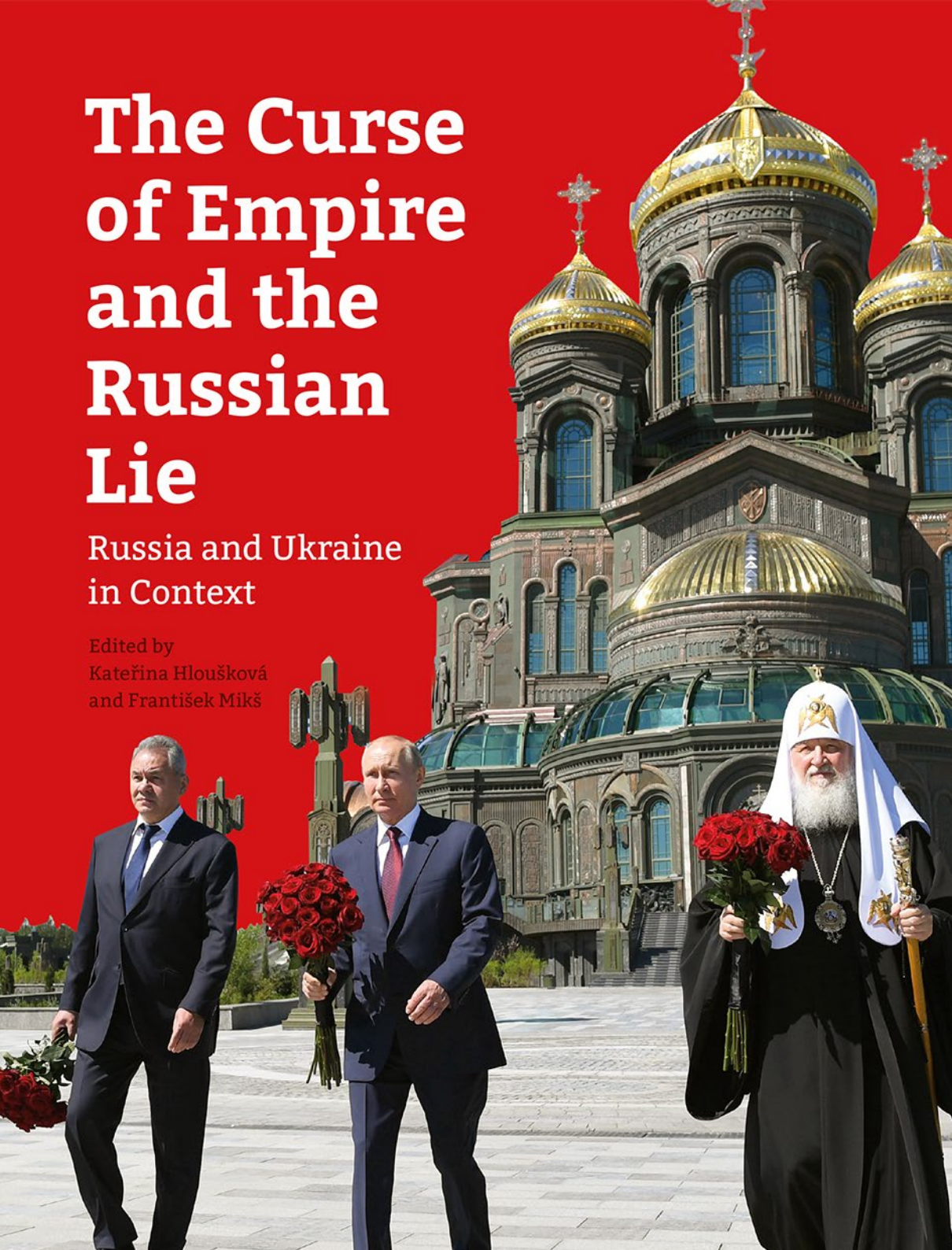
The Curse of Empire and the Russian Lie

Russia and Ukraine in Context

Edited by
Kateřina Hloušková
and František Mikš



BOOKS
&PIPES

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We thank Maciej Ruczaj, the director of the Polish Institute in Prague, Josef Mlejnek Sr, and the translator Štěpán Kaňa for their help in preparing this volume.

A note on transcriptions

The BGN/PCGN system is used to romanise Cyrillic into the Latin alphabet. For the reader's convenience, soft and hard signs are omitted from the text; they are preserved in transcriptions of sources in the footnotes. For Ukrainian place names, transcriptions from the Ukrainian are preferred to Russian; in direct quotations in English, the original spelling is preserved.

FOREWORD: RUSSIA, UKRAINE AND EUROPE IN THE SHADOW OF WAR

Petr Fiala

The invasion of Ukraine by Russian armies in February 2022 changed the face of Europe. War returned to the Old Continent, bringing with it all the horrors we knew only from old war movies: bombed-out streets, destroyed cities, shelling, mass murder, the expulsion of populations, homes without heating, light or water, ruined lives and property, devastation. The war also let old demons out of the bottle that we thought, somewhat naïvely, did not belong in the 21st century anymore: the imperial conquest of foreign territory, Cold War rhetoric, aggressive nationalism and the largest wave of refugees since World War II. Russian tanks west of Russia – an observer endowed with historical memory might feel a sense of déjà vu. Yet these are not images from the past or forgotten stories of a previous century's wars, but our contemporary reality: facts with which we have to live, come to terms with and, above all, must face head-on.

Europe changed on 24 February 2022. It awoke from its illusions of security that had come as a matter of course, and for which there is no need to pay. It saw in full colour the naïveté of the notion that one can come to an agreement with Russia by making concessions to it, because after all that country poses no threat to us at all. It experienced first-hand how weak it had become by allowing itself to be dependent on eastern dictatorships for its strategic resources and supplies. A policy of insouciance and appeasement was brutally uprooted overnight. But as it often happens, not everyone awoke from their dreams at the same speed. Despite this, facing the Russo--Ukrainian war and its consequences, Europe soon found unprecedented strength and determination.

Not everyone was entirely surprised. In the previous century, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe were part of the Soviet Union, or were occupied or directly influenced by it. At that time, the Russian imperial instinct, combined with a dreadful totalitarian communist ideology, left tens of millions of innocent victims in its wake. Due to its history, the east of Europe therefore remained vigilant vis-à-vis Russia, at least to some degree.

