent, Serhii Loiko, wrote, in the fight for Donetsk Airport in 2014, during the Russian-Ukrainian war both sides spoke Russian – the only difference was that on the Ukrainian side a more literary version of Russian was spoken than on the side of the Donbas separatists.

🗨️ **The high number of Jews among the local population was another consequence of the fertility of Ukrainian lands.** 🗨️

Economic studies demonstrate a clear correlation: there is a strong connection between the number of Jewish settlements and the level of illiteracy among the local non-Jewish population. The more illiterate the locals, the larger the number of Jews inhabiting these lands. This connection is very logical. No society can exist without crafts, trade, and money business. In societies connected to land, non-land economic niches are filled by ethnic minorities: Armenians in the Ottoman Empire or Chinese in South-East Asia. Jews performed this role on Ukrainian lands.

Their presence here was recorded in the earliest written sources from the ancient Rus' era. They came to settle here from neighboring states: from the east (Khazar Khaganate where Judaism was the predominant religion), from the west (Bohemian and Moravian lands, modern-day Czech Republic). However, their largest influx took place after the large-scale deportation of Jews from Catholic Europe in the 15th-16th centuries. *Rzeczpospolita* was famous for its tolerant attitude towards religion, so a lot of Jews from German lands (so-called *Ashkenazi*) found their shelter here. They were under the king's protection; the king, among other things, needed them for colonizing the lands bordering the Wild Steppe.

In Hebrew, Poland (*Polania* or *Polin*) sounded as “(God’s) chosen” land (*po* – here; *lan* – live, *lin* – has to live, *ia* - God). Instead, in Latin – the *lingua franca* of Medieval Europe – *Rzeczpospolita* was called *paradisus iudaeorum* (paradise for the Jews). It was a state where the absolute majority (80%) of all Jews of the world lived, and the largest number of them lived along the Eastern frontier (modern-day Lithuanian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian lands). Ukrainian lands became Palestine not only in a metaphorical sense (“the land of milk and honey”) but also in a real sense.

However, the “Jewish paradise” was, at the same time, *infernus rusticorum* – hell for peasants. Jews came to the Ukrainian lands almost at the same time when the nobility and magnates were turning large numbers of peasants into serfs, so as to receive maximum profit from the production and sale of grain on European markets. Local peasants, who were working very hard in the master’s field, sometimes never saw their master, who could be living in Warsaw, Krakow or Lviv. Instead, they saw a Jewish tenant, a Jewish housekeeper or a Jewish shopkeeper almost every day. In other words, they saw all those who received a license from the master to manage his household or to use the master’s monopolies to produce and sell *horilka*. Therefore, the hatred of peasants was channeled toward the Jews. If we add to this the fact that Jews were not Christian (moreover, they were called “Christ killers”) then we can understand why a Jew (“*zhypdy*” as Jews were called) was an “absolute foe”, even a bigger one than the master.

In the early modern and modern times, Ukrainian lands were the main territory of anti-Jewish pogroms – during Khmelnytsky’s Cossack revolution in 1648, Koliyivschyna in 1768, Russian pogroms in 1881, revolutions of 1905-1907 and 1917-1920, in Western Ukraine in summer 1941, and the Holocaust. Given the number of Jews who were killed in Ukraine during World War II, the central symbol of the Holocaust should be not only Oświęcim/Auschwitz but also Babyn Yar – the place of mass execution of Jews in Kyiv. Of course, not all these acts of anti-Jewish violence were connected to Ukrainians.

For example, the main perpetrators of the pogrom in 1881 were non-Ukrainian industrial workers; while the 1919 pogroms involved all armies without exception that were active on Ukrainian lands. But in the Jewish historical memory, Ukraine is closely connected with pogroms and Ukrainians with anti-Semitism.

This image of Ukraine remained almost unchanged even when former Polish Jews became Russian Jews, and later North American and Israeli Jews. Of course, Jewish-Ukrainian relations were not reduced only to antagonism. In their common history both nations managed, in the main, to live side-by-side in a more or less peaceful way, while anti-Jewish violence exploded “only” during big crises – wars, riots, and revolutions or, as in 1881, the murder of a monarch – which in the understanding of traditional peasants and workers was equal to doomsday. Of course, there were many reasons for the violence. But they were ultimately based on controversy, the essence of which can be expressed in just three words: fight for land.

🗨️ **Here is indirect proof of this: the pogroms in Ukraine stopped with destruction of the connection between Ukrainians, peasants and land.** 🗨️

It was destroyed during the Soviet period in two stages: first, in the 1930-40s when peasants lost their land as a result of forced collectivization, and land became formally owned by *kolkhozes* (though actually by the state). Then in the 1960s, when Ukrainians became a predominantly urban nation. Further development of Ukrainian-Jewish relations followed almost a Marxist scheme, when changes in the social basis (economy) are followed by changes in the social superstructure (politics and ideology). Episodic attempts to repair Ukrainian-Jewish relations took place at the turn of the 20th century. However, a real breakthrough took place in Soviet camps and prisons where Jewish and Ukrainian dissidents found themselves together in the 1970-80s. There, they had time and opportunity for discussions,



and for unifying their efforts against the common enemy: the Soviet regime. This process had its final chords in the first Maidan [2004-2005 – Ed.] and especially the second Maidan [2013-2014 – Ed.] when a new group appeared in Ukraine – the so-called *zhydobanderivtsi*, the *Jewish Bandera supporters*.

A radical change of Ukraine’s image, from a country of “born anti-Semitists” to a country with one of the lowest levels of anti-Semitism in Europe, shows once again that there is nothing unchanged in history. At a more general level, this change reflects the evolution of Ukrainian national identity. In general, there are two formulas for a nation – an ethnic one and a political one. Supporters of the ethnic concept of a nation emphasize the language as the main criterion of national identification. Advocates of the political concept of a nation believe that national identity is based not on the language or ethnic origin but on commitment to the state that you live in. It is believed that the more rural a nation is, and the more it is connected to the land, the more likely it will acquire characteristics of an ethnic nation. On the contrary – industrial nations opt for the civic criterion. This formula is not universal, but it does work in Ukraine’s case.

The post-modern era – or late modernity era if someone prefers this name – erases clear boundaries and makes previous divisions problematic. Today, we cannot say for sure whether Ukraine is an ethnic or a political nation: it combines elements of both. The main question is, around which ethnic nucleus – Western Ukrainian-speaking or Eastern Russian-speaking – will the Ukrainian political nation unite itself.

However, even this question fails to convey the complexity of the Ukrainian situation. About 10-15 years ago, a “third Ukraine” emerged: a Ukraine of the center, both geographical and political. A large part of it is Russian-speaking, but its political aspirations are connected to Ukraine’s integration into the European Union. The best symbol of the “third Ukraine” is the capital city of Kyiv, the heart of two Maidans.

Agriculture has also been transformed. From a symbol of something traditional and underdeveloped, it has grown to be one of the most advanced and profitable industries in the world, which suffers from an environmental crisis and lack of national products.

Ukrainian black soil thus regains its value. In the end, it had never lost it.





## **Rus', Cossacks and Ukraine's Identity**



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*Here we publish an English version of an interview he gave to Volodymyr Yermolenko (editor of this book) for Hromadske.ua\*, an independent Ukrainian media outlet. In this interview, we talked about why Ukraine is impossible without the steppe, why the Cossacks can be called “musketeers”, what lies behind the Shevchenko phenomenon, who*

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\* Original: <https://hromadske.ua/posts/mi-bi-ne-nazivalisya-ukrayinoyu-yakbi-ne-kozaki-istorik-sergij-plohiy>

has the right to the name “Rus”, and how Russian counterintelligence continues to this day to use the methods of Soviet counterintelligence.

**When I read your books and books by other Ukrainian historians, I always have this question: where did the name “Ukraine” come from? What we call Ukraine today, used to have different names in the past: Rus’, Little Rus’, Cossack Hetmanate, etc. So, where does the name “Ukraine” come from?**

The toponym “Ukraine” is used in the 12th century Kyiv Chronicle, a sequel to the *Povist Vremennykh Lit* (Tale of Bygone Years) [*an old Kyiv chronicle of the 11th-12th centuries – Ed.*]. It meant a part of modern-day Ukraine located at the edge of the steppe.

It is interesting that this term was also used in translated religious and Biblical texts. For example, these texts mentioned a Palestinian “Ukraine”. In both cases, the word “Ukraine” meant a border between settled and nomadic lands: steppes in the Ukrainian context, desert in the Palestinian context.

👉 **In both cases, the word “Ukraine” meant a border between settled and nomadic lands.** 🗨

**Does “Ukraine” mean “a border”, or a wider designation of lands near a border?**

The best word here would probably be “frontier” — it is an English word that originates from the French “frontière”. A frontier is not just a border, not a line; it is rather all territory adjoining it from both sides.

A frontier forms its specific “ethos”. In the Ukrainian context, the frontier creates a separate social group: *kozaky*, Cossacks.

Cossacks existed throughout the entire steppe border from the River Danube to the River Amur. But it was the Ukrainian part of this community that grew sufficiently strong to be able to try and create its own state.

## **Do you mean that we owe the name “Ukraine” to Cossacks?**

I am sure that if the Cossacks had not existed, the name of the country would have been different.

During the medieval era the term “Ukraine” was the name of a territory, not related to any social or state structures.

Ukraine [as a state structure] arises in the second half of the 17th century, after Bohdan Khmelnytsky’s rebellion [*a Cossack rebellion in the Rzeczpospolita that took place in the mid-17th century* – Ed.]. This word was then used to designate the Cossack state, or Hetmanate.

## **But those lands did not call themselves “Hetmanate”, did they? You write that they called themselves *Vipsko Zaporizke*, “Zaporizhian Host”.**

Yes, absolutely. “The Hetmanate” is the more recent name. It was used by Taras Shevchenko [*Ukraine’s major poet of the 19th century* – Ed.]. Before it the name *Vipsko Zaporizke* was used [*it contained a reference to Zaporizhian Cossacks* – Ed.].

Why? Because of the preferences, the rights given to this structure. Changing the name would have meant losing the rights. And, simultaneously, a new name was emerging – “Ukraine”.

## **Was the “Zaporizhian Host” a legal concept?**

Yes, it was a legal concept. As of the 18th century, it was much less a military unit and much more of an administrative one.

## **Does that mean that the Cossacks created a new core, around which a Ukrainian community was forming? Before that these lands used to be called “Rus”, and the Cossacks brought in something completely new.**

Yes, the Cossacks did bring in something new. Cossacks, and particularly Cossack hetmans, took the place of the remnants of the princely class [*i.e. families of kniazi: princes from the medieval Kyivan Rus – Ed.*]. This process ended in the 17th century.

The top representative of the princely tradition was Prince Kostyantyn Ostrozky.

### | **I think you call him an uncrowned king of Ukraine.**

He was called an uncrowned king of *Rus'*.

But it was after him that the new era of hetmans of *Ukraine* began. All this took place in the 17th century.

The Cossacks were a different social element. They were rebels, warriors, attackers, plunderers, traders, all in one. They were like Vikings during the era of Kyivan *Rus'*.

It would change later, and the 18th century would see the formation of the Cossack aristocracy.

The Cossacks began their history under the protection of princes. That is why we have this idea that Prince Dmytro Vyshnevetsky was our first Cossack. Dmytro Vyshnevetsky is the perfect example of how princely power and the emergence of Cossacks are related.

### | **But the first Cossacks were Tatars, weren't they?**

“Cossack” is a Turkic word. It means all I have mentioned earlier: a warrior, a guard, a plunderer and so on.

The emergence of the Cossacks is a phenomenon of the steppe, of the steppe frontier. Because if you look at the first maps — the ones from the early 17th century — such as the Radziwill map from 1614, you will see that the Cossacks lived in no-man's land. They lived on islands. They lived in the steppe, yet they weren't nomads.

A Tatar Cossack is a horseman, a nomad. Today, we sometimes imagine a Zaporizhian Cossack as a mounted warrior too.



But the word best describing Cossacks as they enter history is “musketeers”.

Fighting on horseback was expensive and required money. You needed more than one horse, and only nobility could afford it.

The Cossacks did not have that. But then the musket was invented. Back in the 17th century a musket was what a Kalashnikov rifle became for the 20th century. Look at the first prints with Cossacks: they stand on foot and shoot with muskets.

Their skills in defending a camp were strong.

That is why when Bohdan Khmelnytsky started the rebellion, he was well aware that he needed cavalry to beat the Polish Hussars. He got that cavalry from Crimea, from the Tatars. Therefore, the Cossack-Tatar army had both components: infantry and cavalry.

### **Is that why Khmelnytsky risked an alliance with the Tatars?**

That is one of the reasons which people sometimes do not notice. They talk about the military-political component, because Khmelnytsky really wanted to avoid a strike from the South. Yet there was also this purely military component. Sometimes, it is hard to believe, because we have this image of a Cossack on horseback. But the reality of the 17th century was different, and the Cossacks needed the Tatar cavalry.

**In your book *The Origins of the Slavic Nations* you quote Khmelnytsky, including his messages to the Russian Tsar. There, he called Ukraine “Rosia” or “Rusia”. You say these letters are translations, not the originals, so we don’t know exactly which words Khmelnytsky used. But if we assume that he did use those terms, why did he do so?**

Because Khmelnytsky was just in the process of creating what was to be later called “Ukraine”. It is just like looking at Christ and St Paul

“ Khmelnytsky was just in the process of creating what was to be later called “Ukraine” ”

[and not seeing what later arose in the history of Christianity] and saying that they were not Christians. They were simply creating this new reality.

Khmelnytsky had, after all, created a state. He did not know, for example, where the borders

would be. These borders were set by the Treaty of Zboriv: the area encompassed Dnipro Region and the steppe frontier. But this state also includes the Chernihiv Palatinate. Chernihiv is far from the steppe [*the city is in Polissia, i.e. a forest region of current Ukraine – Ed.*]. Yet this understanding of Ukraine includes Chernihiv as well, because the phenomenon of Ukraine is related to the Cossacks.

Since the Cossacks acquired three palatinates, including Chernihiv (which had never been a steppe frontier), the name “Ukraine” was extended to include Chernihiv as well.

**Let us go further, to the Mazepa era [*Mazepa was a Ukrainian hetman who rebelled against Russian Tsar Peter I, joined forces with Swedish King Charles XII. They both lost in Poltava to the forces of Peter I in 1709. – Ed.*], in your books you develop a very interesting thought: in the times of Pylyp Orlyk [*ally and follower of Mazepa – Ed.*] an attempt was made to connect the genealogy of Cossacks and Khazars. The reference was, therefore, made not to Rus', but to the Khazaria. It is very interesting, because it seems to be a common European trend of the 17th–18th centuries when people in many countries tried to justify the existence of the aristocracy by claiming that the nobility are descendants of the tribes of conquerors.**

Yes, that is the part of this early modern trend. The closest parallel to this Cossack myth is the Sarmatian myth in Poland. According to this

theory, Polish nobility allegedly had ethnically different “Sarmatian” origins.

**This was the so-called society of “estates” where nobility considered itself as an ethnos different from the ethnos of the “common people”, correct?**

Yes, and when we discuss early modern nations, we mean a certain social stratum, the elites. The very idea that the elites should speak the same language as the common people comes to Ukraine quite late, in the mid-19th century.

Thanks to that, for example, Volodymyr Antonovych [*19th century ethnologist and historian – Ed.*] — a Catholic and a Pole — became an Orthodox believer and regarded himself a Ukrainian. Before that, it was normal for the elite and common people to speak different languages.

**In Ukrainian intellectual culture there is a recurrent argument that Russia has “stolen” the name of “Rus” from Ukraine. This argument was developed by people like Yevhen Malaniuk [*a 20th century Ukrainian conservative intellectual – Ed.*]. But when I read your books I understand that the princes of Vladimir, Moscow and other “cities” of what later became Russia, also continued to call themselves “princes of Rus”. At the same time, Ukrainian lands were also called “Rus”. So, who has more rights to the name of Rus? And does this question actually contain any sense at all?**

The biggest rights on the name Rus’ belong to Swedes and Finns. As we see it today, the word “Rus” comes from the Finnish language and means “oarsmen”.

That was how Vikings were called. “Our” Vikings came from Sweden. The Vikings who plundered the coastlines of the Britain and

France, and created their own states on those lands, came from the territory of modern-day Norway.

Rus' brought the dynasty commonly known as the Rurikids. In reality, those were the descendants of Yaroslav the Wise, a 12th century ruler of Kyiv. All Rurikids were, in fact "Yaroslavychi", the princes of Rus'. Only later did they transfer these features of the "Rus'" identity to the people that they ruled.

According to "The Tale of Bygone Years", there were different tribes – Dregoviches, Radimichs, Polianians (it is now disputed whether the Polianians were actually fictional). But Rus' united them under one common name, and united them politically as well. As there were Rurikids in Moscow, Novgorod and Kyiv, they all had equal rights to the name.

### **So is "Rus'" a dynastical term?**

That is how it began, as a politonym. But later it became an ethnic designation.

For example, if we look at the 16th century, we very often see wars between one Rus' and another: for example, a war between the Rus' of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth — the future Ukrainian-Belarusian conglomerate — and the Rus' that would in future become Russia, and which in Western texts was called Muscovy.

They were fighting for succession to Kyiv because they believed they had rights to it. This is the origin of Muscovite claims to Kyiv: not because Muscovites wanted Kyiv immediately, but because they wanted to get control over Novgorod. They were saying: if we come from Kyiv, we have our rights to Novgorod too. It was a fight for the legacy of Kyivan Rus', and everyone was proud to claim to be "the real Rus'".

### **What does the term *Rossia* ("Russia") mean then in this context? Was it just a Greek translation of "Rus'"? Or something else?**

This is the Greek form of the word Rus', yes. It became popular after the Pereyaslav Treaty was signed in 1654 — in particular, thanks to Kyiv-born intellectuals like Theophan Prokopovych and others. They referred to themselves in their writing as *Rossia*, “Russia”. I once wrote an article called “The Two Russias of Theophan Prokopovych”, which was included in the book *The Origins of Slavic Nations*. Before the Battle of Poltava in 1709, he was writing about the Dnipro “*Rossia*” and Kyiv “*Rossia*”. Later, after he'd moved to St. Petersburg, he spread this concept to the whole of the Russian Empire.

**Theophan Prokopovych was a very strange character. He was a person educated at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, with a Western-influenced Baroque mindset, yet after the Battle of Poltava he became a theorist of cruel absolutism of Peter I. Why did it happen in this way?**

Such was the trend gaining speed in Europe.

**Was this the trend of political absolutism?**

Yes. Those who fell out of trend lost their state. This was the case of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

Today, we look at that Polish state and we like it — because we like democracy. But it could not stand the challenge of the absolutist age [*Poland was weakened in the 18th century and finally divided between Russia, Austria and Prussia – Ed.*].

**It simply did not survive the age of consolidation of power...**

... and centralization. The state-wide factor – centralized tax collection, mobilization of resources – becomes more important at that time. Centralized states became stronger than fragmented states of oligarchic groups (they were called “magnate” groups at the time) such as the ones competing in the Polish Sejm.

**Let's get back to the topic of the Cossacks. You have a book called *The Cossack Myth* where you analyze genealogy and reception of the *Istoria Rusov* ["*History of the Rus*": a book written at the turn of the 19th century by the heritors of Cossack elites] and its influence over Russians and Ukrainians. If this book had not been written, would Taras Shevchenko have probably never existed?**

He would have existed, but he would have been different. "History of the Rus" became a window for him into a "true" history of Ukraine. I have no doubt that he would have also found other "windows" with different perspectives. But the historical vision of Shevchenko was, to a great extent, formed by "History of the Rus".

Another important factor: during his exile [*Shevchenko was sent into exile by the Russian regime in 1847 – Ed.*], because it was difficult to get hold of new materials, he remained under the charms of this book. It was the last thing he read before going to jail.

His fellows from the *St Cyril and Methodius Brotherhood* [a Ukrainian underground organization oppressed by the Russian regime in 1847 – Ed.] Kulish and Kostomarov became more skeptical about "History of the Rus". Kostomarov, for example, understood that the book represented the views of Cossack nobility and social elite, and not those of common people. Kulish was disappointed because of other reasons: he thought "History" was an unreliable document. Yet Shevchenko, in the Kazakh steppe, remained a fan of "History of the Ruthenians". After returning from the exile he wrote a novel called *Bliznetsy* ("Twins"), where he presented a character typical to the post-Hetmanate Ukraine, who was in love with that text.

**Don't you think that, while Shevchenko brought the Cossack myth to its peak, it was Panteleimon Kulish [a Ukrainian writer and historian of the 19th century, author of the first Ukrainian historic novel, "*The Black Council*" – Ed.] who was the first to**

**deconstruct it? Kulish showed that the Cossack era were not just about courage and bravery, but also about anarchy and a war of all against all.**

Absolutely. Shevchenko was one of the creators of this myth; Kostomarov also played a big part. But Kulish was its biggest deconstructor. You can also find some of this deconstruction in the writings of Kostomarov, who perceived the Cossack nobility very negatively and associated himself with common people.

But that begs the question: were Cossacks “common people” or another group of a “higher” status?

When the populist movement, or *narodnytstvo* began in Ukraine, the Cossacks — especially the higher strata of them — were heavily criticised. The young Hrushevsky [*prominent Ukrainian historian and politician – Ed.*] started with a very critical attitude — both towards Khmelnytsky and Cossack nobility. Hrushevsky focused on the popular masses. But it is a big question as to what extent the Cossacks belonged to the masses.

**There is a reverse side to this *narodnytstvo* in the 19th century: Ukrainians forgot about the aristocracy, the elite. We know that after Hrushevsky came Lypynsky [*a prominent Ukrainian politician and political thinker, who had Polish origins – Ed.*], who was critical of *narodnyky*.**

Yes, Lypynsky is one of the prominent figures in this story. He tried to rehabilitate the elite. To achieve this goal, he tried to rethink the history of the elite and rehabilitate that part of the elite that had been Polonized both culturally and religiously. Lypynsky himself comes from this group. But the rehabilitation of the elite began when the “populist” narrative had already been formed. Only then did it begin expanding to encompass the elites and their historical territory.

Skoropadsky [*a leader of the independent Ukrainian State of 1918, who called himself a hetman. His rule is known as “Hetmanate” – Ed.*] was an important figure in this process of rehabilitation of the elites and bringing them back to Ukraine. But he emerged as a political and cultural phenomenon when there was already another, “elitist”, way of thinking, particularly that of Lypynsky. Later, with Dontsov, the *narodnyky* populist doctrine was completely rejected.

**When we enter the 1920s and especially the 1930s: Dontsov, Malaniuk, “Visnyk” — all these ideas were putting forward a new, “elitist” approach to Ukrainian identity. But the result was not very good, was it?**

In historiography, there was this struggle between the school of *narodnyky* (to which Hrushevsky is normally assigned, which is not exactly correct) and another school, the school of Hrushevsky’s followers, predominantly from Galicia, which were called *derzhavnyky* (supporters of state-building).

Actually, that school was not about limiting Ukrainian history to the history of the state, but rather about including in it a history of the elites. But even after wars for independence and revolution, it was not very popular to claim your support for elites in historical terms, or to be an “elitist” in politics. This so-called *derzhavnyky* school was started by Lypynsky and his attention towards the elites.

Dontsov proposed a modern, “integral” version of nationalism. He rejected the *narodnyky* populist stage and fought against it. But it was a common trend. That happened all around Europe. It was the age of dictators, fascism, Nazism, and radical nationalism.

**It was also an era when the idea that a nation is impossible without a leader or an elite was widespread.**

They also believed that with the will and decision of a small group of passionate leaders they could achieve their goals. It was a true



breakaway from the *narodnyky* doctrine. The previous generation, founders of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, Yevhen Konovalets, were not followers of Dontsov's ideology. But the new generation — the ones who came with Stepan Bandera, Rebet and others — did follow it. It was a new ideology in the early 1930s. New to Ukraine, but part of the European trend of the time.

**In your book, *The Man with the Poison Gun*, you write about Bohdan Stashynsky, who assassinated Bandera and Rebet [exiled leaders of Ukrainian nationalist movement – Ed.]. Why did you decide to write about him?**

Because I got access to CIA archives on Bandera's assassination. These materials are now available online, but at the time I worked with real documents.

In the new sources I discovered a lot of things that contradicted the previous version of events. For example, the version according to which the Americans took Bohdan Stashynsky, gave him plastic surgery so that he could not be recognized and kept him under their protection. The new documents showed they had had nothing to do with it. They also showed that when he came to West Germany, he did not want to talk with the Germans, he was seeking contact with the Americans, with the CIA — but they did not believe him. So there were a few points that contradicted the generally-accepted version of events.

**You depicted Stashynsky as a victim of circumstances. You showed how he was recruited by the NKVD through threats to his whole family, and he had no choice to make. And despite his crime, despite killing key figures of the Ukrainian underground he commits a brave act: he flees [from Communist-controlled East Berlin] to West Berlin. Ukrainian writer Yuri Andrukho-vych also published a book, *Darlings of Justice*, which includes**

**an essay about Stashynsky. Why is there such great simultaneous interest in the person who murdered Bandera?**

Stashynsky appeared in the Ukrainian media environment not thanks to Andrukhovych or me. He appeared there after the poisoning of Litvinenko [*Aleksandr Litvinenko was poisoned with radioactive polonium in London in 2006. British investigators accused Russia – Ed.*]

Then, for the first time, an official spokesperson of Russia's FSB claimed that their agency has not been assassinating people since Bandera's murder. In Lviv, posters appeared stating that treason begins with failure to pay for a ticket [*reference to the fact that Stashynsky was allegedly recruited by the NKVD after being arrested for fare dodging – Ed.*]. Then some groups in Kharkiv wanted to name a park after Stashynsky. Stashynsky appears like a torpedo aimed at destroying the cult of Bandera that was regaining popularity in certain circles of Ukrainian society. He was used to "troll" Bandera.

The interest had been there earlier, but it grew after the Cold War spirit and the context returned, with its targeted assassinations.

**It's also important that that was a poisoning. We see it again now in the Skripal poisoning case.**

It was poisoning using new technical means. Stashynsky killed by using new technical means.

**In your book about Bandera's killer and in your book about Yalta [*Yalta: The Price of Peace*], there is a common theme: the strength and cunning of Soviet counterintelligence. In the Yalta book you show that Stalin knew what Roosevelt and Churchill thought and wanted. Soviet counterintelligence worked much more effectively than their Western opponents. Do you think we've returned to the days when Russian special operations in the West overcome their counterparts?**

To answer this question, we need to wait for 50 years, dig in the archives and learn what actually happened. Intelligence and counterintelligence operate in silence. If media outlets write about them, it means counterintelligence has failed. So it's hard to say who is winning today.

But you do not need to wait for 50 years to understand that extremely aggressive intelligence was part of Soviet foreign policy, and remains part of Russian foreign policy. I think this is obvious.

**And this is an old tradition.**

Yes, this is an old tradition. When I was writing *The Man with the Poison Gun*, I was astounded to see how many things introduced back in the late 50s and 60s, are still working today.

“ **Extremely aggressive intelligence was part of Soviet foreign policy, and remains part of Russian foreign policy.** ”



**IDENTITY**

**RUSSIA**

**MONARCHY**

**CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE**

**HABSBURGS**

**ANARCHY**

**ELECTION**

**GALICIA**

**UKRAINIAN COMMUNISM**

**LITERATURE**

**MENTALITY**

**HUMOUR**

**EUROPE**

**LANGUAGE**



# IDENTITIES

**Ukrainian Culture and Literature,**  
*interview with Yuri Andrukhovych*

**Ukrainians. From A Historical Matrix  
to the Present Day,**  
*by Andriy Kurkov*





*Interview with Yuri Andrukhovych*

## **Ukrainian Culture and Literature**

**Y**uri Andrukhovych is a prominent Ukrainian contemporary writer. He's the author of the novels "Recreations", "The Moscoviad", "Perverzion", "Twelve Circles", "Mystery", "Lexicon of Intimate Cities", "Darlings of Justice" and many others. Laureate of Herder Prize (2001), Erich Maria Remarque Peace Prize (2005), Leipzig Book Fair Prize (2006), Angelus Award (2006), Hannah Arendt Prize (2014), Goethe Medal (2016), winner of the BBC (Ukrainian Service) Book of the Year Prize (2018). His texts are available in Ukrainian, English, German, Polish, French, Russian, Swedish, Spanish and many other languages.

The interview was taken by Volodymyr Yermolenko, the editor of this book, in Andrukhovych's native city Ivano-Frankivsk. We talked about Ukrainian language and identity, the prominent personalities of Ukraine's culture, as well as the past and future of Central and Eastern Europe.

**When you meet someone who knows nothing about Ukraine and who asks you to describe Ukraine and Ukrainians, what do you say?**

I don't really remember when this happened last, although there certainly are people in the world who have never heard of Ukraine. Instead, I remember my first contacts with Western Europeans very well, namely in Germany from around 1992, when I arrived there on a writers' residence program. I recall this permanent need – it continued until at least the mid-1990s – when you regularly had to tell people, for instance, that the capital of Ukraine is not Minsk but Kyiv. You also had to tell people that this country has the largest territory in Europe, and that the Ukrainian language is very different from Russian.

At that time, I was mostly talking to journalists or colleagues from the literature community. They have a very open mindset. In other words, my task was not dramatically difficult since they were ready to take in this new knowledge. And they were ready to believe me that the Ukrainian language is different from Russian.

But when I heard, for instance, some Bavarian people saying, “We also think that we have a distinct dialect in Bavaria”, I answered, “No, no, this analogy is wrong. Ukrainian and Russian are not like a Bavarian dialect and standard German. They are like German and Dutch, for example.” This analogy helped them to better understand the difference between Ukrainian and Russian.

**To what extent is this linguistic element of Ukrainian identity crucial for you?**

For me, as a writer, nothing can be more crucial. I interact with this world, perceive it and assess it only through language. And I don't think this is stupid.



**When you imagine Ukraine in some 30-40 years time, as an independent, successful and bilingual country, do you feel upset?**

I think a more realistic scenario is that it will be a unilingual Russian-speaking country.

**But over the years of independence, the space of the Ukrainian language has widened. Ukrainian is now more present in Kyiv than before.**

But it always comes second after Russian. And Kyiv is not exemplary here. An exemplary case is Galicia [*in Western Ukraine – Ed.*] where Ukrainian has always been the first language. But now it is slowly losing this role. Galicia was the last region where the Ukrainian language dominated but now even this region is swinging towards opportunism.

Today's young people no longer note Russian as the language of strangers. And I think this is irreversible. Here, in Galicia we will go from *surzhyk* [*a mixture of Ukrainian and Russian – Ed.*] to the Russian language – this is now just a matter of time. Maybe a formal status will be preserved for this “secondary language”, Ukrainian; but Russian does not need any status to dominate everywhere.

**A lot of Western Europeans dealing with Ukrainian issues believe that bilingualism is Ukraine's great advantage, so it makes no sense to support Ukrainian or give it any preference over Russian. Yet, my argument is that by protecting Ukrainian we are trying to preserve an island of the Ukrainian language and Ukrainian culture, which the Europeans still do not know very much about. This is better for the cultural diversity of Europe: it means one more language and one more culture.**

I share this view very much. Even more so, I often used similar arguments when I spoke to a Western audience. We have this bilingualism

thanks to the Ukrainian language. In other words, Ukraine needs the Ukrainian language to preserve its bilingualism.

🗨️ **Ukraine needs the Ukrainian language to preserve its bilingualism.** 🗨️

The Ukrainian language will never oust Russian here. Fighting in support of the Ukrainian language means fighting for genuine bilingualism.

**There is one starting point that may seem strange for discussions about Ukrainian identity: a book written by ex-president Kuchma, *Ukraine Is Not Russia*. For me, it is an important metaphor that shows how at a certain moment Ukrainian post-Communist elites gave a negative definition of Ukraine for themselves. For them, Ukraine was described in terms of something it was *not*: *not* Russia, *not* USSR, and so on. But they were not able to answer the question about our positive identity: if Ukraine is *not* something, then what is it? I once talked to historian Yaroslav Hrytsak about Ukraine's relations with the West. He made a very good point when he said that "Ukraine is a result of the West's expansion to the East". And I said that during certain periods of history – the era of baroque, of Petro Mohyla, of Ukrainian Orthodox Christianity in the 16th-17th centuries – Ukraine also protected itself from the West, from Catholic *Rzeczpospolita* [*early modern Polish state* – *Ed.*], but it used Western methods to do this. What do you think of this point of view?**

I think *Rzeczpospolita* of that time could hardly be seen as part of the West. It was far from what we now call the West or "European values". The Baroque Ukraine of that era was a fragment of that *Rzeczpospolita*.

We can say that Poland – through Roman Catholicism – was a part of the Latin world. But this was only one of the trends, one of the senses, and not especially significant.

What was significant, however, is that through this “Polish body” Italian or French trends of that time were brought to our culture.

The Germans were also very important – those who constituted the basic population of big and small towns, their merchants and craftsmen. Medieval Lemberg [*contemporary Lviv – Ed.*] was primarily German.

👉 **However, I still personally believe that Europe arrived here when the Austrian Empire annexed Western Ukrainian lands.** 🗨️

Note that this empire was not especially willing to do it. There was a very serious fight between two parties in Vienna, one of which strongly opposed this idea. They said, “Why do we need those swamps somewhere in the East? We will get stuck in them and perish here. These are huge territories we cannot cope with”.

| **Galicia of that time might have been similar to Donbas today.**

It was like Donbas today, absolutely. And even worse.

Yet, the party that supported the annexation of Ukrainian territories won this dispute. They decided to execute their legitimate right on these lands through the heritage of the Hungarian Crown. In this way they were able to justify the takeover of this land.

This brought Europe to these lands. It was the Age of Enlightenment [*18th century – Ed.*]; and Europe itself emerges from the Enlightenment. Of course, you can find the continuity of European history from as early as ancient Greece, but this will be quite a nice historical myth.

| **It is interesting because it looks like Galicia was created by the Enlightenment era of the 18th century.**

And thanks to Austrian officials.

Instead, in Ukraine of the Dnipro Valley, so-called *Hetmanate*, the Enlightenment era of the 18th century brought the loss of [Ukrainian Cossack] autonomy in the Russian Empire, from Peter I and defeat at the battle of Poltava, up until Catherine II. It is interesting in this context to see how Ukraine fits, or doesn't fit, into European cultural cycles. The classical modern European cultural cycle looks like the sequence of "rational" and "irrational" eras: "rational" Renaissance, then religious "irrational" Baroque, then "rational" Enlightenment, and then "irrational" Romanticism. But the key points in the development of Ukrainian culture were the "irrational" eras: 17th century Baroque and 19th century Romanticism. During the Renaissance era these lands lost a certain distinctiveness as a result of Polish expansion. The Enlightenment era was also related to the loss of autonomy – on this occasion under pressure from the Russian Empire. That is why I would say that Ukrainian culture is a culture that stands on one leg, an "irrational" leg, so to say.

It seems so, yes. Yet, in any case Austrian rule in Western Ukraine brought brilliant civilizational achievements. In the 19th century Lviv became an important European city – at the expense of Krakow, by the way.

**Lviv, I think, was the fourth most important town in the Austrian Empire.**

And it became a metropole. Moreover, Chernivtsi also became a metropole, within some twenty-twenty five years, in the second half of the 19th century.

Instead, in "big" [Eastern] Ukraine, Catherine's "Enlightenment" was followed by the rule of Alexander I, and then Nicholas I. That is, an increased and predominant despotic element. It was far from the Enlightenment or classicism: what mattered in the Russian Empire of that time was despotism.

**Going back to Austria: can I say that for you the Austrian legacy in the history of Galicia was more important than the Polish legacy?**

The Polish legacy is an important integral part of this Austrian legacy. Let's look at a prominent author born on these lands, Bruno Schulz. His active period coincided with Polish statehood: he was a citizen of the second Rzeczpospolita [*interwar Poland, 1918-1939 – Ed.*]. But his roots, his worldview, his entire esthetics, were Austro-Hungarian.

**And he was born on the territory of contemporary Ukraine.**

Yes. In other words, the Habsburg Empire was a metatext. Inside, it contained Polish elements too. After the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, it continued to be a cultural determinant in this part of the world for a long time.

**In one of our previous conversations, we were talking about Milan Kundera, who applies this Austrian myth to Central Europe. He defines Central Europe as “the maximum diversity in minimum space”. Is this formula relevant for you?**

Of course. But this does not mean that I am a great admirer of the Habsburg Empire, or that I want to restore or reconstruct it. I am absolutely aware of the entire ambiguity of that formation – and I write about this ambiguity in my texts.

The Habsburg Empire was good only in comparison to the Russian Empire. That is why the experience of today's Ukrainian plays a key role. Ukrainians and Poles can agree in this sense and say that the Habsburg Empire was terrible, and it was a monster, a beast. But compared to the Russian Empire, it was a gentle beast. Therefore, it offered more possibilities for the future. It did not burn down this land

as it was to the east of the River Zbruch [*i.e. in Central, Southern and Eastern Ukraine, the lands under the Russian Empire – Ed.*].

However, Austro-Hungarian multiculturalism had its limits. Let's not deceive ourselves: it was not a land of tens or hundreds of nations. Some time ago I created this myth for myself: an image of a township with my own playful list of various folks, à la Rabelais or Bakhtin. I was saying: look, there were so many different nations in Lviv! But it was my literary invention.

🗨️ **In fact, this multicultural space included primarily Poles, Jews and Ruthenians-Ukrainians.** 🗨️

Of course, let's not forget about the Germans and Armenians who made a big contribution to urban culture here. But from the mid-19th century, both Germans and Armenians slowly assimilated with the local population. German Protestants kept their identity, while German Catholics assimilated with the Poles. And this is the source of such phenomenon as *Volksdeutsche*: during the war [*World War II – Ed.*] and occupation they sided with the Nazis because they recalled their German roots. Even though they had already been polonized.

**Lemberg-Lviv was a German-speaking town, but it became a Polish-speaking town somewhere in the second half of the 19th century.**

That was political game played by Vienna with local elites. While Ruthenians [*19th century name for Western Ukrainians – Ed.*] had not yet produced an elite of their own, Vienna relied on the traditional Polish aristocracy. Therefore, the whole establishment became Polish-speaking.

Multiculturalism [in Galicia] was in fact a Polish-Jewish-Ukrainian triangle.

**But World War II erased that triangle. Nazism was killing the Jews in the Holocaust; but then the Holocaust was followed by massive displacement and deportation of people.**

Nazis were killing the Jews, while Poles and Ukrainians were killing each other. They very often used the Nazis for this, and were reporting against each other.

**After those events Central Europe ceased to be as diverse as Kundera wanted to see it. Today, Poland and Hungary are sliding into ethnic nationalism. In Ukraine, everything is more complex because modern-day Ukraine is a product of interaction between different cultures. But should we be looking for those multicultural roots of our lands today? And how should we talk about the Jewish components of Ukrainian culture, about the Polish components?**

Yes, of course we should. This is something that makes us more than just Ukrainians. This makes us Europeans. In this way we realize that we are also the inheritors of these cultural phenomena. They simply could not have emerged anywhere else. They could have emerged only here, on these lands. Therefore, we are also responsible for their further existence.

Our right and our responsibility is not only to accept these phenomena as our own, but to also protect them from disappearing. Any cultural phenomenon is very fragile. The more exquisite and delicate it is, the more it is endangered by today's world, in which everything is made trivial and uniform. That is why we have to change ourselves, and not be just passive consumers of cultural heritage, but its active promoters, who ensure its subsistence.

**We mentioned Kundera, and I think he has sent a very important message for Ukraine, namely that “cultural” Europe reaches**

**out further than institutional or political Europe. Are there any other European authors whose messages are important for Ukraine, in your opinion, and in whose discussion we are also included? I am thinking, for instance, about Czesław Miłosz with his idea of a specific cultural field of the lands of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania.**

Yes. This is what he calls *Familial Europe*.

**Who else? Bruno Schulz?**

Schulz was not an ideologist. I would rather look at authors who are closer to us historically, who are still alive or passed away recently.

If we mention Miłosz, we should also mention Zbigniew Herbert. Herbert is just a perfect example in this context.

**Herbert's metaphor, "a barbarian in the garden", is very close to Ukraine today, I think, and to our feeling of adherence to European culture.**

Yes. This is exactly what Kundera said, but with a different metaphor. Herbert in general is oriented towards Antiquity. This is the root of this image of the garden and of the barbarian, I think.

Another very important author is Krzysztof Czyżewski, the founder of "The Borderland Foundation", a publisher and thinker.

Also, if we mentioned Kundera, we should not forget about György Konrád. Because the notion of Central Eastern Europe developed in the conversations between Konrád and Kundera. I think they had a meeting in a coffee shop, during which Konrád was saying repeatedly, "We, in Eastern Europe..." And Kundera finally corrected him by saying, "Say not 'in Eastern Europe' but 'in Central Europe', or at least in 'Central Eastern' Europe." At least, that is how the legend goes.



I have also my personal story with Konrád. Somewhere in 2005 or 2006, at one of the literature festivals in Germany, I was publicly reading a fragment from *Moscoviada* [*Andruxhovych's novel about Moscow written in 1992 – Ed.*]. At one moment, György Konrád came into the room – he was also taking part in the festival (and we were introduced to each other later on), but had an interview before and I was late for my presentation. When he entered the room and heard me for the first time, he asked the person accompanying him, “Who is chattering in such cool German with a Lviv accent?”

He had a very good ear for such things. Although his German is perfect, he would never lose his Hungarian-Jewish accent. And for him, there is such a phenomenon as a Lviv accent in the German language.

I can, of course, mention Jerzy Giedroyc. But with Giedroyc, we should also mention Bohdan Osadchuk, without whom many such ideas would have simply been lost.

Among relatively younger people, I mentioned Krzysztof Czyżewski. But this is it, it is difficult to mention anyone else. There are objective reasons for this: things debated actively in the 1990s receded into the background for many colleagues from our neighboring countries.

They have a different agenda now: their countries have joined the European Union, and Eastern European (or Central Eastern European) topics now sound very archaic for them. Though it is already regaining its somewhat ugly relevance.

**Because today the notion of Central Europe is becoming an antipode to the notion of Western Europe.**

Yes. And here we already have anti-Brussels and anti-Western rhetoric produced in these countries by nationalists.

That is why today we once again have a wonderful time to discuss the renewal of Central Eastern Europe.

However, between 2004 and 2015 in Poland, for example, people believed they had passed this stage a long time ago. Their country became part of the West – and that was it.

**I think this is the reason why these topics are now more interesting for us Ukrainians.**

Yes, for us most of all. In our case, they now get some geopolitical meaning.

**You mentioned Antiquity, and Zbigniew Herbert. I recently had the idea that Ukrainian culture lacked this Antiquity element in a way. It was practically absent because during the European cultural eras that tried to bring Antiquity back – Renaissance, classicism, Enlightenment – Ukraine was losing its political sovereignty. Ukrainian culture always felt this lack of Antiquity, and that is why it repeatedly tried to smuggle it back. Kotliarevsky, who wrote his own version of Virgil's *Aeneid*; Drahomanov who was a professor of ancient history; Zerov who translated Roman poets...**

And neoclassicists in general [in Ukrainian poetry of the 1920s].

**Yes, the neoclassicists tried to re-attach antique aesthetics to Ukrainian culture. These are all very important phenomena.**

But this was a drop in the ocean.

I think in general there are some unchanging codes linked to ancient Greece.

Once, during my first stay in Western Europe, during a scholarship program in Bavaria, I had an interesting conversation with a prominent Georgian artist, Rezo Gabriadze, who was also there on the same

fellowship. He was already a wise old man. And, by the way, he is still alive, and his puppet theater works in the heart of old Tbilisi.

At that time, I was thirty-two, and was very open to grasping the memes of this wise old man, which he was relentlessly doling out. I once made a contemptuous remark about the alleged total illiteracy of Americans (back then I used those Soviet and post-Soviet clichés about Coca Cola, McDonald's, etc.). He stopped me and said, "Let's look at a single episode: when the Soviet Union started launching all those spaceships, what did they call them? *Vostok*, *Doskhod* or something else. And the Americans? – They called their space program *Apollo*. And then he said, "Yura, that spaceship was launched from Ancient Greece!" This phrase is among those you remember for the rest of your life. Perhaps, behind this symbolism you can see the continuity of Antiquity throughout the entire Western world.

**We talked about Western artists and writers who are important for you. Let's now talk about Ukrainian literature. If you are asked about it by people who know little about Ukrainian literature, which Ukrainian writers would you name first and foremost? Who are the globally important authors of Ukrainian literature for you?**

Perhaps, I would start with Skovoroda [*Ukrainian baroque philosopher and poet of 18th century – Ed.*].

**He is a wandering philosopher. This image of wanderers, *vagabundo*, is very important for you, isn't it?**

Yes. And the task of popularizing Skovoroda today is a very difficult one. This should be done in a very subtle way. Skovoroda was a kind of travelling poet. It would be nice to connect him with Daoism in some way [*smiles*].

**He is a kind of Ukrainian Buddhist. A Baroque philosopher in the era of Enlightenment.**

Yes.

The next name would, of course, be Kotliarevsky [*Ukrainian writer, author of a remake of Virgil's Aeneid in vernacular Ukrainian – Ed.*]. Both as the author of the Ukrainian *Aeneid* and as a figure, a phenomenon. That is why I wrote one of my essays, *What language are you from?* based on the *Aeneid* case.

**Why is he important for you? Is it because he is trying to return the anchor of Antiquity to our lands? Or because he is the major ironic writer in Ukrainian literature?**

Kotliarevsky started this literature. And he did it as an entertainment. He did not think about publishing his *Aeneid*. The language just spoke through him.

That language had been heard for centuries, but only in folk songs. Nobody would sit down and start writing it on paper – only Kotliarevsky did.

This was a very mystical thing for me. Imagine this sybarite – a moderate sybarite, because when we visit his estate in Poltava, we don't see any big prosperity there – who had so much free time and prosperity to start playing with this language.

In Kotliarevsky, we see a civilizational phenomenon that proves that the language is an objective value, which sometimes forces us to speak it. In this sense, Kotliarevsky is important. In that historical moment when the Russian Empire had completely enslaved Ukraine (precisely in those years [*in the late 18th century – Ed.*]) he found a discourse that ridicules the empire. And then he goes through that irony to political satire.

From Kotliarevsky we can make a bridge to Taras Shevchenko [*major Ukrainian poet of the 19th century and a symbol of the Ukrainian Romantic revival. – Ed.*]. We can look at him as a dissident. He embodied the basic ideal of Ukrainian culture.

**Shevchenko could become an example of the “Russian dream” of that time: to rise from the social bottom of serfdom, enslaved people, and make a career in the empire...**

...yes, he was a self-made person.

**Though he almost made this career, he then rejected it. Yevhen Malaniuk [*a Ukrainian conservative intellectual of the 20th century – Ed.*] once said that Shevchenko appears precisely when Ukraine seemed to be gone, to be dead. Gogol created this epitaph for Ukraine, but with Shevchenko it was reborn. And for Malaniuk this is a real miracle: Ukraine came back when nobody expected it.**

Yes, exactly.

And then I would focus on authors from the turn of the 20th century, on scholars – Ivan Franko [*Ukrainian writer, scholar and philosopher of 19th – early 20th century – Ed.*], Mykhaylo Hrushevsky [*Ukrainian historian and politician of the 19th – early 20th century – Ed.*]. This is a very controversial duet, but it can say a lot to Western intellectuals. Even because of their leftist political beliefs and actions.

**For me, these figures are important for understanding the difference that existed in Ukraine and Russia back in the 19th century. For the Ukrainian identity of the 19th century, an important role was played by scholars, representatives of “positive science”: Drahomanov, Hrushevsky, Franko. The Russian identity of the 19th century rejected Western “positive science”. The major movements of Russian ideology in the 19th century, Slavophiles and Westerners, were all hostile to scientific rationality. Slavophiles went for religion, while Westerners went for revolutionary nihilism.**

But I don't really see the contradiction between Russian nihilism and the scientific worldview. After all, Bazarov [a "nihilist" character of *Turgenev's novel Fathers and Sons* – Ed.] vivisectioned frogs for scientific purposes. It was vulgar materialism, though.

**I would call it "fanatic materialism". There was something religious in this fanatic negation of religion. And it lacked scientific rationality, self-doubt and moderation. The Ukrainian identity of the 19th century was, on the contrary, not only focused around "romantic" and "irrational" Taras Shevchenko; there were also Kořtomarov, Kulish, Drahomanov, Franko: historians, ethnographers, sociologists. In other words, there was not only a poetic, "cordocentric", but also a rational line. Do you agree with this?**

I would rather agree with this, yes. This was, perhaps, an attempt to compensate for the lack of prose. Ukrainian literature had novels in the 19th century, but their number was miserably low. If, for instance, Nechui [*Nechui-Levytsky is a Ukrainian 19th century writer* – Ed.] had not written his prose, we would have had no novels in the second half of the 19th century.

Perhaps scientific activities filled this gap. All intellectuals of that time were making their careers primarily as teachers. Their professorships forced them to carry out their research and to publish the results of that research. I remember my impressions from reading Kořtomarov's *Bohdan Khmelnytsky* – this is tremendous work that must have taken years and years to write.

This work had funding. Nechui could not receive a grant for writing his next novel, because such grants didn't exist. Instead, there were special commissions for making collections of songs, ballads or other folklore. Research was the only option that the Russian Empire still kept open for intellectuals in Ukraine. They could adjust to its rules and express themselves in this scientific field.

**Very interesting. But let's go back to authors: what other Ukrainian writers are important for you?**

Of course, we cannot overlook Lesia Ukrainka [*a Ukrainian female writer of the late 19th – early 20th century, one of the most known and read writers of Ukrainian literature – Ed.*] – both in the feminist context, and in the context of a spasmodic reappropriation of Western cultural codes.

**Lesia Ukrainka is fantastic precisely because she is so global. I think she is the most global writer in Ukrainian literature. The very topics of her dramatic poems are impressive: early Christianity, Antiquity...**

...Robert Bruce, and Northern American Indians, and everything else you could imagine.

And this was a spasmodic fight against provinciality in culture, and permanent struggle to talk at a global and universal level.

Besides Lesia I would, of course, mention our Renaissance of the 1920s, the so-called “Executed Renaissance”. It is very important.

**It did not create a lot of novels either. It was more poetry-focused. Yet it was annihilated by the Soviet regime precisely when it was ready for great things.**

Yes, it was destroyed when it was only beginning to rise.

I think there was also another interesting phenomenon of the 1920s: Ukrainian “national communism” [*a movement in Soviet Ukraine in 1920s that advocated the need to build communism with “national” specifics – Ed.*].

This expression sounds threatening, because “national communism” can immediately lead you, by association, to “national socialism”. I suppose that for a German ear, this name – “national communism” – would sound very threatening. But it was something entirely different.

**An important question in this context is the following: in what ways was Ukrainian communism in the 1920s different from Russian communism? I think they were absolutely different even in terms of literature.**

I think Ukrainians [of the 1920s] wanted to read Marx without mediators. Marx was more important for them than Lenin. As for Stalin, he was not relevant for them at all – and Stalin felt this, of course.

I think Ukrainian “national communists” would not have existed without the earlier Ukrainian People’s Republic (UNR) [*independent Ukraine of 1917-1921 – Ed.*]. Even within the Bolshevik trend they had to go through that furnace of national self-awareness. The UNR itself initially formed those leftist values.

**There is another metaphor that’s important for 1920s Ukraine: Khvylioviy’s metaphor of the “Asian Renaissance”. In it, Khvylioviy [*one of the major representatives of the Ukrainian “Executed Renaissance”; he committed suicide in 1933 after the Holodomor and increased repressions against the Ukrainian intelligentsia – Ed.*] might have expressed trauma from the fact that Ukraine did not have its own 15th-16th century Renaissance. This was an attempt to bring the Western Renaissance to Ukraine through proletarian culture. It was a desire to see Ukraine as a door through which this Renaissance will come from Europe to Asia. This differs dramatically from what Stalin wanted. Stalin was seeking expansion of the East to the West, while Khvylioviy wanted expansion of the West to the East.**

Yes, this was probably the key difference.

**I think that in this sense we are Khvylioviy’s disciples. After the Orange Revolution [*of 2004–2005 – Ed.*], the Euromaidan**



**[2013–2014 – Ed.], a lot of Ukrainians felt these events as expansion of the West to the East, a bit in Kundera’s terms. But I think that today we are lacking this ambition that Khvyliovyy had. We see ourselves as the frontline of opposition between European values and authoritarian Russia. But we do not think that our ambition should perhaps consist of ensuring the progress of European values even further East.**

Well, I would absolutely not recommend that we should try to “Europeanize” Russia. It is important that we first cope with ourselves.

But, perhaps, you are right. Without putting this objective in front of us, we will not achieve our goals that look easier.

We still have to understand, however, where the line [between Europe and non-Europe] lies. Today, it probably lies on the contact line of the war in the East; for us this is the frontline where Europe starts. But let’s imagine that one day agreement is achieved under which these occupied territories [*of Donbas – Ed.*] return to Ukraine. Will it be the same line for us? I do not think it will repeat the eastern border of the Ukrainian state. This is far from being so. That is why today we do not know the outcome of our own events.

**Do you have a feeling that the era of “revanchism” [*return of old pre-Maidan regime – Ed.*] is coming? We are discussing this on the day following Russia’s return to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), and there is a lot of talk in Ukraine about this revanchism.**

Russia’s return to the PACE has been the first defeat at international level. And I think things will go further.

This is directly related to the outcome of the [Ukrainian] elections [*election of Volodymyr Zelensky as president of Ukraine – Ed.*]. The Europeans are not blind. They know the trend, and they know that more than 70 per cent of contemporary Ukrainians prioritize peace with Russia at any price.

In these circumstances they say to themselves: if the Ukrainians are ready to give in, why should we play act? That is why Russia's return to the PACE is the first consequence at international level, which will, no doubt, be followed by others.

In Ukraine, this "revanchism" is still not very visible, it is crawling and manifests itself in some under-appointments or over-appointments. But, of course, it will gain its full force after the parliamentary elections. When, let's imagine, *Servant of the People* [Zelensky's party - Ed.] creates a coalition with Medvedchuk [Putin's best friend in Ukraine - Ed.], then everything will be clear.

### **How do you see relations between Europe and Ukraine in these trends?**

These relations were and will be a love triangle. Maybe not a love triangle, but still a triangle: Russia, Europe, and Ukraine.

We, Ukrainians, are in love with Europe, Europe is in love with Russia, while Russia hates both us and Europe, but behaves differently towards us and Europe.

### **I have a different metaphor: we want a stable marriage with Europe, while Europe is "polyamorous" and is ready for relationships both with Ukraine and with sadistic Russia.**

Maybe, but I would call it "polygamy".

**Europe-Ukraine relations are constantly present in your novels. In *Perverzion* you describe a feeling of mutual exoticism between Europe and Ukraine. A Ukrainian poet, Stas Perfetsky, goes to Venice, and everything he sees around him is exotic. You create an image of carnivalesque Europe – but your character is also "carnavalesque" towards Europe itself. And we see a kind of mutual admiration of this carnival nature of each other.**

**Your other novel, *Twelve Circles*, presents a different picture.**

I would say even the reverse picture.

**Yes, because in this novel, a European man comes to Ukraine and finds himself in a mystic reality; he does not know how to understand it.**

But he just does not bother to understand the Ukrainian language. That is why he stays in this mystical reality all the time. He is internally not interested in learning the language because he wants the translator to be with him all the time.

**In *Mystery* (written after the Orange Revolution), you create an image of a German journalist who does a long interview with you. And he knows everything about you and Ukraine. This means that you write this book in an era, when Ukraine and Europe start talking to each other as equals, and more or less understand one another.**

Yes, we were at the same level then.

***Darlings of Justice*, which you published last year, is a book where this dilemma is completely absent. In it, you speak more about universal human topics: about life and death, about what you call God's mercy.**

**Is this a correct reconstruction of the evolution of your novels?**

It's correct. And I think that this "messianic" period – when I was thinking that I was taking my country to Europe, and tried to persuade the Europeans about something – is over for me. Later, I went through disappointments several times, and today I am going through this disappointment again. So, I will no longer be fooled, so to say.

## **But you did a lot to bring Ukraine closer to Europe.**

Let it stay in the past. Honestly, I would like to achieve some detachment and indifference, even indifference to Ukraine. But somewhere deep inside I hope that when I stop torturing myself with it, it will somehow start building itself on its own.

## **But still, after the Orange Revolution and after Euromaidan we had the feeling that Ukraine was Europe's avant-garde. That some developments were taking place here that were ahead of developments in Europe.**

Yes, I was even looking with some arrogance and compassion at everyone who was not Ukrainian.

I was so eager to give them a short lecture about freedom and tell them that they know nothing about the mysteries of existence.

## **Has it changed now?**

Absolutely. A 180-degree change.

## **Is this the end of that post-Maidan "messianic" attitude?**

It's not like I've started respecting everything European again. But at least I understood the skepticism of Europeans when they were listening to my pathetic statements. When I was saying, "You will never understand when an 18-year old child goes to war to die", and I heard the response, "For God's sake, if I were 18 years old and the war came to my country, I would simply flee this country. You have to run away, you have to live". I was looking at them as if they were inhuman. But today our society [*in the 2019 presidential election – Ed.*] has showed the same attitude.

It turned out we had no right to any arrogance with regard to other nations – we're the same or even worse.

**You entered Ukrainian literature with Bu-Ba-Bu [an informal group of Ukrainian writers in late 1980s – early 1990s – Ed.]. That was an explosion of irony and laughter. Throughout its history, Ukrainian literature was – and still partly is - focused on suffering, on masochism. The Bu-Ba-Bu was a revolution because you brought laughter back to this culture. But with time, your texts became more and more serious. I already felt this in *Twelve Circles*. Instead, mass culture become more and more comical. Do you have the feeling that your opposition to mass culture today is not opposition to the cult of suffering, but opposition to the cult of laughter?**

I feel it, yes. But let's remember that Bu-Ba-Bu appeared in an era when people watched KVN en masse [a Soviet and post-Soviet comedy show, and the origin of most of today's comedy projects in Ukraine or Russia – Ed.]. The Bu-Ba-Bu culture of laughter was an antidote to it. It was the denial of that raucous laughter of the Soviet KVN.

**What was the difference between Bu-Ba-Bu laughter and Soviet laughter?**

Bu-Ba-Bu was high-quality laughter. Irony-based laughter. The humour of the Soviet entertainment *eštrada* [Soviet name for mass culture and pop culture – Ed.] was very low quality, it was the worst type of humor. They were laughing at anything different; this was the embodiment of xenophobia.

**But there was Zhvanetsky, whose humour was very intellectual.**

I am not sure we can tie Zhvanetsky to KVN. He is an intellectual and a writer who reads out his texts to the public. He was the predecessor for stand-up comedians, but perhaps in a different way.

Bu-Ba-Bu itself was, in the end, not only about laughter. It was mostly about the poetic Ukrainian language exploring entirely different territory. And if the public did not burst out with laughter during a performance, this did not mean that a poem had failed – it was simply a different poem.

Zhvanetsky's performances also contained parts when people were just silent and thinking instead of reacting with momentary laughter.

**Today, laughter has itself changed. Laughter today often means the absence of readiness to assume responsibility. And it is also a symptom that society is becoming more individualized, as people feel an individual right to laugh at everything.**

This works at a much simpler level. When you switch on your television and watch some of *League of Laughter* or the *Kvartal*, do you pay attention to how often the camera rolls across the audience? Ordinary people watching this from their sofas are hypnotized: they see rich and successful people sitting in the hall in very expensive garments, and bursting with applause and laughter, as if on command. And if rich and successful people are laughing in the audience, then these simple people on this side of the screen have to laugh as well. That's why this is not a free choice. This is hypnosis.

**Let me ask the last question, a moral question. Ukrainians have a certain degree of victimization of their history. We have the idea that we were tortured and suppressed during our entire history. This is true, because there was the Holodomor, World War II, "Bloodlands" (to use Timothy Snyder's metaphor), and so on. But unless we assume responsibility for the episodes when we committed violence, we will not get out of our vicious circle.**

Yes. I even look at this in some almost mystical categories of karma.

You have to suffer for your own karma. But we repeatedly delay this process. We say that we are still not ready to talk about it.

👂 **We understand that there are “skeletons in the closet”, but we think it is too early to talk about them.** 🗣️

### **What should we talk about? Which cases of violence committed by us against others?**

I think all our history has such cases. In any historical episode involving war, uprising, any violent actions, you can find some crimes.

Khmelnysky, Prince Ihor, Prince Sviatoslav, and many, many others. Look, one of the most aggressive elements of human nature embodies itself in military campaigns against foreign territories. These campaigns involved annexing territories and capturing women. Was the so-called Kyivan Rus free from this?

Every episode of our history is filled with what today's world calls “war crimes” and “crimes against humanity”.

### **What are these episodes in the 20th century? Volyn, pogroms against the Jews, our participation in Communism?**

Yes, everything, including our participation in Communism, and participation in the events of 1956 [*Soviet invasion – Ed.*] in Hungary, and our role fighting in Afghanistan. At a certain moment we became such an integrated part of the Soviet Empire that commanders were proud of the Ukrainians who served in the ranks of the Soviet Army.

Or look at the 19th century: the conquest of the Caucasus, preceded by the conquest of Siberia, or Central Asia... Combat units from around the empire consisted of people from colonies, including from Ukraine.

In the case of Polish-Ukrainian relations and the Volyn tragedy, we could achieve some consensus with the Polish side. I suggest, for example, that Polish intellectuals study Polish guilt only, and that they talk about Polish guilt, while Ukrainian intellectuals study only Ukrainian guilt and talk about it. And then we can bring our studies to a mutual understanding. Because at the present time we are only looking for the guilt of the other side.

| **But there is a risk here that we will diminish our own guilt.**

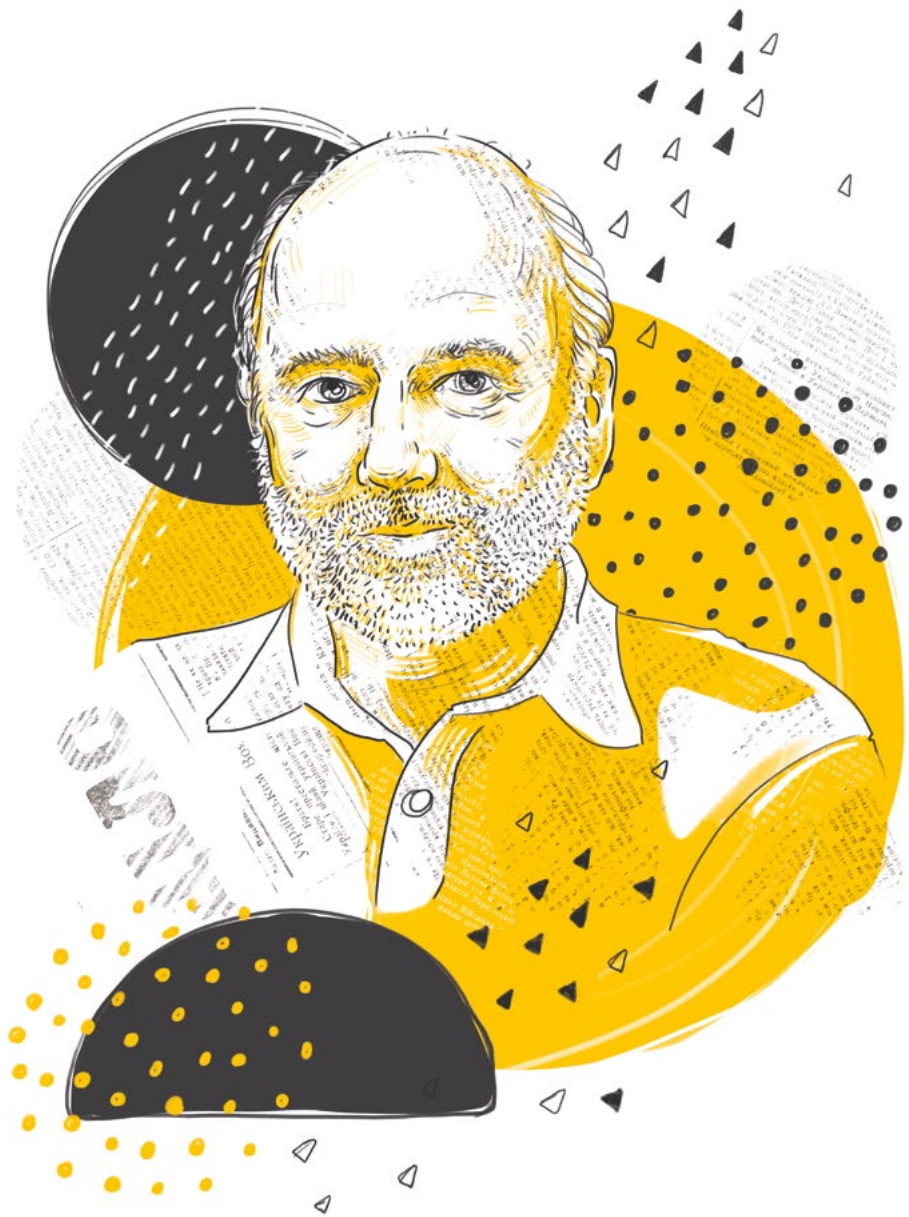
Dishonesty should be removed *a priori*, of course. And often it is certainly impossible to disconnect one guilt from another. But in public we have to talk only about our own guilt. We will, of course, draw fire on ourselves inside our own countries.

| **Do you think this time will come?**

For a start, I would have to publicly express this idea to give the first impulse. Not everything I say is heard, but it is still worth trying.







## Ukrainians. From A Historical Matrix to the Present Day

**H**uman memory facilitates inertia in our perception of the surrounding world. In 1966, our family moved to a new house on Novo-Hostomelske Road in the suburbs of Kyiv opposite the Antonov aviation plant. In 1973, Novo-Hostomelske Street was renamed Tupoleva Street after the Aircraft Designer. I still remember both names although I have not lived there for more than forty years now. Automatically, both names mean the same street for me although in fact Novo-Hostomelske Road had existed for a much longer time and included many more houses. In 1973 it was simply divided into three streets.

In 1991, the Soviet Union was divided into 15 separate “streets”. However, since 1991 the USSR and Ukraine have not been identical for me, neither do they mean the same or even similar things to me. The USSR means a deceased state, while Ukraine means a vibrant state. It is alive and entirely different from the Soviet Union. The USSR is an old name for the Russian Federation: today the Russian Federation professes the Soviet-era values that have been partially modified and adapted to the new era, including the de-facto “one-party system of governance” and the “uniform nation”.

Inertia still exists in worldwide perceptions of the territory of the Ex-USSR. It's still seen as uniform, historically established area with one mentality. The larger the geographical distance from the USSR the stronger this inertia is. I encountered it in India where the notion of "Soviet culture" is still alive and perceived as something almost contemporary. I even came across it in Italy, especially in the circles of leftist intellectuals.

This inertia is also very strong in the heads of many citizens of Russia who like to view Ukraine or Belarus as their own territories which have temporarily gone out of control. Russians have this perception not necessarily because of their imperialistic views but first of all because they do not know anything about Ukrainians. That is why they believe Ukrainians are "part of them", part of the many-faced "Russian" people. For the majority of Russians, the key difference between the Russians and the Ukrainians is in surname endings. In a simplified and conventional way this can be described as follows: Russian surnames end with -ov (Lavrov, Surkov), -ev (Kaverznev) and, of course, with -in (Putin, "Lenin", "Stalin") while Ukrainian surnames most often traditionally end with -ko (Poroshenko) and -uk (Kravchuk).

The Russians are also "assisted" in seeing the difference between themselves and the Ukrainians through clichés about the national characteristics. According to this cliché, a typical Ukrainian is cunning and greedy, and a typical Russian is open, simple and sometimes passionate. Ukrainians, too, have their clichés about Russians: Ukrainians are imagined as good hosts, while a Russian is a drunkard who neglects his or her household.

There is another comparative pair of clichés about the Russians and the Ukrainians. A popular Russian phrasing says, "There is no wedding without a good fight!" Russian YouTube even has a collection of "Best wedding fights". The Ukrainians, on the contrary, are said to have a different tradition – they end a wedding with loud choral singing. Participants of the feast sing very loudly so that everyone in the vicinity hears and envies those who were invited to the wedding.

I have never been to a Russian wedding, but I was invited to Ukrainian village weddings, and, though I remember such singing very well, I am not sure the purpose of the singing was to cause neighbours' envy.

Clichés are most frequently based on some noteworthy features of everyday life and mass culture works to strengthen them. During Soviet times, the controlled mass culture worked to create non-national social clichés which helped everyone to understand what a “proper Soviet person” and “improper (or non-Soviet) person” was. Vladimir Lenin himself, in his articles and reflections about soon-to-be communism, expressed a dream about erasing the difference between ethnic groups and nations. At the same time, Lenin did not quite trust Ukraine and the Ukrainians, and he never visited Ukraine. Perhaps, he realized that the national character of the Ukrainians made them unsuitable as “builders of Communism”. Stalin realized this as well when he observed difficulties with the collectivization in Ukraine. However, for Stalin, these difficulties were caused first of all by sabotage by the “ill-meaning” Ukrainians, and not the result of a particular Ukrainian mentality or Ukrainian national character.

For a long time, Ukrainians and Russians have been different both culturally and mentally. The difference is rooted in two absolutely different historical ma-

trices, on which the two societies and two states were built. Russia's historical matrix is monarchy. Inhabitants of Russia were always distinct in their collective unification around a tsar or an idea. But the idea also led to a cult of tsar, not dynastic, in fact anti-dynastic (Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky). Regularly in their history, however, Russians felt fatigue at loving their tsar, killed him, and loved the next one. Both the murder and the deification presumed mass involvement and collective engagement.

👉👉 **Russia's  
historical matrix  
is monarchy.** 🗨️🗨️

Ukraine, having abandoned the prince-feudal system in favor of the hetman-Cossack system, rejected all forms of monarchy. Moreover, this dislike of monarchy and of power in general created a democratic anarchy matrix in the Ukrainian society of the 16th-17th centuries. It was re-born in the Ukrainian society immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the Russian-imposed collectivism and insincere or sincere love for the tsar of the General Secretary of the Communist Party, sincere or insincere, became history. The Ukrainians are willing to participate in elections, and they fight for the victory of their candidate only to start fighting against him or her several days later. The Ukrainians wait for a miracle and when a miracle does not occur immediately after someone has been elected to perform it, popular dissatisfaction and indignation result. Soon Ukrainians hate the person they brought to power. The tradition of electing hetmen, who, depending on the situation, were either the commanders-in-chief or the heads of state, accustomed the Ukrainian Cossacks to the idea that they elected their rulers. In Russia, on the contrary, people believed that the tsar was given by God.

In a country which has elections, there is always choice, intrigue and alliances that determine the future. In a country where “the tsar is given by God”, there is no choice and potential intrigues and alliances are combated bloodily and brutally even before they emerge.

 **The democratic anarchy matrix turned the Ukrainians into individualists, who are difficult to govern.** 

Each Ukrainian defends his or her point of view to the exclusion of all others. At the same time, they understand that the neighbour can have his or her own “possible point of view”, Ukrainians are ready to accept it if the neighbor is not imposing his or her opinion too intrusively. If we assume that at present there are approximately 40 million citizens in Ukraine, we can say with certainty that there are approximately 40 million conceptual visions of the future Ukraine.

Each of these visions claims it is better and more successful than others. This also explains why there are so many political parties in Ukraine – as of today, more than 350 are registered by the Ministry of Justice. These parties seldom have a specific ideology; they are more often linked to the dream or plans of the party founder to have his/her own Ukraine. Depending on the popularity of such a dream or plan, a party enjoys more or less support. Of course, the party's financial status is more vital to its success than its vision or policies. Furthermore, parties are created for “momentary popularity”. If a party does not work out immediately, it is put aside as nonconvertible stock or until future “renovation”.

For someone educated in the Western tradition, it will be difficult to understand why the majority of Ukrainian political parties are “dormant” and stored away, like a piece of meat in a freezer. At a certain moment, the founders of such “frozen” parties realize that their party is no longer politically active but rather a “semi-processed” product, a political commodity that can be sold to someone who is too lazy or too late to register a new party. Such “frozen parties” sometimes have beautiful dreamy names, such as “Ukraine’s Conscience”. This “Ukraine’s Conscience” was “unfrozen” and sold several years ago to participate in the 2010 and 2013 local elections. After those elections, it was “frozen” again.

I am always pleasantly surprised to observe the entrepreneurial spirit of the Ukrainians, which, of course, goes much further than trade in “frozen” parties. Here I mean not only ethnic Ukrainians, but all citizens of Ukraine raised in the spirit of this freedom-loving land. I mean ethnic Armenians, Greeks, Hungarians, Gagauzians, Russians, Romanians, Poles, and representatives of other national minorities in Ukraine. Social, trade and public life in Ukraine was always louder and more bustling than in neighboring Poland or Moravia. Frontiers and boundaries constantly moved back and forth, and they moved together with the Cossacks. During the Cossacks’ era, civilian administration was seemingly absent, but military administration and

military courts functioned well. There was no Ministry of finance or national currency, but army treasurers ensured that Polish gold and German silver sufficed to buy food supplies. Instead of laws and rules, the Ukrainians used customs and traditions. A legal system was replaced with Christian morality. The political objective of Cossack Ukraine was to “survive and protect what we have”.

If it were not for Russian special operations, the war in Donbas could also be described as a battle, in which two groups of Cossacks want to “survive and protect what they have”. But in order to understand one of the causes of this war let us go back to my thoughts about the difference in historical matrices and mentalities.

As the Russian Empire was expanding, it integrated new territories not only through russification, but also through spreading its collective Russian mentality, ready to fight with the slogan “For faith, for tsar, for Motherland”. Precisely in this way and in this order, Russian government identified the values, for which the Russian people had to die. Still today, Orthodox faith is openly put forward by the Russian government as a unifying foundation for Slavic people. The tsar comes second, and Motherland lags behind: it will inevitably collapse if the tsar dies. This means the tsar has to be protected with far greater courage than the Motherland: because the Motherland *is* the tsar!

For Ukrainians who have never had their own tsar (we do not count princes and other local feudal lords), the Motherland, their homeland has always been more important than a foreign tsar and – which is the worse for Russia – more important than faith.

The “communist monarchy” that was ruling the Soviet Union until 1991 repeated and prolonged all those old pre-revolutionary processes of integrating the occupied territories. But the ideology, which was used to replace religious faith, failed. The collective Russian mentality “entered” Ukraine together with Soviet communist ideology and the Soviet public servants sent to the Ukrainian Republic from Siberia, the North Caucasus and Russia’s Far East. Yet, it was not able to “collectivize” Ukraine’s mentality completely. A large number of Ukrainians,



especially residents of Galicia and Bukovyna, continued to be individualists – each having his/her own opinion. From collectivization they learnt to hide their personal opinion very well and at the same time to feel proud of the mere fact of disagreeing with the “majority”. This pride eventually grew to become the “national pride”, a pride in, and recognition of, its difference from the Soviet and Russian people. The USSR had more time to work on “the collectivization” of the mentality of the residents of Central, Southern, and Eastern Ukraine. A dilution of their mentality was further facilitated by large-scale industrial migration organized by the Soviet government.

In 1991, a large part of the Ukrainian territory was still “covered” by the collective post-Soviet mentality. However, after the economically and socially difficult 1990s, when representatives of this “collective” mentality who had been expecting assistance from the government or from the good tsar saw that “individualists” were taking their destiny into their own hands and were becoming successful in their bid for “survival”, collective mentality in Ukraine was weakened. It has remained strong only where it had originated – in the East, along the border with Russia. Already fifteen years ago, the boundary between the two mentalities cut Ukraine almost in two, but after that, year after year the individualist mentality was pushing collective mentality out and moving further and further toward Russia.

**“ If the war hadn’t happened, within ten or fifteen years, this Ukrainian individualistic mentality, which is also the European mentality, would have reached the border with Russia. ”**

It would have even strengthened the border, emphasizing the double meaning – both geopolitical and psychological – of the frontier.

Of course, there is another aspect here that should not be ignored: all these developments in Ukraine were unfolding under the influence of economic powers and political impotency. The Ukrainian political

elite was not involved in restoring the national mentality and reducing people's dependence on the state. This was achieved by Ukrainian history that remained in the "blood", in "genes", in songs and images. The Ukrainians saw and felt their liberation from the foreign mentality by simply observing what was and is going on in Russia. "We don't want to go there" in this situation did and does mean "We don't want to go back, into the past. We don't want to be in a land of a foreign mentality".

Since the Cossacks' era, the Ukrainians stayed very mobile, easily adapting to new conditions. When they move to law-abiding countries they quickly become law-abiding people, according to the host country's practices. The visa-free regime with Schengen countries has impacted on the Ukrainians' respect for the law inside Ukraine. Migration has led to the growth of material wellbeing together with an awareness of how people live in a rule-of-law state. The traditional respect for private property and the construction of one's own "comfortable private world" has developed over the last twenty years in Ukraine, transforming itself into a respect for control in public life, be it the village, town or street in a big city. People have begun to cooperate in order to change the rules in the area they control. In some places, the church joins them in this process, and in other places civil society organizations do. Sometimes everything is done by a few activists.

In the village of Lazarivka, Brusylivskyi district in Zhytomyr region, where I have a summer house, local activists installed a selfie stand recently at the entrance to the village reading *I love Lazarivka*. In Kyiv, owners of new small businesses on Reitarska Street in the old city center created an association, and for three years in a row they have organized celebrations of the street festival. In response, a part of the street residents mobilized against these celebrations. At the same time, members of a business association united with some residents and began refining a park area in the street. Even "divided" Ukrainians can find common points easily.

In the political arena, the Ukrainians' attempts at co-operation are thwarted by an imperfect political system in which it is difficult to differentiate the ideologies presented at one or other end of the political spectrum (party). Active citizens tend to prefer practical actions leading to specific tangible, and non-political, results, seeing political activity as having no short-term and easily achievable goal behind it. If it was a political fight of ideologies (conservative versus liberal, etc.), more citizens would participate in it. However, since it is a fight among personalities, which – except for the nationalists – avoid stating their own or their party's ideology very clearly, voters become either the fans of a specific individual and don't pay attention to ideology, or switch easily from supporting one person to supporting another. This means they base their choice primarily on sympathies and personal trust, which they often give up easily, transferring their trust to another politician who makes better promises or can describe the near future in bright terms more convincingly.

Such vacillating political sympathies are typical for Ukrainians precisely because politicians have accustomed them to short-term programs and goals that remain unimplemented or unachieved. Yet, in the face of politicians' lack of professionalism, Ukrainians have learnt to identify short-term objectives for themselves and implement them, carrying out small and medium business plans or implementing civil society projects so that the results can be seen already after one year or even less. Planning for five or even ten years ahead is still not typical for us. Even when success is achieved, Ukrainians will often not want to develop it. We are more likely to try to conserve it, to make it permanent and not very visible for an outsider's eye. "Do not draw too much attention to yourself" – this rule also came to us from long ago. In a political sense, unfortunately, it influences our national reality, preventing the public and state figures from being more proactive. That is why we are unable to predict who will be our geopolitical enemy in five years, and who will be our ally. That is why, as a state, we do not carry out systematic work on creating our own

“geopolitical pool”. We include everyone into this pool who supports us either systemically or situationally. And when someone leaves the pool on their own initiative, we accuse them of betrayal.

🗨️ **We are emotional and situational, and we prefer to respond to a danger only after it emerges.** 🗨️

But our response is always so loud that we are heard on the shores of all oceans of the world. This is also a manifestation of the ancient historical matrix of our society.

A Russian politician, Aleksey Pushkov, said recently that “Ukraine is used to being in the forefront” of global political life, but that this era is coming to an end. Having read his Facebook post and his recommendation that Ukraine “should be more modest”, I understand that he, like the majority of the Russians, knows nothing about Ukraine and Ukrainians. Otherwise he would not have written such a post, and he would understand that free people always want to be heard and understood.

The world has already heard Ukraine’s voice. But it still needs to understand it – to understand both Ukraine and Ukrainians.





**SHEVCHENKO**

**STEPPE**

**KOTLIAREVSKY**

**FOREST**

**HEART**

**UKRAINIAN MYTH**

**KHVYLIOVY**

**MAIDAN**

**KHMELNITSKY**

**DONBAS**

**FOLKLORE**

**MIND**

**CRIMEA**

**PLEASURE**

**HISTORY**

**SUFFERING**

**RUSSIA**

**GOGOL**

**REPUBLIC**

**EMPIRE**





# ARCHETYPES

**Steppe, Empire, and Cruelty,**

*by Volodymyr Yermolenko*

**A Split Heart of Incompleteness,**

*by Andrij Bondar*





## Steppe, Empire, and Cruelty

### I. Ukraine, Steppe and the Borderland

When in the early 1840s Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz was lecturing a course called *Les Slaves* (*The Slavs*) at Collège de France in Paris, he had a lot to say about Ukrainians, a large European nation, which, according to different estimates made at that time, was either already long dead, or still unborn.

For Mickiewicz, Ukraine was a “the land of borders” (*pays de frontières*), it has been “a way through which Asian life was entering Europe” and “it is here that two parts of the world (*Europe and Asia – U. Y.*) were opposing each other”. It was a “battlefield”; “all the armies of the world were meeting here”. Ukrainian Cossacks too were an example of ethnic mixtures: “a mixture of Slavs, Tatars and Turks”.

Mickiewicz himself was a mixture, a person with multiple identities. Born on the territory of modern-day Belarus, he begins *Pan Tadeusz* with a famous “Lithuania (*Litwo*), my motherhood” (meaning that old *Lithuania*, whose medieval Grand Duchy united the lands of contemporary Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine). Mickiewicz is now regarded as *the* Polish poet par excellence; but in several Ukrainian cities like Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk or Odesa, you can see monuments dedicated to him.

Mickiewicz's name for Ukraine – “*pays de frontieres*”, the land of borders, certainly referred to the very name “Ukraine” which, according to the most widespread interpretations, leads it to the words “*kraj*” (a border of the land; a borderland; a land itself) and “*okrajina*” (borderland, frontier).

🗨️ **From the 12th century on, this name was used as a designation of the frontier, or borderland, with a Big Steppe, a place where settled European cultures were meeting their nomadic opponent.** 🗨️

The Steppe was for centuries the provider of dangers to these lands. At different periods, Iranian, Mongol, or Turkic tribes posed this danger of encounter with the Stranger, often violent and pitiless. Contact with the Steppe defined much of Ukrainian history, in which violence and cruelty not only took human lives, but also erased traces of the past: the Steppe devours memories and regularly reinvents itself as a *tabula rasa*.



When Western European intellectuals and artists, of Mickiewicz's generation or even older, tried to conceptualize Ukrainian lands for themselves, they usually conceived them in terms of a border with the nomadic Steppe, or as the nomadic Steppe itself.

Look at Madame de Stael's account of her short visit to Kyiv in 1812, in her long European journey away from Napoleon. This highly-educated French writer, supporter of the Revolution but opponent of the Emperor, saw Kyiv's architecture as resembling nomadic camps. Here “one sees nothing that would resemble the cities of the West”, she says, adding that “the majority of buildings in Kiew resemble tents, and, seen from a distance, the city looks like a camp”. For Germaine de

Stael, Kyiv's architecture "took the model of the ambulant houses of Tatars", as if these Kyiv dwellers regarded their houses as temporary, and were ready to leave their place and move to another, without traces or memory.

When seven years later, in 1819, Byron (who admired De Stael's *Corinne*) wrote his poem "Mazeppa", he also made the Steppe and nomadic metaphor the cornerstone of his vision of Ukrainian lands.