I share this experience and historical memory. On 21 August 1968 as a little boy, I observed Soviet tanks in the streets of my native city, Brno. Czechoslovakia was occupied by the armies of five Warsaw Pact countries, but nobody described it as anything else but that the Russians were occupying us. They remained in our country for 23 long years; the last Russian soldier left in June 1991, a few months before the Soviet Union finally disintegrated. August 1968 had not been the first time that we saw Russian soldiers in our streets, however. In May 1945, the Czechs welcomed them with lilac flowers as liberators from Nazi occupation. They had no idea that the celebration

would soon turn into a nightmare. Following the defeat of Nazism, for long decades our country found itself in thrall to Moscow and a communist regime.

Our experience is telling. Russian tanks do not bring freedom, justice or peace. They serve Moscow to enlarge its empire and secure territory on which it can immediately exercise its influence and its interests. Any people who find themselves in Moscow's sphere of influence, whether directly or conceived more broadly, must be unconditionally subjugated. Attempts at independent policy, efforts at independent decision-making, tend to be brutally supressed. In August 1968, Moscow occupied us because Czechoslovakia wanted to go its own way at least in some respects, to make its own decisions about 'socialism with a human face' and breathe a little more freely. In the strategic thinking of the Kremlin rulers, this is always seen as a betrayal and a danger to Russian interests. They followed this mind-set more than 50 years ago in my country, and have now attacked Ukraine according to the same pattern.

Ukraine is a large European country with many problems and historical burdens. For a long time it was joined with Russia in one state; some in its population speak Russian; the years of its independent existence have been marked by economic problems, corruption and internal disputes, often about the appropriate measure of cooperation with Russia. When the domestic situation improved, Ukrainians made it increasingly clear that they saw their future more in cooperation with Western democracies than with the authoritarian Russia; that they wanted to be included in the community of democratic countries, had the ambition to join the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. Independent Ukraine wanted to make its own decisions about where it belonged

and what its future should be, and that is precisely the reason why Russia attacked it.

There are two fundamental mistakes to avoid when interpreting what the Russian invasion of Ukraine means. First, it cannot be reduced to a Russo-Ukrainian conflict. This is not 'just' a local war with limited impacts that can be resolved by somehow negotiating the territorial or other demands voiced by Russia. Second, Russian aggression is not solely Vladimir Putin's affair. It would be tempting to believe that the idea of this brutal war appeared solely in the Russian president's head, that Putin is ill or isolated and that when he is weakened or no longer around Russia will once again be peaceful and friendly, a country with which we can get along easily. Indulging naïve ideas in international politics is a reliable way to lose a lot.

Russian aggression in Ukraine is a gross violation of the international order, a fundamental breaking point in international relations, which may have further devastating effects in this region and beyond, the more so because it occurs on a traditional, geopolitically neuralgic, line of conflict. At the same time, the Russian military invasion of Ukraine is not a deviation, a temporary defect in Russian foreign policy, but rather the product of its long-term direction and an expression of Russian imperial culture.

I would like to avoid excessive simplification, but I will try to say the essential plainly: Russia does not have a well-defined western border and its imperial instinct impels it to make repeated attempts to bring a part of Europe under its influence. Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, a political thinker who investigated cooperation among European nations, wrote in his 1923 book *Pan-Europa* that 'since Peter the Great, Russia has been marching westwards.' It has repeatedly attempted to impose hegemony over Europe: 'The future state form of Russia is

irrelevant here. Once an opportunity arises for it to subject Europe, Russia will exploit this option, whether it is Red or White.' According to Coudenhove-Kalergi, 'the only objective of all Europeans, irrespective of parties and nations, should be to prevent a Russian invasion.' Although his arguments about Russia were informed by World War I and the Bolshevik revolution, he did capture with remarkable forethought the Russian ambitions as they manifested themselves in the century following the publication of his book.

The Russian 'march westwards' and its efforts to subjugate Europe, or part of it, are bolstered by a second fundamental characteristic of Russia, which has found expression in many philosophical and artistic works. Russia both is and is not European. It is part of Europe, yet defines itself against it. It is becoming European, but not entirely. This struggle does not only occur somewhere on the frontier between Ukraine and Russia, but also in Russian political culture, in the 'Russian soul'. In his book *Russia and Europe*, published in German in 1913, the political philosopher, sociologist and first president of the independent and democratic Czechoslovakia, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk expressed this contradiction in a well-known statement: 'Russia is what Europe was'. For Masaryk, Russia was 'split into two halves', an old Russia and a 'new, European' Russia. Masaryk saw the clash between Russian and European thought as a process that would lead gradually to Russia's Europeanisation: 'Europe is not fundamentally alien to Russia, but Russia has not adopted it, has not yet embraced it entirely.' But this strife within Russia did not end up with the victory of that which Masaryk called 'European', but continues to this day, perhaps in part because Russian society did not have the historical conditions for its own emancipation. A horizontal political culture with strong civil society and decentralised government is

alien to Russia. It would be an unpardonable mistake not to see this aspect of Russian culture, and to project our own wishes on it.

Russia – permanently open to expansion westwards and seeking to control at least part of Europe – is a permanent threat. The Russian danger to Europe is not, therefore, linked with a specific moment in its history or a particular ruler of the Russian empire, but is a long-term, characteristic symptom of Russian policy. In recent years, we have had plenty of signals that Russia has bounced back after the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and was again ready to expand its territory and influence. A clear step in its 'march westwards' was the annexation of Crimea in March 2014. Unfortunately, the underestimation of the importance of this violent step and the subsequent weak responses by Western democracies created the conditions for Russia to dare to attack Ukraine.

In spring 2014, I published several articles, later collected in a volume entitled, now symptomatically, *Na konci bezstarostnosti* [The End of Insouciance], in which I warned about the consequences of a naïve and weak policy by democratic countries. I wrote that I did not believe

> in appeasement policy or relying on everyone wanting peace. Although I would wish for such a world, it does not exist. In international politics, it is the interests of states that are promoted. Whoever is not strong enough, may soon wake up in a world entirely inconvenient for them. This is also true of Western democracies. I am speaking of something we do not want to hear, and fear saying out loud: if we do not have the (military, political and economic) strength and if we do not find the resolve to use it, we find ourselves under threat. An understanding of the realities of

> international politics is often lacking, for instance in our considerations of Ukraine and Russian policy.

I was already certain back then that

> Russia's advances in Crimea cannot be accepted, even if we were personally convinced that Putin is the right thing for Russia, Ukraine is bad and Crimea naturally Russian. However, Russian aggression has violated the rules of the game, started to change the arrangements in Europe and created a dangerous situation for the West. History repeats itself, old European demons are coming back. Indeed, there's more at stake in Crimea than Crimea itself. It is not only an important place geopolitically, it has value as a symbol of power.

I also criticised that

> the West shows its weakness. And what might the outcome of its weakness be? Nothing but danger. Whenever someone believes that by accepting aggression they will avoid further conflict, they end up badly.

One historical example concerned with my country offers itself. In September 1938, European powers believed that by sacrificing part of Czechoslovakia to Hitler, they would prevent war. After all, there were German-speaking people there too... We all know from history and the tragic experience of World War II what the outcome was. In spring 2014, therefore, I appealed for decisive steps to be taken,

> severe sanctions imposed. Many people are making calculations as to how much it will cost in terms of economic relations. Yes, it will cost something, but if we do not face the problem head-on, the only thing we will achieve will be that the economic relations will ultimately be disadvantageous to us and/or determined unilaterally. We have to realise that Russia is now willing to pay dearly for the success of its actions in Ukraine, and not only in material terms. It is not reluctant to lose the lives of its citizens. We are not willing to allow even a slight potential decrease in our material comforts, or a dip in the sales of our goods on the Russian market, and this favours Russia and any other adversary that knows about this weakness of ours.

And I added, 'our prosperity and peace have to be paid for with our strength and determination. Nothing else works in international politics in the long term.'

I am not glad to have been right – I am only certain that the outcome could not have been otherwise. Russia did not interpret the mild response of Western democracies as an appeal for peace and cooperation, but as a weakness that had to be exploited. It exploited the dependence of European countries on Russian energy resources to systematically weaken Europe and blackmail its populations. It understood Western weakness as an invitation to take further aggressive steps westwards (the separatist territories), which culminated in the brutal aggression against independent Ukraine. I do not have to be a particularly good forecaster to argue that had an appropriate response not come now, Russia would proceed further in the future. But several things happened that Vladimir Putin did not anticipate and, truth be told, we did not hope for, either.

The first was the surprisingly quick emancipation of Ukraine and the completion of Ukrainian political nation building. As many authors have correctly observed, a fault line between Orthodox and Western civilisations goes through Ukraine. Perhaps the best-known version of this interpretation is Samuel P. Huntington's from the 1990s. In *The Clash of Civilizations*, Huntington inferred three possible scenarios: conflict between the two countries, a division of Ukraine and merger of its eastern part with Russia, and Ukraine as a 'united yet fragmented country' closely cooperating with Russia, which he thought the most likely. Yet in this case, the events were heading towards a scenario that Huntington thought unlikely, but which some analysts (e.g., John Mersheimer) warned about at the time, that is, an escalated armed conflict between the two countries. The fault line between 'Western' and 'Orthodox' civilisations was evidently covered or shifted by the quick strengthening of Ukrainian state identity. Ukrainian citizens, including the Russian-speaking minority, increasingly identified with the Ukrainian state. Undoubtedly, the dilemma they faced – aim for a Western-type society or live under the influence of the Russian state – contributed to this. This rapid completion of the process of Ukrainian political nation building found its present culmination in the resolute resistance by Ukrainians against the Russian aggression. Russian-speaking Ukrainians did not welcome the Russian army as liberators, but stood up in resistance to the occupation force taking their country.

The resolute and brave struggle of the Ukrainians for their independence and freedom is the second surprising aspect of the Russo-Ukrainian war. From the very first moments, Ukrainians put up resistance to the Russian military; they were not broken by the brutality of the Russian units, the attacks on civilian targets, the encirclement

of Kyiv or the systematic shelling of their infrastructure. No divisions within Ukrainian society, calls for concessions or defeatist moods were apparent. United and with enormous self-sacrifice, Ukrainians opposed the Russian superiority and were able to resist. It was this factor that in many ways was decisive for the course of the war and compelled even the vacillating Western countries to support Ukraine. Ukrainian courage and determination is in increasingly strong contrast to Russian weakness. Despite enormous superiority in numbers and material and the brutal methods used, Russia is exhibiting ever more evident military weakness. This is a factor that will have far-reaching impacts on the Russian position in the world over the coming years.

The third important event, which after decades of European concessions surprised Russia at least, was the united and strong response by Western democracies. The European Union together with the USA and other allies adopted effective, harsh and unprecedented sanctions. Russia and its president have found themselves diplomatically isolated, calls are strengthening for war crimes to be punished, prominent figures of the Moscow regime have been added to the sanctions lists, and Russia, its leadership and its society are feeling the unambiguous reaction of democratic countries that will have increasing economic, technological, financial and psychological impacts. The North Atlantic alliance has strengthened its eastern flank, practically all member states have found their lost will to increase defence expenditure, and Sweden and Finland, traditionally neutral countries, of which the latter has inauspicious experience of Russian influence, have applied for NATO membership. The West has supported Ukraine with the same firmness it has shown in opposing the Russian aggression. Humanitarian aid was soon and on a more

massive scale complemented with military and financial aid. My country was among the first to provide Ukraine with military materiel and equipment. What was determinative was that more and more states joined the effort, including the strongest ones without whose support the Ukrainians could not successfully wage their struggle against the enormous Russian preponderance.

I have had the unique experience of holding the presidency of the European Union during countless negotiations concerned with the response to the Russian aggression. For many countries, it was not easy literally within a few weeks to change their position on Russia, on military aid, and to see more clearly the dangers and challenges we face. Yet they did so. Despite varied historical experiences, emphases and interests, I never witnessed doubt that Ukraine deserves our support and Russia must feel our disapproval and opposition. Despite sceptical predictions, the European Union has maintained a unified stance in all crucial matters for nearly a year now. As a political scientist and politician, I often criticised the weakness and indecisiveness, the bureaucratic procedures and ponderousness of European institutions and the inappropriate way they integrated. Yet, or perhaps because of that, the Russian aggression against Ukraine showed the hidden strength of European democracies – perhaps late, but better late than never. And this is extremely important for the future of Europe.