Byron tells the story of the young Ivan Mazepa, caught at the Polish court for adultery, tied naked to a wild horse, and sent out into the Steppe. He took this story from Voltaire, but turned Voltaire's few lines about the "young Mazepa" legend into a big romantic epic. What is striking in this story now is how Byron imagined the Ukrainian lands: tied to a horse, Mazepa was riding through Ukrainian Steppe for three days without meeting a single human being, or even any sign of human settlement. Even for the mid-17th century, which Byron describes in his story, this perception of imagined de-population in Eastern Europe was an enormous exaggeration.

Byron's version of this story was a paradoxical turn-around of a big historical drama: the military loss suffered by Ivan Mazepa, one of the greatest Ukrainian hetmans and Cossack leaders, who joined Swedish King Charles XII in his war against Peter I of Russia. After the defeat suffered by Charles and Mazepa at Poltava in 1709, Peter I had his hands untied in developing a Russian expansionist empire in the 18th century, making possible Russia's expansion both to the north and to the south. But Byron missed out that part of the story.

But, curiously, Byron's Mazeppa story became a scoop, a new legend of his time. The British poet was followed by Victor Hugo and French painters like Gericault or Delacroix, Polish writer Juliusz Słowacki and many others, from Russia to America, who made "Mazeppa" one of the archetypal characters of 19th century European romanticism. For them, it became a story of a "romantic hero" who descends into hell on earth (Ukrainian Steppe), almost dies there but is reborn and gets a new life. A good story, which had little to do with history.

As the 19th century went on, and the “Mazeppa” story was turned increasingly into a story about Tatars, not Ukrainians, it became a symptom of Europe’s “Orientalizing” of the European East, in which Ukrainian lands were seen as a desert, a *non-human* space, where human culture meets its alternative, and where cruel violence is possible.



Jacques le Goff, the famous French historian, once described the mental map of a medieval Western European mind as an opposition between the ordered and safe world of the City, and the disordered and dangerous world of the Forest.

But in the Ukrainian Steppe the opposition might have been radically different: Steppe mythology imagines the Stranger in a different way.

The Forest is a realm of creatures who have *been always been here*, have deep roots, have their eternal possessions and do not tolerate human “invaders”. The only option for humans to be able to survive in this world was to have roots themselves, to have a long genealogy and a long history.

Steppe is different: the key danger here comes from those who have *never* been here, who are coming from the outside. The horror of Ukrainian popular culture, exemplified in early collections of historical and political songs put together in the 19th century by Maksymovych, Kostomarov, Drahomanov, Antonovych and others, is directly related to the risk of sudden attacks by nomadic warriors (mostly Tatars), who would torch villages and kidnap people as slaves to be sold on Turkish slave markets.

In the Steppe culture the danger comes not from the “deeply rooted”, but from the unrooted, from the nomads.

The only way to beat the nomad, the unrooted, was to become a nomad yourself. This is the beginning of the story of Ukrainian Cossacks, the major founding block of Ukrainian identity.



When we come back again to the 19th century again, to the imagination of the epoch where people like Madame de Stael, Byron, Hugo or Mickiewicz were writing their stories, we will see how the Forest myth comes back to the European imagination. But contrary to Le Goff's Middle Ages, the Forest was no longer seen as a danger, but as an opportunity, or even as a model.

Opposed to the Enlightenment, the rococo and classicist esthetics of the 18th century, with its admiration for transparency, "civilized customs" and court life, 19th century romanticism brings forests back to the agenda: as the best metaphor for both personal and national identity.

Trees have roots, plants have roots, humans have roots too, 19th century romantics said, from Herder to Chateaubriand, from Mickiewicz to Shevchenko. The early 19th century political philosophy was all about the "botanization" of human nature: humans, as plants, have flowers, fruits, periods of flourishing and decline. They also have national "ecosystems", as we would say today.

Ukrainian literature of the 19th and early 20th century followed this European trend. "Forestization" esthetics reaches it fully during the fin-de-siècle, with Lesya Ukrainka's *Forest Song*, and Mykhaylo Kotsybynksy's *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*. Both these texts, cornerstones of Ukrainian culture, challenged the nomadic Steppe identity, revitalizing old forest mythology of "roots", and "those who have always been here" – and injecting Volhynian and Carpathian forests into the Ukrainian Steppe imagination.

This is an important aspect of how a culture, intrinsically linked with encounters with the Steppe, with the unrooted, was trying to discover or re-invent its roots, its deep past, its complicated rhizomes.

This thirst for roots has an interesting continuation in the Ukrainian literature of early communism. Russian Bolshevik communism was supposed to cut national roots, to perform a global de-rootization of

culture and to make the future prevail over the past. But Ukrainian communist literature was different – as if it tried to combine this new nomadic unrootedness with an earlier romantic search for roots.

When proletarian writer Mykola Khvylioviy (who called his esthetics “romantics of vitalism”) and neo-classicist Mykola Zerov were imagining the place of Ukrainian culture in world history, they were thinking in terms of roots, deep European roots. This is why they revitalized the “Renaissance” metaphor, which in itself implied a strong desire for root-seeking. Khvylioviy’s “Asiatic renaissance” and Zerov’s “Eurasian renaissance” were attempts to see Ukraine in the 1920s as a country where the European “Renaissance” paradigm spills over to Eurasia. Zerov’s slogan “*ad fontes*” (“to the sources”) was a new search for roots, this time the transnational and global roots of old European culture; but this search for roots was only possible for a generation that felt itself deeply unrooted.

Zerov’s friend, writer and archeologist Domontovych wrote a novel entitled *Bez gruntu* (Without Ground), introducing a metaphor later used by Yuriy Sheveliov, one of the most important Ukrainian intellectuals of the 20th century, to name the whole generation as *bezgruntiany*, those who do not have grounds, who lost their roots – but are trying to find them again or reinvent them in global culture. Zerov’s “*ad fontes*” meant an attempt to root back Ukrainian culture in the old European Greek and Roman tradition so as to ensure enlargement of this old European civilization further to the East, up to India and China. The Forest, which Ukrainian culture was looking for, was no longer a local ethnic forest; it became a global forest of humankind, a new tree of life.

But the metaphor of the Steppe was strong enough to return. It came back in the 1930s, when the Ukrainian struggle for sovereignty in both the Soviet Union and Poland, was defeated. This was the time when Ukrainian political émigré and thinker of the 1930s, Yevhen Malanyuk, called Ukraine a “steppe Hellas”, as opposed to a new “Roman” empire, the “third Rome” of Russia, as reinvented in the Soviet Union.

This definition was also a search for roots. It was a paradox of a nation looking for roots (forest metaphor) in the unrooted (steppe metaphor).

It was also root-seeking in a much more dangerous environment, marked with extreme violence and erasing of traces. This was a time when new violence came to Ukrainian lands, from the Holodomor of 1932-1933 to World War II, when Ukrainian lands, together with lands of Poland and Belarus, were turned into the bloodlands (to use the concept of Timothy Snyder), or bloody Steppe. Ukrainian lands again looked like a borderland with the Big Steppe to which the new communist and then Nazi nomads came and burnt cities and villages to the ground.



This duality between settled and nomadic identities, between root-seeking and un-rootedness, is one of the keys to understanding Ukrainian culture and history. Interestingly, Ukrainian literature has a unique example of anchoring this duality to one of the founding myths of European culture: the myth of Rome.

Indeed, Roman mythology provides one of the most famous examples of combining the imagination of the settled culture and a nomadic culture. From the times of Virgil, it developed the story of Aeneas, the son of Venus and a Trojan hero, who escaped the burning Troy with his father and his son, and, after long journeys, set up a town on the brinks of the River Tiber in Italy. Rome as a settled *patria* was founded by a nomad; Rome as an empire had its roots in the unrooted.

It is a paradox that Ukrainian modern literature was restarted in the 1790s by Ivan Kotliarevsky with his version of this story. Kotliarevsky's *Aeneid* was a satirical replica of Virgil's *Aeneid*, written in vernacular Ukrainian and presenting Aeneas, his Trojan fellows, as

Ukrainian (Zaporozhian) Cossacks. Despite its ostensible playfulness, the poem had huge political and geopolitical implications.

Virgil's epic was written in the times of Augustus, the first Roman emperor, and was aimed at giving deeper roots to the Roman political project. Aeneas was a Roman response to the Greek Odysseus, told from "the other" side, by those who suffered a defeat in Troy but then "evacuated their patria", as Virgil said. Aeneas was also "upgraded" version of Odysseus: *Odyssey* was a story about the return to roots; *Aeneid* was a story about a nomad who takes his roots with himself; an imperial story created on an emigrant myth.

This makes Kotliarevsky's *Aeneid*, and Ukrainian modern intellectual culture that began with it, a big political paradox. Kotliarevsky did not make a eulogy to the empire (the Russian Empire in his case), but satire against the empire. At the same time, he drew a direct parallel between the Cossack myth and the Roman myth. Just as the Romans were initially political emigrés evacuating their fatherland and re-starting it from scratch on some empty hills on the brink of the River Tiber, Ukrainian Cossacks were hoping to do the same. Zaporozhian Sich, the Cossack Troy, was destroyed by the Russian Empire in 1775; and Kotliarevsky's epic could have been read as an indirect hint that the new Cossack Aeneas will soon be able to set up a new kingdom, one capable of challenging the Russian Empire.

Interestingly, it is Ukrainians, and not Russians, who made the Aeneas story a foundation of their literature. Despite the fact that the metaphor of "evacuation of patria" would have worked perfectly for a Russian imperialist takeover of Kyiv's medieval cultural and political heritage, the Russians never fully used it.

From the times of Peter I, Russia was seeking a new imperial symbolism: Peter created the Russian Empire, and built a new city, St. Petersburg, as the new "St Peter's city", i.e. a new Rome, continuing Russia's claim to be the Third Rome. This imperial project had a direct impact on the Ukrainian political project: the empire presumed



expansion and centralization, which left no room for the autonomy of the Ukrainian Cossacks. Russians didn't use the Aeneas metaphor, however, maybe because, in Russian eyes, the story of Troy-Kyiv or Troy-Sich had to be erased, not preserved.

Anyway, modern Ukrainian literature started with a text that anchored the new culture in the old Roman (and European) myth, but, at the same time, injected it with a rebellious laugh.

## II. Republic against Empire

Putting a Roman story at the beginning of Ukrainian modern literature was no coincidence.

 **It integrated Ukraine into one of the key controversies of European history: a debate between the Republic and the Empire.** 

Virgil was a witness, and a genius propagandist, of one of the most important twists in this history: an era when the Roman Republic, with Caesar and especially his posthumously adopted son Augustus, Virgil's patron, was becoming an Empire.

The dilemma between the Republic and the Empire is simple: it is focused on the question of origin of power. The republican paradigm states that power stems from below, and has a bottom-up decentralized nature: it is a compromise, or a contract, between free citizens or communities. The republican project is pluralist.

The imperial paradigm states, on the contrary, that power stems from above, and has a top-down centralized nature: it is a gift from God, or any other Absolute Entity (nature, nation, race, class, etc.), and, therefore, cannot be challenged or restricted. Ultimately, there can only be one empire on the Earth.

One of the key historical points of meeting republican and imperial paradigm in Eastern Europe was the history of Ukrainian Cossacks

and, in particular, Bohdan Khmelnytsky's Cossack rebellion against Polish Rzeczpospolita in the mid-17th century.

This rebellion was a republican antithesis to two imperial projects: the Roman Catholic project, which was re-defining itself in imperial terms in the 16th-17th centuries, and the Muscovite (later Russian) project that was also trying to define itself in imperial terms at that time.

Khmelnytsky's rebellion started in 1648, the year when Europe's Thirty Years War, the most drastic religious conflict, was over. The end of this war was a symptom of the failure of the ambition of the Roman Catholic Church to oppress the Lutheran "schism" born in the early 16th century. But this Lutheran upheaval, aside from its moral and religious grounds, also had an anti-imperial tonality. Catholic Rome of the early 16th century, with Borgia, Della Rovere, Medici popes, had the ambition of becoming a reborn Roman Empire which would conquer the world through faith, and not only through the sword. Julius II, during whose reign Michelangelo and Raphael created their famous frescos in the Vatican (and Luther came to Rome and saw it as a new Babylon), saw Julius Caesar as his model. During his rule, ancient Roman topics, images and emotions flooded the Roman Renaissance.

An interesting parallel between Catholic Rome and Orthodox Moscow, the two major poles defining 1648 Khmelnytsky's rebellion, is that they both took the Turkish takeover of Constantinople in 1453 very seriously. For Muscovite political mythology, it was a pretext to create a mythology of Moscow as the Third Rome (started by Metropolitan Zosima in the late 15th century and developed by monk Filofei in 1520s). But for Roman popes and intellectuals of the same era it meant a different thing: if Constantinople, a "second" Rome, fell, a real Rome should be again the first one, and the *only* one.

The century and a half that followed from Luther's "95 Theses" of 1517 up until the end of the Thirty Years' War, was the era of the great religious controversy between the Roman new imperial project, and the Protestant anti-imperial project. Rome wanted to become a new empire, visible in architecture, arts and richness; Protestantism was

an attempt to oppose it with the anti-imperial and rebellious force of *sola fide*, “faith alone”, i.e. the power of the Invisible.

But throughout the late 16th and early 17th century protestants were not the only target of Roman imperial ambitions. In Eastern Europe and in particular Polish Rzeczpospolita, these ambitions were directed against the Orthodox Church. To survive, it replied to Rome using Rome’s weapons: militarily, by developing a Cossack military force, and intellectually, by creating the Academy (now called Kyiv-Mohyla Academy) and educating generations of people able to compete intellectually and rhetorically with Catholic Jesuits.

When the republican-imperial struggle in Western Europe ended in 1648, it re-started in Eastern Europe, with Khmelnytsky’s rebellion. Khmelnytsky, just like European protestants, also won this battle against the newly-imperial Rome, creating anti-Roman (anti-Catholic) Cossack Ukraine as a political entity, but also putting it under the protection of the Muscovite tsar. Thus, Khmelnytsky cut off part of Ukrainian lands from one imperial project (Roman Catholic) but integrated it into another (Muscovite) political project that was gradually defining itself as a “Third Rome” and moving towards an imperial identity. Paradoxically, it was Ukrainian Kyiv-Mohyla intellectuals like Theophan Prokopovych who helped their northern suzerains to better formulate their identity and their goals, which gradually turned the apocalyptic and inward-looking Moscow-Third-Rome concept into a modernized expansionist concept of the Russian Empire under Peter I.

Ukraine was, therefore, born between two imperial projects, between the two versions of the old Rome: Roman Catholic and Third-Rome-Orthodox-Muscovite. It struggled against the former, it helped to create the latter, and then it struggled against the latter.

Later Ukrainian history, from Mazepa to Shevchenko, from the Ukrainian People’s Republic to the Holodomor, was a series of dramatic attempts to squeeze the republican project into confrontations between different empires, and to maintain a republican island in the stormy imperial ocean.

### III. Hedonism and Asceticism

We have already seen how Ivan Kotliarevsky, the founder of modern Ukrainian literature, carried out an ironic trick by putting Ukrainian Cossacks into Roman costumes.

In a sense, this was a satire not only against the Russian Empire, but against the imperial idea in general. Virgil's image of Aeneas based the Roman imperial expansionist identity on his refugee unrootedness, while Kotliarevsky did the reverse trick: he turned a refugee, a wanderer, a vagabond, into the image of an anti-imperial republican project.

But Kotliarevsky's poem had other important implications. Apart from drifting into the core of Europe's key political controversy, that between the Republic and the Empire, he also touched upon an important nerve of Europe's psychological and ethical controversy: the debate between hedonism and asceticism.

The Ukrainian *Aeneid* presented a modern, and now classical, version of the mentality of Ukrainian Cossacks: both hedonist and ascetic, joyful and rigid, hard drinking and asexual. Kotliarevsky may have hinted that the Cossacks were, in their humorous and careless nature, hedonists; but were also ascetic in their readiness for suffering and eagerness to heroically accept pain, deprivation and eventual death.

Indeed, the controversy between hedonism and asceticism has been one of the key questions of European modernity since at least the Renaissance.

The Renaissance of the 15th-16th centuries, apart from renewing the principles of ancient art, also regenerated ancient hedonism. The rediscovery of Epicurus, Ovid, Apuleius, of a naked body and erotic literature, brought hedonism back to European culture after centuries of oppression.

By contrast, 16th century reformations, both Protestant and Catholic, can be interpreted as an ascetic backlash. New asceticism and religious devotion marked 17th century Baroque, but the 18th century, especially

in France, was a time of a new hedonism: rococo painting, libertine literature, rediscovery of the human body and frivolous emotions. 19th century romanticism began, by contrast, with the anti-hedonist counter-revolution: the great themes of suffering and expiation, history moving through cleansing catastrophes, and long stories of punishment leading a human being from sin to virtue, were major topics of the “long” 19th century – up until the hedonist revolution of the early and especially mid-20th century.

Looking through this hedonist/ascetic cycle, Ukrainian history seems to be an animal on one leg: what it lacked was the hedonist element. The hedonist Renaissance revolution left it deaf: the 15th and 16th centuries were marked by gradual loss of autonomy, which “Rus” lands enjoyed under the medieval Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and which it was losing under Polish rule, with the aristocracy increasingly taking over Catholic identity. The rebirth of the old “Rus” culture, and its gradual “translation” into an Orthodox-Cossack “Ukrainian” culture, took place only in the 17th century, during the ascetic Baroque.

Again, the “hedonist” 18th century was marked by the gradual loss of autonomy of the Ukrainian “Hetmanate” within the Russian Empire, from the Battle of Poltava in 1709, to the destruction of the Sich in 1775. The rebirth of Ukrainian culture took place in the 19th century, with its renewed ascetic and semi-religious language.

Even more importantly for understanding today’s developments, Ukraine also missed the hedonist revolution of the 20th century.

In this 20th century, especially the postwar half, Western Europe was increasingly seeing progress as a hedonist project of enlarging the space for pleasure. After a long history of elitist hedonism, Europe finally let this hedonism spill over to the masses.



For the Soviet Eastern Europe progress, on the contrary, meant an ascetic, or even masochistic project of achieving great things through great suffering. Despite promising happiness for all in the future, Marxism was essentially an ascetic doctrine. This

asceticism was only radicalized on Russian soil: throughout the history of the Soviet Union the seeking of pleasure was considered a symptom of *petit bourgeois* attitude. Instead, the practices of mass killings, sending people to Gulags or sacrificing them *en masse* on the war front was considered moral and justified – only because it serves the interests of history and its messianic class, the proletariat. This specific proletarian morality was essentially a 19th century idea: it implied that progress *needs* suffering, that it devours victims, like a pagan deity, and that these victims are the only fuel that can push society forward. Thus, the asceticism of early communism was gradually becoming a new political sado-masochism: a belief that in life you should either commit violence or suffer from violence.

This sado-masochism did not disappear from post-Soviet societies. From the 1990s on these societies had a shock invasion of pleasure and hedonism from the West (primarily through consumerism); but strangely enough this hedonism did not replace earlier sado-masochistic trends. As pleasure was still considered to be *rare*, the only way to get it was to take it from someone else through force.

This explains important traits of post-Soviet societies and their attitudes towards violence. It makes clear, for example, why Russia is now considering the world only in terms of power politics, expansion, annexation and invasion: it feels the pleasure of taking its pleasure from someone else by force (in one of my essays I called this Russia's "zoopolitics"). This also explains why Ukraine still finds it very hard to combat corruption: in this highly predatory post-Soviet world, when pleasure can be always taken away from you, or when you can lose your life to a predator that wants your pleasures, the only way to protect yourself was to *buy* security. Corruption is a way of buying security, of individualizing security in a society where no-one feels safe, and when sadism is still seen as the only way to proper hedonism.

## IV. Beyond Survival

 **Settled culture versus the nomads, republic versus empire, hedonism versus sadism: these are the controversies, which in many ways define Ukrainian history and identity.** 

They have deep roots in the past, and they still persist today, setting the framework of the ways in which Ukrainians think, feel and act.

Ukraine is a nation born on lands, which could become both an earthly paradise and an earthly hell. It was a paradise thanks to its fertile lands, biodiversity and cultural encounters. And it was hell because for centuries they were borderlands, on which different cultures, political projects and massive ambitions clashed, turning them into “bloodlands” where nomads and empires marched pitilessly.

The Big Steppe was bringing the imminent danger of the nomadic Stranger or a nomadic Empire, who came, who saw, who conquered, but who also destroyed, and left no traces of the past. Amnesia and myopia, big Ukrainian cultural diseases, might have come from this Steppe identity, in which history does not leave traces, and which does not let you plan your future. Space always had influence over time, and geography always put important frames over history, and both had their influence on mentality.

In a way, Ukraine’s self-definition traces its roots back to the 16th and 17th centuries. Facing a Big Nomad, it needed to accept part of the nomadic identity, but to also challenge it, defending its *locus* and its roots. The semi-nomadism of Ukrainian Cossacks was defending a settled culture of local places against a nomadic culture of big spaces. Today, by defending itself against Russia, Ukrainians are re-inventing their Cossack myth, perceiving Putin’s Russia as another Big Nomad, an imperial power fighting on the lands of others, and challenging cultures that are proud of their local identities. This might explain why so many current Ukrainian soldiers in the East even copy the

hairstyles and moustaches of Cossacks, and why since the Maidan protests Ukrainians have re-appropriated the concepts of Cossacks (like *sotnia*, hundred, or *pobratym*, adopted brother). Moscow, which was an ally for Kyiv in the 17th century in the defense of the Orthodox locality against Turkish and Tatar nomadism and Polish Catholic imperial expansionism, now turns into the symbol of the new nomadic and imperial expansionism of the 21st century. History twists – and Crimean Tatars, once a nomadic opponent, are today siding with Ukrainians in defending their local identities. Similarly, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (the *Uniates*), seen by Orthodoxy of the 16th – 17th centuries as symbols of Catholic Counter-Reformation expansionism, is now one of the truest expressions of Ukraine's local uniqueness.

Another historical dilemma, between Empire and Republic, is also at the core of Ukraine's current history.

 **With its essentially pluralist political culture, Ukraine opposes Russia's new expansionism, which is an attempt to revive the empire in the mask of a nation state.** 

The success or failure of Ukraine's republican project will determine whether Russia's new imperialism will expand or fail in Europe as a whole.

Finally, Ukrainian intellectual history had its peaks during those eras in which asceticism prevailed in European culture, which made the presence of hedonism in Ukrainian culture so little and modest, and so overwhelmed by the cults of suffering, self-restriction and violence. This also leaves behind its trail today.

Ukraine is a nation born in violence and traumas. It is probably a world champion at survival. Ukrainians are now learning to live, not only to survive, and to plan their long-term future, not only to hide their small belongings from nomadic or imperial strangers.

It is important that Ukrainians survive this time too, though it is also important that they do far more than this.









Andrij Bondar

## A Split Heart of Incompleteness

Let me begin this text with a *contradictio in contrarium*:  
Ukrainians did not have:

- The Renaissance, with its discovery of the “humanity” of human beings, with its free thinking and revival of the heritage of Antiquity;
- The Reformation (we had “Orthodox Baroque” instead of the Reformation);
- The Enlightenment (instead of enlightening ourselves, we co-created a senseless Russian Empire and, in the 18th century, we were enlightening Russians with what we took from Europe during the Baroque period – which was itself a conservative reaction to the Reformation);
- The Industrial Revolution of the 19th century, when peasant Romanticism was flourishing in Ukraine oppressed by the Russian autocracy, which we ourselves, in fact, had co-created and glorified back in the 18th century;
- modernism and modernization (instead, we had Stalin’s collectivization with the Holodomor, and industrialization with repressions);

- The Sexual Revolution; instead, we are ranked high in terms of prostitution and the hypocritical “morality” of politicians and statesmen...

In this list of absent phenomena and things, similar to well-known Borges’ “Chinese classification”, we could also include the following things that we lack:



- A Ukrainian language translation of Schopenhauer’s *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*;
- trust in institutions;
- the culture of comic books;
- freedom of movement;
- culture of reportage (how is reportage possible without the freedom of movement?);
- urban culture (apart from Galician romance, old town halls and legends about Magdeburg Rights);
- the protestant work ethic, and, therefore, the spirit of capitalism;
- national aristocracy;
- good dry red wines;
- a national bourgeoisie;
- Calvados or any other apple spirits;
- lasting historical memory;
- culture of listening to music;
- environmental consciousness;
- a political elite;
- a Literature Nobel Prize winner...

Any person who has experienced Ukraine can add a few lines to this non-systemic list. This means, *volens nolens*, that our country has ended up in the early part of the 21st century broken down, messed up and deformed. Ultimately, one may find hundreds of reasons and

factors explaining why we are what we are today. For me, it is just as interesting to think about where the “we” of today begin. Where is that place on the maps of our psychology, geography and traumatology, at which we begin.

If you think of Ukraine as a metaphor, this will definitely be a metaphor of loss and lack. A loss of something/someone and a lack of something/someone; a loss in the past and thus a shortfall today, losses in the present caused by lacks in the past — political, social, cultural, demographic, and economic.

We have never seen development, we have only formed and been deformed chaotically, in a regime of continuous losses/lacks. More exactly, the regimes varied — sometimes they were cruel, sometimes moderately repressive, or authoritarian. But they have always been alien, imposed from above, with their own rules, restrictions, and laws. The most important thing for Ukrainians, under each of those regimes, was to survive, to cling on to life.

 **‘A good government is the one that kills less’,  
Ukrainians thought, and chose life.** 

Maybe this is the source of our distrust of innovations and progressive ideas, of our deadlock between survival and development, between identities and values, between East and West. We still cannot give a definite answer to the question “Who are Ukrainians, and what do they want?”, as the problems begin at the stage of self-identification: who should be considered Ukrainian? Therefore, the second part of the question gets lost in the uncertainty of the first: if we still do not know who Ukrainians are, how can we find out what they want?

Yet, the metaphor of loss/lack, as any figure of speech, is limited, and does not exhaust all the complexity of the issue. It obscures the roots of the problem: why did all of this happen to us in this particular way, and when did it actually start? Ukrainians are sometimes natural

fatalists, and quite often they have two explanations: “it was destined” and “it was a curse”. They usually tend to explain this specific character of their historical destiny through the intervention of factors, which are totally out of their control. Meanwhile, those of us seeking a rational explanation of contemporary defects or eternal properties of the “Ukrainian soul” sometimes find nothing but references to “ancient times”: medieval controversies of semi-legendary princes, the Mongol invasion and, from a more recent past, treacheries on the part of the Cossack elite. The more remote those references, the more likely we are to get confused in our search for the probable roots of the problem. The more likely we are also to blame, for example, a dualism between paganism, which was all too important here, and Christianity, which has never been deep enough to overcome this dualism. That is why it is, in a way, simpler to say “it was destined” and “it was a curse”. Regardless of the method used, the search for our losses and what we lack will inevitably be distilled down to things that have no relation to “us” as we are today.

As a literature-centered person, I tend to evaluate the horizon of Ukrainian problems based on literary texts. For stateless nations, literature becomes their state and their statehood. Texts record attitudes, express hopes and bewail losses. Literature becomes virtually the only cultural institution for Ukrainians of the 19th century. After all, it was literature and the invention of folklore during the Romantic era that gave the birth to a new Europe. In this sense, we are not unique.

No wonder that the first work of the new Ukrainian literature, a remake of Virgil’s *Aeneid* by Ivan Kotliarevsky, was about a loss. It can be interpreted from different standpoints: as ordeals of the Ukrainian soul, as a story of the loss of Ukrainian sovereignty or an undying dream of it, as a literary document declaring the connection between the nation and the Cossack myth, as a piece of proof that Ukrainian culture belongs to, and is inspired by, European culture; finally, as the claim that the power of folk life with all its eternal robustness, resplendence and optimism will always prevail over historical destiny.

The latter is something we would particularly like to embrace: after losing his motherland, the Cossack Aeneas finds a new one. But where is it? In fact, it does not really exist. The old Cossack motherland is lost, and the new one, imagined and acquired in imagination, exists only in the field of desire.

👉 **A Ukrainian exists not thanks to the history, not with the history or in the history, but rather *near* the history, and most often *despite* it.** 🗨️

The history — as a narrative of consequent events where causes bring consequences, where geopolitical vectors compete and great efforts confront each other — is a secondary and unknown world for us. Our interaction with history has never done us any good. Therefore, we are exactly an “unhistorical nation” in the Hegelian sense. Ukrainians as a nation do not just grow out of the environment of folklore or make it the main source of their existence — like, for example, Germans with their Herderism and Grimms’ Fairy Tales. That would be too simple. We do more than that: we have an author and writer who is more folkloric than folklore itself, and more vernacular than the nation itself: Taras Shevchenko.

Taras Shevchenko’s *Kobzar*, as has been noted on many occasions, creates the myth of Ukraine, with its Golden Age, which actually never existed, and with the loss of the Golden Age that actually *did* exist. He creates the myth of Ukraine with its heroes, archetypes, narratives, flair, ambitions, traumas, catastrophes and seas of both Ukrainian and foreign blood. In a way, Shevchenko has overcome not only history, making reference to historical events as if they happened in a mythical time beyond history, but also reality. He defeated them for many decades to come. That is why, in our culture, Shevchenko can do anything, and anyone can do anything with him. In the hierarchy of national icons, only Jesus Christ is probably on a par with this poet. But, first, not too many people in this country truly believe

in Christ, and, second, he was not a Ukrainian, though some people claimed that he was. By contrast, people believe in Shevchenko even now. They would fail if they tried not to believe. I assume he is the only Ukrainian in all our history whom everyone believed. That does not happen to Ukrainians very often. They trust so strongly only in the Creator. I would say that this boundless love towards Shevchenko is actually unquestionable proof of the capacity of Ukrainians to love.



Shevchenko is our Christmas and our Easter. He is celebrated by all. Some celebrate him encouraged by the government, some because of their occupation, and some out of genuine love. It is hardwired in us, and cannot be eradicated or overcome. He changes easily between a bronze monument and plasticine, out of which any person can fashion some sense. Shevchenko's work has produced multiple quotes and memes used at various occasions in various amounts. He is the most recognized hero of our time, who always provokes vivid emotions. He is passionately defended from non-canonical interpretation, and all people turn to him as to a source of Holy Water: the right-wing, the left-wing, conservatives, nationalists, post-modernists, modernists, metaphorists, confessors, primordialists, liberals, those supporting Ukraine in Europe, those supporting Ukraine's authentic "third path", and even those who support Ukraine in one family with the "brotherly Russian people".

In this way we, Ukrainians, grow out of the loss of motherland described jokingly in the *Aeneid* of our "pioneer" Kotliarevsky, and make the loss of the Golden Age the main trauma of Ukrainian existence described by our "founder" Shevchenko. These narratives are our key constructive elements. A key trait of modern Ukrainians arose out of this imagined and dubious "Golden Age", that has been ingrained in Ukrainian consciousness for many decades. Ukrainians believe that "once upon a time" it was better than now, and it could never be as bad as it is now: "There was a time in our Ukraine", Shevchenko wrote, and people believed in this statement once and for all. It was good then, in the past, and now it is no longer good, Ukrainians think. This



“once upon a time” may, for modern Ukrainians, mean the Brezhnev-era *zastiy* [stagnation – Ed.] with its flourishing “stability”, or Stalin’s totalitarianism with its strict “order”, or the Cossack Era with “justness” and “glory”, or even medieval Kyivan Rus’ with the “wisdom” and the legal code of “Rus’ Justice”. Despite our unhistorical and stateless past, we often turn to history when we look and find pieces of evidence of our former integrity, imagined and false. “Sad, dire it was; but memory / Makes the heart smile today”: that is Shevchenko again, and this is the chief vector of our spiritual physiology.

“The smile of a heart” is an interesting idiom.

 **For Ukrainians, the “heart”, is an organ not only responsible for the emotional world, but also replacing the rational world.** 

Ukrainians bring their “philosophy of heart” [*philosophy of heart*, or *cordocentrism*], is one of the clichés describing the mentality of Ukrainians – Ed.] into the area of thinking, where the methods and concepts, rigorous thought and discipline of the mind should all prevail. “The Dictionary of the Ukrainian Language” (where else should we look for truth?) lists 397 phraseological units, locutions and collocations, including the word “heart” (*sertse*). On the contrary, “mind”, or “reason” (*rozum*) trails far behind with only 89 idioms, a good half of which relate, expectedly, not to achievements of the mind, but to its losses, defeats and disasters. *Holova* (“head”) gets even worse results, and *mozok* (“brain”) gets the worst of all. Brain seems to be the least certain human organ for Ukrainians, who do not just “ache” and “feel” with their hearts, but also “understand” and, in these days, even “vote” with it. Only a few idioms include “brain”, with just two of them, *vorushyty mozkom* (“move one’s brain”) and *krutyty mozkom* (“twirl one’s brain”, i.e. think hard), having neutral connotations, while the other two are negative: “slice one’s brain” (*krapaty mozok*) and “correct one’s brain” (*vpravliaty mozok*).

With the complete victory of heart over mind and reason, of the emotional over the rational, it was inevitable that the language itself moved towards “cordocentrism” [*i.e. the central role of the heart – Ed.*] which, at some point and without an alternative at hand, was named the inherent Ukrainian type of thinking and worldview. Why? Because the brain is a wasteful luxury for a stateless nation. It will sow the seeds of doubt, will not give pleasure and will not send out an alert about danger. Instead, the heart “will not betray”, will “warn” and “show the way out”, as people say. This excess of the heart creates a deficit of rationality and coherence, making Ukrainians inclined towards emotions and passions. Therefore, in this big broken heart of Ukrainian being of the mid-19th century another inherent national feature arose: duality.

I certainly mean here another remarkable figure of Ukrainian literature — Mykola Gogol, our “infiltrator” (or, as we say, an “infiltrated Cossack”, i.e. a “double agent”) into the Russian culture, whose *The Overcoat* (Shynel) became inspiration for the whole of Russian classical literature. He grew up in an old-world, baroque environment, and was also creating the Ukrainian myth in his own way, populating his early works with romantic characters, infernal forces and, again, the image of the lost paradise of the past. The Russian language of Gogol’s texts opened doors for his new conquests: the Ukrainian Romantic writer from the old Ukrainian nobility turns into a Russian realist, and then, in the latter years of his life, into a religious mystic. His nature, split between Ukrainian and Russian elements, is the neural core of all his writing.

This “combination of two natures” would become a pattern that Ukrainians would follow in the next century and a half. Many of them will split in two and forget their language, adapting to the lifestyle where native identity is seen as a burden and disadvantage, while true completeness in the imperial culture can be achieved only through rejection of the Ukrainian part of one’s identity. That is just what Gogol wrote: “I do not know myself, what soul I have, that of a *khokhol*

[*pejorative name for Ukrainians – Ed.*] or that of a Russian. I just know that I would give no preference to a Little Russian [*a name for Ukrainians, widespread in Gogol's time – Ed.*] before a Russian or to a Russian before a Little Russian”.

In his view, each part of the identity has something the other does not have, so they must mutually complement each other. Gogol dreamt about becoming a true Russian, so he fully discarded his Polish ethnic background and tried to sell, for a good price, his unique accent, his talent and the Ukrainian part of his soul. The latter had to “fuse” with the Russian one and become something of “the most perfect among humans”. The idealistic project of Gogol’s adherence to the Russian imperial substance made him a father of the Russian literature. He actually determined the future sociocritical vector of Russian literature, yet he was never truly embraced by Russian culture. I think it is hard for Russians to forgive him for his work *Dead Souls*. Only a stranger could have written such a scornful portrait of the Russian upper class. In this way, duality turns from an affect into another Ukrainian archetype, which would yield its bitter fruit in the 20th century, in new historical conditions.

If we look at the electoral map of today’s Ukraine, the first thing we notice is this: two large groups of people exist in Ukraine. The first of them strives for an integral Ukrainian identity, while the second has this split between Ukrainian and Russian identities, of which the former provides purely decorative elements (such as self-designation) and the latter lends the culture and the language. In the 20th century, Gogol’s dualism is deepened through creation of so-called “Soviet man”, a “new man” which the Bolsheviks tried to relieve from the “chimera of the national”, so that s/he becomes completely devoted to novel ideals of collective life in the internationalist spirit.

Today, some people in Ukraine attempt to present this Soviet identity (which had inevitable affection towards Russian culture and the Russian language) as a healthy, universal alternative to Ukrainian identity, narrowing down this Ukrainian identity to conservatism,



nationalism, and isolationism. Thus, Gogol's "fusion", which had to incarnate in a wonderful unity of two different national elements, has become, for some Ukrainians, an attempt to completely or partially erase their national identity. This phenomenon has led to the creation of Mykola Riabchuk's theory of "two Ukraines". That is why the question "Who are Ukrainians, and what do they want?" — a sort of question, to which "historical" nations have given an answer a long time ago — keeps bringing different, sometimes totally opposing answers. In this context, the pathos of progressive development, with its world of values, gets lost in discussions on the complexity of identification.

After Shevchenko, several attempts were made in the second half of 19th century to build a new Ukrainian unity through the idea of Ukrainian autonomism, liberalism, socialism and anarchism (Mykhailo Drahomanov), through positivism and social democracy (Ivan Franko), through "*contra spem spero*" [*"I hope without a hope"*, a poem by Lesia Ukrainka, — Ed.] and "Ukrainian Risorgimento" (Lesia Ukrainka). In a way, the work of these three authors was a rational response to the centuries of defeats and incompleteness that could allegedly be overcome using the progressive trends of European thinking and its aesthetic trends. Multiple attempts were made to understand the *narod* [*the people, the nation, "folk"* — Ed.], but also to see it as the main source of positive traits, to enlighten it, to show it the way to a balance between social and national, where the "plebeian nation" (Drahomanov) of "paralytics at the crossroads" (Franko) would overcome its age-old incompleteness. In this context, a Ukrainian version of 19th century "populism" (*narodnytstvo*) was born, aimed at showing the truth and the way to the people through enculturation and the "Prosvita" ("Enlightenment") project.

Later, in the 20th century, the idea of a Ukrainian state as the only way to achieve this desired completeness and overcome dualism came close to becoming reality. However, each attempt to create it wound up another national catastrophe. The project of the social democratic

Ukraine in the Ukrainian War of Independence faced a response from reality in the form of the Ukrainian SSR, which became part of the Soviet Union. The project of cultural “Red Renaissance” and Soviet Ukrainization faced the reality of physical elimination of the literate elite and the establishment of social realism as the only acceptable creative method. Peasant revolts faced the reality of the Holodomor of 1932-1933. The “integral nationalistic” Second Independence War faced terror from both Hitler and Stalin. The dissident movement of the 1950-1980s and poetic Sixtiers were punished in labor camps, prisons and mental hospitals. The velvety attempt at Ukrainization by the communists in the 1960s was followed by massive russification in the Brezhnev era of the 1970-1980s.

The bloody separation from Ukrainian and European cultural and political traditions that took place in 1930s did not just extend incompleteness and dualism, but made this dualism the only possible modus vivendi.

 **Ukrainians survived the 20th century by a miracle, thanks to their skill at clinging to life, and reached the 21st century only thanks to a whim of history, when the Soviet empire partially collapsed in 1991.** 

In the last 28 years, from the time the new Ukraine appeared on the map of Europe, the aggregate state of society and the elite has provided no opportunity for economic leaps forward or gradual development, or reform of the country, or miraculous establishment of a Western-type liberal democracy, or competition between ideologies to enable political and social development.

The war with Russia began in 2014 as Russia’s response to Ukraine’s radical attempt to liberate itself from Russian influence during the Euromaidan of 2013-2014. Russia responded to Euromaidan by annexing Ukraine’s Crimea and occupying Donbas. The war, on the one

hand, further aggravated internal divisions, but, on the other, showed that no socio-economic project in Ukraine can be successful without resolving the main issue: the country's complete and final exodus from the empire and its political, cultural, psychological structures, which do nothing but feed our dualism and incompleteness.

In the foreword to his novel *Trans-Atlantyk*, Witold Gombrowicz wrote about the situation Poland found itself in in the mid-20th century: "We, the Poles, were a part of an entity too weak to live properly, yet strong enough to survive". Following the Poles, our fellow travelers in great repartitions and catastrophes of the 20th century, we can admit that 'survival' was our biggest achievement in the last century.

Yet, it would be interesting to think positively and, in contrast to *contradictio in contrarium* of the first paragraphs in this text, to conclude with mentioning some achievements. So, here is my brief registry of what Ukrainians actually possess.

So, they have:

- a lot of patience;
- the culture of musical performance;
- oligarchic feudalism with elements of democracy;
- free speech;
- a low level of aggression in society;
- well-developed (for a post-Soviet country) civil society institutions;
- the ability to consolidate and unite efforts to attain a common goal;
- the inability to ensure that achievement of a common goal provides impactful and irreversible effects;
- the strong, newly-invented tradition of Ukrainian ethnic music of various types;
- religious tolerance and a generally highly tolerant society;
- the inability to learn from our own mistakes and reluctance to learn from the mistakes of others;
- generally good sense of humor, but not much of a sense of irony;

- a rather low level of anti-semitism;
- the readiness to national discussion;
- a rather high level of understanding that there is no alternative to “psychological Europe” [*a concept of a key Ukrainian writer of the 1920-1930s, Mykola Khvyliovyi – Ed.*]; another option is death from empire: a slow one as its integral subordinated part, or a fast one, in the fight against the empire;
- the understanding that a systemic shift and fundamental changes of life rules are inevitable, but lack of understanding that these changes would affect every single person;
- quite a strong chess school, internationally successful for decades;
- authentic modern Eastern European literature that is popular abroad, yet relatively unknown at home;
- conflict-free bilinguality; some knowledge of foreign languages;
- preeminence of the individual over the collective;
- strong national school of photography;
- ineradicable gene of freedom and rebelliousness;
- a great desire to switch from “survival” mode to “life”;
- a high level of openness to the world and willingness to conduct dialogue;
- a talent for enduring hardship;
- a demand for justice;
- a desire to live with dignity;
- a desire simply to live...

Every person could add some lines to this list. These points would, perhaps, suffice to overcome the incompleteness and lack. This would also help to do something for our dramatic dualism: to overcome it, or, if we cannot do that, to at least use it for our benefit. This dualism is not exclusively our trait either.