Russia's steps against Ukraine have fully revealed Russia's real intentions and objectives. For all doubters, they have shed a new light on the actions of the Putin regime. As in some horrifying jigsaw puzzle, the pieces suddenly fell together: the aggressive rhetoric with claims to power over Eastern and Central Europe and a return to the security situation of the 1990s; the exploitation of many European countries' energy dependency on Russia; various forms of hybrid

war and a mass disinformation campaign to disconcert European nations; murders of political opponents at home and abroad; and unprecedented acts of state terrorism, committed by Russian intelligence services, for example in the Czech Republic in the explosion at a munitions depot in Vrbětice. The individual actions could be contested, excused or overlooked. In combination with an aggressive war, they only confirm that Europe must defend itself. And that means it must be strong, strategically independent and resolute.

But also, and above all, it means not allowing Ukraine to fall now and Russia to achieve its objectives. That is our task these days.

Some of us predicted years ago that if we do not show our strength, Russia will continue with its aggressive march westwards. But hand on heart, none of us could imagine that Putin's regime would opt for such an extensive, brutal and massive military action, that it would unleash a war that sends chills down your spine. There is no space for doubt, relativisation or craven equivocation here. In the Russo-Ukrainian war, it is evident from the first moment who is the aggressor and who the victim, who has truth and justice on their side and who acts iniquitously. This is not about how much we like Russian literature or music, how much some doubt the quality of Ukrainian democracy or what they think about the history of Russo-Ukrainian relations. Russia has attacked an independent state, infringed every rule of the international order and caused suffering to millions of innocent people; and we must act accordingly, because that is right, but it is also in our own interest.

Twice during the war, I had the opportunity to visit Kyiv, first alongside the prime ministers of Poland and Slovenia on 15 March 2022, when the Ukrainian capital was encircled on three sides by the Russian military. We saw a silent city, from which hundreds of thousands

Petr Fiala and Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Kyiv, 31 October 2022.
Reproduced from: Úřad vlády ČR

had fled, with no people in the streets, dark, without lights, with roadblocks and at war. We negotiated with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal. Already back then, a few days after the start of the war, I was surprised not just by their resoluteness when faced with what was then a desperate situation, but also by the composure and strategy with which Ukrainian leaders defended themselves against Russian superiority.

The second time I was in Kyiv was on 31 October 2022 with members of my government. Ukrainian leaders had lost none of their determination, faith, decisiveness or hope. But I saw a different Kyiv now, full of life, with streets crowded with people who despite war wanted to live their normal lives if possible. Although missiles fell on

them at least once a week, and occasionally they had no heat or light, they did not give up, they lived their lives to the full, as far as possible. And where there is life, there is also hope... I had the opportunity to talk to many Ukrainian refugees, people who fled their country to save their lives. Mostly these are women with children, whose husbands and fathers are fighting at the front, outnumbered by the Russians. They were not looking for economic or social benefits, they did not want to leave their country, they only wanted to live.

This brave European nation deserves our aid and support, because that is humane, just and right, but also because unless this nation successfully defends itself, Europe will not be safe. Whatever we do for Ukraine today, we are doing for our own future. Peace and normal relations with Russia can only be established when its western border is clearly defined and secured. And today that is the border with the independent Ukraine. Our common task is to make everyone respect that. Without our strength, determination and readiness to sacrifice some of our comfort, we will not prevail. There is no other option.

I thank my friends from *Kontexty* magazine and the Pravý břeh think-tank for preparing this book for publication. At this time, it is particularly important that we should try to obtain a deeper understanding of the pasts, mentalities and cultures of Russia and Ukraine, the history of their mutual relationship and the current tendencies in the development of both societies. This book offers a rich collection of information and views by authors who have been studying these issues in the long term. Hopefully, it will help us to understand better what is going on in Ukraine today and its causes; most importantly, how we can avoid making mistakes and underestimating risks that threaten our security.

EDITORS' PREFACE: RUSSIA AND UKRAINE IN CONTEXT AND IN *KONTEXTY*

Kateřina Hloušková and František Mikš

> We should have listened to the voices inside our Union – in Poland, in the Baltics, and all across Central and Eastern Europe. They have been telling us for years that Putin would not stop.
>
> *Ursula von der Leyen, September 2022*

The idea of publishing this book emerged from the circle of editors, authors and collaborators of the conservative review *Kontexty*, published in the Czech Republic in various forms since 1990.[1] There are not many cultural and political magazines like *Kontexty* in Czechia that focus on Russia in the long term, examining its transformations and its constant determinatives and the particularities of its culture and mentality. We have always published on Russian topics, even at times when the country was paid at most marginal attention. We

have noted the dangers that could follow from a lack of concern about the transformation of Russian politics and society and from underestimating Vladimir Putin's ever more aggressive rhetoric, growing nationalism and purposely fuelled hatred. We have warned against a purely economic approach and published evidence that in Russia different rules have always applied for those in the West. Especially after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the half-hearted Western response, the discussion in our pages grew more intense. Petr Fiala, one of the founders of our magazine and for many years one of its editors, who today is the Czech Prime Minister, was one of those who repeatedly warned about the growing Russian threat; we have also published many prescient pieces by foreign authors, including Alain Besançon, Françoise Thom, Walter Laqueur, Andrzej Nowak and Paweł Rojek. It seems, however, that those in power did not take these warnings sufficiently seriously.

We have noted many times that Russia is essentially an irrational and messianist nation. It is an Asian, autocratic civilisation, and the roots of its political behaviour lie somewhere deep in the Mongol--Tatar style of governance, in the Byzantine culture and the Russian Orthodoxy strictly subjected to the deification of state power. The cultural substrate necessary for the successful development of civil society, the rule of law and a market economy is virtually absent; the mentality is collectivist; the disrespect for property, privacy and indeed human life is notorious. Despite this, everyone tried to believe that following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia would attempt to deal with its problematic past and crimes and embark on a path, however thorny, of democratisation and adopt Western standards, as its former vassal states in East-Central Europe did. Or, at least, that it would use its tremendous mineral wealth to ensure

a better living standard for its population and mutually beneficial trade with the developed West.

In the 1990s democratic West, nearly everyone, including even the best-informed people, was mistaken about the future direction of Russia. Browsing through old issues of our magazine, in No. 7 from 1996 we find the reprint of an extensive essay by Richard Pipes, a leading Polish-American historian specialising in Russia, who in 1981–1982 was President Ronald Reagan's advisor on Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Entitled 'Russia's Past, Russia's Future',[2] the piece explored why it was so difficult for Russia to adopt the Western model of society, despite other Asian countries being able to do so, even if they were even more remote from our culture in every respect. In particular, Pipes investigated whether retrograde development to communism (even in a more moderate form) or a revival of the Russian Empire was conceivable in Russia, and rejected both options as unrealistic. He did, however, admit as one possible variant the rise of an authoritarian government that would eliminate political competition, but tolerate economic and even intellectual liberty. Such a regime, Pipes argued, would very likely be only temporary in form, and on the way not to neo-totalitarianism but democracy.

> In sum, there are reasons for cautious optimism. The burden of history does weigh heavily; but it only slows Russia's progress, it does not condemn the country to immobility, let alone regression. My own hopes rest on the assumption that Russia, a country aspiring to the status of a respected world power, will not want to opt out of the 21st century.[3]

Cautious optimism?! In retrospect, we have been too optimistic and not at all cautious. It is telling that even this clear-sighted historian, who approached Russian history and culture with scepticism, and was considered an American 'hawk', was fatally wrong in his estimate of Russia's future direction, even if his analysis of the country's deep cultural and historical problems was accurate. Pipes did not live to see Russia exclude itself permanently from the civilised 21st-century world by unleashing the war in Ukraine; he died in 2018 at the ripe age of 94. Nevertheless, in a March 2015 interview, a year after the Russian annexation of Crimea, he noted with disappointment,

> When the Soviet regime collapsed in 1991, I had hoped that this experience of seventy some years of totalitarianism would cure them and that Russia will move towards a Western-type democracy. And I was very surprised to see that this did not happen. And that the regime is, in some ways, trying to get back to the Soviet regime. [...] Putin, at heart, I think, sympathizes with the Soviet regime and with Stalin. And that deeply disappointed me. [...] I don't know maybe in 50 or 100 years Russia will move in another direction – but for the next decade or two I think we are going to see more repression and more nationalism and more expansionism. I find this very discouraging.[4]

The aim of this book is to present a Central European perspective on Russia, its history, culture and mentality (perhaps due to our unfortunate experiences, its perspective is understandably more sceptical

Russian Ministry of Defence propaganda posters from the 'special military operation' section of the website mil.ru. Reproduced from: Wikimedia Commons


НАШЕ ДЕЛО ПРАВОЕ


ЗА ПОБЕДУ

than that taken further west). It seeks to view recent events in the light of Pipes's 'heavy burden of history', which impedes Russia from joining the civilised and cooperating countries in the 21st century. It also wants to show how in this respect Russia differs from Ukraine, which seeks to emancipate itself from Russia's crushing sphere of influence. Beyond regular contributors to *Kontexty*, the book features pieces by the Polish historian Andrzej Nowak, one of the most respected scholars of Central and Eastern European history and an expert on Russian imperial thought, and Constantin Sigov, a Ukrainian philosopher who leads the European Centre at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. The book is sponsored by Alexandr Vondra MEP of the European Conservatives and Reformists Group, who also penned the introductory piece, **Putin's puzzle, Ukraine and us** (pp. 37–49), in which he considers the various factors that might have led Vladimir Putin to unleash his insane and risky war against Ukraine and in fact the whole Western world.

Constantin Sigov wrote the extensive and emotional **Letter from Kyiv** (pp. 51–69), which follows, on 15 March 2022 in the Ukrainian capital under bombardment and addressed it to his friends in France and elsewhere in Western Europe. He describes what he was living through in Kyiv under attack, explains the historical background and reveals some of the less evident contexts of the Russian aggression. 'After 2014 and the Maidan events, the world began to discuss a so-called "Ukraine crisis", often in confused terms,' writes Sigov. 'No one can doubt today that this crisis is actually a "Russia crisis", fundamentally linked with the nature of Putin's regime.' It is no accident, he notes, that the harsh rhetoric and the attacks against Ukraine coincided with screws being tightened in Russia, for instance the *de facto* liquidation of a well-known NGO, International Memorial,

which revealed crimes in the erstwhile Soviet Union and championed human rights. The suppression of human rights, the curtailing of freedom of speech and the impediments placed on attempts to deal with the communist past have all become stronger in Russia in recent years and foreshadowed what was to come.

Measured by European standards, Putin's attack on Ukraine seems to go against common sense, his own interests and those of Russia, which excludes itself not just from the civilised community but also from international trade, with crushing consequences on its economy and the living standards of its population. However, Putin does not think in Western categories, and declines to have an interest in common with the democratic West, to share some common 'good' stemming from mutual cooperation. As the historian Kateřina Hloušková shows in **Russia misunderstood and incomprehensible** (pp. 71–85), Russians have created their own 'sphere of civilisation' that does not require, desire or admire Western institutions. True, like people elsewhere in the world, many Russians have become addicted to American popular culture, which they consume on a massive scale, but popular culture does not equal political culture. Fondness for Western clothing brands, music or fast food does not imply the acceptance of democratic and economic standards, or Western-type institutions. Russia has always been, and most likely will continue to be, the victim of its own chimeras and imperial ambitions. It does not recognise *win-win* scenarios in diplomacy; in its world, only Lenin's celebrated maxim, *kto-kogo?* (who-whom?) rules. Until recently, many of the statements by Russian strategists and academics, which we have analysed in *Kontexty,* sounded to Western people so absurd that one was inclined to laugh them off. But the reality today is that Russia continues to dream of its bygone glory

Stalin and Lenin impersonators pose for foreign tourists in Moscow, 2 September 2011. Reproduced from: Wikimedia Commons

and of renewing its sphere of influence, and, unfortunately, acts accordingly. Its modern-day rulers, and also often its common people, do not see Russia as a normal country, the aim of which is to ensure the welfare and security of its people. They believe that Russia has

a higher religious and cultural calling, that it must make sacrifices in the name of restoring the lost empire and defending Christian and traditional values, as is disseminated by massive propaganda at home and abroad, where it is occasionally taken on board.