**STORIES**

**TRAINS**

**FOOD**

**HALUSHKY**

**COMMUNIST PARTY**

**HIPSTERS**

**MAIDAN**

**LIFESTYLE**

**WORLD WAR II**

**CITIES**

**BARS**

**SOVIETS**

**FOREIGNERS**

**VARENYKY**

**FRIDAY NIGHT PARTY**

**MARSHRUTKA**

**KYIV**

**HAPPY**

**BEAUTIFUL**

**LVIV**

**ODESA**





# STORIES

**Ukraine as a Movie,**

*by Irena Karpa*

**You Know It Better Than Me,**

*by Haska Shyyan*



## Ukraine as a Movie

### I

Together with my colleagues – a journalist and a producer – I was recently involved in making a presentation about Ukraine for a group of French bankers. They were nice people from various regions, and had a vague idea about where Ukraine is located. Yet they spent a whole day at a conference on Ukrainian issues, and in the evening they were going (almost) to a Ukrainian restaurant so, prior to this, they wanted a kind of cultural *l'apéro*.

My colleague, a movie producer, talked a lot about Kazimir Malevich [*Ukrainian avant-garde artist of 1910-1930s of Polish origins – Ed.*], the Paris Ukrainian School, Sonia Delaunay [*Ukrainian avant-garde painter – Ed.*], Oleksandr Arkhymenko [*Ukrainian avant-garde sculptor – Ed.*], and Oleksa Hryshenko [*a Ukrainian artist and art theorist – Ed.*]. My journalist colleague presented her first book about a sculptor, Khana Orlova, from Odessa who won the attention of Montparnasse and, along the way, acquainted Modigliani with his unhappy Jeanne.

While sitting in Orlova's workshop, the bankers were nodding politely, making some notes, and asking polite questions. Some were politely falling asleep.

Then it was my turn to speak. You know, I told them, they make suuuuch great cocktails in Kyiv that you can't even imagine them in your dreams. Well, maybe you can if you are a frequent visitor of the *Experimental Cocktail Club* (the bankers knew the location a little bit better than Ukraine's place on the map). When I told the bankers that our cocktails are twice as large and three times cheaper, I had their attention.

Then I talked away about food and about friendly, open and beautiful people. Depending on the specific member of my audience, I was careful to focus on their specific area of interest. I talked about techno parties, co-working spaces, shops for hipsters, terraces: all this is for an urbanite. Faraway villages, mountains, gardens with cherry trees, and strawberries sold at a roadside are for pastoral lovers.

(I have to emphasize here that I used the word *people* in a very broad sense, as it included both old ladies who will find a way to communicate with you using the language of gestures, and geeks speaking perfect English. And I would rather swallow my tongue than refer to Ukrainian women as a *brand* or an attraction for tourists, or if I mention "women taking off their clothes in Spring" as it was mentioned in passing by two Ukrainian presidents in their speeches).

The bankers asked for precise addresses – in their imagination, they were already sitting there with cocktails swinging their legs from the rooftops, enjoying Kyiv's skyline. I recommended they should visit the *Barmen Dičtat*, *Parovoz Speak Easy bar*, *11 Mirrors Rooftop* and *It's not the Louvre Gallery bar* (because they also have cool exhibitions there).

And I told them, you should also go for a train ride across Ukraine. Buy something called CB – "es-ve", say just like this) – there is no such thing left in Europe any longer. Europe only has occasional night trains where "sardine can" experiments are carried out on passengers, probably with the aim of figuring out whether passengers can survive in a compartment for six persons or whether some of them will die of scoliosis. In Ukraine, instead, we still have the relics of old-time luxury: compartments for two, almost like in the *Orient Express*.

Well, if you are brave, go for hardcore: buy a ticket in an ordinary compartment (called “coupé”) or in a communal compartment (called “platzkart”). Then you will experience real life without embellishments. The most important thing is to get rid of any prejudices. Look out the window. Get off the train at a random station. And look at everything that seems ugly to you as if you were watching an *atmospheric movie*...

The French bankers remembered the part about the movie, but they would hardly dare to go for hardcore. Probably Kyiv or Odesa, already exotic for them – well, it is nice there and the food is great. Yet, I am eager to write this short story for someone like myself..

For a long time, I did not like Europe, and Asia seemed much more appealing since transitional societies are so interesting to experience. Perhaps, Ukraine remains one of these societies. If you like to peek behind the curtain of tidiness and pre-packed tourist info – just read and come over.

So, what do you know about Ukraine? Has it been long since you stopped confusing it with Russia, or believing that all those miserable 15 republics in the former Soviet Union were Russia? Okay, I will not go on like this. This is not, after all, an exam.

If by chance you were in Paris, and together with crowds of tourists happened to visit the *Rouge* exhibition about arts of the Soviet era, then you could exclaim together with others: “Oh it’s so exotic, it’s so romantic, and it used to be secret!”

And I will tell you that yes, it used to be secret, but it is not damn romantic. KGB archives contain a lot of “exotic” data even today. I am not a historian, and I am sure that in this book one will find proper expert analysis by brilliant professionals.

 **Yet what I can do well is tell you honestly about what happened to several generations of my Ukrainian family.** 

Things that happened to them planted a grain of rejection of the Soviet regime in me from the most tender age. From anti-Soviet jokes told by my father, from detestable school uniforms (can you imagine wearing double layers of thick wool in 30-degree heat?) to repressions against my great grandfather for his “anti-Soviet activities”. In simple terms, the Soviet regime killed dreams in my family on a regular basis.

My father, for instance, was not able to make it into the journalism department, his dream and ambition, because he had the mark of “public enemy” in his dossier: i. e., my great grandfather. This great grandpa Oleksa was an extremely interesting personality. He was an ordinary farmer, and before the Second Soviets came [*2nd Soviet occupation of Western Ukraine in 1944 – Ed.*] he owned the best rideable horses in the village. That large village in Lviv Region, Peredilnytsia, was on the route taken by pilgrims to the Madonna of Częstochowa. It had as many as seven coaching inns, so my grandfather had his income.

The local landowner was also fond of Oleksa’s superb horses, he used them for a ride to the local Las Vegas – a casino near Przemyśl. The gambling pleasure-seeker would lose all his money there, and had to recoup his losses in order to protect his noble dignity. The only money on his horizon was the money from Oleksa’s pocket. The landowner threatened and begged to borrow money. Oleksa shook his head stubbornly: I have nothing there, he said. Then the landowner would sigh, take a piece of paper out of the pocket, draw his fields on it and indicate with a dotted line the piece of land he would give to Oleksa if he lent him some money. This was the point when, surprisingly, Oleksa would find the money. In this way, the landowner had a rapid and fiery life, whereas my great grandfather’s fields were growing exponentially. Landowners and peasants have somewhat different existential values: while the landowner was fritting away the estates he inherited and was living from day to day, Oleksa tried to multiply the legacy he would leave to his children. The entire family had to work indefinitely to achieve this distant and beautiful future.

That is why Oleksa himself, all his children and his wife, had to deny themselves everything. All eggs, meat and milk were brought to the market place and sold for a sole purpose – to get as much cash as possible so that it can be lent to the landowner the next time he went to the casino.

The Second Soviets took everything from Oleksa's family that was not taken away by the First Soviets in 1919 or by the Nazis in 1939. They took everything, down to the last egg. Every cow and chicken, all the fields. Everything was collectivized, and Oleksa, as a *kulak* (a generic name for wealthy peasants who had to be exterminated according to a plan devised by Vladimir Lenin) was sent into internal exile to Siberia. He was accused of subversive activities against the Soviet government when they found a file of *Prosvita* magazines in the attic – a Ukrainian language periodical for teachers and intellectuals...

One of Oleksa's sons, my grandfather Ivan, became the chief engineer of *Prykarpatis* (I still wonder how he was ever able to get there a miracle) and afterwards somehow managed to get his father out of the Siberian gulag. Interestingly, Siberia did not make my great grandfather Oleksa a resentful man. After he returned from exile, he even started a *kolkhoz* apiary. And then he became a foreman of the road crew, and paid in his own money to plant not state-imposed poplars, but apple, pear, plum and walnut trees along the road side for several kilometers up to Nove Misto.

👂 **My father remembers that his grandpa Oleksa could talk to horses. Now they have a trendy name for it, *horse whisperer*.** 🗣️

My relatives on my mother's side of the family did not show any weakness in their loyalty for the Soviet government either. Our grandfather Petro nearly died during the 1947 famine, and was already being carried to a morgue when, at the last moment, Uncle Hrysha came rushing, took out his gun and said he would "blow everyone's fucking

heads off” if this boy did not survive. No-one brought a complaint against Uncle Hrysha. He was the second secretary of the district committee of the Communist Party...

The same grandfather Petro later became a career military man, a reconnaissance troop commander, lieutenant colonel of the tank force. Unanswered questions tortured him until his death. A successful Soviet military man, he read a lot of books after he retired: about UPA [*the Ukrainian Insurgent Army active during and after World War II – Ed.*], the Ukrainian national struggle and figures like Petliura, Bandera, Konovalts, and Shukhevych. When Ukraine became independent, my grandfather became almost the first among Soviet top-rank retirees to join the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists. Why?..

Well, grandfather Petro was one of those who brought troops to Prague in 1968. “Already back then”, he used to tell me, “strange things were happening. A Czech student came to our bonfire one night. He asked us carefully why we were there. And he was explaining what they were protesting against... I don’t know, maybe he was a provocateur sent by the KGB. But already then a doubt sneaked into my head”. And it was torturing my grandfather until he died.

My father could have been a rock musician during his student years. He even introduced a rap bridge (unimaginable at that time) into a hard-rock composition. And everything could have been nice, and girls would have thrown lots of flowers and their bras onto the stage if only that rock hit had not used lyrics written by... Taras Shevchenko. In the 1970s freedom-loving Lviv accepted Shevchenko’s *Dumy Moyi* [*My Thoughts*] (by the way, the poem was translated into the majority of the world’s languages, including yours, so ask Google to help you), exactly as it was meant to.

“Well, right, for a patriotic song contest in a forestry engineering institute, everything was a little bit too spectacular”, my father says, laughing, when I start asking questions about that old story. “A song with the refrain ‘I’ll stamp out oppression – With my naked feet!’



[*a verse from Shevchenko's poem Kateryna – Ed.*] was performed eight (!!!) times. And every time, girls from the Applied and Decorative Arts Institute ran onto the stage with flowers to kiss us. I love Zalizniaka Street in Lviv to this very day..."

The morning after was not so cloudless. A meeting of the Party bureau was convened, during which the Party organizer demanded that the Soviet students' community should be cleansed from Banderist filth. "Even my father would not help me; he would only get into trouble because of his son. You won't believe it but sometimes it pays to be a good student – I was a favorite student of the deputy head of the Department of History of the Soviet Union Communist Party. And he was the *partorg* [*Party organizer, i.e. the leader of a local Communist Party unit – Ed.*] for the entire institute and a boyhood friend of Brezhnev himself. What, he said, do you want to expel them? Tomorrow, they will organize a torchlight march (and there were precedents in Lviv by that time), and the day after tomorrow they will go through the city center with a mass *koliada* [*Christmas carols, which were also prohibited – Author's note*]. Shove it under the rug, and cancel stupid contests – send them out to collect plants for a fucking herbarium...". That's what this Party official said.

That story had an even better outcome – they sent my father out of harm's way, to the German Democratic Republic on an exchange program for engineering students. However, there is no picture of my father on the "Department-is-proud-of..." sign depicting all the delegates sent to foreign universities. That was petty revenge on the part of the dean. "Still, my parents were proud of their son. In secret, but I am sure they were," my father smiles.

One can say that my family was lucky. At any tough time, there was someone smart who saved everything at the last moment. For instance, during the Famine, when NKVD [*People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, Soviet secret police – Ed.*] enthusiasts took away all the grain from peasants and shot people for three hidden pieces of wheat, my ancestors hid their grain in the ground under a wicket gate:

this was the only place that could not be pierced with a probing rod. And they were hiding not only grain but people as well. During World War II, my great grandfather escaped from German captivity. Yet, the USSR “greeted” such people with execution by firing squad – they said, “How did you manage to escape? For sure you were released only because you betrayed your Motherland!!” So, my great grandfather needed to hide too...

During the same war, my grandmother, who lived through it as a child, learned never to divide the world into black and white (and she passed this skill onto me). I will always remember the strange story about 6-year old Lidochka (my grandmother) and a German driver, Otto (the general’s driver) who was lodged in their village house. Otto had children back home, and he missed them very much. He shared his entire rations with the Ukrainian family. And my little grandmother put the most precious things – candies and cookies – on a Christmas tree for the New Year.

When the Germans retreated, Soviet troops came, and the first thing done by a liberating soldier in grandma’s house was to tear off and eat everything the child had put on her poor Christmas tree...

I started talking about killed dreams, didn’t I? Half of our families or even more have them. Someone was repressed by the Soviet system directly, while others turned on self-censorship (which is even worse) and started writing graphomaniac verses and songs glorifying the System. Dreaming about freedom, baptizing children, singing authentic songs – all this was seen as equal to the worst crime, but we were doing this. Children were baptized secretly and at home, Christmas carols (*koliadas*) were sung behind tightly-closed doors, “forbidden” books were handed personally from one person to another, and people came together in the kitchens to listen to the banned *Voice of America*...

However, there were representatives of the opposite camp. It would be interesting to learn which stories they share with their grandchildren – all those who wrote reports and anonymous letters to the

authorities, and who simply cooperated passionately without doubting the righteousness of the system. And I would be furthermore interested to know if you can compare this to at least something in the experience of your country without referring to spy movies.

“Well, what can one love that *Sovdepia*\* for?” my father asks me. “Maybe for the fact that every class in my school, which was considered top-tier at that time, had to have children of KGB officers who would pass on everything they heard to their parents? In our class, there was Ritka Kalashnyk, and we suspected she was doing precisely this... And she confessed this at an alumni reunion much later. She cried and tried to persuade us that she never did anything wrong... And we believed her while the girls cried together with her”.

It was precisely because of this hatchet-like job to cut the wings off of human dreams – depending on whether you were born a child of an anti-Soviet person or a child of a KGB officer, you were already doomed to something – that I can find nothing romantic in the *Sovok*. What is romantic about a brown school uniform? About Lenin’s portraits in every office? About reusable cloths one had to wash instead of tampons or hygienic napkins (OK, it’s Oksana Zabuzhko who likes giving this example)? Is it about waiting in a queue for years to buy a *Zhiguli* car? Or is it about the slogan, “*From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs*”? Or about the impossibility to speak the truth? About grey boxes of nine-storey buildings often constructed in places where architectural monuments are located? About the impossibility to leave the country in order to go somewhere beyond the borders of the socialist camp? Honestly, I don’t know.

Just think about all this when you are watching your movie about the Ugly, or walking around Ukrainian towns. And do not forget to look for drops of the Beautiful in it.

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\* This is how we call the Soviet regime here. There is another term, which is more widespread – *Sovok*. — AUTHOR’S NOTE

On August 24, 1991 [*Ukrainian Independence Day – Ed.*] I was ten years old. On August 21, several days before Ukraine declared independence, a *putsch* took place in Moscow. World renowned *Swan Lake* was playing on all the TV channels, and armored fighting vehicles were converging on Red Square. I remember my friend and I walking silent and scared, holding our bicycles by their handlebars with our heads low, thinking what was going to happen and whether we would get that Independence that we dreamt so much about. I do not think it was caused only by fragments of adult conversations and confusing messages from innumerable media outlets. It was more about striving for freedom and independence, which runs in the human blood. It is either there or it isn't. The Ukrainians definitely have it – regardless of how fucked up our geopolitical position has been for all these hundreds of years, we never bruised the ass of any tsar with kisses. Every time we, the rogues, manage to organize a new revolution, a guerrilla movement or a liberation competition arises. This is our hobby. And you know what? We are good at it. If we'd only learn how to preserve what we have and manage it properly, we would be worth our weight in gold.

I think you already know about Maidan 1 in 2004, and about Maidan 2 in 2014 (yes, we are punctual). If you want to learn more, I recommend you should read *The Gates of Europe* by historian Serhii Plokhy or the *Maidan Diaries* by novelist Andriy Kurkov. I doubt that I would ever be able to describe everything that happened to us because the last Ukrainian overthrow of dictatorship was too intimate, emotional and personal for me. Yet I can tell you one thing:

👉 **I am extremely grateful to the age I was born in for the privilege of being part of that incredible historical solidarity.** 🏹

This cannot even be seen in a movie. It was “the descent of the Holy Spirit”, as historian Yaroslav Hrytsak described what happened in 2004. In 2014, Michael the Archangel joined the Holy Spirit carrying

his fiery sword: we became more united, angry and not like the “kittens” we were back in 2004.

If one can imagine a feeling of experiencing the living pulse of one’s nation, this was it. I was simply overwhelmed just in the middle of a street with this love for ordinary men in blackened sheepskins carrying homemade armors, for women with their hands, red from frost, stirring soup and tea in the cold weather for everyone who was freezing, for girls simply walking around and hugging everyone who needed a hug... Who were they and what did they do in their normal lives? It made no difference. There was a feeling of affinity never felt before. And an understanding why I was born in this country during this era.

By the way, if you’re interested, watch Pharrell Williams’ clip, *Happy* [a cover made on this song on Maidan in 2014 is available on YouTube, type Happy Kyiv – Ed.]. We are dancing there on Maidan in relatively hot weather, only minus five Celsius instead of minus twenty, and we feel really happy. Because at that very moment in time we were changing something. And it also hurts very much when I hear this song at European discos as some of those filmed in the clip are no longer alive. They are part of the Heavenly Hundred now. Have you ever heard of the Heavenly Hundred?

When you are in Kyiv, you have to walk along Instytutska Street. Do not pay attention to the standard boring monuments – they are often erected like tombstones in Ukraine. But if you see ordinary printed photos of extraordinary people, you definitely have to look into their eyes. I wonder if you feel something similar to what I feel there. I’m sure you do. Fighting for freedom is a universal thing.

## II

My first husband was Jewish, my second was American, and the third is French. Apparently, something in me decided that I have enough Ukrainian genes inside of me to produce future generations. When my children are asked in a Paris school where they are from,

my first daughter says she is from Berlin, and the second one says she is from Barcelona (this is correct, they were born in these cities), but they are both Ukrainians. Therefore, French kids think that their names – Korena and Kailash – and fluency in three languages are typical Ukrainian features.

👉👉 **The girls love the Marseillaise since the age of four or five, but this did not prevent them from adding a yellow and blue flag to each school drawing of a princess’s castle.** 👉👉

My Ukrainian friends who were born in the USA or Canada (parents and grandparents had to emigrate for various reasons – some for economic reasons and some while escaping repressions for participation in OUN-UPA or anti-Soviet guerilla movements), speak Ukrainian very well. “Just because English was forbidden at home”, they laugh. “As soon as you said something in the ‘language of school and friends’, mom would stop speaking, and dad could even kick your ass”. As a result, having lived not even for one uninterrupted year in Ukraine, these citizens of USA and Canada speak Ukrainian better than me. For instance, they do not have Russianisms, and you have to explain modern Ukrainian slang to them in simple terms or use English equivalents.

I am not such a strict mother. If my kids get spanked, it isn’t for the language. Besides, isolating ourselves at home by speaking Ukrainian when having a French husband would be a bit impolite to him. (However, he has already learnt a couple of Ukrainian words: little mouth, little nose, little eyes, little hen – everything in a diminutive form because he heard it from the kids, and the key phrase from me: *Kids, go to bed!*)

And yes, he has also learnt some Ukrainian swear words from me. (These will probably be the first words you’ll have to learn after “hello” and “thank you”. Remember these words for greeting and for gratitude because your *spasibo* [“thank you” in Russian – Ed.] will not cause such admiration as *diakuju* [“thank you” in Ukrainian – Ed.],

even in the Eastern regions of Ukraine. Yes, that's right, *spasibo* is Russian. Ukrainian is an entirely different language and it is less similar to Russian than Italian is similar to French).

So, swear words. I am not going to give you an entire list here, let's reduce it to polysemic *kurva* [bitch], *sraka* [ass] and *biad* [fuck or whore, depending on the context] where the latter can be heard in all regions, while the former mostly in the West.

The great grandmother of my American husband was born in Ukraine. She came to New York with the first waves of immigration. Her son did not speak Ukrainian and he married an English woman, but some words were passed even to his grandson. These were precisely those swear words. But before he completed a Russian language course in the University of California, the would-be father of my children had perfect command of Ukrainian swear words, which replaced the prohibited *fuck*, *shit* and *bitch* at home.

Well, I am teaching you bad things again. So let's talk about something good now. For instance, about Ukrainian food: what can be better?

When I was a student, the love of my life was a Finnish guy, a fighter for human rights and a vegetarian. "Your Ukrainian spices are just salt and hot water," he used to say. Lies, I am telling you! We also have dill (try and find it at a Paris market) and black pepper, he-he. However, my vegetarian guy, despite the limited range on offer in Kyiv supermarkets, was all into a typical Ukrainian breakfast. Slices of dark Ukrainian bread (it is called just like this, "Ukrainian bread", and it is round), cucumbers cut into large pieces, seasonal tomatoes, and briny *bryndza* [white cheese from sheep milk]...

I have never seen cucumbers anywhere in the world that would get at least close to the taste of Ukrainian seasonal cucumbers. In France, one gets the impression that they are born giants already packed in plastic. In addition to this, they are as gelatinous and watery as a drama actress at the death door. In Indonesia, they make a sweet smoothie from cucumbers. It is refreshing, but ugh... And here, in Ukraine, they

are not cornichons and not butterballs, you just go to the market and buy them yourself. Or you can go to a shop if it's the right time of year. Everything is just fine with vegetables in Ukraine. And for God's sake try the squash spread. Just ask for it in a shop, "De u vas ye kabachkova ikra", because it is one more Ukrainian know-how.

You might know that Ukrainian beetroot soup, aka *borscht* is included in the UNESCO heritage list. Now you have to remember that this UNESCO borscht with beetroot, potatoes, meat and even cherries is *Ukrainian*. Because the Russians are proud of their *shchi* based on cabbage and brine, while Polish beetroot *barszcz* is meatless and dietary.

The next classical thing is *varenky*; their closest relatives are ravioli and Asian dim sums. *Varenky* are heavy and tasty, and you can't stop eating them. They are made with potatoes, cabbage, mushrooms, cheese, with added crispy cracknels and liver. One of my friends swears that she is ready to kill for *varenky* with cherries or blueberries. I do not think it's true, but I would rather not test that.

👉👉 **Then, if you go to Poltava, ask for real *halushky*.  
In Ivano-Frankivsk Region ask for *banush* with  
*bryndza* and *deruny* (potato fritters) with  
Julienne sauce 🍴🍴**

(Hutsul sauce made with porcini mushrooms can be also called "Julienne", why not!). If you are in Odesa, ask for fresh fried mullet fish. Of course, we have plenty of gastronomic restaurants here as well as good meat and wine – no worries. The cliché that Ukraine only has terribly heavy and fatty food is an outdated myth. You have enough to choose from. Until recently, our street food was Italian and Japanese. Now first place is taken by Georgian food, and it's incredible! This is something you should definitely not miss.

What should you listen to and where can you lose calories? Well, if you love techno-music and they did not let you in last time to *Berghain* in Berlin, then go to see the *Strichka* or *Skhema* at the Closer Club.



If you want something more refined, you won't believe it but we have a magnificent National Opera, and you can afford tickets not only when celebrating your 30th wedding anniversary. The same can be said of the Philharmonic Hall. Kyiv has its intelligentsia style. (Odesa, Lviv and other big cities as well. The most important thing to remember when you are making your way to the cultural hearts through kiosks and boxes of buildings is our magic trick – watching your movie...)

Should I also tell you about modern art centers, and about Ukrainian object and fashion design? Yes, incredible clothes are made here by Litkovskaya, Frolov, Bobkova. And we have stipends for young talents from the *Pinchuk Art Center*. Several times a year, incredible exhibitions are held at *Mystetsky Arsenal*. And that's without even mentioning small progressive galleries such as *Ya-Gallery*. This is all Kyiv, and how many wonderful things can be found in other places! Heh, it's a pity they did not ask me to write a guidebook...

Listen, I am already sleepy and you are still asking me about movies to watch. Well, switch on the HBO series *Chernobyl*. After six episodes, you will become an expert on the last days of the USSR. Or watch Serhiy Loznytsia. His movies may well be gloomy, but still they won at Cannes. His most recent movie, *Donbas*, is a feature film though too much of a documentary. Or watch Kira Muratova again. Out of the new Ukrainian movies, I liked *Dyke Pole* [Wild Field] based upon Serhii Zhadan's novel. And I have not seen it yet, but experts say it's the best debut in Ukrainian cinema of recent years: *Dulkan* by Roman Bondarchuk. And you probably already know the classics. Like Paradzhanov's *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* or Dovzhenko's *Earth*.

What, so you want me to tell you about literature as well? Oh no, this is an entirely different and very long story now. I recommend you should start with a library in your town. Ask the seller for translations of the Ukrainian authors that they have. Don't be afraid to surprise people.





Haska Shyyan

## You Know It Better Than Me

The fact that you are holding this book in your hands and even feel curiosity towards reading it probably means you are interested in this massive land, situated there, somewhere between Europe and Russia.



You probably still see it as terra incognita for you, and as part of mysterious Slavic space, with its intriguing and slightly wild soul. A cold territory inhabited by clones of Natalya Vodyanova where people speak few similar languages using Cyrillic to spell it all. Nevertheless, intuitively you feel that there must be something special and distinctive hiding around here. And also, you feel anxiety, imagining how does a country which is at war live on a daily basis? Is it safe to land in its airports?

Or maybe not, maybe you have travelled here enough times to learn that it actually can be pretty hot, is rather safe and yes, the trend for impressive eyebrows did recently expand across the region and female faces. And lumbersexual beards conquered the chins of young men.

Maybe your knowledge of local specialities is even good enough to not get confused identifying the Ukrainian and Russian language, hanging out with locals in one of chill and hip bars of Kyiv, which

generously open their doors and summer terraces these days. In this case you can be proud of the proficiency of a true linguist who cares about the letter ‘İ’, which we tenderly carry in the name of the country (*Ukraine is spelled Україна in Ukrainian – Ed.*), as well as its capital. Although it does not necessarily make us naïve in our struggle for #KyivnotKiev [*a campaign calling to spell Ukraine’s capital city as ‘Kyiv’ in English, according to Ukrainian phonetics (Київ), rather than ‘Kiev’ (Киев), in Russian phonetics – Ed.*]. You will have quite a few confusing moments when opening the maps of the country and cities. Sorry for that. But in the 20th century things were renamed so many times that it makes Chervonoarmyska, Bolshaya Vasilkovskaya, Krasnoarmeyskaya and Velyka Vasylkivska the same street, especially in the navigation inbuilt into the heads of taxi drivers. But anyway, be happy you have the luxury of avoiding listening to political analysis “exclusively from Behind the wheel” even if you understand the language, pretend you don’t – these experts “in everything in the World” can easily provoke you to run away.

And you better not.

 **There are many things to see around this country and usually you foreigners are even more passionate than us locals in exploring remote and hidden treasures.** 

I will share my individual suggestions, feelings and memories, trying to balance between my personal few pages for Lonely Planet Eastern Europe and a personal friendly chat that should help to encourage, intrigue, seduce and invite.

I won’t go deeper into times than to glide over the Soviet era as, anyway, one young girl recently called it ancient, giving me more confidence about my own life experience, so to say. Our history of the previous century is not an easy piece of cake, especially when it gets segmented into puzzling pieces of human stories with all the secrets

and shades of emotions. Grandchildren often unite the radically different political views and reflections of their grandparents, mixing deep painful traumas with sweet nostalgia. And the patchwork of these stories is, at the same time, such a strong celebration of our diversity and unity.

Ukrainian culture is strongly associated with its ethnic and rustic origins and rightfully so, but its urban landscape offers a wide spectrum, full of objects of admiration from the cute heritage of Austrian and Polish architects to Soviet empire style, functionalism and brutalism. Folk elements exist successfully with the strong industrial and city culture developed under various influences of more and less tolerant empires.

Being an urban creature myself, I will take you on a tour around a few beloved cities, telling stories through the eyes of friends who helped me to discover a lot.

## **Julia in Lviv**

Julia is just wonderful – I don't know how else I could start talking about her. She came over from Krakow, where she is doing her Erasmus. Who would not want to come from Barcelona to Krakow as Erasmus, really! Who would not go for a weekend from Krakow to Lviv! Or Lwow, as they keep calling it there [*in Poland – Ed.*]. Another confusion of letters and sounds. Julia was probably told that Lwow is almost like Krakow but a bit quieter and cheaper. There's no Easy Jet connection from UK, if you know what I mean. So, she grabbed her backpack and sent a Couchsurfing request to me and my sister, received almost immediate confirmation and left her 35 square meters room in a huge, old shared apartment. Julia is an adventurous girl, so she decides to take a pedestrian crossing in Shehyni, packed with smugglers of cigarettes and vodka, competing with each other over the number of gold teeth, place in the queue and odors collections hidden in the layers of clothes they use as smuggling tools. After smiling

to an indifferent border officer and getting through the labyrinth-path together with the crowd, Julia gets on a marshrutka, aka minibus, when it is already dark. OMG, thinks Julia, where is this rusty yellow bus, floating like a submarine in the cold black October air, going to take me? The soundtrack is far from recognizable Beatles melodies, the driver is crossing himself when travelling by every church and statue of the Holy Virgin – the only enlightened islands ... ah, ok, the petrol stations too... but there are more Holy Virgin. Front window decorations consisting of tons of weird stuff, from religious items to naked girls and fluffy toys, makes road visibility even worse. The driver crosses himself again. Is he so scared to drive here? His face reflects the opposite – a peaceful experience is resting in his wrinkles. Even when the bus jumps on a new pothole whose location he still does not remember by heart. He does swear. Julia recognizes the Polish word “kurwa” in a longer list of unknown expressive obscenities. But his heavily suntanned forehead, his plump red cheeks, his tired gaze, stay almost frozen. Even his lips don’t really move – the words come from the depths of his heart – only his strong hands, with stains of black soil and oil, twist the wheel harshly. The metal makes the sound of a dog being beaten, and some passengers sigh. Where is it going to take me? – Julia asks almost out loud. And instinctively replies to herself: C’mon Julia, it should be fine and maybe even fun. He-he, she still does not know my phone has only 1% battery life and a risk of not being heard in a loud bar. It is Friday night after all. Although, my life in Lviv back then was an endless Friday night.

Julia arrives at the train station at midnight, like Cinderella on a yellow pumpkin, just that this vehicle does not have more potential to degrade. The building is rather gorgeous; it seems like it is recognizable from one of the movies she watched recently. The city is more generous with the lights than countryside roads are. My phone is charged again as not so many bars offer drinks after 11 p.m. This place is not as wild as you sometimes would want it to be, Julia, you won’t meet too many loud gangs hanging out till dawn. Instead, it offers the coziness of a hot

meal, an uncorked bottle of wine and a soft sofa to sleep on. We chat for a few hours and Julia almost becomes our sister very quickly, so the next day we decide to show her real Lviv, with all the layers of epochs, skipping the ticks in the boxes of well-promoted touristy musts.

We start in one of the coffee places that could easily be called dodgy, right behind the corner of the once luxury George Hotel. The sculptures on the façade turn their butts and open their breasts to the cold October sun. The air is crispy fresh and the light is golden orange. We roll our cigarettes outside; they burn our lips together with the shot of strong black liquid from an old-school machine. Men in their late 50s: with their elegant grey hair, torn violin cases and flutes under their arms, inhabit the place. They have their morning cognac and try to flirt with us in a manner that's as vintage as their faded coats. One of them even makes it to kiss Julia's hand. And cheek. Her face blushes. He bows, like on the stage of an opera house, grabs aged sheet music and leaves to teach a new generation of orchestra players at the Conservatory across the street. We go ahead to Rynok Square – yes, it is a must, but we still don't skip it, we're just going to watch it from different angles. A corner location is perfect for that. In a small authentic Greek tavern – the owner settled down here for a few years and decided to share his cooking skills with locals. We grab some pitas and sit outside, as we're offered a secret glass of ouzo as a compliment. The smell of anise together with the sun, which shares the last warmth provided for this year, takes us south. Soon everything is going to get humid and grey and in a year or two most of the places we visit today will no longer exist, replaced by trendier ones. Such are the lively dynamics of cities like Krakow, but cheaper. Low-cost flights will soon land in a tiny and homey airport. Some locals will complain, some will be happy, but for now Julia and us just move our chairs, meter by meter, avoiding the shadow, feeling like sand watches. The ancient stones around have their own way of measuring time. One more century, with all its historical turbulence, is nothing for them.

🗨️ **They've seen Austro-Hungary, Poland, the USSR and, finally, Ukraine and they will still find a little hole between the bricks to hide a little memory of Julia.** 🗨️

Before sunset we walk up the hill, to see the city from the top. It is golden with all its churches and autumn parks. Coming back through proletarian industrial neighborhoods, which after the last wave of gentrification don't look like such a bad place to live, we stop at the brand-new playground and get on the swing. "I love this city!" – says Julia. And this city loves her.

### **Erdem in Kyiv**

Erdem lands in Boryspil Airport and is happy not to look for a connecting flight and to discover his guitar was not damaged by Turkish Airlines. He has heard that this country is full of opportunities and wants to try outsourcing for IT, but also maybe cracking a deal with a small manufacturer of funky colorful socks. Erdem is full of ideas and hopes, and after registering a LLC and getting a residence permit his Dutch boyfriend is going to join him to settle down. I help him with bureaucratic practicalities – people all around the world find paperwork challenging, scary or even repulsive.

The hot air outside can easily compete with temperatures in Istanbul, so it's hard to believe that in six months time a warm parka will be very necessary. A taxi takes Erdem across the bridge over the River Dnipro, whose waters are calm and magnificent, the car smells like cheap perfume, the music is a bit strange and the driver can not keep himself from pronouncing the word "devochki – girls" in a context Erdem does not understand, though guesses about. Nevertheless, he decides not to go into the details of his private life too much as he intuitively feels that taxi drivers all over the world can be very judgmental.



We meet at the hotel lobby, which is inhabited with the bright and young. Colorful hair (magenta, lemon, teal) baggy clothes, piercing and tattoos.

👂 **Hipster culture blossoms here, on the terrace overlooking the roofs of Podil – a neighbourhood that makes Kyiv feel like New Berlin more than others.** 🗨️

Five years ago, this city was full of hardly digestible tacky glamour, but underground night clubs hosting the best DJs, and not pretentious bars and cafés, takes it further and further away from nouveau-riche bandit aesthetics, turning the place into a very vibe-filled location.

After discussing boring logistics and convincing Erdem that everything is doable without bribery, we start to research the funky sock market and discover that one of the brands designed in Lviv close to the Polish border is manufactured a few kilometers from the front line in Luhansk Region. Colorful threads 1,500 kilometres long, connect people in the West and East, and are also a reminder that we are a country at war. Erdem starts to ask. I try to explain. He listens.

👂 **Annexation, invasion, separatism, occupation, IDPs – words that hardly correlate with the joyful crowd of youngsters chilling on the grass and kids splashing at the fountains, with the street food by the river and the white yachts floating back and forth.** 🗨️

Erdem does not even know that communist monuments have been demolished within the last few years – I tell him this too. He wonders WHY a bit. Bathing in orange sunset, boys are playing football and girls are skipping in the synagogue yard, all dressed traditionally. Their fathers discuss some important issues after the service.

Teenagers cosplayed as unicorns pass by, nicely groomed puppies bark at the street dogs and then sniff each other, wagging their tails.

I decide to share an interesting experience with Erdem, to make him fully understand if this city is made for him (or he is made for it).

We go to visit a cemetery. Not that I think it is the first place to check if you have a chemistry with the city, but that's where the play of immersive theatre starts. I am not sure I would end up here on a different occasion, but that's what is so intriguing about it. Graves located in the middle of the city, behind the hospital built in the Soviet era, the disturbing quietness of the place is expected but, at the same time, embarrassing. There is a tomb stone in the shape of a football field and Erdem picks it to start the journey according to the instructions in the headphones. A group of thirty people becomes very disconnected and connected at the same time. This brave experiment takes us to an underground pedestrian crossing full of kiosks selling meat, flowers, lingerie and even manicure sets. We are clapping the crowd entering the metro – it's a part of the game. Beep-beep, I pay with my phone to enter the station, increasing the rating of Ukraine as a contactless country. Couples are kissing on the escalators and our group makes funny moves imitating ballet dancers. An afro guy with dreadlocks hops on the train and we follow him feeling so detached and so integrated in this flow of life while still wearing our headphones. Getting up, back to the city's surface, we are protesting in front of the administrative building, dancing at the entrance of a luxury department store and end up on the roof top, watching the central avenue of Khreshchatyk as a toy model full of tiny cars and people.

After the 12 kilometers walk is over, we are starving – the choice of sea-food in the food court makes us greedy and we cannot stop picking the shrimps and sashimi for take away.

Designs dresses are waving at us almost as humans: black with pink fish pattern, lemon yellow with blue unicorns; perfumes and make-up collections are trying to convince us of their importance. We run away empty-handed.

Full of sticky pleasures, the summer night leaks to the frying pan of the streets like pancake dough. We are eating peaches and raspberries while sitting on a bench. The city does not fall asleep and we stay up till dawn too, changing places and companies, getting to the dance floor at the abandoned factory, walking a new pedestrian bridge with the stunning view of endless perspective. “My mother taught me to do exercises for my eyesight,” Erdem tells, – concentrating on the detail very close and very distant. I do it every morning. I will do it here. After jogging”. “Well, wait for winter to come, Erdem, and let’s see where your ophthalmological meditation is going to take you”, I reply. And we both laugh. He definitely wants to stay. I recommend him a very handy application to order drinking water – they deliver within one hour. “Don’t drink from the tap, Erdem, it tastes like just it’s been pumped from the river! In everything else this city is a great home!”

### **Stephania and three other girls in Odesa**

What can be better than a night train to Odesa in early September?

A compartment with crisp linen and full of girlish gossips and this careless joy is not going to expire for the next three days. We are lying in our bunks, listening to the wheels on the track, drinking ritual tea in traditional thick glasses with metal holders and exercising in wittiness about the most important things in the world.

Arriving at 6 a.m., after a two-hour power nap, I am still able to think the morning is glorious and assume that it would be not so bad to try and catch more of those, finally accepting the fact that there is a point in starting the day before noon.

Grabbing a few bottles of champagne on the way we’re heading straight for the coastline.

The beginning of the school year vacuumed up the beaches from noisy kids and clucky mothers with lunch-boxes, and only a few aged, sun-tanned sardines and seals were left here and there. The warm saltiness and peaceful sandiness is almost just for us. The sellers of sweet corn

and tiny shrimps pass by, completing our perfect picnic, which attracts a flock of hyperactive sparrows and a few lazy, mean seagulls. With the help of the sea breeze our skin gets brown very fast and we feel like queens of the beach until one of us notices the diva lying on the chaise longue and putting pieces of water melon into her mouth piece by piece. She is in her early 70s. At least. Fit and dark brown, with makeup and hair done in the style of the 1980s, she's obviously spent every single day of the previous twenty summers here, in this bearable Odessness of being. She stretches, stands up and walks, full of grace, and then starts to run straight to the water, taking a long swim, that wakes up the desire for competition in us. The salty water tickles our skin and leaves white straps all over when we let it dry running along the tiny waves of the tide.

"I know what we're going to do in the evening! – Stefania says, – let's sit on the promenade and read the prints on people's T-shirts!"

We sign up for the game.

"Let's meet in Paris!" – insist the letters in glitters on the bosom of babushka – "BALI" – silently declares her old friend in a large Panama.

It starts to rain.

The girl in the headphones does not care, she walks on by, singing.

"Let's go to the Seventh Kilometre market tomorrow and buy ourselves T-shirts with the word 'ODESA' emblazoned on them", – Stefania suggests. "Not really sure they sell them there", we reply in chorus.

The evening city gases around like a woman who has sent her man sailing.



I could go on and on with this shorter and longer episode.

Like a car trip to Berdychiv with a French friend of mine, for example, just because Honoré de Balzac got married there. Or the Christmas adventure of a Mexican guy in Ivano-Frankivsk – the winter story is missing in this collection.

One can say that this patchwork of glimpses does not tell any story. Where is the tradition, where is the culture, national spirit after all? But these impressionist flashes are true and the real quintessence of all that. The diversity of daily life, mixture of languages, unity of generations, layers of epochs.



I've met so many coming here to discover.

To join the crowds of Jazz, Literature, Theatre, Film Festivals.

Trying to understand why people here can be insulted when you say *The Ukraine*, or ask if Russian and Ukrainian are actually different languages.

All these friendships keep helping me to explore my own country better.

As many of them know it better than I do.

 **They are the ones going to Uman for a Jewish pilgrimage, or to Pereyaslav-Khmelnytsky to see the parachute of Yuri Gagarin exhibited in the Museum of Space located in an old church.** 

Travelling to Lutsk Soviet Bus Station as an example of unique architecture (Oh yeah, who would have thought!)

I've met a Japanese man who was only interested in one tick in a box: the Tunnel of Love for his Instagram (good mosquitos are not visible on the pictures).

A Mongolian man who travelled around the world for two years, survived in Africa and decided to challenge the Carpathian Mountains in winter. February is not the best time to enjoy the region, especially if you are not the biggest fan of depression caused by sun deprivation.

There was an Irish biker who went as far as Kinburn Spit, a wild and remote national park by the sea.

I've seen a lot of adoration for the Ukrainian countryside in the eyes of travelers and a lot of persistence to assist in the introduction of garbage recycling.

I've met those who followed the falling of Lenins under the law of Decommunisation helping us to heal the traumas of the past and Corruption Park uncovering the shameful present.

All of them tried to understand our revolutions and wars, share our tragedies and triumphs, our pains and sorrows, our joys and victories.

They made me look at our country through a magnifying glass, watching its precious little lives. Human pearls and diamonds, iron nails and sponges.

You are welcome to join them and help us to discover ourselves even better!