One of the biggest lies with which Putin and his regime have long bamboozled a not inconsiderable part of the Western right has been the presentation of his regime as 'right-wing' or even a 'conservative' and Christianity-infused world, where 'things are still alright' – meaning a world free of the ideological dictates of the liberal left in the spheres of culture and values. And it has to be admitted that some figures and parties on the European right have truly been fascinated by Russia and Putin to some degree, not just in countries such as France and Italy, where pro-Russian tendencies are pervasive pretty much across the political spectrum, but even in Central Europe which one would expect to be immune to any 'Russian luring'. Andrzej Nowak's piece **Russia as a saviour of the traditional world?** (pp. 87–93) is based on his late 2020 lecture – that is, delivered before the Russian invasion of Ukraine – and investigates precisely this fascination. 'Why are there movements in the West that consider themselves conservative, yet look hopefully to a country controlled by a former KGB officer?' asks Nowak. 'Why are there those who see a morally wrecked country that has the highest abortion rate in Europe as a sanctuary of Christian values?' Although it is evident that in a certain sense Russia has Christian roots, and undoubtedly there are people in the country who are deeply pious, the country's religious tradition is very problematic. Its current political system, whatever its propaganda might claim, has nothing in common with Christianity; on the contrary, it is a radical denial of Christian ideals.

The Russian Orthodox Church, which has historically subjugated religion to a divinised state power, and its present Patriarch Kirill, who like Putin spent his apprenticeship in the service of the KGB, deserves a chapter of its own. As Josef Mlejnek Jr shows in his essay **Virgin Mother of God, banish Putin!** (pp. 95–117), the long-term dispute within the Orthodox Church about Ukraine's autocephaly (independence from the Moscow Patriarchate), or more precisely the historical and political essence of this dispute, is one of the causes of the Russian invasion. Patriarch Kirill has long promoted a religious conception of the 'Russian world', a conception that is seen as the 'soft power' of Russian militarism – an integral part of the Russian military machinery. According to this conception, the Eastern Slavonic Orthodox nations – that is, primarily the Russians, Ukrainians and Belarussians – are inseparable and must continue to develop their own specific civilisation, growing out of Orthodoxy and to differ from the West. Obviously, this would be under the leadership of Russia and its state-controlled Patriarchate of Moscow and all Russia, as the Russian Orthodox Church sometimes calls itself.

The most terrifying symbol of the Russian religious crisis and the deep interconnection between religion and state militarism is the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces in Kubinka, near Moscow, completed in 2020 under Putin's supervision and something that for a Western person is hard to believe. Officially dedicated to the Resurrection of Christ, it uses Christianity merely as a decorative shell. In reality, its purpose is to venerate the official Russian military-nationalist-pseudo-religious cult, which has been used to justify the military attack on Ukraine. One of the tallest Orthodox churches in Russia and the world, it is coloured military khaki and surrounded by columns whose shape and colour are redolent of the

bombs that Putin is now dropping on Ukraine. One of the mosaics is dedicated to the participants in wars in which the Soviet Union and Russia have been involved since 1945. The detailed caption includes the occupations of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 as well as the annexation of Crimea in 2014. It is not hard to guess who the empty space, to be filled later, is reserved for.

Our volume cannot ignore Russian culture, which the Russian studies scholar and translator Ivana Ryčlová has long regularly examined in the pages of *Kontexty*. Her essay, **Russia's cultural exodus** (pp. 119–135), seeks to describe how the Russian cultural opposition perceives the developments in their country, why some artists are leaving Russia, while others voluntarily opt for unfreedom. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, for some time it looked as if better times beckoned for Russia's culture too, but seen from today's perspective this was but a brief episode, before gradually everything returned to the old ways. The war against Ukraine has exposed this fact in its naked truth. Ideological demagoguery and propaganda have been restored to their places. The list of the enemies of the Orwellian empire, in which war is a mere 'special operation', is growing longer. Whether described as 'foreign agents', 'traitors' or 'spies', new names are published by the media every day. The social stratum that we habitually call the scientific and cultural intelligentsia again forms a substantial part of the persecuted.

The final three essays in the volume are dedicated to Ukraine, its earlier and newer history, its efforts at independence and the creation of its own distinctive culture and identity. Andrzej Nowak's extensive essay, **Where did Ukraine come from?** (pp. 137–155), explains the broader historical and cultural context of Ukraine's difference from Russia, and why it so tenaciously seeks to break out

of Russia's paralysing grasp. As Nowak shows in a long-term view of history, Ukraine was a relatively late addition to the Russian empire, something that many people like to forget. Actually, Ukraine is heir to Kyiv, a much older spiritual centre of Eastern Slavs than Moscow, and its political culture was shaped by its participation in the Rzeczpospolita project – the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of nobility or estates, that is, a cultural and historical formation that (despite all its problems) differed significantly from absolutist Russia. Nowak describes the period from the mid-16th to the early 18th centuries as crucial for the emergence of Ukrainian political identity and as evidence of its difference from Moscow's culture of tsarist autocracy. This, of course, does not mean that the Ukrainian transition to a stable democracy based on Western-type institutions will be easy, but it is certainly much more of a realistic prospect than it is in Russia.

František Mikš's contribution, **Indigenisation policy, the Great Terror and the liquidation of the Ukrainian cultural elite. The case of Mykhaylo Boychuk and his Kyiv School of monumental painting** (pp. 157–175), returns approximately to the interwar period, when the first significant attempts at a national and cultural revival were made in Ukraine, first during the brief, turbulent period of independence after the collapse of Tsarist Russia in 1917, and, later, after 1922 and to a limited extent in the newly established Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, through the policy of indigenisation. Using the little known, yet horrific case of the incarceration and murder of an entire national school of painting, the so-called 'Boychukists', the author demonstrates how Moscow and Russian Bolsheviks purposely liquidated the Ukrainian cultural and educated elite and with it the Ukrainian identity and nationality.

A longer piece by Josef Mlejnek Jr, **The perpetual motion of Ukrainian independence** (pp. 177–212), deals with the most recent history of Ukraine: its efforts at emancipation from Russia and completing the nation-building process after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. It is an engaging and thorough summary of what has happened in Ukraine from the declaration of independence in August 1991 until today, with the country facing a military aggression for many months now. The author ends on an optimistic note:

> Ukraine is still being born, now in a great war, and hence in enormous pain and suffering. We are witnessing a remarkable paradox. While the second Ukrainian president, Leonid Kuchma, in the 1990s considered the formation of the Ukrainian nation, or completing the nation-building, as the main task, Russia's President Vladimir Putin has inadvertently managed to achieve it. A new Ukraine is being born, different from the pre-war one. We do not know exactly what it will be like, but it will be inhabited by tenacious, inventive, free-thinking and brave people, essentially indestructible people [...] because Ukraine is a perpetual motion machine.