**MOTHERLAND**

**MINORITY**

**MAJORITY**

**MULTICULTURALISM**

**HOLODOMOR**

**DONBAS**

**LANGUAGE**

**GREEKS**

**RESPONSIBILITY**

**PEASANTS**

**STALIN**

**HITLER**

**RULES**

**HOMO SOVIETICUS**

**CORRUPTION**

**SOVIET UNION**





# MOTHERLANDS

**Majority as a Minority,**  
*by Larysa Denysenko*

**Gaining a Motherland,**  
*by Vakhtang Kebuladze*





Larysa Denysenko

## Majority as a Minority

If we could cry out all our pain and finally speak out all our traumas, grievances and misunderstandings, then our entire land would be covered with festering and bloodstained black soil, fertile and breeding, and on the surface several salty lakes would appear, big ones, the size of a small European country.

But we are silent. And when we begin letting this pain out – in small portions, in a heartbreaking way so that heaven, God, or at least the European Union could hear us, the world is not ready to understand. Do you really think you are so unique in your tragedies? Well, no, it says.

That is why the Holodomor [*artificial famine organized by the Soviet regime against Ukrainian peasants – Ed.*] has not been recognized as genocide, and Ukrainians are more easily associated with collaborators in World War II than with the Righteous Amongst The Nations.

We are reminded of pogroms, massacres, xenophobic sentiments, the shameful attitude towards the return of deported indigenous people, namely Crimean Tatars, and of one-sided interpretation of history.

Critiques mention forceful Ukrainianization and decommunization, establishment of a religious monopoly, and intolerance.

And we say: no, stop it, we're not guilty. It was not us! Or we say: Yes, maybe such things happened, but still... Or: every nation has its heroes and villains. Or: we did not do that, it was the Soviet Union, the Soviet people...

In response, they are shouting to us: admit it, finally admit that you are not without sin! Stop dividing the world into black and white!

I want to talk about this. Not from a standpoint of in-depth understanding of history, but as a person who has always been interested in the psychological aspects of human behavior and development.



If we look at our history, we will see that our land never had common rules for everyone that were acceptable, discussed and supported by all. These rules existed on paper for some time, but people knew very well that this was an illusion. There was no equal treatment or equal conditions.

At the same time, there were people that were free of common rules or from "rules for all". They formed the privileged caste, and it did not matter who created it or who belonged to it: empires which ruled on Ukrainian lands or the communist party.

There were also people who obeyed these "rules for all". This helped them escape the attention of others and survive. They thought and acted as if they had ruined their eyesight intentionally and did not see reality.

There were some who tried to create a protective shield for themselves and their neighbours. Sometimes they would grass to certain people about something, so that their neighbours would be arrested first. And those who "informed" the penal system about their neighbours, could live a little bit longer in fear and look for their next victim.

There were those who were exterminated for their own grain during the Holodomor, which they had harvested and kept for their family in breach of the "rules for all".

Others could die of hunger, be deported from their own land, or be evicted from their apartments, simply because they belonged to an unwelcome minority. Indeed, belonging to the minority brings you even outside the “rules for all”.

People were destroyed and humiliated, their rights were restricted because of their religion, language, gender, and origin... But their own experience of violence and victimization often does not teach them anything when they have an option to go from being a minority to the majority. Then the desire to oppress the others develops in full force, because the practices of the majority are remembered, valued, and perceived only in this way.

The dissidents opposed the “rules for all”, and they crippled their lungs in the pine forests of Siberia attempting to keep freedom in their minds, hearts and souls in order to write it down, depending on whether their fingers were able to describe what they had been through.

They were also speaking up *for* freedom, dignity, and justice. But it was easier for the Soviet system to blame them for going *against* something. “Crimes” against the state, against socialist property, against the rule of governance, against public health: all this was easy to criminalize...

We, Ukrainians, often want to be perceived as a nation of righteous people and great martyrs. But righteous people and great martyrs live hand in hand with executioners, accomplices, traitors, and those who remain indifferent.

All this hides a terrible trauma that we are not ready to discuss because almost every single one of us is fighting a silent internal war.

We basically do not know whose descendants we are, and how our ancestors managed to survive, at whose expense or which expense? Thanks to what, in spite of what our ancestors survived during the Holodomor, World War I and World War II, repressions, cleansings, revolutions, civil war, killings? Perhaps some violated the rules and were able to save a loaf of bread? Perhaps, someone used another person as a shield? Perhaps, some were hiding behind their status and committed crimes? Others were able to get back home from prison;

some were hiding themselves in internal emigration, and others were “lucky” to leave their homeland and find a new one overseas. Others were following the “rules for all” and had complete power to punish... When we find this out, we will not know what to do with this, and what impact it may well have on us. It is difficult for us to understand whether we can be responsible for this, and whether we really are free.

I believe the time has come for us to rethink responsibility. Perhaps, in order to do so, we have to first come back to the initial step: what can I be responsible for? What should I be responsible for? What will I not pass on to anyone else? Why do I want to fight not only for my freedom but also for my responsibility?

I don't wish the rules to be still seen as a manifestation of inequality and violence. I absolutely do not wish them to be like this.

I am in favour of really acceptable and understandable rules, for the rule of law, equal for everyone, for equal access, fair competition, transparent procedures, good governance, and respect for human beings. All this guarantees justice, and creates conditions for people to feel free and safe, oriented toward development and not destruction, and to being self-confident.

However, all of this will not work unless we learn to take responsibility for our freedom.

The majority of us have a very curious and not very responsible understanding of the freedom of choice: as if it existed only because it is mine.



“Language, Army, Faith”, the conservative slogan (or short political program) of presidential candidate Petro Poroshenko [*at the 2019 Ukrainian presidential election – Ed.*] roused indignation among the liberal community or caused surprise. But although I myself have a liberal view of the world, I was still able to understand why it was important.

Perhaps, these slogans were not good for immediate acceptance and approval. But they were important for a discussion, for understanding historical developments, especially those that seem to be in the past. They were important messages for a nation seeking to restore, or at least to feel, historical justice.

“Language, Army, Faith” were directly related to national sovereignty, which we are still afraid to lose or do not feel properly at all.

During Viktor Yushchenko’s presidency [2005-2010 – *Ed.*], we began talking about the Holodomor. Traditionally, ritual things were implemented first – memorials, the commemoration date, and then public explanations.

There are still people who are not hurt by this. Soviet propaganda knew very well what should be silenced, what should be distorted, and what should be shouted out loud. Yet, we failed to learn how to talk about this in an understandable way.

There are people who still say: there were Ukrainian men and women among those who facilitated, implemented, destroyed, betrayed, and punished during the Holodomor. So who are you blaming? It is your own fault, you were devouring yourselves, you hated, and you destroyed.

Can this formally sound fair? Yes.

But when you have been intimidated for ages, your ethnic and cultural identity was walled up, and you were required to bite off your tongue and swallow your language, when you were turned into *Homo Sovieticus*, a person of the great Soviet (read Russian) culture, it would be unfair to require from you that you also admit guilt for this crime.



“You can have a couple of Ukrainians there, and one Belarusian, and someone funny from Chisinau, someone from the Caucasus, someone from the Baltic States, and someone from Asia, silent so that he would

walk around and listen silently without interfering”. These were the words I once heard from one Komsomol [*Soviet Communist organization for youth – Ed.*] and party official. He used such phrases quite often. One of his favorite phrases was about “*White Russia*”. He didn’t mean Belarus as one would assume [*“Belarus” means, literally, “White Rus” – Ed.*]; he meant, instead, Russia without the Ossetians, Tatars, Evenks, Yakuts and other dubious “national elements”.

All such things were said by different people who had another strange nationality in common – the Soviet party. They were saying this when they were setting up sports delegations for cultural, educational or sporting events. Those delegations had five to six representatives of so-called “White Russia”, and no one had any doubts that these were “real” Soviet people.

Our foreign colleagues perceived us in this manner: for them, we were Soviet or Russian, there was no significant difference in meaning between these two words.

I was an active child, went in for sports, wrote essays, and studied English. I participated in never-ending competitions, contests, performances, and joined those Soviet “progressive youth” delegations.

“Soviet person sounds proud”, “Don’t disgrace the name of a Soviet person”, “Show them the power of the Spirit of a Soviet person”, “No bourgeois defiance or whining: don’t say that something is wrong with us”. “How is it that you don’t like something? We are going to show the world to you!” We heard this over and over again. These people were washing out our national identity.

It is very strange but, according to my observations, Georgians, Lithuanians, and Ukrainians had the strongest attachment to this national identity, regardless of social and family background.

I never heard stories at home about the national liberation movement. There were no such stories. But there were others. For instance, the story of the deported Lithuanian grandmother. They were diligently swallowed because you do not live happily ever after with such stories. Or, alternatively, they send you from Kyiv, where you live, to





the far north. My grandma understood this very well. And she liked Kyiv more than the potential “northern” alternatives.

Yet, despite the absence of patriotic discussions and the powerful influence of Soviet propaganda that I absorbed from movies, books, mythical heroic figures, grotesque images of the enemy that was showing its teeth to the fair and unbeatable Soviet fighters for peace and a better future for all children, I felt injustice very acutely when they were talking about representatives of “15 Republics – 15 Sisters”. I even felt injustice towards people living in the Russian Federation itself: my mother had occasion to work in Tyumen Region, and on the pictures she brought from there I saw the cheerful students’ faces of children who did not belong to *White Russia*, children whom I never saw among members of Soviet delegations.

I was asking, why it was so. Why did they include two Ukrainians in this delegation, and only one person from Georgia? Where is Spartak, who’s a brilliant mathematician? Why do we have Madara, but no-one from Lithuania? Why is Botyr coming again, always silent, and why do we have to call him Boris?

When I did receive an answer (I was often simply shut up), I heard various things: “Ukraine is the closest sister of Russia, which is why there are two of you. What are you unhappy about, should we exclude someone?”, “Where is Madara from? Latvia? What’s the difference, Latvia or Lithuania, these are the Baltic States anyway?” Or, on Botyr: “No-one can remember his name, and he likes Boris very much himself”.

The Soviet Union could have been an impressive model of cultural diversity, but everything was reduced to school celebrations of “15 Republics – 15 Sisters” and the erasing of national identity on a daily basis.

 **Totalitarian regimes are frantically scared of diversity and hate it. The feeling of your own national identity, a focus on your language and culture, religion and traditions could send you to prison or kill you. **

Despite all these games with showcase Soviet delegations, it was often the case that to be a Lithuanian, Georgian, Ukrainian or Kazakh and to talk about this without Soviet piety, was dangerous: one could be ridiculed or even punished for this.

But a human being should never feel intimidated, ashamed and threatened because of his or her national identity.



We should never forget that the greatness of the Soviet person was built at the expense of denigration of other people.

Hybrid people were marching at demonstrations, hybrid people were making decisions at party congresses, hybrid people were ruling and obeying, and all this is not a brief summary of some fantastic utopia, but the true reality of the Soviet era.

But what were the consequences of transforming people into a hybrid human being?

Back in the era of the Ukrainian SSR, Ukraine was a full member of the United Nations as a country that suffered great losses during World War II. We were on the good side. We were on the side of those who defeated Nazism. This fact was recognized at global level.

Is it psychologically easy, in this context, to start a conscious discussion about the fact that there were guards, policemen, collaborators, murderers, and supporters of Hitler's policy among us? Imagine you have been told that your country suffered huge losses, and you were the winners: is it easy to realize that history contains a lot of twists, turns, and alternative explanations? Is it easy for a person who hates Nazism frantically but knows nothing about the fight for independent Ukraine, to analyze and not to get angry about this? And how should we distinguish those who saved others from those who punished others, and from those who were trying to survive?

This is like having bipolar disorder, an illness that we all seem to suffer from. Suddenly an executor during Holodomor or World War II who was a completely Soviet person became a Ukrainian, and now we have to be ashamed of this fact. On the other hand, this Ukrainian hero from Ukraine's resistance movement was killing Soviet people who were ethnic Ukrainians – so how can we say he or she is a hero?



In the early years of Ukraine's independence, Crimean Tatars were returning to their land. They were met with rejection, threats, discrimination, and accusations. They were accused of being intruders and robbers, "dark" forces seizing land and building houses illegally. Children travelling by buses were told by tour guides to be careful: "Do you see people over there? They are Crimean Tatars, and they can cause harm."

During the Soviet era, when Crimea was part of Soviet Ukraine, mention of the indigenous people was deleted from textbooks and excursions: as if they had simply never existed. Those who did exist in the past were enemies – and, it was said, they were punished for this, because they "supported Nazism", "organized chaos and disorder", refused to denounce their God and culture. The Khan's Palace in Bakhchisarai [*a town in Crimea, one of the key centres of Crimean Tatar culture – Ed.*] was called the pearl of the Russian Empire: this was repeated over and over again to generations of Soviet people.

Can such things just go away without any consequences? No.



Ukrainianization also has its own history. I think all of us have, in one way or another, a language trauma. Therefore, everyone has their pain, their trauma, and their truth.

In the 1970s and 1980s in Kyiv, a Ukrainian-speaking person, a child or an adult, was immediately associated with peasantry and the *kolkhoz* [*communist collective farm in the countryside – ed.*]. This association not only indicated where the person lived or was born, not only connected him or her to the place of residence, but disgraced him or her. I remember this quite well: when a child was sent to a Ukrainian language school, the comment was, “Well, they are from the countryside, after all”, meaning that they were underdeveloped peasants and, therefore, could only speak Ukrainian. Or nothing was said, or else these people were thought to be weird.

One had to be very strong in order not to get insulted, not to surrender, to feel that Ukrainian is the only possible language for you, and keep talking, not to be silent, and not to switch to Russian. Switching to Russian was needed to obtain the aura of an urban person, to get a job, to be liked, to stop those who were saying offensive things about you, sniggering behind your back and calling you “vulgar”. “Well, she seems to be a normal although she speaks Ukrainian, she might be from the *countryside*”, they said.

And one also needed a lot of strength so as not to remain silent and in order to protect Ukrainian-speaking people, not to giggle together with the insulters or keep silent with others. I usually said nothing, and I’m now ashamed of this. Back then I did not understand that you can behave differently, although I felt awkward and ashamed at those moments. This is my memory and my experience.

Now I am a typical bilingual person, although my childhood was totally Russian-speaking and comfortable in terms of language. I was not described as a “countryside girl” and a girl from a *kolkhoz* just on the grounds of the Ukrainian language. I was a girl from Kyiv from a nice family of public servants. I was socially protected. Music, sports, good schools and a dog were included in the package.

Students of the Law Department at Taras Shevchenko National University had no law manuals written in Ukrainian in the 1990s. Not a single one, until 1995.

It was a difficult period: Soviet legislation was transformed into Ukrainian legislation. However, in the capital of Ukraine, and in a metropolitan university in 1990-1995, would-be lawyers were not taught any specialist discipline in Ukrainian, except for agricultural law. Even during the first years of independence, the Ukrainian language was still associated with a *kolkhoz*.

Russian-speaking people also have their traumas. We were all trained to think that the language of a Soviet person was Russian, and no-one even tried to change this situation. That is why when the same legislative norms were introduced in Ukrainian, it was difficult for people to switch over. During the first years of independence, and also later, there were no comprehensive programs in humanities and language studies that would clearly explain the history of the destruction of the Ukrainian language.

Imagine that your life is in your hands and you may think that nothing will change and nothing will influence you. You have a Russian-speaking family, books and the press are all in Russian, and everyone at work speaks Russian, television programmes are in Russian. But then it changes.

These changes were gradual, but some people perceived them as sudden and radical.

A child goes to a kindergarten, and then to school; here, first uncertainly and then with more confidence, teachers and lecturers speak Ukrainian during classes. Then there is higher education, public service, court proceedings, bills; then *yanvar*, the Russian name for January, is suddenly switched to *sichen*, the Ukrainian name, and so on.

You were hoping that this would not influence you, and so you listened, understood, resisted, got used to it, but you never actually started speaking Ukrainian.

You were suddenly deprived of this majority status, and it became very painful. This does not go away quickly and unnoticeably.



It is unbearable to feel yourself to be in a minority. Especially when legislation and the strategic development of the country turns you into the majority, but you continue to fight for the right to speak Ukrainian in private and public spaces, desperately searching for magazines in Ukrainian as well as for schools, kindergartens, environment, etc.

Ethno-dictatorship is very humiliating, and it is wrong. Being bullied over your language, stigmatized for language – this is so simple, and so shameful. There is so much I can remember and share, but everyone is so tired of hearing this, and every ear hears its own truth, own whisperer, own picture of the world.

Yet how difficult it is to learn tolerance and understanding when we are still bearing these traumas, and it is not known who we will give birth to: a political nation or some other type of nation.

I feel equally bad, even when I notice the slightest arrogance in those who do not humiliate the Ukrainian language and culture directly, but who send out a message on how much greater the Russian language supposedly is. And I find this hard to understand, really hard given my own experience, that it is so impossible for someone to learn Ukrainian.

But I feel equally bad when I see how someone ostracizes a sales assistant because she speaks Russian, when her interlocutor can understand her without translation. Because the majority of us are able to understand a person who speaks Russian without translation. This should not be a reason to humiliate another person.

On the other hand, all those who have lived in Ukraine even for five years, let alone since childhood, are also quite able to respond in the Ukrainian language to a greeting said in Ukrainian.

Our traumatized mentality, which we almost all share, can explain these phenomena. All of us seem to be protecting our language, thinking it is a key for self-identification.

 **The bulk of xenophobic manifestations in contemporary Ukraine are caused by the fact that though Ukrainians became the majority, they still feel themselves a minority.** 

Therefore, they are not ready to assume responsibility for ensuring respect for the rights of minorities, regardless of type. It is so because a real (not imaginary) majority is still made up of “Soviet people”, or even people with inherited Soviet-ness, although the USSR now exists only on collectors’ maps.

\* \* \*

In this context, multiculturalism in Ukraine still remains an illusion.

In Ukraine, a country where Ukrainians do not still feel that they make up a majority (I am thinking here of fundamental identification, not linguistic identification), which implies increased political responsibility, those regions where ethnic minorities live do not benefit from mutual cultural influence. They seem to be closed communities with a lower or higher degree of hostility. Psychologically, it is always easier to bully and tyrannize someone who is smaller in order to feel that you are bigger, and it becomes especially important when you do not really feel that you belong to the majority.

The same happens with religion, as religion is being increasingly turned into politics. What I mean is not relations between people and God, but relations between people and God through the Church. Although in some cases God seems to be an accidental and unimportant entity in this sequence.

Not so long ago I had a conversation with a right-wing regional politician when we discussed the possibility to grant internally displaced persons [*from occupied Donbas and Crimea – Ed.*] who had lived in the region for about five years the right to vote at local elections.

He said this should absolutely not be allowed “because these people have a different faith”. But I became curious – which faith? They were Christians, and they were Orthodox Christians. They were simply parishioners of churches that belong to the Moscow Patriarchate.

It may look like discrimination on the grounds of place of residence and religion, but again it all comes down to discrimination for political reasons. It happened because the Church took on the mission of political instruction and abandoned the mission of mercy. I think this is absolutely unacceptable.

The Church and the State should be separate because the state has demonstrated practices of destroying churches and faiths, and the Church also has practices of interference in, among other things, the right to education and the right to private life. Furthermore, faith and politics should not overlap. This is difficult to achieve, but here one should not mix religious politics with faith.

On the other hand, the Tomos [*a decree about autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and its independence from Moscow – Ed.*], which Ukraine finally received not long ago, is also about the self-awareness of the majority. It is about independence, about historical justice, about the end of political information meetings and Russification or Sovietization which were, unfortunately, carried out by priests of the Moscow Patriarchate.



Let me conclude by saying that I do not want to use my story and reflections for justifying any unworthy politics, behavior or expressions.

Rather, I am saying we should stop being afraid to admit our traumas, we should start talking about them, finding the correct words, and listening to each other. We should start thinking about how to eliminate this bipolarity, this hybridity, these traumas, how to find identity that is important for us, and how to respect the identity of another person.



👉 **We need to discuss how we should escape from the trap of accusations and excuses, how we should become the responsible majority and respect the rights of minorities.** 🗨️

We should also discuss how to become Ukraine for everyone, without forgetting that there is a Ukrainian inside everyone. Because we are, at the end of the day, a Ukrainian majority.

Just like any therapy, this should begin with understanding and a willingness to talk.





Vakhtang Kebuladze

## Gaining a Motherland

One of the most painful and traumatic experiences for a person is when he or she feels disgust and contempt for his or her own Motherland, the country where he/she was born and grew up.

I was born in the Soviet Union and grew up with the feeling of disgust and contempt for this country, which was dominated by pervasive lies and a lack of freedom. In addition to the ban on public expression of any critical opinions about the totalitarian communist regime and its victims, a ban on reading books, listening to music and watching movies that you wanted, this lack of freedom also had a purely spatial dimension: restricted freedom of movement, no opportunity to go abroad except for emigration which was highly unlikely, and which would then mean completely breaking ties with one's friends and relatives.

“ I remember how, at the age of 14, I approached a large mirror hanging in the hall of my parents' apartment, looked at my reflection, and said, 'You will never leave the confines of this prison'. ”

I obviously did not mean my parents' apartment, but the state in which I was born. When I later shared this experience with my wife, she said I managed to coin her own adolescent feelings very clearly. I guess that, from time to time, similar feelings came upon all my peers, who were looking at the world in the same way.

The understanding that we were living in a distorted world began developing in me at an early age. That world composed in the main of never-ending lies that surrounded us from all sides, penetrated into the most intimate relationships, poisoned our consciousness, making us used to being dishonorable from a very early age. The lie was so prevalent that the majority were not even able to realize they were constantly lied to, and that they were constantly replicating those lies in their own communication. I could say that a Soviet person had a schizoid dual mind. It seemed like we knew the truth but, at the same time, we accepted lies as something absolutely normal and justifiable.

A perfect example was my great-grandmother who taught me to read, write and count, and who I still remember with love and tenderness. Yet, I cannot but admit that her whole life experience was permeated with communist lies. From my childhood, she was trying to develop gratitude in me for the Soviet regime, saying that everything in our life was given to us by it. My great-grandmother would tell me persuasively that she was from a poor rural family, and that it was only thanks to the Soviet government that was she able to receive an education. I believed in this until, later in my life, I was able to compare the facts of her life with historical developments. She was really born to a rural Greek family in the south-east of Ukraine (now in Donetsk Region). However, she graduated from a grammar school in Mariupol before the Soviet era (she was born in 1900, so when our land was seized by the Bolsheviks, she was over 20 years old). So how could a child from a poor rural family make her way into a grammar school located in a big city? She could not answer this question. Not because she did not know the answer, but because she diligently forgot it.

In fact, in the 18th century, after the Greeks were forcibly displaced from Crimea, they received a lot of land from Russian Tsarina Catherine II. This was a dismissive pittance from the flatulent sovereign to colonized people who had lost their historical homeland. In the early part of the 20th century, the descendants of those displaced Greeks were wealthy peasants who would later be destroyed by Russian Bolsheviks under the pretext that they were *kurkuls* [i. e. rich peasants]. My great-grandmother was a communist and, therefore, she could not admit that Russian Bolsheviks had robbed her family of everything their ancestors received from the Russian Tsarina.

One of the methods the Bolsheviks used to destroy rich peasants living in eastern Ukraine was Holodomor [*artificial famines organized by the Communist regime in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s – Ed.*]. My Greek ancestors were also among them, but the majority of victims were Ukrainians. During the Soviet era, no-one in our family mentioned Holodomor. This topic was taboo even though I knew that my great-grandmother's father died from famine in the early 1920s, and that in the early 1930s her mother was brought, at the last moment, to Kharkiv where my great-grandmother lived at that time with her husband and her little 7-year old son. That boy is now my grandfather. Later, during the post-Soviet era, I heard a story from him about dialogue that he had had with his grandmother in the terrible year of 1933 [*the year of the most tragic Stalin-organized Holodomor of 1932-1933 – Ed.*] in Kharkiv:

- 🗨️ — **Don't go outside, boy!**
- **Why?**
- **Because they will eat you.**
- **No, they won't - I am skinny.** 🗨️

In Germany, Hitler had come to power just a short time before, and all the atrocities of Nazism were still ahead. Stalin had already ruled the Soviet Union for several years, and under his patronage

the communists were already committing terrible crimes against humanity.

The dialogue I mentioned earlier is part of my family's oral history. However, the story was never told during the Soviet period. Fear forced people to lie and distort their own historical memory. The fear was not so much for themselves, but fear for the younger generation. If I were growing with the knowledge of all the crimes committed by the Soviet regime, I would hardly be able to survive in the Soviet Union unless I were cynical scum. Only destruction of that geopolitical monster removed the seal of silence from the lips of my grandparents.

However, was it only fear that made people blind toward the crimes of communism, deaf toward the cries of its victims, and silent about this? Perhaps not. It was the state of some strange moral and psychological numbness that was caused by intoxication of consciousness by Soviet propaganda. Its creators were skilled in mixing intimidation and lies, and they were feeding this terrible cocktail to millions of deceived people not only in the Soviet Union but beyond it as well. The employees of contemporary Russian mass media outlets are, by the way, talented students of their Soviet predecessors.

The lies became more and more visible at the end of the 1980s. Gorbachev's attempt to reload the regime through *perestroika* only showed its rotten core instead of saving it. The intoxication of society with lies was just too strong. *Glasnost* was not able to save it from paralysis and collapse. Truth injections did not save the Soviet Leviathan, but merely accelerated its death.



The Soviet Union died abruptly in 1991. This happened so quickly that we did not even immediately understand that this had really happened. Yet, I remember that the moment when I realized this fact was one of the happiest moments of my life. We felt the head-spinning breath of freedom.

However, the first years of our lives in independent Ukraine were disappointing for many of us; our hopes for a genuinely free and successful society failed to come true. The young Ukrainian state inherited almost

all the shortcomings of the Soviet Union, and added its own deficiencies to it, which provoked nostalgia in many people for the Soviet past. This nostalgia, to a certain extent, still distorts the historical memory of Ukrainian citizens, dimming and erasing memories of communist crimes and painting a false picture of Soviet prosperity and security.

This nostalgic picture leaves no place for Stalin's concentration camps, where millions of people worked unpaid, in unbearable conditions, for the well-being of those who remained free. However, even those who "remained free" could barely be called free because of the constant risk of being sent to prison on an absurd charge, and having no opportunity to leave the Soviet Union.

Today's widespread recollections that there was no corruption during the Soviet era, lack the understanding that corruption was impossible in those days because the country was ruled by a gang of criminals called the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Corruption is possible when, on the one hand, there are authorities, and, on the other hand, criminal milieus that corrupt these authorities. But when a criminal organization has power and makes up the authorities themselves, there is no-one to corrupt them.

 **The corruption that we see in Ukraine to this very day is not a phenomenon of the independence era, but rather a replication of the power hierarchy from the Soviet era.** 

That is why we often call it systemic corruption since it does not corrode the state apparatus from outside but is a manifestation of the internal construction of the government structure inherited from the old system.

One of the main problems of the young Ukrainian state was that power was seized by the former communist bosses who brought the old principles of governance to the new political establishment. Ukraine, unlike, for instance, Germany that went through denazification, has not

yet gone through decommunization. Therefore, the belated decommunization introduced only recently in our country is so important for us. It should not just imply decommunization of the names of Ukrainian towns and streets; it should lead to much wider decommunization and desovietization of the minds of Ukrainian citizens, and lustration of those state officials who held executive positions in communist government agencies.

Intellectuals from other countries sometimes fail to understand the importance of this process. Indeed, in the 20th century atrocities against humanity committed in Western Europe by far-right forces – German Nazis, Italian fascists, etc. Instead, in our lands, equally terrible crimes were committed by far-left forces: Soviet communists.

Equivalence between the Soviet and Russian systems was another element of the old system. In the 20th century, there were two strategies in place aimed at destroying the Strangers. The approach taken by the Nazis to representatives of ethnic groups they considered inferior, envisaged physical extermination of some of them (Jews and Roma), and transformation of others, like Slavs, into slaves of the “real Aryans”, the Germanic people. The daring cynicism and inhuman cruelty of the Nazis was a factor that led to their downfall.

The strategy used by Soviet communists to destroy the Strangers was more subtle. A representative of any nationality could be successful in the Soviet Union, provided he or she gave up his or her own national and cultural identity. To this end, the linguistic mutant “Soviet people” were created.

**🗨️ Yet, the Russian identity remained the core of Soviet identity. Sovietization was hidden Russification. 🗨️**

Soviet communism was impregnated with Russian chauvinism. The consequences of this infusion can be seen to this very day both in our country and at international level. For instance, Russia inherited the role of victory over Nazism, although the victory was achieved



by all the peoples of the former Soviet Union, while a huge number of ethnic Russians fought on Hitler's side in Vlasov's Army and in other Russian Nazi groups. This, on the one hand, provides the possibility for pro-Russian forces to manipulate the minds of Ukrainian citizens. On the other hand, Russia took the place of the Soviet Union in the UN Security Council as the victor over Nazism, and used its position there against its former colonies, namely Ukraine and Georgia.

For me, post-Soviet Ukraine of the 1990s was an ugly continuation of the Soviet Union. It was my conscious choice not to participate in the political process. This was also a consequence of Soviet social and political trauma. For me, just as for many of my peers, politics was not a field of the common cause of free and responsible people, but rather a field where criminal groups fought between themselves for power. Perhaps this was why I did not take part in the mass resistance towards the Ukrainian Soviet government in the early 1990s, called the Revolution on Granite in history books. Today, looking back at those developments, I understand that at that time this revolution laid the historical and political foundation for two Maidans at the beginning of the 21st century. The principles of the fundamental difference between Ukrainian society and Russian society were laid back then too. Despite all the troubles of the post-Soviet period, we won the most important thing: our freedom.

The understanding came to me that the Soviet Union was, in fact, one of the reincarnations of the Russian Empire, and Putin's accession to power was not an unfortunate coincidence but a logical stage of the empire's development. That is why the first Maidan [2004-2005 - *Ed.*] and (even more so) the second Maidan [2013-2014 - *Ed.*] had such a manifest anti-Russian nature. This was influenced not so by Ukrainian nationalism but rather by post-colonial resistance to Russian imperialism, and an attempt to break free from the sphere of influence of the Russian Empire and join civilized European countries. Everything Ukrainian was growing to become a marker of our belonging to the civilized world and rejecting Russian imperial xenophobia.

This can better explain the emancipating role of the Ukrainian language in our society. To understand this role, it is important to deconstruct one persistent manipulative bias used by pro-Russian forces in Ukraine. One of the main components of their rhetoric is related to “protection of the rights of Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine”. But, in fact, we are all bilingual.

““ **All citizens of Ukraine speak at least two languages - Ukrainian and Russian.** ””

This does not mean that all of us are fluent in both languages, but we all, even those who speak Russian, understand Ukrainian very well. And this makes Russian-speaking Ukrainians different from Russian citizens. Making Ukrainian the official language, therefore, by no means abases the rights of those who speak Russian in everyday life. Their own bilingualism does not prevent them from understanding the Ukrainian mass media or from participating in legal proceedings held in the Ukrainian language.

Unfortunately, everyday communication in many Ukrainian regions marginalizes Ukrainian rather than Russian. It is especially noticeable in the service sector. For instance, in the Ukrainian-speaking cities of Lviv or Ivano-Frankivsk a Russian-speaking customer will have no problem using the Russian language. In the majority of cases he or she will not only be understood and served politely, but also answered in Russian as well. On the contrary, in some south-eastern towns of Ukraine, however paradoxically this may sound, Ukrainian will not always be so welcome. Ukrainian is understood very well there, the number of people speaking it is growing all the time, and people who do not speak it fluently are rather sympathetic to it. However, to this very day there are cases of a phobia towards the Ukrainian language and culture, and addressing someone in Ukrainian can be met with silence or a rude answer in Russian.

The language of the *russkiy mir* [“Russian world”, i.e. an idea that Russian sphere of influence goes beyond Russia’s political borders – Ed.] is often that of hate speech. The artificial Russification of south-eastern territories of Ukraine in the 20th century became one of the conditions that made Russian aggression against our country in the early 21st century possible. Russian propaganda justifies occupation of Crimea and seizure of south-eastern territories of Ukraine with the need to protect the Russian-speaking population, which is a lie for two reasons.

First, as I mentioned earlier, it was not Russian but Ukrainian that was attacked and marginalized in this part of Ukraine.

Second, a large number of Ukrainian soldiers protecting their native land from Russian invasion speak Russian in everyday life, although they understand that the fact that they speak the Russian language is, by and large, a result of artificial and coercive Russification of south-eastern territories of Ukraine.

One of the tools of that Russification was, by the way, the Holodomor, when the territories were purged of Ukrainian-speaking residents with artificial famine, and were populated afterwards with Russian-speaking people from the whole of the Soviet Union. The mine planted by Stalin in the early 20th century detonated during the Putin’s rule in the early 21st century. This makes it clear why the Ukrainian language is, for us, not only an irremovable element of culture but also a security factor. I can quote here a formula used by one of the founders of the post-colonial studies of the literature of empires, Edward Saïd, who said that “culture is a field of struggle”. And one of the main and indisputable elements of culture is language. The Ukrainian language in Ukraine becomes not only a means of cultural identification but also a tool of political emancipation and an important component of national security policy.

Atomization of society is another terrible legacy of the Russian Soviet Empire: totalitarianism was based on disintegration. It’s much easier to make slaves out of people who do not trust each other. Soviet



communists diligently implemented the old formula of divide and rule. Soviet society was a society of total distrust – and perhaps we needed the experience of two Maidans, especially the second one, to get rid of this distrust.

### “ The Maidan space was the space of trust. ”

In order to survive and to defeat the criminal government of Yanukovich, which was supported by Putin’s gang in Kremlin, we needed trust like we need fresh air. Maidan was breathing with trust. Without trust it would have failed immediately. A huge number of people learnt to trust each other, give money for the needs of Maidan, unite quickly with absolutely unknown people to solve problems that emerged every day, every hour, every moment. Maidan covered the entire city with a network of trust: underground hospitals where wounded protesters were treated; shelters at every place where exhausted Maidan protesters could wash themselves and have some rest; self-defense squads in all districts of Kyiv who, though without weapons, protected the citizens of Kyiv from mobs of criminals paid by the criminal authorities to destabilize the situation; young people who guarded local hospitals so that officers of the special services controlled by the regime and guided by their Russian puppet masters could not abduct wounded protesters to torture and kill them. The same was happening in other towns around the whole country. We learnt how to trust each other. We began to understand that real political power grows from this trust, and that this political power is the common cause of free and responsible people.

The growth of the level of trust and integration in our society is commensurate with the decrease in xenophobia. Many Ukrainians understood that our identity has to be built not around the ethnic nucleus but around the values of the free world. After Maidan, the level of anti-Semitism in Ukraine fell dramatically. The most recent research demonstrates that no instances of anti-Semitic-based

violence have been reported in our country since 2014. One of the explanations is that many Ukrainian Jews were active participants in Maidan and took the pro-Ukrainian side in the fight against Russian aggression. The first people who sacrificed their lives in Maidan's fight for Ukraine's freedom were an Armenian, Serhiy Nigoyan, and a Belarusian, Mykhailo Zhyznevskiy. Crimean Tatars were also actively involved in the fight against the Russian Empire that occupied their historical homeland. They understand very well that free life in Crimea is only possible if Crimea is part of independent Ukraine.

 **Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine defend their motherland from Russian aggression in Donbas shoulder to shoulder with Ukrainian speakers.** 

And neither are we divided either by ethnic origin, religion or language. We begin to gradually understand that people can be united not so much by common interests and memories of the past, but rather by universal human values and a common vision of the future.

As a result of all these developments, I have finally gained my Motherland. Now, when I am asked “Where are you from?” – I can answer proudly “I am from Ukraine”. Those who did not grow up with a permanent feeling of shame for their Motherland will hardly understand this sentiment.

I know that this feeling of pride in one's country is fragile and endangered. Our independence is threatened by a terrible external enemy: Russia, which is trying to draw us into the ugly “Russian world”. Its attempts inside Ukraine get the support of hostile sympathizers of Russian imperialism, and of short-sighted or corrupt acolytes of the Kremlin in European countries. There are also many internal economic, legal and cultural problems that prevent Ukraine from becoming a really free and successful country. It is true that our country still has lots of problems. It is very difficult for us to reform the corrupt state system that we inherited from the Soviet Union. However, during

the years since the last Maidan, systemic corruption has decreased. In order to eliminate corruption for good, we need radical changes in the structure of the public authorities and in the minds of ordinary citizens. This is a long and painful process.

As of today, we have not yet reformed our education system. This reform is, by the way, impeded by another myth widespread in our society. It says that in Soviet Union we had good education, which we lost during the years of independence. To destroy this myth, it is important for Ukrainian citizens to understand the difference between education and learning. Good education is, of course, not possible without diligent study of professional skills, which leads to the necessary level of professional knowledge. Yet, real education is not just this, but more. The education process includes access to cultural achievements of the whole world, and getting an ability to critically rethink historical developments and contemporary problems. Therefore, education implies freedom. In a closed totalitarian society, education – first and foremost, in humanities – is not possible: it offers almost no access to the cultural achievements of other countries, and critical thinking is not only unsupported but prohibited. The Soviet Union had, therefore, good learning that was generally related to professions in the field of defense and strategic branches of industry and agriculture. However, real education did not exist in the Soviet Union – just because the Soviet Union was totally lacking in freedom. That is why our task is not to revive the old education system but to create a new one. This new system should also include definitive decommunization and desovietization of Ukrainian education.

Reform of the state apparatus and development of a modern education system was, just like many other reforms, launched in our country after the second Maidan, and has to rescue Ukraine from the imperial influence of Russia and to result in Ukraine's natural integration into European civilization. However, I have recently been hearing on a frequent basis from Western European colleagues that for us, citizens of Ukraine, Europe still looks like the Europe of the late 20th

century, while it has become absolutely different today. I understand this, of course, and it hurts when I see the actions of Putin's European right-wing and left-wing friends. I certainly do not like this Europe. At the same time, I know that my country can have a better destiny only in the community of European states where unity does not kill diversity, and where freedom does not destroy solidarity. I can also suggest that Europeans could look at themselves through the eyes of those citizens of Ukraine who came to Maidan for the sake of the European future of their country, those who are dying in the East of our country while protecting it from Russian invasion, and those who are slowly dying in Russian prisons sent there on trumped up charges. Will you then perhaps like yourselves? Or will you see a way to overcome something that you do not like? If you're not happy with life in your own country, you might try listening to our voice – the voice of those who have finally gained their Motherland, or, more precisely, won back their Motherland.



**CRIMEA**  
**CRIMEAN TATARS**  
**RUSSIAN AGGRESSION**

**ISLAM** **DONBAS** **APRICOTS**  
**INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS**

**WORKING PEOPLE**  
**RUSSIAN LITERATURE** **WAR**

**WOMEN** **DEPORTATION**  
**FAIRY TALES** **STEPPE BIRDS**

**OCCUPATION**  
**IDENTITY**





**Donbas - Ukraine, a Life Journey,**  
*by Volodymyr Rafeenko*

**Ukraine and Crimean Tatars,**  
*interview with Alim Aliev*



## Donbas - Ukraine, a Life Journey

### 1. Donetsk-Kyiv

In 2019 I will be fifty years old. I spent forty five of them in Donbas, in the very heart of this industrial Ukrainian district, the city of Donetsk. Exactly five years ago, when the war began, I had to leave my home because armed Russian combatants entered the city under the slogans of protecting the region's Russian-speaking population.

Yet, I have been a Russian-speaking person my entire life. I have been writing and speaking only Russian, and I never had to be protected from my country. I am a philologist by profession and a writer by vocation.

Before the war, my works were published by the most influential Russian literature magazines and publishing companies. Several years before the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of Russian aggression in Donbas, I received several international literature prizes in Moscow. And I never felt any discomfort because of that at home, in Ukraine.

Then, all of a sudden, I saw some armed people who came to Donbas (not a single familiar face) and said they would protect me. I was, to put it mildly, unpleasantly surprised. It was only several days later

that I finally realized that my city was occupied, and I had to leave immediately while it was still possible.

👏 **I remember very clearly my last evening in occupied Donetsk. It was a hot July 2014. Armed combatants were walking through the crowd at the railway station. My wife was saying goodbye to me at the platform and trying to smile.** 🙏

I had to leave the city all by myself, because I did not know where I should bring my family, had no idea where to seek shelter and work. And I had to find answers to these questions within a couple of weeks so that my family could join me.

The train to Kyiv (one of the last trains from Donetsk station to Kyiv station) departed, my wife's silhouette flashed by in the window, my heart exploded with ice and fire, the railway station and buildings disappeared, and a hot wind blew into the windows.

When the night came, the full moon was floating above the Donbas steppes, and I was looking at it and thinking that the Russian slogans of protecting the Russian-speaking population of Donbas made me a victim and, at the same time, a cause of the war. It seemed as though my native Russian was a pretext for war. But only a person who did not have the faintest idea about the real Donbas could believe this lie.

The night was long, the moon was hiding behind the clouds and coming out again while I was going to Kyiv in a train filled up to its roof with pity, grief, sadness, despair, and an absurd, almost childish, hope for the future.

Saying goodbye to Donetsk was a symbolic death for a person who had lived on this land for forty five years. At the same time, it became the story of finding myself and my Motherland. During these years, after my departure from Donetsk, I managed to find new friends, learn Ukrainian, and write several novels. This was my modest contribution to the cause of fighting Russian aggression and

black craziness – fighting it in that part of the Universe which was entrusted to Ukrainian artists.

War as the beginning of life. A sad paradox, but it contains a lot of truth that's valid not only for me but also for many of those people who finally began to understand who they were and where they lived, in which country, and what it meant for them only after they had found themselves in the middle of a war.