It has been our intention for this volume to blend contemporary politics, history, religion, philosophy and culture, as has been the purpose of *Kontexty* magazine since its inception. Above all, we wanted to bring attention to a false notion of Russia, created by a flood of blatant lies – a notion that has always been the Achilles heel of the Western democratic world. 'The art of the lie is as old as Russia itself,' wrote Alain Besançon in the introduction to his book *Holy Russia*, which seeks to disentangle the complicated historical, religious and cultural background of Russia's very strange relationship with the

truth – a permanent discord between ideas and words, and reality. The Russian nation has always been wholly subjected to an authoritarian power and this power had to succeed with its visions and plans. Lying has always been a way to cover up failure. People lied to the authorities and to each other, but above all lies were presented abroad. Karl Marx noted that Russia's behaviour was 'redolent of a comedian who wanted to astonish and deceive', that Russia was 'a matter of faith and not facts'. A few years earlier, the French historian Jules Michelet wrote indignantly: 'Russia is a lie. The whole of Russian society is riddled with lies that deprave it. Lies sit in the nobleman, the priest and the tsar… lie on lie, the supreme lie that crowns all lies, a crescendo of lies, falsehood and illusion.' Although more than a century-and-a-half has elapsed since these utterances, there is no need to change much in them. Russia truly is a *different world*, whose isolation from European culture has endured from the very beginning and is probably insurmountable.

The crescendo of lies, falsehood and illusion, an unfree society where propaganda and manipulation are everyday reality – these, alongside the imperial messianism, are among the main causes of Putin's baffling attack on Ukraine and of his failure. It would be interesting to know what information from those around him reached this modern-day Russian tsar, sitting at a desk with late 20th century push-button telephones – for instance, about the technical situation and the morale in the Russian military. Undoubtedly, he had a strongly distorted idea about the mood of the Russian-speaking population of eastern Ukraine, and as always expected a histrionic and toothless response from the West.

Like Hitler before him, Putin placed his bets on outrageous lies and especially on the weakness and naïveté of Western democracies.

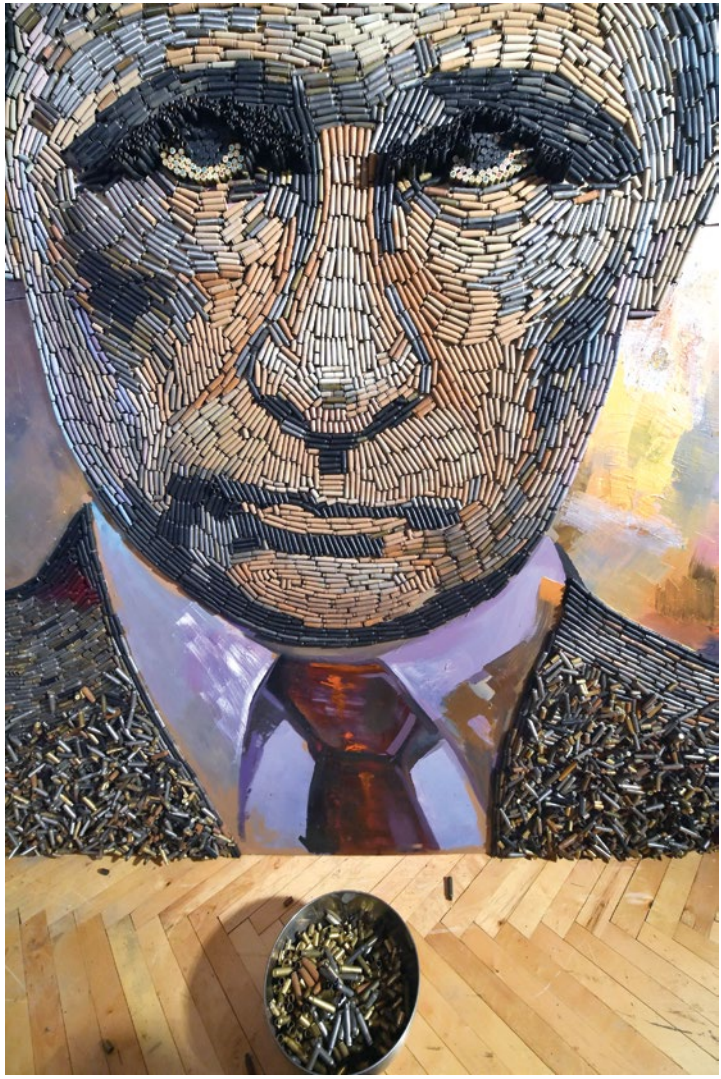
For a long time, the tactic of 'Schröderising European elites' (as Françoise Thom aptly called it) – that is, corrupting Western elites by selling them oil and gas, while they overlooked his 'minor' territorial conquests – served him well. Yet in starting an open war in Ukraine, he overplayed his hand. He failed to understand that democracies, focused on business and satisfying the needs of their people, and used to consensus and civilised manners, usually need a strong impulse, or even an outright shock to wake up and sense the threatening danger. But when they do sense it, they are able to find enough energy and resources to vanquish their adversary. The unleashing of war in Ukraine will mark Russia for many years, and not just economically. In the domains of perception, trust and interaction with the civilised word, the damage will be difficult to undo. By contrast, for the now severely tried Ukraine, a historical opportunity to become a part of the democratic European community is opening up. To what extent it will be able to exploit this opportunity will depend primarily on the country itself.

1 The magazine was previously called *Proglas* and *Revue Politika*; it has had the name *Kontexty* since 2009, but the continuity of opinion and personnel has always been consistently maintained.

2 Originally published in the June 1996 issue of the American neo-conservative magazine *Commentary*, the translation was published in Proglas, No. 7/1996, pp. 8–16.