## **2. A land of birth and its language**

If you have never visited Donbas in Spring, you probably have no idea what an apricot ocean looks like. One of the first memories of my childhood is an apricot tree, the queen of fruit trees of eastern Ukraine, with its wild fragrance, where you cannot tell what taste prevails: bitter or intoxicating sweet. It flooded my entire universe, with its aroma making it fabulous and gentle, and a little bit sad. Sadness was part of the very essence of this fragrance, gentle and bitter. Apricot trees were in abundance: both growing wildly and domestically. When the blooming time would come, paths of my childhood – between clumsy private houses on the streets of a poor proletarian district of Donetsk that never knew such a miracle as asphalt – were covered with a carpet of pink-white petals that were slowly circling in the air during quiet days or falling on the ground under currents of the first warm Spring thunderstorms.

The second memory, which is no less important and that is related both to the land that raised me and the air that embraced me as a small child, is the fairy tales told by my grandmother from my dad's side of the family. In these fairy tales I found an amazing world of real meanings that did not obey the adult world. These fairy tales were my happiness, my miracle and joy. Oh God, how I loved these mysterious stories!

Grandma spoke *surzhyk*, an eastern dialect of the Ukrainian language. This was the language spoken in the village from which she

came to Donetsk. Her fairy tales were fundamentally different from the book versions that I later read when I attended school, because they were born in the pure and free elements of the genuine verbal village folk tradition.

👏 **In Donbas, the Ukrainian language was spoken in small towns and villages whereas Russian dominated the large cities.** 🗨️

There was never any abyss between them, between these two languages, because Russian spoken in Donbas differs significantly from the language spoken in Russia, while Ukrainian, in this Donbas time and space, was transformed under the influence of Russian into its eastern dialect. In a certain sense, this was one Eastern-Ukrainian language that had two wings: as wild steppe birds, abundant in the suburb where I grew up.

In my family, my father and mother spoke only Russian. This was the language they were carefully taught first by Soviet state institutions, and second by their own parents. Russian was believed to be the language of the city, the language of education, the language of the actual center of that country, the metropolis where my parents were born and lived, and where I myself was born: the USSR. If you wanted to earn a degree, qualification and, more or less, a significant position in Donbas-based enterprises, you had to distance yourself from the purely Ukrainian context and get the only possible – Soviet – identity, from which the national component as a phenomenon was carefully removed.

My other grandmother – on my mother's side of the family – understood this very well. The first grandma, whom I mentioned earlier, on my father's side, worked her whole life as a low-level employee of the *Donetsk-Pasazhirskiy* railway station. At her work place, no one was particularly bothered by her constant and wonderful *surzhuk*.

On the other hand, my mother's mother eventually became a prominent Soviet engineer, and she even contributed to the development

of the space program. She never told me any fairy tales. Perhaps she did not know any, or she did not remember, or maybe she was too educated to preserve a genuine connection with this world of popular tales, especially in their folklore tradition. What she told me in whisper were sad stories about her past, about her childhood, how her life was unfolding and forming.

She was born to an absolutely Ukrainian-speaking family, and when she was brought to school, Russian-speaking teachers and children insulted her. It was difficult for her to study because she had to master a language she did not know. So she decided that she would learn the language at the level of a native speaker. And she did so.

At the school I went to, Ukrainian was taught but in such a way that made it impossible to speak. I could not speak it until the age of forty five, although I read well, and I loved to read in Ukrainian. However, I think this was not due to the school but due to my father's large library. But, naturally, my native language, the language of my childhood, adolescence, and my first meeting with world literature was Russian.

This was my personal linguistic background. As far as I know, this is also the story of a large number of my peers and their families. Our grandmothers and grandfathers spoke a different language in their childhood than our parents, and a different language was native for them.



Ukraine became independent in my early student years. No-one objected to my speaking Russian, I enjoyed my studies at the Russian Philology Department at a local university, wrote literary reviews on the poetry of Pushkin and Bunin, reveled in freedom and youth, and I had a whole life ahead of me without any desire to look back at my past. My half-rural childhood, and a very mediocre school in terms of the level of education, and slag heaps that we climbed together with my schoolmates to smoke or drink cheap sweet wine, and ponds where we went to fish, and even beautiful apricot gardens where a lot of other wonderful things happened as I grew older – all now sank into oblivion.

My own, sound and understandable historical “household” past, which would be different from the Soviet historical tradition established for decades, was almost absent. However, on several occasions one or the other of my grandmothers whispered something totally absurd or incomprehensible for my teenage experience. For instance, something about the Famine that was artificially created by the Soviet regime in Ukraine in the early 1930s. Yet, these tiny pieces of truth were so rare and so different from the overall discourse, which formed my civic consciousness, that, as far as I remember, at the age of ten or twelve I perceived them as the horrible continuation of an endless Ukrainian fairy tale – incredibly mystical and mysterious. All the more so because before telling me something like this, my grandmothers always warned me, “But don’t tell your father”. I understood that if my father should not know, then no-one else should.

Even during the pre-war years I was slowly feeling an urgent need to ask myself a question about civic self-identity and the need for really well-argued reflection about the post-Soviet ideological heritage. I needed, first and foremost, to reflect on the colonial myth of “brotherly nations”, where the Russian people always played the role of a wise older brother while the others acted as their endlessly slow-witted and moronic relatives. But it was only after the beginning of the war that I understood that I had to face it now. These were Russia’s attempts to forcefully return Ukraine and, particularly my native Donbas, to its colonial political and cultural paradigm, that became the last boundary, beyond which even the thought of “brotherly relations” for me personally reeks of death as something incompatible with life, with everything that I currently feel and see as the truth and my own way.

In general, in everything we call our lives, there are too many personal things. It is impossible to escape this, or to try to separate one’s own experience from your country’s experience. I am neither able nor willing to pretend I am a person who can do this.



 **Dishonesty, ugliness, the animal cruelty of the behavior of the country whose heritage I studied for my entire life, in the greatness of whose culture I believed and was even proud of, became one of those traumas that I think will remain with me until I die.** 

And I will always remember that train from Donetsk to Kyiv, and the night I had to live through, and the moon that was looking at me through the window ironically and absently, and those endless heavy dreams that I had during the entire first year of my life in Kyiv as soon as I closed my eyes.

### **3. Identity and isolation**

In the very beginning of my life as an internally displaced person, I happened to visit a book fair in Europe. My new acquaintance, an intelligent and educated woman, a professional philologist and translator who was interested in the situation that was developing in Ukraine at that time, asked me among other things the following question: how did it so happen that I first visited Lviv – a great and beautiful city in the west of Ukraine – only in 2014, and before the war I had little knowledge of the center or the west of the country that I was born in.

I remember she found this fact suspicious and thought it confirmed the idea of Donbas being fundamentally separate from Ukraine, which would automatically justify Russia's aggressive actions.

There is no point in retelling our entire long conversation. I remember my painful reaction not so much to the specific question but to a general attitude to the situation in Ukraine. I was unpleasantly surprised by her childish belief that in order to find the truth one ultimately has to listen to and take into consideration opposing views about the existing situation.

I do not know how successful I was during that conversation in conveying my understanding of a simple fact that if someone says white is black, this will not make white black. In life, an attempt to balance two opposing views often leads to a loss of the very hope to get closer to the truth.

However, some time later I told myself, “Indeed, my friend, you have not visited Lviv, this is true. And in forty five years of your life, you visited Kyiv only twice, at most”. Twice, including that first time when I was brought to Kyiv as a child by my grandmother. And I saw Lviv for the first time in my life in autumn 2014. Why was it so? I had to think about it.

Of course, one of the reasons was that I am an introvert, and travelling has never been an attractive pastime for me. Another reason is that – fortunately or unfortunately – I am a specialist in Russian philology. Sometimes, it was difficult to earn enough money in Ukraine to even travel freely around one’s own city, never mind the whole country.

However, when I was going along my life path as an internally displaced person, collecting the meanings of my own past, in the course of time I understood that the real reason for the emphasized “hermetic” character of my personal life in its larger part can be explained that my Donbas always existed as a region in a certain cultural and – more importantly – political isolation from the rest of the country. This is the situation that Russia used very skillfully in 2014.

**““ The isolation of Donbas has always been artificial. It was invented and carried out by the Soviet regime, which carried out the policy of tough control over our industrial province. ””**

Donbas was contrary to all other regions of the country as an entirely proletarian region. That is, the region where the proletariat, the main driving force of social progress in the universe according to Soviet ideology, ultimately held winning positions.

Over the years of independence, the separation of Donbas from the rest of the country that had been instilled over the course of seventy years played for the benefit of the interests of a certain section of local elites. The idea of cultural separation of Donbas was meticulously cultivated by some regional politicians as a convenient and efficient instrument for achieving necessary compromises with Kyiv.

Still, one has to mention that despite all its specific characteristics, Donbas never felt it was part of Russia in a cultural sense. Ukraine and everything Ukrainian were much closer for all of us than anything Russian. And this actually happened precisely because there has never been such phenomenon as “the people of Donbas”. This nonsense, invented by the occupying authorities in Donbas since 2014, sounds wild and ridiculous for a person who was born and lived their entire life there. The residents of Donbas have never believed their land was part of Russia, but that separation from the national Ukrainian context which had been constructed over seventy years of Soviet rule gave birth to a very peculiar regional identity that was, nonetheless, still essentially based on the Ukrainian cultural matrix.

Ukrainian fairy tales were told to children, and Ukrainian songs were sung during celebrations. Christmas was celebrated in a way it would never be celebrated in Russia. Looking back at my past, I can see that we have always felt ritual energetic affinity with our country. On the contrary, Russian folklore, for instance, has always been something exotic and absolutely unnatural for us, not understandable at a personal level. All these *kokoshniks* [Russian head bands], round dances and *matryoshka dolls* [Russian stacking dolls] were always perceived as something strange and foreign.

In one way or another, we were connected with Russia precisely by memories about the USSR, which year after year was becoming inexorably dimmer and farther away from us. The years came and went and new generations of Ukrainians were born, and the myth about the nation of “Soviet people” was already seen as clearly archaic in the early 2000s. It was back then that even the regional identity

began to give up its positions significantly to the general Ukrainian identity.

I am absolutely certain that if Russia had not attacked Ukraine, the emergence of the political nation, which has never been fast and simple in any country, would have definitely absorbed the lands of our Donbas. Ukraine is a very young country – we have existed for less than thirty years as an independent state. This is just a moment from the standpoint of historical processes. We have just begun to gain our strength and self-awareness. This war hit us at the start. We see an attempt to kill our skylark before it rises higher and higher. But somehow I believe it will fly upwards anyway.



#### **4. Donbas in my memory**

Since 2014, I have visited Lviv, perhaps, dozens of times; I have lounged around its small warm ancient streets, drinking coffee in city cafes, hugging my friends from Donetsk who moved to Lviv in the Spring or Summer of 2014. I have travelled around the whole of Ukraine doing presentations of my books. My Motherland came before me in the form of thousands of faces, dozens of towns and villages, destinies of people who were forced to walk the road of losses and trials similar to mine. And you know, this meeting with my country confirmed what I have always known even without it: Donbas is Ukraine beyond all doubts. In terms of how we perceive the world, in problems, in destinies, in our hopes, in our grief and joy, and even in our shortcomings, we, Ukrainians, are very similar.

Of course, my dear people from Donetsk had their specific features in terms of mentality and character, which were based on the very nature of this region. Their profession and labor, their native mine or factory, whose siren organized their entire life, and determined both physiological and socio-cultural rhythms, were the most important things in the world for them. Rational and practical attitudes towards everything in the world prevailed, by and large, over pathetic attitudes.

The hard work of a miner or a metallurgist does not facilitate sentimentality or metaphysical quest. These people were not looking for a philosopher's stone; they were making steel and mining coal instead.

But I too worked myself for five years at a metallurgical enterprise in Donetsk, and I remember the sincere love of these people for their hard and never-ending work, for incredibly large factory buildings, for the hum of working furnaces, in which steel was made, for this amazing city inside the city where tens of thousands of people worked. I remember their tenderness toward the metal beast of the factory that had been living and breathing for decades of years in a row, and where quite often three or four generations of the same family used to work.

 **These were people of honor, people of labor. They were simple, honest, as hard as anthracite and as trusting as children.** 

Ukraine is a very large country, and our differences are absolutely natural. Our life would be very boring if we all were the same. I think Ukraine is wonderful precisely because of its diversity, which may not and should not be ignored. You have to see it, appreciate it, and preserve it carefully. We are one as a country, although we do not always realize it.

The more I live, the clearer I see my Donbas with my inner vision – the steppes that, as a child, I believed to be the best place in the world, the streets of my city, the people who surrounded me as I was growing up. Our city was clean and full of roses. Back in the Soviet era, they were planted regularly along the avenues and on city squares. In the city there were chestnut trees and acacias, lindens and black poplars, elder and mint, thickets of lilac, and whole islands of wild cherry, apricot and walnut trees. It had a huge number of rivers, streams, large and small ponds. In spring, Donetsk was up to its knees in them, and this water flowed unceasingly, creating its own song that

intertwined itself into the general symphony of the city. The central city was home for hares and hedgehogs, large self-confident pheasants ran through it, and foxes used to wander into it from the steppe. Ravens screamed in their cheerful metal voices, pigeons quarreled with sparrows, while jays were mocking wild cats and meowing more plausibly than the latter.

The city center, with its boulevards and parks, used to be a shelter for students. Universities and institutes, dozens of scholars whose names were recognized around the world, thousands of young people, including those who came from different countries to study here. There were very powerful drama and opera theaters, an annual jazz festival, and an international ballet festival. In 2012, our newly constructed football stadium designed to seat tens of thousands of spectators hosted final matches of the European Football Championship. I thought that all of this would never end and that it would last forever, just like my own life..

But everything went wrong. Russian aggression continues, the hybrid war has no mercy for anyone, and people forced to live under occupation for years are losing connection with their country. *Terra incognita* is the term used on maps for designating unknown territories, and it is becoming increasingly suitable for my native city because it is changing, as eyewitnesses say, and not for the better. And in my turn, I am slowly and irreversibly forgetting it.

So, can anyone tell me if the train will depart in the opposite direction, from Kyiv to Donetsk, in my lifetime?









*Interview with Alim Aliev*

## **Ukraine and Crimean Tatars**

**A**lim Aliev is a Ukrainian Crimean Tatar activist and the program director of Crimean House, a Crimean Tatar cultural centre in Kyiv. Today, Crimean Tatars play a major role in developing Ukraine's political nation, making up a bright and visible element of Ukraine's current multi-cultural and multi-faith identity.

*We're publishing an English-language version of an interview with Tetyana Ogarkova, for Hromadske.ua\*, an independent Ukrainian media outlet. In the interview below, we talked about the Crimean Tatar identity, Stalin's deportation of Crimean Tatars in 1944 and their return to their homeland in the late 1980s – early 1990s, and the consequences of the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014.*

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\* Original: <https://hromadske.ua/posts/krimskotatarska-kultura-ce-ne-cheburek-intervyu-z-krimskim-aktivistom-alimom-aliyevim>

**Let us start with late 1980s – early 1990s, when the families of Crimean Tatars, deported by Stalin in 1944, gradually came back to Crimea. How would you describe that era?**

I was born in Uzbekistan in 1988 and my family came back to Crimea in 1989. Both my father and my mother have roots in Bakhchysarai.

Crimean Tatars have three ethnic sub-groups – *jaly bojlus* (south coasters), *nogais* (Crimean Tatars of steppe) and *tats* – mountain dwellers or Crimean Tatars from Bakhchysarai region. I am a native *tat*.

We wanted to go back to Bakhchysarai. At that time, it was practically impossible because people either refused to sell houses to us, or the prices were kept artificially higher. But my father finally bought a house in a village not far away from Saki, between Saki and Simferopol.

In general terms, the 1990s for Crimean Tatars was the era when we not only came back, but also planted our new roots in the peninsula. One of the symbols of the early 1990s was a stone called shell rock. When Crimean Tatars to whom the authorities refused to give land started to build without permission – first temporary dwellings, and then proper houses – they built them from shell rock.

In that era, communication within the community was very strong.



**Can we say that Crimean Tatars who were coming from Uzbekistan or from other than Socialist republics were “Soviet people”? Were your parents “Soviet people” [*i. e. people who strongly identified themselves with Soviet identity and Soviet Union – Ed.*]?**

Identity has always been a very important issue for Crimean Tatars. And I would not say that my parents were Sovietized. Our people always had the sense of resistance in them. They always saw the Soviet government *a priori* as something hostile to us. This was

the government that deported us, and that killed half of our people. This was the government that prevented us from going back to our Motherland, and that pinned a huge number of labels on us.

**According to the 2013 statistics, there were approximately 270,000 Crimean Tatars in Crimea. If we look at the entire population of Crimea, it comes to about two million. At the same time, today we can see that the Crimean Tatars are very visible and very present in the public discourse, despite the fact that they are a minority. How can this be explained?**

The only argument is that we have no other Motherland except Crimea. This became an absolutely sacral element of Crimean Tatar life, and part of our everyday life.

 **Before the first annexation of Crimea by Russia's Catherine II in 18th century, Crimean Tatars accounted for 95% of the total population of Crimea. This figure has been falling gradually since that time. In 2013, Crimean Tatars accounted for 13-15% of the peninsula's population.** 

We have been always fighting for a place under the sun in our native land. I fully share the words of Myroslav Marynovych [*a Ukrainian dissident who spent 10 years in Soviet camps – Ed.*] who said that the Crimean Tatars, when they were returning in the late 1980s-early 1990s, came back to Crimea through the back door. There were problems with work, housing, and the overall perception of them. After deportation, a lot of Russian citizens were brought to Crimea who expected that after the Crimean Tatars returned, they would be very aggressive and violent towards others. Therefore, now, it is very important for us to come back to our Motherland by way of a “grand entrance”.

## **Did you speak the Crimean Tatar language in your childhood?**

Yes, I did. And if we did not speak our language, we were penalized by our parents, grandmothers and grandfathers. Speaking the Crimean Tatar language at home has been an absolutely normal thing for me.

My grandmother, for instance, had very poor command of Russian. She died two years ago, and right till the last days of her life not only did she speak only the Crimean Tatar language but she also taught her grandchildren to speak it. She was very irritated when she heard Russian.

Now, however, the Crimean Tatar language finds itself in a difficult situation. We are losing it. The younger generation does not know the language so well. In this age of modern technologies, when you have a huge array of various types of content, why should a person consume the content, for instance, in the Crimean Tatar language when it is easier to consume it in Russian? People often choose to watch Russian movies or read Russian books.

The language has to be popular. This should be a fashion for young people. Now we're seeing that speaking the Crimean Tatar language is trendy again.

**Today, this can be rather easily done on mainland Ukraine. At the same time, developments in occupied Crimea are not so easy at all. We can read in the media, for example, that the number of Crimean Tatar schools has fallen by half during the current Russian occupation.**

At present, there are seven Crimean Tatar schools in Crimea. Even they can hardly be called Crimean Tatar schools. But before the occupation, there were fifteen.

These are schools with intensive study of the Crimean Tatar language and literature. The [Russian] occupation government, instead, is doing everything to expand the use of Russian.

They actively impose this simulacrum: the idea of the “Crimean people”. During the Soviet era they were promoting the concept of “Soviet people”. Now they do so with the “Crimean people”.

But the “Crimean people” do not exist. This concept is needed for the creation of Russian political identity, but also in order to erase the ethnic identity of the Ukrainians and of the Crimean Tatars who live there.

### **In addition to the language, what else makes up the Crimean Tatar identity?**

I think there are three components: language, religion, and territory, the land.

### **Let’s talk about religion. Crimean Tatars are Muslims. What role has Islam played in your life since childhood?**

I will tell you immediately that our national and religious holidays are the main holidays of the year. Kurban Bayram, Oaza Bayram – they have always been a priority for every Crimean Tatar. And it was the same in my childhood. Holidays, weddings, and funerals helped us to preserve our identity during deportation.

I am not one of those people who pray five times a day (making the so-called *namaz*), but some Crimean Tatars do. Some go to the mosque during holidays. This synthesis has been quite natural in recent centuries.

What makes Crimean Tatars interesting for the world is that we have an understanding of two different contexts: the Muslim, Turkic world, and the context of the European world. We are connectors that understand these two languages.

### **Are there Crimean Tatars who reject Islam, and who identify themselves as atheists or do not have a faith?**

I only know one or two, though I know thousands of Crimean Tatars. At the same time, the Constitution of the Crimean People's Republic, which was adopted during the first Qurultay of the Crimean Tatar People in 1917, stated that men and women had an equal right to vote during elections.

**This is a very important question. I see a large number of young Crimean Tatar women who are very active in Ukrainian society. Equality in Crimean Tatar families: does it exist?**

I have the impression that Crimean Tatar families are very often ruled by women. In addition to the Qurultay of 1917, the Women's Qurultay was also convened. Women played one of the key roles in the Crimean Tatars' national movement during the deportation period.

**One can often hear the opinion that education has great value for Crimean Tatars. Parents are trying to ensure that their children make their own way in life. Why is that?**

In the 1990s, when my parents' generation was returning to Crimea, many of them did not have a higher education. There was line No 5, the "nationality" [*or rather "ethnicity" – Ed.*] line in Soviet passports. There wasn't even any talk about access to a technical or diplomatic education. That is why it was very important for my parents generation to give their children an education.

A degree certificate gave some confidence to parents because they could say, "You will not suffer, and you will not have to fight for the right to live 'under the sun' as we used to in our time". This applied to both boys and girls. We never believed that a girl had to get married at the age of 18.

**In a very short space of time, Stalin deported over 190,000 Crimean Tatars to various republics of the former USSR. Nearly**

**half of these people died during deportation or in the first years of it. At the same time, according to 2013 statistics, the number of Crimean Tatars reached 270,000. This means the number of Crimean Tatars is growing. What is the reason for this demographic growth? Is it because of large families?**

Not necessarily. A family may have from one child to ten children. The Crimean Tatar National Strategy states: “four children will save us”.

I know families with twelve or thirteen children. For instance, there are the families of political prisoners imprisoned by Russia. They have large families. Very often, in this situation the mother stays at home with the children. They have 7-8 children and are not able to pay for a nanny. Fathers, imprisoned, cannot support their families.

**How many Crimean Tatars have left Crimea since 2014?**

The number of internally displaced persons who have left Crimea, which include Crimean Tatars and other nationalities, reaches about 50,000 people. Among them, there are approximately 30,000 Crimean Tatars.

The majority of Crimean Tatars try to stay and live in Crimea. Our policy is to live as long as possible in our Motherland because Russian policy is aimed at squeezing these people out. For us, on the contrary, it is important to preserve ourselves and our land.

**In Ukraine, people rarely blame those Crimean Tatars who stayed in Crimea despite annexation. The connection between the Crimean Tatars and their land is much more obvious for Ukrainians, even for those who criticize people who stay in occupied Donetsk or Luhansk despite being able to leave.**

One should not blame people living in the occupied territories. I remember the year of 2014; the post-Maidan empathy was very strong

back then. But when people started coming from the East, propaganda in social media played its role, and people often said that “separatists” were coming.

I remember our press conferences when we came out to people saying that these were myths. Those bogus stories were posted in the social media in order to insert divisions into an already polarized society.

I often say jokingly that our country would be put together by low-cost carriers, by cheap flights between the different regions. So that we could fly from Simferopol to Ivano-Frankivsk, or from Luhansk to Lviv instead of travelling for many hours by train.

In Crimea, there was this idea that there is no land beyond Crimea. This was an absolute island mentality – when you know that all you have is this piece of land, and there is nothing beyond it.

🗨️ **In fact, Russian occupation of Crimea began much earlier than in 2014.** 🗨️

It began through mass media outlets, through mass culture. Even in the guides for tourists, when they showed all those Catherine’s paths, Chekhov’s houses, Galitsin’s grottos, Shaliapin’s places – this was an absolutely Russian cultural discourse. Instead, the Ukrainian cultural discourse in Crimea was completely absent. And the Crimean Tatars were only left with their Khan’s Palace.

| **And with petty trade...**

...and cuisine. But Crimean Tatar culture is more than a tasty *cheburek*. This is what we were trying to show – for example, in an exhibition at Mystetskyi Arsenal [*Art Arsenal – a big art exhibition space in Kyiv – Ed.*], called Amazing Stories of Crimea. It shows that the Crimean Tatars are not people who came from somewhere. We are indigenous people precisely because we have been a product of this melting pot of Goths, Alans, Kipchaks, Scythians, Tauri, Cimmerians,



and so on. Look at the various types of Crimean Tatars – and you will see the traces of these mixtures.

**Indeed, Crimean Tatars have completely different faces.**

Look at me, at Jamala [*a Ukrainian Crimean Tatar singer, winner of 2016 Eurovision Song Contest – Ed.*], at Akhtem Seitablayev [*a Ukrainian Crimean Tatar film director, who filmed, among others, ‘Khaytarma’ about Stalin’s Crimean Tatar deportation in 1944, and ‘Cyborgs’, about the battle for Donetsk Airport in 2014 – Ed.*] or at Refat Chubarov [*a Ukrainian Crimean Tatar politician and MP, chairman of the Crimean Tatar Mejlis – Ed.*]. We are so different...

**We have recently been witnessing the strengthening of a far-right nationalist movement in Ukraine. Do you feel any threat from it, among other things, for Crimean Tatars?**

I see very clearly that any movements are dangerous if they are inspired by Russia. Some of these movements, unfortunately, are like this. I think they are the most threatening.

On the other hand, the last five years were, for me, the first in my life spent in a truly independent Ukrainian state. It is important for Ukrainian society to have a unified national idea.

**“ We are Crimean Tatars by ethnic origin, but we are part of the Ukrainian political nation. ”**

I think it’s a very important element of Ukraine’s development as a state that this political nation has been crystalizing on the basis of values and not on the ethnic basis.

**You talk a lot about the importance of identity, language, culture, and historical memory. At the same time, you are an absolutely**

**contemporary young personality living in the modern world, and Crimean Tatar children also merge into Ukrainian society and eventually become not so much different. Where is this balance between the heritage of the past and the future? Could we say that Crimean Tatars are in some sense citizens of the Universe who can also travel around the world freely, learn English, and feel at home everywhere?**

The mission of my grandfathers and grandmothers was to return to Crimea and preserve their identity. My parents mission was to plant roots in Crimea, to build up. The mission of my generation is to make Crimean Tatars competitive in the global context. The Crimean Tatars should have their own Nobel, Booker Prize winners. We're glad that we already have a Eurovision winner [*i.e. Jamala, the 2016 Eurovision Song contest winner – Ed.*].

But we have to be competitive. We should not live exclusively in a victimized, self-sacrificing discourse. We have to be interesting for the world by generating new ideas and new products, but, at the same time, remaining Crimean Tatars. I travel a lot, and this is always an interesting amalgamation of innovations and traditions. It's like a combination of ethnic music and modern technologies. When you combine this, it leads to balanced development of both the people and the land that you live on.





**RUSSIA**

**VOLYN**

**WAR**

**JEWS**

**HOLOCAUST**

**NEIGHBOURS**

**PACIFICATION**

**POLAND**

**JEWISH UKRAINIANS**

**POGROMS**

**ANTI-SEMITISM**

**OTHERS**

**GIEDROYC**

**UNDERSTANDING**

**RECONCILIATION**

**MAIDAN**



# RELATIONS

**Ukrainian-Polish relations,**  
*interview with Ola Hnatiuk*

**Ukrainians and Jews,**  
*interview with Leonid Finberg*



## Ukrainian-Polish relations

**O**la Hnatiuk is a prominent Polish-Ukrainian researcher in Ukrainian studies, professor of Warsaw University and at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. Her book *Courage and Fear* won the grand prix at the Ukrainian Publishers' Forum in Lviv in 2015 (the English language version is coming out this autumn at the Academic Study Press and Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute). Her other book, *Farewell to Empire*, received the Jerzy Giedroyc Prize (2004). Together with Bogumiła Berdychowska she is the co-author of a book of conversations with Ukrainian intellectuals (*Rebellion Generation*). She is also the author of numerous other books and articles on history, culture, politics and literature.

Here we publish the English version of an interview that Ola Hnatiuk gave to Volodymyr Yermolenko (editor of this book) for *Hromadske.ua*\*. The conversation focuses on Polish-Ukrainian relations in the 20th century: about the Volyn tragedy, history of Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation, and how Ukrainians and Poles should look for points in their history that unite them.

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\* Original: <https://hromadske.ua/posts/kompleks-zhertvi-graye-z-naciyami-zlij-zhart-intervyu-z-polskoyu-ukrayinistkoyu-oleyu-gnatyuk>

### **You combine two identities – Polish and Ukrainian. Is that easy to do?**

Today, it is easy and natural, almost like combining different professional, public or family roles.

I am a person of two languages and two cultures.

I am a Polish citizen, and Ukraine is a second homeland for me (however, not in terms of citizenship). We enjoy this comfort as a result of democratic transformations; neither my parents nor my grandparents had it. Totalitarian or authoritarian states forced their citizens – or rather “subjects” – to choose by using a specific formula of loyalty: “who is not with us, is against us”.

### **Your mother was born in Lviv, if I am not mistaken, the day after Soviet troops entered Western Ukraine.**

Yes, my mother was born on September 18, 1939. Six years later, already after the war, my grandmother and mother were forcefully displaced from Lviv to Poland. It was called *repatriation* despite the fact that a large number of *repatriates* were born and grew up not in the places, to which they were *repatriated*, meaning not in central Poland and, moreover, not in Western Lands, which Poland received only after the Potsdam Conference (so-called Returned Lands, another creation of propaganda language). My mother grew up in Polish culture, and her identity was Polish. My father was born on the Polish side of the contemporary border in Chełm Land into a Ukrainian Orthodox Christian family. Before the war, he went to a Polish primary school: there was no Ukrainian school, although the only Pole in the village was the teacher, and the [Ukrainian Orthodox] church was intentionally ruined when my father was nine years old.

During the forced displacement of Ukrainians within the framework of Operation Vistula in 1947, my father first found himself near Wrocław, in the so-called Recovered Territories [*former German lands attached to Poland after World War II – Ed.*], then in the Northern Lands, and then in Warsaw. And later on my father met my mother in Warsaw. They



started a family contrary to the national narrative that dominated, which was especially hostile towards Ukrainians. In those circumstances, such a family was not supposed to exist. Of course, there were mixed couples, but in most cases the Ukrainian partner had to give up his or her identity.

**This was after the Volyn tragedy and after “pacification”. Is the story of your family unique or were there many such stories?**

This happened about a dozen years after the war, which not only ruined the pre-war world but wiped off entire communities from the face of the earth. With regard to my family, it was more of a rarity than a rule at that time. And in post-war Poland, this phenomenon was tabooed altogether.

**When people talk about Ukrainian-Polish relations, they see a positive point in the union between Symon Petliura and Jozef Piłsudski in 1920 [a short-lived union of the army of independent Ukraine and Polish army against the Russian Bolsheviks – Ed.]. Yet, this was not the only point, was it?**

Certainly, it was not the only one. And I would not say it was the most successful. In my opinion, a better example would be the activities of Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky [*prominent head of Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church from 1901 to 1944, coming from Polonized Ruthenian family – Ed.*], yet Polish historians need to first re-evaluate their attitude towards this person.

The Piłsudski-Petliura union caused disagreements both from the Ukrainian and from the Polish sides right at the moment when this agreement was signed.

**Were residents of Western Ukraine opposed to it?**

Polish right-wingers opposed it strongly, and they tried to persuade Polish and Western public that Piłsudski’s adventurism would not

get him very far. If we talk about the “betrayal” of Polish interests, which according to Polish historian Andrzej Nowak was allegedly committed by the West, then we should remember the by far not unanimous position held by the Polish political elite regarding Eastern politics and Eastern borders.

From the Ukrainian point of view, this union was forced by the extremely unfavorable international situation and, in the first place, by the threat from Russia. Of course, Galician people opposed this union (it was a different story with Volyn people) because it required the Ukrainian People’s Republic to give up its claims on Eastern Galicia [*now Galicia is in Western Ukraine with its centre in Lviv – Ed.*]. Let’s remember that the Act of Unification was signed between the Ukrainian People’s Republic (UNR) and the Western Ukrainian People’s Republic (ZUNR) in January 1919. That is why giving up these Western Ukrainian territories meant betrayal of ZUNR’s interests. That’s how Galician politicians saw it, and their opinion was shared by a lot of political figures in the UNR.

However, when we assess this agreement, we should remember when and in what circumstances it was signed. The negotiations began in September 1919. At that time, the Ukrainian-Polish war for Eastern Galicia was over (in July 1919), and ZUNR troops retreated behind the Zbruch [*river in Western Ukraine that marked the border between Poland and Soviet Russia from 1921 to 1939 – Ed.*]. From a military standpoint, Eastern Galicia was lost. UNR troops did not have sufficient forces to win back these lands from the Poles because they were holding the frontline from the other side against the Bolsheviks and Denikin’s army. Neither should we forget about Romania, which occupied the territories of Southern Bukovyna and Bessarabia. This brings us back to the unfavorable international situation. Not only did Ukraine have no allies, but it also, unlike Poland, did not have international recognition.

Ukrainians even had different perceptions of their main enemy: for Galicians “the devil himself was better than the Poles”, but for Ukrainians of the former Russian empire Red [Bolshevik] and White

[Tsarist army] Russia constituted the biggest threats. That is why the dictator of ZUNR, Yevhen Petrushevyh, made arrangements with the Russians, even with Bolsheviks, but not with the UNR or the Poles.

On the other hand, the Polish authorities were indisposed to negotiate with the Galicians, and even at the moment of extreme danger for the young Polish state, they were not ready to release interned Ukrainian Galician Army soldiers for a joint fight against Bolsheviks. Of course, this can be explained by concerns they had about the loyalty of Galicians, though I think that triumphalism was the main reason. This ultimately determined Polish policy regarding the Ukrainians during the interwar period, with its attempts to introduce splits between Ukrainian political elites and public activists.

### **What is your assessment of history that followed, of 1920-1930, namely the so-called “pacification” of the Ukrainian population by interwar Poland?**

This history, despite individual attempts to find the *modus vivendi*, was very complicated. It was difficult to turn Ukrainians into Poles, in accordance with the program of right-wing forces, and even into loyal citizens (program of centrist forces) in a situation when they were supposed to be second-class citizens.

🗣️ **In early autumn 1930, the Polish government held a campaign (it lasted several weeks) for “reconciliation” of the civilian Ukrainian population. This was so-called *pacification*.** 🗣️

### **Was it aimed against the churches?**

Churches – no, but priests – yes. Churches were destroyed later, in 1938, and in a different territory – Chełm Land and in part of Podlasie.

These were Orthodox Christian parishes that the Polish administration wanted to destroy in order to restore “historical justice”. This meant the intention to return the population that was made Orthodox by force in the late 19th century into the Catholic faith.

I am explaining the logic of their actions though, of course, I don’t want to justify them. On the contrary, I believe it was a manifestation of extreme intolerance toward another Christian church and a violation of fundamental human rights, the right to freedom of religion, and wild behavior towards architectural monuments. And all of this was done for the sake of an ideological purpose, which was considered to be a civilizational mission, but *de facto* was intended to forcibly Polonize these territories. A reminder that all this was happening one year before the beginning of the war. During the war, citizens of Chełm Land were able to restore some parishes; but the Poles saw it as manifestation of disloyalty and traitorous cooperation with German occupants.

Instead, the so-called “pacification” [*of 1930 – Ed.*] targeted first of all the territory of Eastern Galicia, which at that time was called Małopolska Wschodnia [*Eastern Lesser Poland – Ed.*] by the Polish administration. This name was an ideological construction, which had no historical foundation but had an obvious objective – to affirm its Polishness. An artificial border was created inside the country between Volyn and Eastern Galicia, the so-called Sokal border to protect Volynian territories from “Ukrainian/Galician nationalists”.

The idea was to separate Galician Ukrainian politicians and public figures from residents of Volyn. The very word *Ukrainian* and *Ukrainians* was excluded, and the official terms used were *Rusyny* and *Ruskyi*. Attempts were made to create separate ethnic groups, Lemkos, Boykos, and Hutsuls, and to create a separate Apostolic Administration in the Lemko region, in order to divide Ukrainians into different ethnicities, and block the development of a unified national movement. This was the policy of the Polish administration and the Nonpartisan Bloc for cooperation with the Government (BBWR) controlled by Piłsudski. This policy was coming closer and closer to the

views held by Polish national democrats, or the right-wing views of supporters of Roman Dmowski [*National Democrats (ND, Endecja) were the right-wing opposition to Józef Piłsudski – Ed.*]

“Pacification” began in early autumn of 1930 and it encompassed the territory of Eastern Galicia. This was real demolition of organized Ukrainian life, and the victims were not only activists, cooperators, priests, but also women and teenagers. The material basis of the Ukrainian movement suffered greatly. The official cause for “pacification” was arson attacks on corn fields allegedly organized by OUN, the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists. However, in reality a wave of arson attacks rolled through the whole of Poland and was caused by economic reasons (the 1929 global crisis brought corn prices crashing down). There were also political reasons, but not those still being described by Polish and Ukrainian historians (not terrorist acts by OUN, for example) but a deep crisis in Poland’s domestic policies. As Parliament was dissolved back in Summer, and the animosity between Piłsudski’s camp and right-wing forces exacerbated markedly, an external enemy was needed in order to de-escalate the situation.

**Do I understand you correctly that the right-wing radicalism of the Second Rzeczpospolita also radicalized Ukrainian communities?**

Not quite so: first, “pacification” was carried out not by the [right-wing] National Democrats, but upon the personal orders of Józef Piłsudski himself. Second, precisely at that time, in the 1930s, Ukrainian politicians were seeking understanding with the Polish authorities.

Piłsudski’s objective in 1930 was to appease his opponents from the National Democratic camp before the elections, and to fundamentally transform the Polish political arena so that it would be dominated entirely by his camp. They were appeasing the right-wing radicals by finding an internal enemy. They found this enemy in Galician Ukrainians.

“ This was yet not the period of widespread anti-Semitism of the mid-1930s, when violence broke out in the streets and in universities against the Jews. Ukrainians, instead, became a convenient internal enemy. ”

Not all Ukrainians though, because Ukrainians from Volyn were not included in this [pacification] campaign. The target was Galician Ukrainians, Galician civil society institutions, and cooperatives that formed the financial basis of social life. Galician Ukrainian intellectuals, especially the young, could not find jobs as public servants. Therefore, they went to villages where they worked close to the land. The Polish administration decided to attack these foundations of civil society. OUN's terrorist activities were good justification for this.

After “pacification”, the Ukrainians became significantly weaker and much more ready to recognize the *status quo* (although having an independent and united Ukrainian state continued to be their strategic goal). They realized that in the near future they were unable to do more, unable to create a separate state. So everything they could do in those conditions was to achieve autonomy within the borders of the Polish state. Legal Ukrainian political forces were trying to attain it. This tactic became especially widespread after the Holodomor [*artificial Famine organized by Stalin against Ukrainian peasants in 1932-1933 – Ed.*]. Ukrainian politicians in Poland understood that they were the only ones able to represent Ukrainian interests, and that the most important task for them was to preserve the “national substance”, i.e. national self-awareness.

On the other hand, the Ukrainian underground movement in Galicia was trying to persuade as many people as possible that the Poles were the greatest enemies for Ukrainian identity and for the Ukrainians. However, as of 1930 it was already clear that the main enemy was not Poland, but the Soviet Union. Stalin, as the leader of the USSR, first forced its collectivization plan, and then deprived Ukrainian peasants not only of arable land, but also of any food, annihilating the Ukrainian peasantry as a class. But shifting the focus

to Poland was precisely something that worked for the interests of the Russian Empire, which was called the Soviet Union at that time.

In 1932 and 1933, understanding the scale of the Holodomor tragedy, Ukrainian politicians in Poland tried to seek ways to normalize relations with the Polish administration. However, soon after the death of Piłsudski (in 1935) all attempts to find understanding faded away. In the years that followed, the situation of Ukrainians in the Polish state only deteriorated.

**The 1930s were very difficult years in terms of Ukrainian-Polish relations. But you often also write about those who sought reconciliation. Who would you name in the first place?**

First of all, the camp of Polish neo-conservatives who brought forward the proposal to start looking for *modus vivendi*. Paradoxically, at that time allies from the Polish side came not from the left, not from Józef Piłsudski's camp, but from the neo-conservatives camp.

Yet the biggest ally was socialist Tadeusz Hołowko. However, this supporter of the idea of understanding between the Poles and the Ukrainians was killed by an OUN unit in 1931.

**And what was the logic of it? What was the sense of killing a Pole who called upon reconciliation?**

The logic was “the worse, the better.” This is the style of revolutionary thinking.

Yevhen Konovalts, who headed the Ukrainian Military Organization (UVO), was shocked by that murder. Perhaps, the initiative was coming from low-ranking Ukrainian nationalists, but in unknown ways. One cannot exclude the possibility that this murder was instigated by provocateurs encouraged by the Polish police or (I think this version is more probable) by Soviet intelligence.

Soviet intelligence was very well informed about the Galician political spectrum. It knew very well which strings it had to pull in order to achieve the desired objective.

The story is painfully familiar: this is an old scheme tried many times. Western public opinion was also influenced in a very similar way. We simply don't study it enough and know very little about it.

**Let us talk about World War II. You have a book called *Courage and Fear* that received the Grand prix at the Ukrainian Publishers' Forum in Lviv in 2015. It is about the double (Soviet and Nazis) occupation of Western Ukraine. And you show very well how totalitarian regimes were trying to ensure clashes between Ukrainians, Poles and Jews against each other. Did they succeed at that time?**

Yes, to a certain extent, they did. When Soviet rule came to Western Ukraine [*in September 1939, according to the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact – Ed.*], it destroyed all elements of the previous political culture and public life. The Soviets arrested not only representatives of the Polish authorities, but also Jews and Ukrainians, members of the Polish Parliament, and all distinguished political figures.

**Timothy Snyder wrote that during World War II occupation erased pre-existing state institutions; and this erasure made uncontrolled violence possible.**

Of course, I agree with this. Besides, occupation implied governance through fear and distrust. In other words, both occupants [*Nazis and Soviets – Ed.*] were trying to completely destroy trust.

**Were the Soviets and the Nazis different in any way? Or did they use the same methods?**

Their style was very similar. But there was also a fundamental difference. From the Soviet side, there was political terror against individual layers of society; depending on their past, they were categorized



as [politically] trustworthy and untrustworthy. These layers were large – repressions affected almost 10 per cent of the population at that time. “Trustworthiness” was determined by social status and activism, and not by ethnic origin. If a person was a public servant (and they were predominantly Polish), a public or political figure (Ukrainians and Jews) then this person was “untrustworthy”. There was a newly-emerged category that was similar to the one from the Bolshevik Revolution era. But what was called “former people” [in the USSR], was now called “former Poles”.

Instead, Nazis put all Jewish citizens into the category of non-humans. The category of sub-humans — *Untermenschen* — was filled with Poles and Ukrainians. However, the Ukrainians received a few more rights.

**And this did more harm than good, because it later created the grounds for accusing Ukrainians of collaborating with the Nazis.**

The word “collaborationism” should be used very carefully. At that time, it was believed that a collaborator is always *another* person or another nation. It was never “I”, despite the fact that “I” was doing the same.

**During those first months of Autumn 1939, during the Soviet occupation of Western Ukraine, were Ukrainians in any way enthusiastic?**

Enthusiasm was ascribed to Ukrainians, especially by the Polish side. In reality, the attitude of Ukrainians towards Soviet occupation could hardly be called enthusiastic. A lot of Ukrainians, especially those involved in the UNR [*independent Ukraine’s People’s Republic of 1917-1921 – Ed.*], escaped to the German side, understanding they should not wait for anything good from the Soviet government. For instance, the half-Jewish Rudnytsky family fled from occupied Soviet

territory to German territory. They realized very well what was waiting for them from the Soviet side, and they had no illusions. Milena Rudnytska was a wonderfully educated person; she visited Europe many times and represented Ukrainian interests in the League of Nations. She realized very well that she was risking, but she also knew that in Soviet reality she did not have the slightest chance of surviving.

Out of all five Rudnytskys, only one elder brother, Mykhailo, stayed in the Soviet administration. But during Soviet occupation, the Soviets grabbed him by the throat.

**I will only tell our readers that they can read about this in more detail in your book, *Courage and Fear*.**

Yes, the book also shows that, regardless of circumstances, there are manifestations of humaneness and solidarity that go counter to national identities. It shows that old friends [with different ethnic origins] kept their close contacts, and which could not be influenced by the government.

Certainly, I cannot say that this was a mass phenomenon. But even if the share of stories about how some people saved others was just one per cent (the real number is much higher), they would still deserve our attention.

**Let us talk about what happened in Volyn. How should we talk about Volyn, how can we define what happened in 1943, and how can we live with it now?**

I think the problem already starts with the way we call it. The Polish Parliament recently called it *genocide*. This is a political decision that entails legal consequences. In Ukraine, the phrase *Volyn tragedy* is frequently used. But the Poles perceive it not just as a euphemism ...

**...but as an attempt on the part of Ukrainians to lift the guilt from themselves?**

Yes, if we understand the word *tragedy* in classical Aristotle's sense, when the characters do something because of doom or fate, and hence have no impact on developments and no moral responsibility for their actions. But this is a very simplified interpretation. In fact, characters from Greek Antiquity are responsible, here and now. For instance, Antigone, who for the sake of values refused to follow the tyrant's command and the earthly order established by him, was punished, although she acted according to a moral principle and buried the dead.

However, the contemporary understanding of *tragedy* is much wider than the classical one, and it includes the notion of responsibility for crimes committed. At the same time, tragedy has an individual dimension.

### **Violence in Volyn in 1943 had a mass character.**

It was ethnic cleansing. Polish historians say that the number of civilian victims among the Poles reached 100,000; the number of Ukrainian victims reached 10,000. Ukrainian historians, however, say that the number of Polish victims was between 40,000 and 60,000, while the number of Ukrainian victims reached over 20,000. Ethnic Czechs also suffered.

This violence was not just limited to the territory of Volyn. For instance, in 1944 mass crimes and extermination of the civilian population also took place in Eastern Galicia. In fact, we do not know the exact numbers of victims of this massacre even now. Unfortunately, there is speculation on the numbers from both sides. Moreover, this speculation is present not only regarding the numbers, but also the general picture of the war that took place on the territory of Volyn and Eastern Galicia. There is a tendency to separate the period of Spring and Summer of 1943 from the whole period of occupation – both Soviet

and German. One should remember that ethnic cleansing began not in 1943 but in 1940 with the repressions by Soviet forces and the cleansing of territory from so-called “counter-revolutionary elements” i.e. colonists. It continued in even more cruel forms during the German occupation, with the total extermination of Jews (Holocaust by Bullets). Extermination of the Polish population by Ukrainian units in Volyn and Eastern Galicia was a continuation of the wave of mass violence. Unfortunately, it continued in these territories right up to the early 1950s.

The word *tragedy* conveys the individual dimension, but it fails to convey an understanding of the scale of the crime. At least, this is how it is used in Polish vocabulary. Instead, in Ukrainian vocabulary, the word *tragedy* has a much wider meaning, and an example can be found in the fact that the Holodomor is often called a tragedy, although officially the Holodomor was recognized as genocide in Ukraine.

In Polish vocabulary, the phrase *Volyn massacre/slaughter* was used until recently. This phrase was used for a very long time in Polish historiography and journalism. I see it as dehumanization when the murder of people is equated with the slaughter of animals. This vocabulary leads to further rhetorical war. I do not accept, at the very basic level, such dehumanization of victims and everything in me protests against it. It makes no difference that this phrase is a widespread one, and I grew up with it and had to use it because no other name could be found.

I also feel a strong denial toward the phrase *Ukrainian genocide of Poles* (ukraińskie ludobójstwo na Polakach / narodzie polskim). In this case, we're dealing with manipulation based on the figure of speech *pars pro toto* and, as a result of using this phrase, Ukrainians are believed as such to be guilty of crimes.

Will Ukrainians and Poles be able to agree on the terminology? I believe they will, because it is difficult to imagine denial of the obvious: civilians were killed.

But what do we know, and what do we not know about those events? How do we study them? I think that Ukrainian historians and researchers have spent too little time studying those developments. And now a very high price is being paid for this.

We are not saying here that there is a point of view of the Ukrainian side and a point of view of the Polish side. It was precisely this erroneous attitude (Polish side versus Ukrainian side) that resulted in a situation when historians now behave as if they were crouched in the trenches. More and more pointed accusations are being voiced from one and the other side. While one side calls the developments in Volyn in 1943 genocide, the other side calls them the Polish-Ukrainian war.

### **| Is this an attempt to shift the guilt from oneself?**

Yes, and, unfortunately, from both sides. The “Second Ukrainian-Polish War” is not just the name of a book [*by Volodymyr Viatrovych, head of Ukrainian National Memory Institute – Ed.*], but also a statement. On the other hand, in the Polish context, when there is a talk about killings of the Ukrainian population, a euphemism is used: “retaliatory actions”. It means: “evil was done to us, so there were retaliation actions from our side”. The word “retaliation” is used, not the word “revenge”. But those retaliatory actions killed women, elderly people, newborn infants, everyone. And this was done only on the basis of their ethnic origin. And today we know neither the geography of those crimes nor their scale.

### **| What should the Poles and the Ukrainians do today?**

I think they should, first and foremost, get out of their trenches. They should stop trying to impose the one and only standpoint. They should realize the consequences of using phrases that continue the war in a symbolic space.

**Still, talking about Volyn, I think Ukrainians should admit that they were not only victims in their history, but also killers. And this is very difficult to admit.**

Yes, this is very difficult to admit – for any person, for any community. Just like for the Ukrainians, it is hard for the Poles to admit they were not only victims but killers as well. And this martyr mentality in both nations has played a bad trick on us.

**This is a case when martyrology – i.e. belief that you are only a victim – can be cruel. Would you agree?**

Yes. I will mention here a brilliant essay written in the early 1980s by Jan Józef Lipski about different ways of understanding patriotism.

🗨️ **It is important to be a patriot who recognizes the mistakes of his or her own people.** 🗨️

Who believes that we are not the best in the world; we are ordinary people, ordinary communities, ordinary nations – like others next to us. It is a pity no such significant text was written by a Ukrainian author.

**Let's move to the era after World War II. Of course, Poland had its painful interpretation of the Yalta division of the world, according to which it lost Eastern Galicia and Volyn. And then people like Jerzy Giedroyc appeared who founded *Kultura*, a Polish émigré magazine in Paris. He called on Poles and Ukrainians to forget mutual accusations and seek rapprochement. Can Giedroyc be called an architect of Ukrainian-Polish reconciliation?**

Absolutely. But Giedroyc did not come from nowhere. He grew up in independent Poland, in the 1920s. He was in the trenches in Warsaw

when the Bolsheviks were advancing in 1920. His patriotism was real, not learnt at school; there were also real actions behind it. He was, perhaps, the most prominent Polish political thinker of the second half of the 20th century, although he did not write big texts nor a political treatise.

In the early 1930s, Giedroyc, having graduated from a law department, studied Ukrainian history at the University of Warsaw. His professor was Myron Korduba, a student of Mykhaylo Hrushevsky [*prominent Ukrainian historian and politician – Ed.*]. Myron Korduba was not admitted to the Jan Kazimierz University in Lviv as a Ukrainian professor and had to teach at a grammar school. Then he received an invitation from the University of Warsaw. And so Giedroyc attended his lectures.

### **What did he learn from Korduba?**

First of all, he learnt a different view of history. Understanding that our standpoint is not the only possible one. In other words, it was the understanding that one can look at all those developments from a different point of view. And Korduba was able to show it – not only using an example of early modern history in which he specialized, but also contemporary history since he participated in the events of 1918–1919.

**Ukraine should definitely be grateful to Giedroyc, and the first thing that comes to my mind is the anthology *Executed Renaissance* edited by Yurii Lavrinenko, which was a collection of texts of many Ukrainian writers from the 1920s, who were exterminated by the Soviet regime in the 1930s. The anthology became possible thanks to Giedroyc; he even came up with the name.**

Yes. But the most important point was that he inspired the rethinking of Ukrainian-Polish relations. At that time, the issue was a huge

trauma for the Polish people, the change of borders through the Yalta order. Just as important is the fact that Giedroyc saw Ukrainians as partners for negotiations and agreements, as an actor, not an object.

**And Giedroyc called on acceptance of the idea that Ukraine has a right to be independent.**

Not only independent, but independent in those new borders. He called on people to admit that Lviv is a Ukrainian city. Back at that time, in the mid-20th century, this was an impossible thing for a Pole and an emigrant to imagine.

He started doing so in late 1940s – early 1950s. The discussion itself began in the 1950s. Let Lviv be Ukrainian, Vilnius be Lithuanian, let the blue and yellow flag flutter in Lviv, one of the correspondents of Giedroyc's Paris-based *Kultura* wrote, and this caused indignation among Polish readers. The public was absolutely not ready to accept Poland's new borders. 1952 was just seven years after the end of the war. This time is too short.

**It was so because Eastern Galicia, including Lviv was, for Poles, an annexed territory.**

Of course. On the other side, Poland had received western post-German territories. The period of uncertainty lasted for a long time, until the end of Communism, during which the Poles had the feeling that the Germans would come and take everything back.

**When did Giedroyc's ideas start to penetrate into Polish society?**

In the 1970s.

By the way, publication of the *Executed Renaissance* collection [*in 1959 – Ed.*] won the sympathies of Ukrainian emigrants. This opened up the possibility for talking with Ukrainian emigres.



In the 1960s, not many things were happening – but still, Koshelivets published his book, *Ukraine 1956–1968: Collection of documents of Ukrainian dissidents*. Borys Levytskyi published his book about national policy in the USSR. *Kultura* published regular articles by Bohdan Osadchuk: from the first half of the 1950s he was the staff correspondent of the *Kultura* magazine in Paris and informed its readers about eastern-Ukrainian affairs, first and foremost about Ukrainian affairs.

The first noticeable change happened in the 1970s. The political concept of a new Polish Eastern policy was developed.

🗨️ **This was the so-called ULB concept – Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus as ally countries of Poland; their existence was supposed to guarantee Poland’s independence.** 🗨️

This was the topic of letters exchanged between Juliusz Mieroszewski and Jerzy Giedroyc, and later – of Mieroszewski’s publications in *Kultura*. There was also a statement issued by Polish intellectuals about recognizing the borders.

But still, the breakthrough was the Polish *Drugi Obieg* [*Second Circulation – underground press in socialist Poland – Ed.*], a strong movement by the Polish opposition that became interested not only in its own Polish affairs, not only in reflections as to how to make the Communist order more humane or how to overthrow it, but also in the question on what to do with Poland’s neighbors. This was a debate as to what country we see in the future and what we are striving for. The Polish political imagination started working in the mid-1970s, and it exploded in the mid-1980s. That is why Poland became the first state to recognize Ukraine’s independence.

**Today, we see a conservative turn in Poland, often with a lot of anti-Ukrainian rhetoric. Are there people in Poland who would like to revise Giedroyc’s ideas?**

Lots of them. This is a very dangerous trend in Polish political thought. And this could result in another geopolitical disaster. The tendency to see the Russians as allies has not disappeared. The tradition of Polish National Democracy that goes back to Roman Dmowski is based on the idea that the Russians are the biggest allies of Poland, and the Germans are the biggest enemy. Also, contempt for the state-building capacity of Ukrainians is rooted very deeply in the Polish tradition of political thinking.

**Are these the dominant opinions in the *Law and Justice* (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS), the ruling party?**

I wouldn't say they are dominant inside the PiS. To a large extent, they are present in much more extreme environments. However, when the PiS has to fight for voters, its political strategists are ready to go that far.

The most extreme environment permeated with this ideology is the clergy. Yet, it would be unfair to generalize, because not all priests and even less so bishops think this way.

**Do these doubts about Giedroyc's ideas mean that there are forces in Poland that want to revise the borders?**

No. It is not about the borders; it is rather about the weight of Ukraine in Poland's Eastern Policy.

**So, there are no people who say publicly that Lviv should be Polish?**

There are no politicians who say this.

**If we talk about the Ukrainian side – do you have the feeling that there is some skepticism in Ukrainians, even West-oriented, about Poland and about our common history? For instance, in your book, *Farewell to Empire*, you analyze the search for**

**Europe in new Ukrainian literature, including such writers as Yuri Andrukhovych. And you show how they refer rather to the legacy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, to Central European history than to the Polish legacy. Do Ukrainians have a virus of distrust toward the Poles?**

It exists; it has not disappeared. But, on the one hand, empathy [on the part of Ukrainians towards Poles] prevails. Public opinion surveys show that, unlike the Poles, Ukrainians like Poland a lot. Apparently, this is because they are convinced that Poland is a very close example of success for Ukraine. More senior people remember the economic situation in Poland in the 1980s or in the early 1990s. And they understand what kind of reforms the country implemented during this period.

On the other hand, there is some distrust towards those Poles who do not have sufficient understanding of Ukrainian problems and aspirations.

**What should the Poles and Ukrainians do today?**

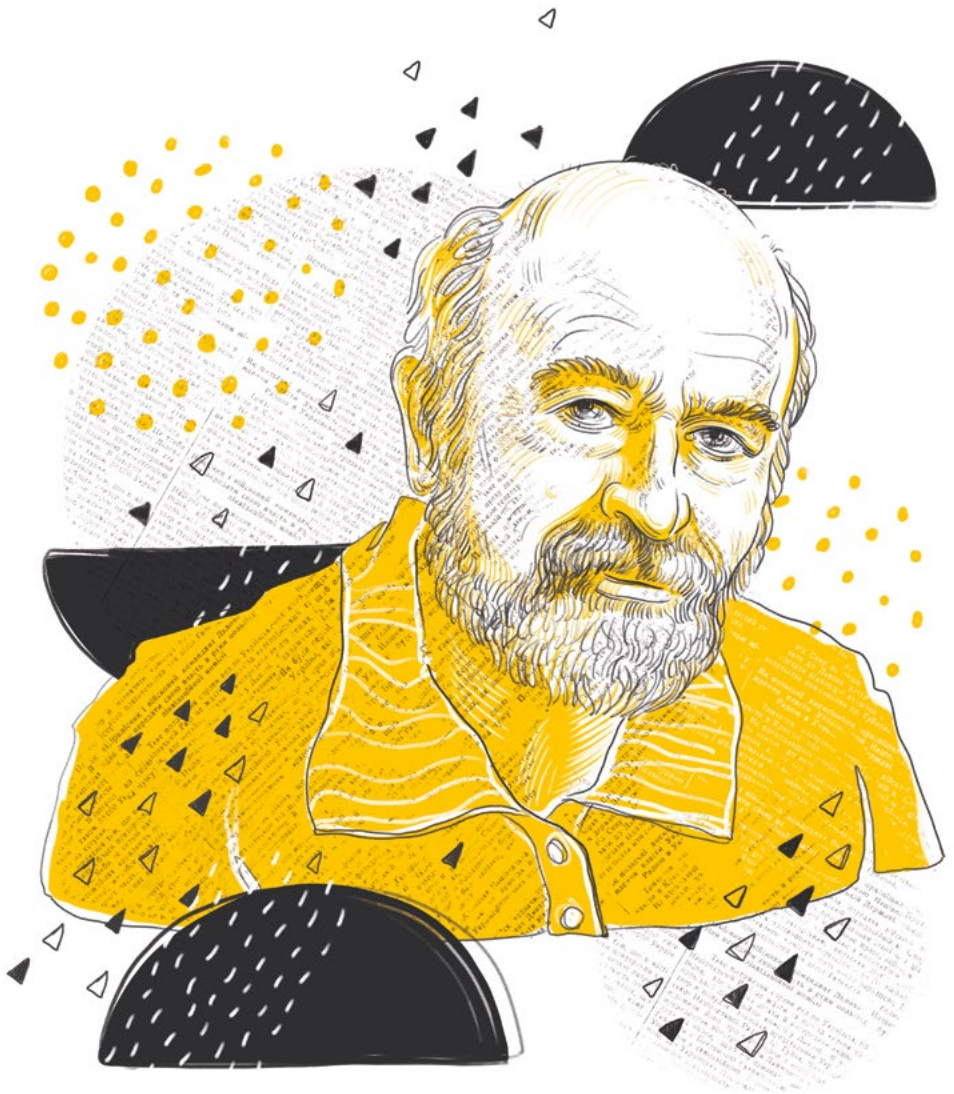
They should not succumb to despair. Despair is present not only in Ukraine but in Poland as well. Inside these societies, there are political oppositions, very deep controversies. I cannot say that there is an abyss, but these controversies are based on negative emotions, such as hatred.

These deep political controversies divide societies and prevent them from moving on. And this is not a purely Ukrainian problem – it is a global problem. Populist slogans are not purely Ukrainian problems – these are global problems.

When you have common problems, you should find common solutions. Polish-Ukrainian cooperation should continue, and it cannot be just limited to Polish-Ukrainian disputes about history. Historians must learn their lessons. However, I am not so naive to believe that politicians will leave history to historians. Because history is a fertile field for manipulations.

On the other hand, history can unite, and not only through common victories but also through common experience, analyzed and rethought. And we have to look for these factors that unite, and not only look for specks in each other's eyes.







Interview with Leonid Finberg

## Ukrainians and Jews

**L**eonid Finberg is one of the leading Ukrainian researchers of Jewish culture, Director of the Center for the Studies of History and Culture of East European Jewry in Kyiv, Editor-in-Chief of the *Dukh i Litera* [Spirit and Letter] Publishing House, and a member of the Executive Board of PEN Ukraine.

*Our discussion with Mr. Finberg took in Ukrainian-Jewish relations in history, about their positive and negative aspects, anti-Semitism and the search for mutual understanding, the Ukrainian liberation movement and the USSR, as well as the people who connect the Ukrainian and Jewish cultures.*

**You are a person who has perhaps the best and deepest understanding of Ukrainian-Jewish relations in Ukraine. They were both complicated and difficult throughout the course of history. In your opinion, to what extent has the Jewish culture which developed on the lands of contemporary Ukraine, become a fully-fledged part of contemporary Ukrainian culture?**

I think we still cannot say today that even Ukrainian culture itself is genuinely Ukrainian. Despite all the years of more or less free development there are still a lot of texts and stories that we do not know.

Soviet stereotypes still prevail in public discourse. As for intellectuals, I would say that those intellectuals who are focused on studying Ukrainian history and culture know approximately eighty per cent of what one should know. Or maybe even less.

As to Jewish culture, the situation is even worse. Jewish culture has existed and developed in these lands for centuries. Many people who later became renowned throughout the world were born and lived here. For instance, Shmuel Yosef Agnon, a Nobel Prize Winner; but Agnon's works have never been translated into Ukrainian.

We [*Center for the Studies of History and Culture of East European Jewry and the Dukh i Litera Publishing House – Ed.*] wanted to translate his texts, but we are only just beginning to translate some of his stories. Agnon is an extremely difficult writer. He is one of the most difficult authors of the 20th century, because the fabric of his writing is very much linked to Biblical texts. A translator has to know these texts perfectly, and there is still no such person either in the Ukrainian or in the Jewish culture on our land.

We started from scratch approximately thirty years ago. During this period, we have published nearly one hundred books on Jewish studies. Yet, what does “one hundred books” mean when there are hundreds of thousands of them in developed countries? We face a challenge every time we have to select the best one, because we are



not able to publish a dozen or a hundred books about a specific subject or a specific author, as we can publish only one.

Today, we have a small group of people – several dozens in all of Ukraine – who know languages, who are immersed in Jewish-Ukrainian culture and history. However, in order to dig into the culture of the past centuries, we need hundreds and hundreds of people. It's only in recent years that we began receiving some state support to do this job. Before that, there was nothing.

**Let's talk about the major figures in Jewish-Ukrainian culture, the representatives of the Jewish culture who are connected to contemporary Ukrainian lands. For instance, I can think about Paul Celan, one of the biggest German-speaking poets of the 20th century who was born in Chernivtsi/Czernowitz. Or Joseph Roth, the author of one of the best novels about the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, who was born in Brody. Who else would you name?**

I would absolutely mention Volodymyr Ze'ev-Jabotinsky.

I would also name the figures from the period of the Ukrainian People's Republic [1917-1921 – *Ed.*]. There was a phenomenon called the Kultur Liga (Culture League), which was, in fact, the ministry for Jewish rights.

**Even the banknotes of the Ukrainian People's Republic had an inscription in Yiddish, among other languages.**

Yes, and that era was very interesting. It was very short but extremely intense. The Culture League dealt with libraries and schools, but there was also an artists' club. In that period (1918-1924) the club's members included Marc Chagall, El Lissitzky, Robert Falk, Mark Epstein, Sarra Shor, Abraham Manievich. All of them became world famous later.

These are world-class phenomena, and people have to know about them. Do you remember how anti-Ukrainian or anti-Semitic texts were promoted in the Soviet era? Do you know how many anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic books were published in the Soviet Union? Four hundred. Can you imagine? And we are happy that we have published one book on a specific topic, and discovered a phenomenon thanks to this book.

**How strong was anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, especially after World War II? Before the war a lot of Jewish organizations participated in the revolutionary movement, but after the war anti-Semitism began to thrive gradually in the USSR. To what extent did you feel it?**

There are stereotypes and Soviet clichés linked to this topic. In fact, before the [1917] revolution, Jews in the Russian Empire voted for religious parties, for Zionist parties. Very few of them voted for the social democratic or communist parties.

Then there was a wave of pogroms, and a lot of Jews were killed. Of course, Jews were not the only ones to be killed because violence was very widespread at that time; there were gangs that aligned themselves once with the Whites, then with the army of the Ukrainian People's Republic, and then with the Reds. It was the chaos of hunger and armed violence.

In those years of the Civil War [*late 1910s – early 1920s*], the Bolsheviks (although their gangs also participated in pogroms) were the most consistent in their efforts to end that spiral of pogroms. They did this not because they treated Jews so well, but because they wanted to master the situation and lead the country.

The Bolsheviks managed to do this, although they used the cruelest methods, and we know it. At that time, a lot of people (Ukrainians, Jews, Russians) joined the Bolsheviks. Others hid for some time, but they faced progressive restrictions of their rights and, finally, extermination.

At that time, there was no ideology of anti-Semitism in the USSR, it is true. Yet it was present in people's minds, it had never disappeared.

### **Do you mean the pre-war period?**

Yes. The Bolsheviks were trying to play the international card. But they were playing it in a specific way, prohibiting the Hebrew language and, thus, Judaism as religion: Judaism cannot live without the language.

The same happened with the Ukrainian community when the Bolsheviks went about destroying churches, when they melted church crosses to make cannons. That madness was not national at that time, it was social.

National tragedies began with the Famine of 1932-33. These were already national extermination campaigns, because the empire understood that independent peasants showed the greatest level of resistance to it, and, quite consistently, the empire began to use these barbaric campaigns against peasants. First, the revolution chose various social groups, other classes as its targets. Then there was the Famine, which was, objectively speaking, a fight against Ukrainians.

Later, before World War II, there were socially motivated trials once again, repressions against the military, but not only them. The communists started exterminating their own people, those who knew the truth about what was happening.

After the war, nationally motivated trials – anti-Semitic, anti-Ukrainian – started again. After the war anti-Semitism became horrible because it was organized by the state. First it was soft when the USSR began to cooperate with Hitler (1939-1941); during that period there was silence about all the tragedies involving the Jews that were happening in Europe. The party disoriented citizens and did nothing to protect these groups of citizens later on, when the war broke out. The USSR cared first of all about its factories, so only factories were evacuated, and those who moved with the factories. Others were left behind.

The trials of the late 1940s – the fight against the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, the Doctors’ plot case – were terrible campaigns aimed at destroying the Jewish intelligentsia. There was a plan to deport Jews as a community to Siberia.

**Why did all of this happen? The Soviet Union defeated a huge anti-Semitic power, and instead it became anti-Semitic itself. One of the explanations that I find is that Israel began to drift more towards the US and the West. Another explanation is that Russian nationalism in the Soviet Union had triumphed. But how would you explain it?**

There are several factors. One of them is that Stalin had to exterminate someone all the time so as to keep the country living in fear. The time had finally come for the Jews.

Why the Jews? First, the communist party was fighting against the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee because these people had huge connections in America and huge influence. During World War II they went to America and collected big money for Soviet weapons.

Similarly, the USSR sent to Siberia those people who were in Western countries during World War II, especially officers. Those officers had seen the West and knew how people could live decently, so they were immediately sent to the camps.

Why did they fight doctors? This, I think, was Stalin’s idiosyncrasy. He was afraid of everything. At some stage, he was afraid of the doctors near him – and there were a lot of Jewish doctors and professors among them.

For me, it is obvious that Stalin felt he had to destroy one community after another in order not to let any resistance emerge.

Similarly, after the war there was a fight against Ukrainian “nationalism”. I put the word “nationalism” in quotation marks, of course, because everyone who spoke Ukrainian and refused to write an ode for Stalin every day was said to be a “nationalist”.

The Soviet regime also created a legend about the disloyalty of Crimean Tatars. There were just as many heroes [*of the fight against Nazism – Ed.*] and Soviet Army soldiers among the Crimean Tatars than among other ethnic groups. There was, perhaps, an even bigger proportion of those people compared to the proportion in other groups. But they were made scapegoats. Stalin was clearing the space in Crimea and the Caucasus to continue the war in the Middle East. He was halted only by American nuclear weapons. He had the strongest army in Europe, which had drunk its fill of blood and stopped only when the Americans became stronger.

**Let's talk about Ukrainian national movements and their impact on Ukrainian-Jewish relations. The tragic paradox is that what Ukrainians see as liberation movements frequently meant tragedies, pogroms, violence for the Jewish community.**

Do you mean the Bohdan Khmelnytsky period?

**Khmelnysky, *Haidamaky*, *Koliivshchyna*, Petliura and others. For instance, a lot of people accused Petliura of anti-Jewish pogroms, although there are documents confirming that he tried to stop them. We know that the assassination of Petliura [*Petliura was killed in Paris by Samuel Schwartzbard in 1926 – Ed.*] was accompanied by the message that it was the revenge of the Jewish community; but the murderer could also be an NKVD agent. Yet if we look at it from a wider angle – how do we interpret this today? The Ukrainian liberation movement and the Jewish community very often went one against the other, and the Jewish community suffered very often from Ukrainian movements.**

Liberation movements were tragic for everyone who stood on their paths. The Poles were killed no less frequently than the Jews. The Jews were a literate nation and a stateless community, so those tragedies

were interpreted and articulated in a serious manner. Such phenomena have very simple laws: during such wars Strangers and Others are always killed. But those who were not Strangers, and belonged to the same community, were also killed – but perhaps did not have the opportunity to talk about it.

I don't know if you read an article written by Vadym Skurativskyi [*a Ukrainian intellectual, historian, and art critic – Ed.*] about Taras Shevchenko. He has a brilliant statement that Shevchenko was the first person in world culture who vocalized the largest pains of those people who had no words to express their feelings. Before him, there were people like Byron who could be sent to prison for a short time, and then write a poem about his experience. Instead, Shevchenko went through all the stages of humiliation, imprisonment, exile and sufferings, and he voiced them as nobody had done earlier, which made his voice so strong in world culture. In his article, Skurativskyi used a metaphor of the residents of African tribes who, when experiencing hard times, came together and just howled together.

In the 1920s gangs robbed Ukrainian villages as well, and killed members of the civilian population. But often this remained unexpressed, and there were no words or witnesses to share those stories.

It is important to conceptualize the problem of statelessness. There is no coincidence that the biggest victims of World War II were Jews because of the “specific” policy of Nazism. But Ukrainians were big victims too, because they were stateless as well. All victims of the first years of war were, to a large extent, people from Western territories – Ukrainians, Belarusians, etc. Later, the Soviet army was victorious and began reconquering those lands, but during the first years of the war it was almost destroyed, and out of a five-million army almost four million were captured and made prisoners. The Germans did not know what to do with such a large number of people.

That is why I believe that statelessness means victimhood.

You mentioned Petliura. In the past, together with Roman Korodskyi, we published a book called *Field of Despair, Field of Hope*.

There was an article in it about a person belonging to Petliura's entourage who was responsible for preventing pogroms. They really did try to stop pogroms, and pogrom participants were executed.

However, at the latter stages Petliura did not have his own army; it broke down into groups of independent armies or large divisions. He was losing one squadron after another because his people joined the Bolsheviks or others, and he was no longer able to contain them. That was his fault. Yet this is a bit different fault than one of organizing pogroms. Petliura was an intellectual, and he tried to stop violence in any form, including pogroms.

With regard to Petliura's murder in Paris, I could say that, like in many other similar historical cases, we will not have the evidence of, say, an order from Stalin to kill Petliura. The Russian archives will be closed for a very long time, perhaps until the end of this empire. Yet there is no doubt that during that time the Soviet secret services were killing one opponent after another of the regime, who were hiding in Europe. Petliura was one of them. It is very probable that he was killed by the Soviet secret service.

I don't know if you know an artist, Hlushchenko, who was a Soviet intelligence officer and a correspondent at the Petliura trial. At that time, the Soviet government provided only documents it wanted to provide for the trial. It was in the mid-1930s, and we know which terrible trials began in the USSR from the late 1920s – in 1929, 1930, 1933.

**Let's talk about the Holocaust. I think this issue is still not duly researched in Ukraine. We cannot answer the questions as to what extent Ukrainians collaborated during the Holocaust, and to what extent did Ukrainians resist the Holocaust. What can you say about this?**

Indeed, this issue is almost not studied – like very many other aspects of Ukrainian history. A genuine history of World War II [in Ukraine] is only now emerging. There are the first books written by

Vladyslav Hrynevych, Yaroslav Hrytsak, Olena Stiazhkina, Tamara Vronska. Before them, we had only Soviet legends. Everything in them was lies.

The topic of rescuing the Jews was also taboo in the Soviet Union. Commemoration of the executions in Babyn Yar was prohibited and, therefore, investigations only began when there was almost nobody left who could say what happened back then.

The number of Ukrainians who rescued Jews and are called the Righteous Among the Nations is rather high. However, saving the Jews caused unwanted associations [in the Soviet era] and trying to avoid the need to give explanations to the authorities, people were afraid to talk, and were scared that their neighbors would report them. If reported, then – unlike what was going on in Western Europe – they would be killed. It was not just persons who rescued the Jews or helped them would be killed, but their entire families.

Adam Michnik once wrote, *I don't know what I would do if I had a wife and a child [during the war] and they [the Jews] would come to me and ask for shelter. But the fact that there were people who saved others – this, he said, is the sign of God's presence on Earth.* I think these are really great words.

**Ola Hnatiuk, in her book *Courage and Fear* showed, using materials from Western Ukraine during the double Soviet and Nazi occupation, that there were a lot of stories of mutual rescue and solidarity among Ukrainians, Jews, and Poles. But in Western literature we can constantly find the stereotypes that Ukrainians were inclined towards collaborating – for instance, that the Ukrainians worked for police and helped to kill Jews.**

I avoid the word “collaborator”. Collaborators are traitors. Whom did Western Ukrainians (or Poles, or people from the Baltic States) betray when the Soviets came to them? How could they betray the Soviets that destroyed their intelligentsia?



With regard to cooperating with the Germans: people from all nations cooperated with the Germans. [In Ukrainian lands], more than 80% of residents remained in the occupied territories. How could they survive? There were different forms of cooperation. In our publishing house, we published a book by Olena Stiazhkina [*The Stigma of Occupation. Soviet Women in Self-Awareness of the 1940s – Ed.*] about women during the war. It contains different stories. One is about a Soviet patriot who wanted to die but win in the war. Another is about a Ukrainian patriot who tried to save her family, nation, and everything she could. The third is about a person who wanted to survive, and she worked at a sausage factory. Thanks to that work, she was able to save a lot of people who were not sent to Germany and were not exterminated. Later, when she was arrested by the Soviet regime and sent to Siberia, people defended her. They wrote, “She saved us”. And they were able to get her brought back [from the Soviet camps], which was an exception, a one in a thousand case.

So there were all types of situations. The war had different stages, and we know it. At the initial stages, some Ukrainian forces were pro-fascist, and some were liberal – but this was the same in all other countries as well. The Ukrainians hoped that after the Soviet occupation they would be liberated by the Germans, and they would be able to create an independent state. However, the Germans did not need this. This Ukrainian movement, therefore, very quickly began to fight both the Soviets and the Germans. There were instances of helping the Germans and of fighting against the Germans. Similarly, there was assistance for Soviet forces and of resistance against them – when Soviet forces repressed the Ukrainians, the Jews, and the Poles back in the first years of their occupation, in 1939-1941. All of this requires careful research.

In 1991 [*the year when the USSR collapsed – Ed.*] together with Ivan Dziuba [*a Ukrainian dissident and writer – Ed.*] we organized a conference [on Ukrainian-Jewish relations], and it had a huge effect. I can quote Yevhen Sverstiuk [*a Ukrainian dissident and writer – Ed.*]

who wrote, “For the first time, children of Ukraine and children of Israel sat down together to talk, to clean these stables that no-one had cleaned for centuries, which accumulated legends about Ukrainians who hanged the Jews, and Jews who kept the keys to a church. The only thing missing in those legends is the truth”.

Then we had an interesting presentation by a historian, Yaroslav Dashkevych, who tried to show various stages of the coexistence of Jews and Ukrainians. In his words, if the Jews had felt so bad living on these lands, one third of all the European Jews would not have lived in this territory. Now we are gradually discovering some humane forms of coexistence between the Ukrainians and the Jews.

A wonderful book written by Johanan Petrovsky was published recently about life in shtetls [*Jewish towns in Central-Eastern Europe – Ed.*]. This is not a story about how shtetls struggled for their survival, but about a period that came before that difficult time. When Russia capitalized on the part that had earlier belonged to the Polish-Lithuanian state, it gave concessions to Polish magnates. These magnates invited Jews, who acted as catalyzers of development in big and small towns.

### | **Was this in the 19th century?**

Yes, it was in the early 19th century. Petrovsky had access to archives and discovered fantastic materials. For example, he discovered evidence about joint Polish-Ukrainian-Jewish gangs, “counterfeiters”, but also about all the other legal social structures, which had not yet been suppressed.

At later stages, when the Russian authorities began to “tighten the screws”, everything was ruined, and there was nothing to hold on to for survival. But before that, those communities cooperated in a normal way. “Normal” has both a positive and a negative sense. They cooperated but they also fought, though this was not a fight on national grounds.

**The level of anti-Semitism in Ukraine is currently very low. After the Maidan [in 2013-2014], anti-Semitism-based crimes have been virtually absent. One can say that Ukraine is one of the least anti-Semitic countries. We are sitting now in the office of Yosyf Zisels [Ukrainian-Jewish dissident, co-president of the Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Ukraine (VAAD)]. He describes very well how Ukrainian and Jewish dissidents met each other in Soviet camps. Was this the beginning of reconciliation?**

I would not say “reconciliation”, but rather “mutual understanding”.

**Can we say that it was the Ukrainian-Jewish dissident movement that led to this understanding?**

I think that the dissident movement played a positive role in the entire “healing” of Ukrainian society. Before that, we had Soviet stereotypes. Dissidents provided a breath of “fresh air”: European traditions, traditions of respect for the law, for a human being, and for religion. Of course, dissidents played their role in it.

It’s another matter that all of this was a gradual process, and almost no-one knew about their [Ukrainian-Jewish] cooperation. It was only in the years that followed, with *Rukh* [literally, “Movement”, a Ukrainian national movement founded in the late 1980s – Ed.], with Chornovil, Sverstiuk, Zisels, Gluzman, that we learnt a lot more than we knew before. Yet, it is important to remember that actions of solidarity between the Ukrainian and Jewish intelligentsia during the Soviet era were numerous. When anti-Semitic manifestations appeared, provoked by the authorities, instigated by the KGB, or someone did something individually, there was always a response from Sverstiuk, or Marynovych, or Antoniuk [*Ukrainian dissidents – Ed.*].

Similarly, we held many actions of solidarity when Ukrainians were groundlessly or provocatively accused of anti-Semitism.

Yet, it's not only this that's important. The main point is that after the "Soviet Wall" collapsed (there was not only the Berlin Wall, there was the Soviet Wall as well), and all this Soviet madness came to an end, world culture opened up to us. During the Soviet era, we knew nothing about democratic movies, tolerant movies or movies about Jewish destinies, or about the Holocaust, or human solidarity in general. We knew the Soviet communist ideologemes that had been pounded into our heads. The specific trait of Soviet propaganda was that it emphasized negative things. It darkened the positive sides of joint histories of different countries or different nations. I think that Soviet propagandists had their own kind of "divide and rule" game, and they played it quite successfully. According to them, the Ukrainians had always been nationalists, and the Jews had always been Zionists; both these words had negative connotations.

**During the Maidan in 2013-2014, a new meme was created, *Zhydo-Banderites* [Jewish Bandera supporters]. It is very paradoxical, because Bandera's ideology in the 1930s had elements from the far-right movements of that time, including fascism, with their anti-Semitic aspect. How should we look at this aspect today?**

The same terms work differently in different contexts. I think that the victory of this term, *Zhydo-Banderite*, is in the fact that it has removed pre-existing stereotypes, as it destroyed the pejorative meaning of the word *zhyd* [one of the names for Jews, that got pejorative connotations in the 20th century - Ed.]. It is important to remember that a *Zhydo-Banderite* is a self-appointed name of the Jewish intelligentsia which associated itself with the Maidan movement, which was part of the Maidan.

The same has happened now, for instance, in relations between Israel and Germany. There is no-one who brought more grief to the

Jewish people than the Nazis. Yet today, Germany and Israel have normal relations, a constructive approach and support. I think that Ukrainian-Jewish relations are now at this constructive stage in our country. And I believe that this is the achievement of those people who we have already mentioned, and many others who we have not been mentioned here.

We recently published a book by Yurii Skira about how Jews were saved in the Stoudios Charter monasteries. For some reasons, Ukrainians did not talk about this for so many years. However, along with the tragic pages of history there were heroic pages as well. We know Schindler's list, we know Polish, Dutch, and Danish stories. Now we also know some Ukrainian stories.

The first book about it appeared three months ago. It is about an extraordinary, heroic deed: Jewish children (and not only children) were hidden in monasteries, and the whole community and an entire branch of the Christian church was involved in this process. Now I want to find someone who could make a documentary about it, and translate this book into English. For ten years, I was looking for someone who could write this book – and finally I found this person: the book was written by a young 26-year-old scholar from the Ukrainian Catholic University, Yurii Skira. Together with a priest, he visited those people who are very old now, and who told these stories to them. They would have not talked without a priest [*the book by Yurii Skira is called "Those Who Were Called: Monks of Stoudios Charter and the Holocaust" – Ed.*].

We recently published another book, it's called *Silence Speaks*. The problem is that first of all those people who survived the Holocaust wanted to talk, but no-one wanted to listen to them because of fear. This was just after the war. And then they locked themselves up and fell silent because they were afraid. At a certain moment in time, many of those who found strength in themselves to share their stories committed suicide because it was extremely difficult to experience all that again...

**There is another very tragic event in Ukrainian history of the 20th century – the *Holodomor* [Artificial Famine] of 1932-1933. In Ukraine, it is often called the *Ukrainian Holocaust*, and there is even a multi-volume publication that collected personal stories about the Holodomor with this title. I do not think this is a good title – but still, do you think that these two events can be compared, and do you think that Nazism and Stalinism were in some ways close?**

Yevhen Sverstiuk once said very correctly that if the world had not turned away from the Holodomor, if it had not turned a blind eye to what was happening in Ukraine in the 1930s, then perhaps the Holocaust would have never happened. The Holodomor was a warning to humanity, but humanity buried its head in the sand. And I think that Sverstiuk is right. Had the world's attention been focused on the Holodomor tragedy organized by Stalin's regime, maybe they would have found the levers that would have helped to contain other totalitarian regimes at a later stage. In any case, they would have been able to better unite the efforts of democratic forces.

Yet, every tragedy happens in its own way. Tragedies, as joys, are all unique. Both the Holodomor and the Holocaust were terrible, and both tragedies should be known, remembered, and studied. We should be strong enough to fight it, because we cannot live our entire lives with this tragedy, with such hard feelings. Memory should be full of light as people say – we should remember, but move on.

Why is there constant talk about Bandera? Why don't people talk about Stalin? Stalin has the blood of millions of people of all ethnic origins on his hands. Yet he is glorified by some people today, and for some people – in Russia, and not only there – he is a hero. Instead, people are talking about Bandera, whose role is much smaller. And what about Zhukov? What about Sudoplatov? This list can be continued. Not only in the Russian context, but also in the Ukrainian and Jewish contexts, there are a lot of people who deserve to be condemned.

But there is a set of stereotypes that frame human thinking and I believe that, to a large extent, these stereotypes are still the remnants of Stalinist propaganda.

### **| How would you describe the Jewish movement in Ukraine today?**

I think it is very difficult to analyze it today, because the Jewish community is no longer as important, as influential and organized as it used to be. In the past, Ukrainian parties and Jewish parties, Ukrainian communities and Jewish communities were well-structured, in one way or another. They are no longer like that. Today, there are perhaps a dozen Jewish organizations that exist nominally in Ukraine, of which 90% are absolutely fictitious, there is nothing behind them. They are used by some oligarchs of Jewish origin who need to show at some moment in time that they are Jewish leaders. So they bring old Jews from different places, and they have a one-day gathering to adopt a decision, because the community, as such, practically does not exist.

Perhaps the only exception is VAAD Ukraine, which is headed by Yosyf Zisels, but this association does not represent the interests of all Jews either. The integral community is, by and large, no longer around.

### **| There are simply fewer people left.**

Yes, of course. There are individual communities and small groups that work. And we are one of them.







# STEREOTYPES

**Neither Admiration Nor Fear:  
Stereotypes About Ukraine in Germany,**

*by Andriy Portnov*

**Insecure Security of Ukraine,**

*by Hanna Shelest*





Andriy Portnov

## Neither Admiration Nor Fear: Stereotypes About Ukraine in Germany

When the Maidan movement began in Kyiv in November 2013, I was giving an introduction on Ukrainian Studies to a class at Humboldt University of Berlin. In 2013–2015, I had to speak a lot about Ukraine in different languages to different audiences – from the Bundestag to a congress of German historians, from the Berlin Poetry Festival to summer schools and TV programs. Gradually, I had to get used to the fact that virtually every public presentation about Ukraine turned into political debates with rather aggressive sympathizers of Putin’s policies. I also had to abandon naive initial assumptions that the main cause of numerous misunderstandings and stereotypes was *only* a lack of knowledge about Ukraine and shortage of reliable information in Germany.

Later on, I tried to write down the regularly repeated basic points used in the disinformation war, and to note cultural stereotypes on which the Kremlin’s propaganda relies. Today, looking back at the observations I made at that time and partially verifying and complementing them (this article focuses on these issues too), I can also say that in general, over all these years, despite a significant increase in mention of Ukraine in the German media, there has so far been no

significant change of the previous stereotypical picture. Perhaps not enough time has passed to let this happen. Perhaps Ukraine itself has not made sufficient efforts to face this challenge. Perhaps the motivation inside German society was not sufficient to re-think one of the largest and most controversial European countries east of the Oder...

### **Basic Putin-friendly statements about the “Ukrainian crisis”**

The list of the most frequently used Putin-friendly statements should start with the emphasis on the overall perception of the definition of the Revolution of Dignity, annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas as the “Ukrainian crisis”. This notion of “crisis” is presented in the German media as *neutral* and *unemotional*. Both characteristics are extremely important if we talk about the expected standards of journalism and political analysis. The same logic was used by university professors I know when they deliberately avoided such term as “annexation of Crimea”, or told their students that it would be “more correct” to talk about “secession”, i.e. the separation of the peninsula from Ukraine (it is clear that following the logic of such language, the emphasis is placed not on external aggression but on the alleged will of the majority of the local population).

Hence, the most frequently used Putin-friendly points were (and still are) the following:

*“It is primarily the West which is to be blamed for the Ukrainian crisis”.* The main argument here is that the West was the first to violate the principle of inviolability of post-war borders, having supported and recognized independence of Kosovo, and it was not careful enough and irritated Russia by consistently expanding NATO eastwards. The “expression of [popular] will” during the Crimean “referendum” is equated to Kosovo’s expression of [popular] will (following Putin’s logic of explaining the annexation of Crimea with the “right

of the local population to self-determination”). Instead, the choice of the majority of the Ukrainians in favor of the European integration is proclaimed to be imposed from the outside (mostly, from the United States), not independent, and unrealistic. As the supporters of this argument say, the EU supported the “exaggerated expectations” carelessly and, with this support, provoked Putin. Following the same logic, they emphasize the need to understand the *legitimate interests of Russia* in the post-Soviet space. To use the words stated in a TV show by a retired NATO general, Harald Kujat, and met with applause, a solution to the conflict should be sought “not in opposing Putin, but together with Putin”.

*“In Ukraine, there is an ongoing civil war between the East and the West of the country, mainly caused by nationalism of the West and the Kyiv-based government that was brought to power by the Euromaidan”.*

This statement is based on the image that has been supported for decades by the media depicting Ukraine as a deeply divided country where the “West” is pro-European (and at the same time, ultra-nationalist), while the “East” is pro-Russian or simply Russian. Stereotypes about the east of Europe as the terrain of various ethnic nationalisms and anti-Semitism (to which I will return later) supports the belief in the “nationalism” of the Ukrainian government. In addition to this, Ukraine is described as an imperfect state, a random product of the collapse of the USSR, a deeply divided country without its own historical and cultural sovereignty, which is just a *battlefield* for real international powers. In the “civil war” argument, the issue of Russian intervention and subsequent open military aggression, falls away to the background (or is completely lost from sight). The context of the same argument makes it possible to compare Ukraine with Czechoslovakia (which implies that it would be good to split the country) and argue for the advantages of federalization.

*“The Russians and the Russian language in Ukraine need to be protected, especially in the regions where Russians constitute the majority”.*

At first sight, this sounds like a legitimate European statement. But against the background of the lack of knowledge about the real situation with language and the language policy in Ukraine, it turns into acknowledgement that an *equation mark should be put between people in Ukraine who speak Russian, who have Russian identity and are politically loyal to Russia*. This equation mark, however, is strategically important for Putin’s propaganda. German mass media outlets repeatedly published maps of linguistic and ethnic “zones” of Ukraine that failed to take into consideration the specifics of Ukrainian bilingualism: that people can use Ukrainian or Russian depending on a situation, and depending on their social status (cities are mostly Russian speaking, while the countryside is mostly Ukrainian speaking). This leads to a very typical statement about East Ukrainian regions with a “Russian ethnic majority”. For instance, on August 23, 2014 in an interview for *Welt am Sonntag*, Vice Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel stated with confidence that Ukraine could preserve its territorial integrity only provided that it offered federalization to the “regions where Russians constitute the majority”.

*“Germany has to avoid a new war, especially when there is a threat of use of nuclear weapons”.*

In this case pacifism, which became the norm for post-Nazi Germany, is turned into indirect support for military aggression. The price of avoiding war includes making concessions to Putin, and manifestation of flexibility and of peaceful intentions. The issues related to the Budapest Memorandum or violation of the Great Agreement with Ukraine by Russia, are simply taken off the table. This logic was recently manifested in Germany’s direct support for the return of the Russian delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Such logic is based on the European culture of seeking political compromise and the need to “keep talking”. It ignores, however,

the specific nature of Russian politics, for which such manifestations of indecisiveness and weakness only encourage further escalation of the situation.

*“The economic and historical aspects of German-Russian cooperation should not be sacrificed for the sake of inconceivable, distant, and weak Ukraine”.*

This statement is based on the conviction that Ukraine’s problems have a local nature (see the statement on the “civil war” above) and, by and large, present no threat to Germany. Instead, deterioration of relations with Russia is already seen as an economic, military, and cultural threat. In that scheme of things, Ukraine is seen merely as a regrettable obstacle for a long-term process of achieving understanding with the big eastern neighbour. The relevant rhetoric regarding Nord Stream-2 (as an allegedly exclusively economic mutually-beneficial project) is the best confirmation of this.

*“Criticism of Putin and of contemporary Russian politics is Russophobia”.*

This purely manipulative statement is not only very popular, but also belongs to the factors that have to be taken into account at any time when you address a German audience. Careless statements about the Russian language and culture are the worst tools for use in persuading the German public, especially when the speaker is from Ukraine. But not only from Ukraine: I heard how a well-known local historian, presenting a publication about Ukraine, deemed it necessary to emphasize that he “loved Russia”. I saw how, during a discussion about the cultural situation in Ukraine, a well-known Ukrainian writer was asked by a German moderator when she’d last visited Moscow, and he was shocked by her answer: never.

In general, the supporters of the above-mentioned statements *do not constitute a unified social group*. They include a large part (but not all) of supporters of left-wing political views (primarily, sympathizers

of the Left Party – *Die Linke* – represented in Parliament); part of German big business; part of conservative and right-wing Germans who are usually skeptical about further EU enlargement (right-wing populist party *Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD, expresses their political views); and part of immigrants who arrived from the former USSR.

### **Cultural underpinnings of the pro-Putin standpoint**

— *strong anti-Americanism*, in the first place, of German left-wing milieus tending to recognize imperialism exclusively in the West, but not in Russian politics in post-Soviet space, and to express solidarity with any regime that positions itself as anti-Western. The results of opinion polls, according to which Germans see a greater threat and feel more antipathy for Trump than for Putin, are examples of indirect evidence of such an approach. I will take a risk to claim that this shows not only attitudes towards the personalities of the presidents of two countries, but also about the stereotypical attitudes towards these countries as such.

— The German *post-war culture of consensus and pacifism*, according to which any negotiations are better than the use of force, the struggle for peace requires exclusively peaceful means, and any conflict can be resolved if the involved parties drink enough coffee together. Therefore, it is not surprising that there is a negative attitude towards Ukraine's accession to NATO and towards supplying weapons to Ukraine among Germany's elites and its society. Of course, such pacifism leaves very little chance for the victim of aggression. It also fails to answer the question of how to stop violence, which first establishes new rules and borders, and then imitates a negotiation process.

— *stereotyping Eastern Europe as the land of chaos, ethnic nationalism and anti-Semitism*. Putin's propaganda tries to put today's developments in Ukraine into the historically perpetuated and recognized stereotypical scheme by, inter alia, overblowing the topics of "neo-Nazism", "threats for minorities", and others. Interestingly,



this “Eastern Europe” includes not only Ukraine but also Poland and the Baltic States, but not Russia. Consequently, violence against immigrants, homophobic rhetoric, restrictions of freedom of speech in Russia are taken out of sight, while manifestations of racism in Russia are mentioned much less frequently than “fascism in Ukraine”. A great deal has been written about the historical roots of the “German complex with regard to Russia”. Perhaps the most accurate metaphor describing this complex can be found in the Russian title (the German version of the book had a different title) of the monograph written by Gerd Koenen, *Between Fear and Admiration*. Russia frightens, even a lot, but it also attracts and causes admiration. It is like in a widely-quoted statement from one of Rilke’s books stating that Russia borders not with other countries, but with God..

— *feeling of historical guilt towards Russia*, first of all, for German crimes during World War II. At the same time, in the German collective consciousness, the war in the East, which took place primarily on the lands of contemporary Ukraine, Belarus and Poland, is seen as the war “in Russia”, despite the fact that the zone of military actions or occupation covered no more than 9% of the territory of the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic. Equally significant is that many Germans associate Ukrainians with collaborators and Russians with victims. This scheme is reflected, for instance, in an extremely popular TV series *Our Mothers, Our Fathers* broadcast by the ZDF TV channel in 2013. The series tried to draw a distinction between Nazism and “ordinary” Germans, and called the lands of warfare on the Eastern front exclusively “Russia”. However, the movie also shows Ukrainian support police beating Jews mercilessly in Smolensk (!) [*a city in modern-day Russia, some 400 kilometers away from Ukraine’s northern border – Ed.*], wearing blue-and-yellow armbands and speaking the Russian language. There were no other Ukrainians in the series. Ukraine as a geographic notion was also absent in the movie.

Millions of Germans watched the series on the eve of Maidan. After Maidan, in the context of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, Gerd

Koenen whom I mentioned earlier, wrote in *Die Zeit* that the German mind ascribes typically all terrible losses suffered by different peoples of the USSR during World War II, to the “historical account of eternal mythical ‘Russia’”. At the same time, the feeling of historical guilt and responsibility toward Ukraine that was occupied twice (first in 1918, then in 1941) by the German army is much weaker and practically never connected to the perception of current developments.

— *lack of cultural and historical associations with Ukraine.* In some German encyclopedias it is possible to find, even today, that borscht is a “Russian soup”. Very few people are surprised or indignant at the established German name *Dnjepr* for the Dnipro River and *Kiew* for Kyiv. Therefore, it is no surprise that an influential former chancellor of the German Federal Republic, Helmut Schmidt, said in an interview for *Die Zeit*, in the midst of Russian intervention in Ukraine (in May 2014), that “to this day, historians have doubts that the Ukrainian nation exists”.

Until recently, there were virtually no permanent university positions studying Ukrainian history or literature. In Berlin, there are no permanent courses of Ukrainian in any university, even now. I myself became, in May 2018, Professor of Entangled History of Ukraine at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder) – the first (and only in Germany) professorship with “history of Ukraine” in its title. After Maidan, several institutions and initiatives emerged for developing at least the basics of Ukrainian studies in Germany. One of the essential challenges for all of them was the stereotypical association of Ukraine with nationalism and wartime collaboration. And also the rhetorical trap of the continuous need to distance oneself from alleged or true “manifestations of fascism”.

Evidently, the words *fascist* and *Nazi* are absolutely negative. They are a stigma, not a description. The most important thing is that they place a person from Ukraine or supporting Ukraine in the position of someone who *has to exonerate herself or himself* and prove that she or he is not a fascist. Interestingly, this situation did not change after

the early presidential and parliamentary elections in 2014. And I am not certain it will be changed by the results of the presidential and parliamentary campaigns in 2019, which manifested a phenomenal success (in the entire territory of Ukraine!) of a political force that can by no means, be described as “nationalist”.

The most important thing is that for a *very large number of Germans Ukraine is not a sovereign actor of the historical process and current politics*, but just a field of conflict of real powers (of the West and Russia), or even merely a function of anti-American sentiments. In other words, German society is only beginning to get used to the idea of Ukraine’s cultural and historical sovereignty, and very influential voices regularly suggest the doubting of this idea.

### **“*Putinversteh*er” : actors and methods of propaganda**

In the German public space, there is an active diverse group of so-called *Putinversteh*er (i.e. those who [allegedly] understand Putin). It consists of influential former and current politicians (including ex-chancellor Gerhard Schröder and some of his fellow party members); retired military officials (Harald Kujat); journalists and political experts (for example, Gabriele Krone-Schmalz and Alexander Rahr). It would be an over-simplification to explain their motivation exclusively by financial or business interests. This motivation is often based on the cultural stereotypes which I mentioned above, and on the personal experience of the *detente* of the 1960-80s, which some politicians still use as the framework for interpreting current developments. Today, they avoid supporting Ukraine in the same way that they avoided supporting Polish *Solidarity* in the 1980s so as not to irritate the USSR. In this situation, Russia is able to “make foreign policy with foreign hands” as Viktor Chernomyrdin, Russian Prime Minister and Ambassador to Kyiv, once said.

The methods of Russian propaganda in Germany are diverse – from seemingly insignificant street campaigns (which during Maidan

associated everything going on in Ukraine with the nationalist *Svoboda* party and *Right Sector*) to the German-language version of the *Russia Today* TV channel. An important role is also played by social media and aggressive mass comments on the most significant publications of German mass media outlets covering developments in Ukraine. The focus in this case is not only on the reference groups which I mentioned earlier (“anti-American” left-wingers and “anti-European” right-wingers), but also on today’s widely-recognized ideal standards of *balanced presentation* and the need to *hear the other side*. The noble idea of a “balance” is often used for manipulation emphasizing that the truth (and, thus, an objective description) does not exist as such and, therefore, we have to deal only with various interpretations, each of which is *equally* subjective.

I had the chance to observe the admiration of a large number of listeners caused by the performance of a poetess, Yelena Zaslavskaya, from Luhansk, at the Berlin Poetry Festival in June 2014. Refined audience members possessing leftist attitudes and disparaging disdain for the “bourgeois mainstream” identified themselves easily with her clichés about “Ukrainian fascism”. The performance offered them the feeling that they are non-trivial; it did not provoke any moral restraints in their minds (because who cares about that Ukraine?). The same ideological and psychological key can easily open the “secret” of propagandist movies about Ukraine produced by someone like Oliver Stone.

## **What does Ukraine need to do?**

— An old Chinese proverb says that *a proper assessment of the situation* is half the solution. Both the Ukrainian state and society, and the international community, should clearly understand that Ukraine finds itself in a *situation of war*, and its international information aspect is one of its main frontlines. Russia invests a lot in this front, and – unlike Ukraine – it implements systemic information policy,

which contains a significant disinformation aspect. An important component of this policy is the attempt to impose their own language for describing current developments. In this context, Ukrainians should use their best judgement, for instance, to understand that the self-given name *Banderites* [Bandera supporters] used by many to counter Russian propaganda can be, for example, a trap that will reinforce the stereotype of “exceptionally nationalist Eastern Europe” in the eyes of Germans. Ukrainians should also realize that developments in Ukraine are currently being monitored very closely by the whole world, and each manifestation of homophobia or anti-Semitism (disgusting and unacceptable in itself!) will be used to the maximum against the entire Ukrainian project. The same goes for manifestations of Russophobia which, as I mentioned earlier, should be separated from the principled criticism of Russian policies.

— *reforms in Ukraine, visible changes in all spheres of life have to demonstrate both to Ukrainians and to the international community that Ukraine is committed to the European integration vector. Ukraine needs to prove its sovereignty, to prove that, contrary to Putin’s widely disseminated statement, Ukraine is not a failed state. I think that in this context it is extremely important to emphasize and prove that the regional, linguistic, and religious diversity of Ukraine is a component of this sovereignty, and does not deny or undermine it. It is essential, among other things, to realize that anti-Donbas rhetoric, pushing the guilt of local elites to the population of Donbas, dissemination of statements about “unnecessary Donbas” and “vatnyky [pejorative name for supporters of Russia and Putin in Ukraine] who are themselves guilty of this” play into Putin’s hands.*

— *Ukraine needs the broadest possible participation in international exchange programs and strategic investments in its cultural promotion. The objective is to bring Ukraine closer to Western Europe, create personal, historical and cultural associations, and to develop empathy and undermine stereotypes. In this regard, insisting on the use of Ukrainian transliteration of the names of cities like Kyiv or*

Lviv [instead of Russian transliteration], of course, makes sense. But it is important not to stop here. The task is much more ambitious: to prove Ukraine's historical and cultural sovereignty by referring to the heritage of Hryhorii Skovoroda, Olha Kobylianska, Dmytro Chyzhevskiy, Lesia Ukrainka, Oleksandr Dovzhenko, Vasyl Stus and hundreds of other names. There were also Joseph Roth and Rose Ausländer; Sergei Prokofiev and Karol Szymanowski; Isaac Babel and Friedrich Gorenstein; Kazimir Malevich and Oleksandr Arkhypenko.

🗣️ **Bandera should not be the first historical association with Ukraine. Neither should Brezhnev and Shcherbytsky be.** 🗣️

Ukraine's modernization and development of its public space are equally important. I agree with Yurii Ruban that when Ukraine confronts the threats emerging from the information war, it should not build its information security strategy on "repeating the moves" [of the adversary] (among other reasons, because Ukraine has more limited resources) and should instead *envisage asymmetry of responses to such threats*. While Russian information aggression is aimed at opposing the West, Ukrainian strategy has to be based on Ukraine's integration into the European cultural and political space.

— Directly connected to the previous statement, *better knowledge and understanding of the European Union's* nature of the decision-making process in Brussels and at the level of national governments is of critical importance for Ukraine. Today, the EU is looking for an answer to the very difficult question of how democracy can oppose authoritarianism possessing nuclear weapons, how openness can win over secrecy, and how pacifism can win against a military invasion. In the Ukrainian public space, a simplified view is fueled once in a while that the German government exclusively follows the logic of concessions for Putin. Unlike Putin, any German chancellor is a democratic politician who has to be engaged in constant dialogue

with coalition partners and with public opinion. The latter, as I have shown above, is far from always being supportive of tough sanctions against Moscow and univocal support for Ukraine.

— *Ukraine's potential for the vision of a new Europe.* It is often said that today's EU is in crisis. For many citizens of "old Europe" open state borders are an everyday life experience, and are no longer a dream. For many, the EU is associated more with economic problems, cumbersome bureaucracy, phobias about immigrants, etc. Enthusiasm about the "reunification of Europe" is gone, and the European project needs new legitimacy to respond to strengthened Euro-skeptics. In this situation, Ukraine has, at least in theory, a chance to persuade its partners in the EU that it has the potential for European security, economy, and culture. However, this is a difficult and creative task, which goes significantly beyond the "European choice" slogans, and furthermore envisages systemic structural changes. Post-Soviet Ukraine looks like a huge laboratory that, with its intrinsic situational bilingualism, political pluralism, experience of mass protest movements, and well-developed informal economy, could present the challenges of religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity for EU member states in a new way. Perhaps it would force them to think seriously about this question: what would Europe lose if it were to lose Ukraine?





## Insecure Security of Ukraine



**F**or the last 5 years, I have been talking about Ukraine, conflict, security, Russia, in unison and separately on so many occasions that one can struggle to find new words, new arguments and new internal forces to persuade, to explain and to just discuss the issue. Sometimes, you are lacking words as you think that everything is so logical, so how is it that your colleagues cannot understand what is happening? Or do they understand, and just do not want to accept it? Or do they accept it, and are at ease with their conscience?

The second dilemma is how do you speak about security in Ukraine without talking about Russia? Very often, our discussions are so Russia-centric, that they do not go beyond the issue. While Russia is definitely, in the current conditions, the biggest threat to the national security of Ukraine and regional security in Europe, and to be precise, it has been for quite a time in contemporary history, nevertheless, to talk about security and to look only at Russia means to undermine Ukraine itself, to follow the Russian discourse and the perception of the world that they would like us to see.

Let us start from the end. In order to guarantee our security we need to go beyond Russia, to debunk some of the myths it has been

imposing on us for generations, to build our own resilience and reliable network of partners. But also, to demonstrate that despite the conflict, Ukraine is no longer just a security recipient, but a security provider for Europe.

Before 2014, I had studied conflicts for about 10 years. I visited conflict zones and post-conflict societies in Europe and Asia, had hundreds of hours of conversations about peace, security, conflict resolution and reconciliation. I thought I knew how complex conflicts are, the logic behind them, how to mitigate their consequences or to prevent their development. I just didn't know how difficult it is when conflict comes to your land, what the feeling of insecurity means even when fighting is taking place 700 km from where you live.

Unfortunately, we are all used to conflicts or pictures of war. Media outlets have made it such a familiar and daily occurrence. We feel sorrow for one killed person, we easily consider it a statistic, when hundreds are killed and millions displaced. People in Western or Central Ukraine realize it is an ongoing armed conflict in their country only when somebody who's wounded or killed return to their neighbourhood. Therefore, what can be said about the Spanish, Belgians or Swiss, who may have seen some videos in the evening news, but even then did not realize that the reality of war has returned to Europe?

With all of this insecure world around us, we do not know whether absence of war really means peace and security, or with all new methods and tools that are being used, the feeling of insecurity is something that will define our generation. Security is in flux. For a few decades already, while talking about European or Black Sea security, we have predominantly analysed issues of soft security. We have talked more and more about human security, energy security, environmental security, information security, trafficking and organized crime, illegal migration, sustainable governance. Most of us experts paid little attention to the classical, hard, military security.

🗨️ **The year of 2014 took us back to the rhetoric that the majority of Europeans had forgotten - occupation, annexation, spheres of influences, aggression against a sovereign state, violation of territorial integrity, the list can go on and on.** 🗨️

Russian aggression really has changed a lot. In 2008, Europe thought that the short Russian-Georgian war was merely a continuation of separatist conflicts in Georgia. It was too short and a cease-fire was negotiated so quickly, that many European politicians considered it merely an incident. In 2014, the scope and manner of the aggression caught not only Ukraine unprepared, both morally and military. However, the problem is that 2014 was not a beginning but the continuation of Moscow's long-built policy and strategy, the strategy that had introduced narratives, myths, perceptions, without the deconstructing of which it will be impossible to talk about Ukrainian security.

Moreover, we, Ukrainians, wished to think that our crisis is unique. Our politicians and diplomats have been trying to present Ukraine as an outstanding case and that all efforts on the part of the international community should be directed immediately towards Ukraine. We did not want to accept that we are competing with other conflicts and crises around the globe – for media attention, for international support. It sounds odd – competing conflicts... Still, how should we explain to the international community that when a part of our territory is brutally annexed using military forces, but not killing hundreds of people (as it happened with Crimea), it is just important as when explosions killing hundreds occurred in Baghdad or Aleppo.

After 5 years, we have learnt how to fight, but we're still learning how to speak with the international community. How to persuade other countries not to back off, not to lift sanctions, not to return to "business as usual" with Russia. How to see Ukraine not as a problem of European security, but as an integral part of it. How to make our

arguments more pragmatic and sharp, but not emotional, so as to speak the same language as other European capitals speak.

We are still fighting for narratives, we are still battling against myths and stereotypes, and we're still lacking security.

### **The Myth of In-Betweenness or Being a “Cushion”**

You hear less recently about Ukraine being a buffer zone – a concept winning all popularity prizes in the 1990s and 2000s. A bridge, a buffer zone, the destiny of an in-betweenner, a grey zone. You can continue this list of analogies that we've all had to face at hundreds of international conferences and in articles written by both Russian and Western authors. Unfortunately, this concept is coming back in analysis of the roots of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict.

I always asked: is it logical to call the second biggest country in Europe a buffer zone? More than a thousand kilometres from East to West, with the geographical centre of Europe located on its Western border, 46 million people – which is far too many for a buffer zone.

As the term “buffer zone” had been receiving more and more negative comments from experts, a new term appeared recently – “in-betweenness”. It's an even more ambiguous term, which demonstrates not only an absence of subjectivity, but also of the functional role assigned to it. The problem with “in-betweenness” is not only that it rejects subjectivity towards Ukraine. For me, it does not even make it an object of the foreign policy of neighbouring states.

A buffer zone, in-betweenness – these are all clichés and narratives that were created when somebody didn't know how to deal with the situation of the collapsed Soviet Union, and were not ready to accept Ukraine to the European fold mentally, and not even institutionally. Already understanding that Ukraine is not Russia, and spheres of influence is not a concept that Europeans want to follow, they still lack the courage to oppose such Russian narratives.

In 2014, I heard a term in Rome usually used by Italians, that struck even more – a “cushion”, a nice word for a pillow for your chair, and used instead of the boring “buffer zone”. It seems to me that it describes the situation, its perception and attitude of many Europeans towards Ukraine much better than any academic terms.

👉 **Nevertheless, a buffer zone is never a secure one for you; it is never a stable and developed place.** 👈

It is either terra incognita, or a place to stay as far away as possible for your own security. Is it what Europe wanted for Ukraine?

### **“You Cannot Fight Russia”**

Another narrative that we all heard for the last 5 years, thousands of times, from Chicago to Astana, is that you cannot fight Russia. Why? They are big and aggressive. So what? When you are being raped, you do not think that your offender is bigger and stronger, you are fighting for your life and dignity, you call the police (international community) to help, and in good societies, you put the offender into a jail.

You could say that this comparison is very emotional. Yes, it is. But what should be done when the majority of calls to observe the norms and principles of international law and practice do not work, when there are still members of the European Parliament and national parliaments who are eager to lift sanctions against Russia that were introduced after the illegal annexation of Crimea? When your opponents repeat – ‘do not poke a bear’ as a mantra.

We are emotional about our peace and security. We know you do not like it. But neither did we like it when we travelled to the Caucasus or Balkans before 2013. Neither did we understand why it is so difficult to reconcile, we also did not value our safety and security enough.

The problem is that you CAN fight Russia. You do not want to, but who really wants a war except an aggressor? It is normal to reject the

option of war and armed resolution of disputes. It is normal to seek negotiations instead of provocations. What is not normal is to appease an aggressor. It is like starting discussions with a rapist whether the victim should wear a longer skirt or should a court rule two years in prison and not 10, instead of investigating the crime committed and handing out punishment.

We cannot (or should not) fight Russia? No, we can and we will, because we are defending ourselves. We are motivated, we have a reason. We are not like we were in 2014, we are different. Yes, we are still not united. Yes, there are still enough people who are not interested in what is happening and do not want to think about who is to blame and who is not to blame. Yes, there are still intense Russian propaganda and information operations against Ukrainians and Europeans aimed at sowing doubt among people as to the real reasons behind the conflict.

### 🗨️ **'You cannot fight Russia' is a myth and a narrative imposed by Moscow.** 🗨️



The reasons are simple. First, to start having doubts in your government and army, in their capacities. Then in your partners and strategic alliances like NATO – will they really be ready and willing to protect you, to help you (ask Estonians, were they 100% sure whether NATO allies would introduce Article 5 of the Washington Treaty if Russian “green men” appeared on their territory in 2014?). And finally, yet importantly, to create an image of how strong and influential, especially in military terms, Russia is, that everybody will be afraid to fight.

However, the Ukrainian Army is changing rapidly. We are no longer just a recipient of security. For the last five years, Ukrainian security and military services have been protecting not only Ukrainian sovereignty and peaceful sleep. Economic sanctions imposed against Russia are a small price that the EU has had to pay.

While Ukrainian society has had to pay with the lives of about 13,000 people (according to UN data), of whom one third are civilians, 30 thousand wounded, and 1,388,972 officially registered internally displaced people.

These are only official statistics, and the real numbers are, unfortunately, bigger and growing on a daily basis.

Of all the state institutions, the military are among the most trusted, as more than 50% of Ukrainians trust the army. Within the last few years, most serious reforms have been implemented in the military field, from adopting NATO standards in logistics, command and control to training through practice and reaching both necessary combat readiness and interoperability with NATO partners. The Annual National Program Ukraine-NATO (ANP) is a complex and comprehensive document that is no longer a list of activities and round tables, but a vision of the whole scope of reforms. Some European states are still afraid to grant Ukraine a Membership Action Plan (MAP) – the arguments are from the same “do not poke a bear” basket. Nevertheless, ANP 2019 is de facto like a MAP. The reforms, readiness and necessity to protect one’s sovereignty is what is making Ukraine oppose the statement that “we cannot fight Russia”.

 **The problem is that when NATO has been updating its strategies, naming Russia a partner and searching for cooperation, Moscow still mentioned the Alliance as a “danger” in its strategic documents.** 

When the EU was introducing its neighbourhood policy, Russian official doctrines stated that they were ready to use any means to protect its interests in a so-called “near neighbourhood”. This dichotomy is what still influences some decision-makers.

Neither Ukraine nor its partners were ready to fight in 2014, but it does not mean we did not learn how to do it, and how to do it well. But to fight effectively does not mean only to use force, it’s also

about building alliances, trusting in your partners, and demonstrating a different paradigm of relations between states.

### **The New Cold War Is Coming**

For some people to understand current events it is easier to return to a paradigm of the Cold War, where you had two superpowers, spheres of influence and a certain logic of development in relations. It also enables various Sovietologists to return to the media and academic scenes and to present their colourful scenarios, including the notion that if the West did not provoke Russia, Moscow would not need to aggressively protect its interests. What is interesting enough is that such rhetoric can be heard from both sides of the former Iron Curtain.

However, it is not a New World Order. It is not a new Cold War. Both need a certain notion of order, meaning certain rules and principles that all actors agree to follow. And at present we are not even formulating new rules and principles. We pretend that we are satisfied with the Helsinki principles, and UN conventions and norms. However, when one state is trying to comply with them in full and the other one is completely ignoring them... what kind of order is that?

I clearly understand that any international agreement and convention is a kind of gentlemen's agreement. Even when a certain sanctions mechanism is envisaged for those who violate the norms, the implications for this are still not automatic. Different schools of international relations explain differently why states and governments agree to limit and restrict themselves with certain norms. Some stress it is goodwill and understanding future implications. Others insist that it is just a pragmatic and practical decision, because to follow the rules is either cheaper or more beneficial for everyone. However, the core idea remains – states agree voluntarily to these rules of the game.

Surely, in certain periods of time, different interpretations of norms are possible. Neither have disputes been rare in international relations



over the last 70 years. Otherwise, all international courts and tribunals would not have had any work.

 **The Ukrainian case became unprecedented because it is difficult to find an international convention that the Russian Federation is not violating.** 

Even in cases when legislation and decisions are clear Russians still do not implement them. The latest example is the International Tribunal in Hamburg, which ruled that Russia must immediately release Ukrainian Navy sailors and ships captured illegally in November 2018 near the Kerch Strait. Moscow has not only refused to release the sailors in a timely manner, but also tried to use the issue to bargain with Paris, Berlin and Kyiv – to make European parliamentarians bring back Russian MPs to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), and Ukraine to agree to sue its own sailors in accordance with Russian law, de facto recognizing the illegal annexation of Crimea.

That is why the whole situation with Russia's return to the PACE is so dangerous, and was so actively opposed by Ukrainian MPs. Russia regards this not as goodwill and an invitation for dialogue, but as weakness on the part of Europe, as an invitation to continue ignoring international principles and norms. Did Europe see any rapprochement after it allowed the Russian delegation to return without fulfilling any of the clauses of previous PACE resolutions? No. Russia immediately proposed the appointment as vice-president of a person who is under EU sanctions and who was recently in a big scandal concerning sexual harassment. A perfect candidate to lead an organization who declares the protection of human rights as its highest priorities.

 **It is difficult to talk about Ukraine and its security without talking about Russia. Not because Ukraine cannot be without Russia, but because Moscow has monopolized the discourse.** 

The Kremlin has managed to persuade the international community that you cannot speak about Ukraine and its security without Russia, however, you can talk about Ukraine without Ukraine. The demarche of the Ukrainian delegation to PACE in June 2019 demonstrated that this way of thinking is no longer acceptable for Ukraine. Support expressed by MPs from seven other countries also proved the value of each individual and each choice of country and moral decision when you are entering times of the new disorder.

### **“Frozen” Conflict as a Solution**

After five years, Ukrainians have learnt how to fight. Both diplomatic and military fronts are hot. Civil society is sharpening its tools. Thus, so many of us want to talk with our counterparts in Washington, Brussels or Berlin about different Ukraine. To discuss constructive cooperation rather than fight at each available front. That is when some politicians start to propose the idea of “freezing” Donbas, so as “to allow other parts of Ukraine to develop”.

However, the “frozen conflict” solution is not an option. Usually it is not a conflict, which is frozen, but only its resolution. It can sound very provocative, but when people are not killed, the chances are less that the sides to a conflict will really search for ways to end it. History has had a lot of examples, when after a cease-fire, the parties start endless talks about talks, and for years cannot decide on simple questions that can build a road to peace. Ukraine have seen it in conflicts near its borders, for example, in Transnistria. With every new day of the “frozen conflict”, you receive new ambiguity, the habit to live in a vague legal status, development of parallel structures and realities of cooperation, with criminal circles cooperating better than government ones.

The longer conflict goes on, the more difficult it is to find a solution. It is a vicious circle, Catch 22 – the people are ready, but governments cannot find a common language, there is a pace of time, governments

can understand the necessity and be ready, but... the population is used to living with a conflict and an image of an enemy, a generation can grow up, who knows an adversary only as the quintessence of evil. Therefore, at this moment, leaders will be afraid to compromise, to finish a war, because they are not sure whether their people will accept such peace.

The Donbas conflict is only five years long, but due to the different level of information influence that the world had even 20 years ago, we can already see how perceptions about each other are changing. To sign a cease-fire agreement will be the easiest thing to do. Reconciliation and reconstruction is what will be needed for a real fight with ourselves, with the reality on the ground, with created myths.

The red lines will remain. For many post-conflict societies, different things made up this set of burning items. Ethnic minority rights, border regimes or distribution of resources – each of them can be that very issue that prevents further reconciliation or becoming a delayed-action mine in the peace process. If some issues, like an amnesty, are already seen as those that can create these dispute elements in Ukraine, others can create a far more serious spillover effect. For example, the idea of federalisation.

Autonomy for the separatist regions sounds so easy for our international colleagues to implement. Our German partners could not understand for a long time what is so problematic for Ukraine to accept the idea of federalisation.

The mediators proposed certain models derived from their own perception of terminology. Back in 1995, the USA, as a federal country, in which individual states enjoy broad powers, did not perceive the new constitutional structure of Bosnia and Herzegovina as something risky. The same can be said about Germany's position in the Minsk process, which saw the proposal of "federalisation" through the eyes of a well-functioning federal state, as a properly managed decentralisation of powers rather than as a mechanism for one or two regions

to control the central government, which is the Russian idea behind the federalisation of Ukraine.

As far as Russia is concerned, federalisation does not mean decentralisation of the country, as in granting regions greater powers and responsibilities for the management of local issues. In their interpretation, the idea of “federalisation” does not apply to the whole country, but rather means a separation of two particular regions, with no clear boundaries, which should have special status, in many ways greater than any administrative entities have within federal states. The idea expounded by Russia is to turn Ukraine into a dysfunctional and divided state.

On the contrary, Ukraine has been using the term “decentralisation”, which assumes administrative reform being implemented in the country. This reform should result in greater responsibilities for all regions and better distribution of financial resources. For Ukraine, which has been struggling for centuries due to its partition by other states, ideas of “federalisation” are viewed above all from this standpoint – not to allow new, additional divisions within the country.



### **Freedom is our religion**

Many colleagues used to say that Ukraine received its independence in 1991 too easily, too peacefully. Therefore, in 2014 it paid the price and has been overcoming what many other post-Soviet states went through at the beginning of the 1990s.

My Russian colleagues often stated in disputes: how it is possible to speak with Ukraine when it does not have a joint position about Donbas, when each party had their views and propositions. I always reply that it is a democracy, it is a plurality of opinions, and it is important that any of them can propose their vision for return, reconciliation or prosecution. What is significant is, that for all of them, for all of us, Ukrainians, there are few denominators that absolutely nobody is questioning – sovereignty and territorial

integrity of the state, freedom to choose by ourselves, which rulers to have and which alliances to join.

In 2017, at the revolutionary square in Kyiv known to the world as Maidan, a huge banner appeared, covering a trade union building that burnt in 2014, which stated – “Freedom is our religion”. Now this slogan looks so natural, we’re used to it and we state it so often, forgetting that it has an author – Hennadiy Kurochka, Managing Partner of the Kyiv-based strategic communications company CFC Consulting introduced it to make a powerful statement in the middle of the city hosting the Eurovision Song Contest. Could he have imagined that this slogan would become a part of national discourse?

 **Freedom is not anarchy. Freedom is also responsibility. When nobody is controlling you, you are not only free to choose, but also responsible for your choices.** 

Ukraine is making its choices constantly. We, Ukrainians, are making our choices all the time. Are they always good ones? Definitely not. But when you are free to make decisions, there is nobody to blame for them.

In Europe, people forgot what it means to value their freedom. Freedom of choice, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, freedom of speech. They became so natural, an integral part of life, that many citizens forget how nations struggled and fought for them.

The illusion of stability is what we are struggling against now. This is the manipulation of narratives: the Soviet Union was stable; Russia is stable, so why not to give up some part of our freedom to return that illusion of stability? Such a notion has been promoted very often.

The problem is that you cannot give away just a little bit of freedom. I do not want us to confuse lack of freedom with delegation of a part of our sovereignty to supranational institutions. Because

such delegation also happens voluntarily. When you give up your freedom, the chances are high that you'll lose your dignity.

## **Resilience as the Answer**

Ukraine is building up its resilience. It does not mean that we know how to solve every problem, but at least we're getting immune to them. Most Ukrainian experts have already understood that the current security crisis will continue. The development of so-called hybrid warfare against Ukraine has become a suitable instrument for disturbance. The biggest problem is that you cannot completely prevent such warfare. You cannot build walls or train your army in the same way you do for open fighting. Hybrid warfare is finding new means and tools, new weak points in your society, new reasons to be used. Hybrid warfare is not just about military aspects and security. It is about a society and a state.

However, resilience, even that this concept is still developing, should be regarded as a vaccine. It will not allow us to prevent disease, but it will allow our society and state to be prepared, to overcome symptoms quicker and easier, to continue functioning and to guarantee security to our citizens.

What is good in the development of resilience is that it can push for cooperation not only with traditional partners, but also with those who are hesitating about closer security cooperation as they fear its politicization.

The most difficult thing for us has always been to explain around the world that it is not just about Ukraine. It is not a Ukrainian crisis, a Ukrainian problem, or a Ukrainian conflict. Not because we are repudiating responsibility and want the world to save us.

 **The root of this conflict is not in Ukraine. We merely became a trigger, a quintessence of the Russian problem.** 

That is not to blame Moscow for all our problems. If Ukraine were more stable, integral, would fight corruption and develop its state institutions, then perhaps Russia would not be able to interfere in Ukraine so easily. But history does not like conditional clauses. Reluctance to oppose Russian actions in Ukraine led to interference in other European states. If it started with elections, it does not mean it will quite end there.

European integration and future membership of NATO is also a part of resilience for Ukraine. Resilience is the ability of your state to function even when a crisis is taking place. European integration is seen by many in Ukraine as a way to create such functional state institutions. NATO is seen as a way to create security and military services capable of protecting us.

Many European countries do not themselves present the best example of such resilience. The rise of populism and nationalism, the ability of Russia to interfere in elections and to sponsor political parties, difficulties with cyber-attacks – all these problems are clearly visible to partner-states.

Ukrainians went onto Maidan in 2014 carrying European flags, not because European integration was their core demand, but because they saw the EU as a symbol of all those things, they wanted to reach – democracy, freedom of media and assembly, punishment for corruption and accountable government, reforms that lead to development and innovation, not to stagnation and the monopolization of power. The 2019 elections were the first transition of power to take place without a change in the political course.

The insecure security of Ukraine is not a destiny, but merely conditions that we can overcome. Overcome if we build resilience and partnership, and not buffer zones.

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