3 *Proglas*, No. 7/1996, p. 16. The original quoted from https://www.commentary.org/articles/richard-pipes-2/russias-past-russias-future/

4 https://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/10064



This picture shows Ukrainian artist Darya Marchenko's portrait of Russian President Vladimir Putin. The young artist captured the global media's attention by creating a portrait of Putin out of 5,000 bullet shells collected in the separatist east. Darya Marchenko's picture The 'Face of War' is more than two metres tall. Reproduced from: Profimedia.CZ

PUTIN'S PUZZLE, UKRAINE AND US

Alexandr Vondra

24 February 2022 will go down in European history as a tragic date: after many years, a large and bloody war between two states erupted in Europe. It is a war as if from another century: a war over territory and the subjection of people. A war the scenes from which are redolent of the worst that the Old Continent went through in the 20th century. Photographs from Bakhmut, full of mud, blood and freezing people in uniforms, are at first sight no different from pictures of Passchendaele in 1917. News of hundreds of thousands of young people sent into a meat grinder with pitiful equipment and insufficient supplies takes us back to 1905, when the Tsarist army was losing against the underestimated Japanese, previously considered by the conceited Russian officers as 'mere half-apes with bamboo sticks'. Photographs from Bucha, showing the mass graves of hundreds of tied and executed civilians, take us back to the brutality of the Soviet

NKVD in Katyń in 1940. And then there are the tens of thousands of Ukrainian children sent to Russia for adoption and re-education – here, for us in Central and Eastern Europe, a historical parallel with the Nazi and Bolshevik rampages forces itself into our reluctant consciousness.

The Russians themselves continually change their public proclamations about the causes and objectives of the war, and one might laugh lustily at many of their explanations, were it not for the fact that, behind the rhetoric, thousands of human tragedies are unfolding every day. The Russians do not exhibit the typical signs of insanity, so let us abandon the theories about Ukrainian Nazism or Satanism, and let us try to delve deeper into the Russian thinking. After the initial shock of the war frenzy, a group of *Putin-Verstehers* – or Putin-empathisers – has once again emerged in the West who seek to understand the Russian president and to explain his actions as a response to the alleged expansionism of the West and NATO enlargement further east. Let us accept for the moment their premise that countries cannot freely make decisions about how to provide for their own security, and which defence community to belong to, and see how well their theories resonate with the Russian narrative.

It is evident that months and probably years before 24 February a process had been ongoing in President Putin's soul and mind of which the current turmoil of war is the result. There is a lot of speculation about this, so let us stick to the facts. After the anxious Putin took refuge from the coronavirus in strict quarantine, he decided to write an essay about Russo-Ukrainian relations. Putin has no education as a historian (he is a graduate of a law faculty and KGB spy school), but history is his great hobby and the essay itself shows that his grasp of this field is considerable, though he always

interprets the facts in the spirit of Russian romanticism, revisionism and imperialism.

The essay displays a distinct idealisation of the common past of Russians and Ukrainians, and any Ukrainian national feeling is considered a conspiracy by foreign powers and confused people, and will lead to the oppression of minorities. There is no lack of the notion of Russian superiority, and the idea that the Ukrainian nation cannot govern itself, so it has no right to exist; for that matter, its statehood is allegedly based on an illusion and a misrepresentation of history. Essentially, expanded to seven thousand slightly more benign words, this is the idea of the interwar Hungarian politician, János Esterházy, originally voiced about Czechoslovakia: 'We have always viewed the Czechoslovak Republic as an unviable patchwork of human maliciousness and stupidity and knew well that this artificial abomination, wrongly described as a state, has no right to exist.' In this extensive essay, to which Putin has undoubtedly dedicated many hours of his own work, from studying the sources to writing up, there are merely two mentions of NATO, both somewhat inadvertent – neither makes up a full sentence. Similarly, in his long-winded 'war' speech on the eve of the Russian attack on Ukraine, Putin mentioned Ukraine's accession to NATO only once. Can it really be that the matter for which, according to the Western *Putin-Verstehers*, Putin decided to unleash a war, would fail to be discussed in his most important utterances?

And then there is the annexation of the four Ukrainian regions, which Russia more or less managed to conquer at the beginning of the invasion – these have even less to do with the demand that Ukraine should not joint NATO. And, yes, there is the published phone call between Putin and the French president Macron, who promised

Putin three days before the start of the invasion that he was negotiating with President Biden about their bilateral meeting, which could include discussion about the future status of Ukraine or a revision of the Minsk agreements. Of course, there was no meeting, because the very next day Putin recognised the independence of the DPR and LPR (without mentioning this to the gullible Macron the day before) and two days later the tanks set off towards Kyiv.

Ukraine's accession to NATO certainly was not imminent at the time, and even the successor of Putin's successor would be unlikely to see it. Although Ukraine has NATO membership as an objective in its constitution, for it to be really in the game, the NATO countries would have to consider it seriously too. As the saying goes, 'it takes two to tango', and there certainly have not been two in recent years. First, Ukraine has a disputed border – Putin himself made it so. Second, Germany in particular was in no mood whatsoever to have its *Ostpolitik*, developed over decades, and its access to cheap Russian gas, steamrollered by the Ukrainians. Third, there were others who had issues with Ukraine's accession to NATO, for example the French, as this would undermine their vision of a Franco-centric security architecture in Europe, and the Hungarians, who have had a long dispute with the Ukrainians over their language law and blocked all Ukrainian cooperation with the EU and NATO. Western European politicians long cured themselves of their daring in the nineties and noughties, and following the 2008–2012 economic crisis fell back to an appeasing and supporting notion of geopolitics. The United States, meanwhile, was fully occupied with the economic, military and great-power rise of China, threatening its own exclusive great-power status, and in this light sought not to escalate, but to moderate relations with Russia. One might even argue, cynically, that had Putin

not been an idiot, but a realistic and rational politician, a year ago he could have offered an olive branch and cooperation regarding China to the West rather than aggression, and he would perhaps have carried away tacit acceptance of the Crimea annexation as his reward.

But Russia is not rational. Putin wanted much more, as shown by his statements: 'Peter the Great waged the northern war for 21 years. You might think he was fighting with Sweden, seizing their lands. He wasn't capturing them. He was reclaiming them. Apparently, it is also our destiny to reclaim and to reinforce'. Or consider this from the Kremlin spokesman, Dmitriy Peskov: 'Ideally, we want Russia to have the borders from the period of Nicholas II.' It seems the *Putin-Verstehers* suffer precisely from the same deficiency they accuse their opponents of. They are enclosed in a Western thought bubble and cannot admit that others might think differently. Desperately they seek an explanation for the Russian invasion that would make sense to themselves. They refuse to see that the causes of the current Russian rampage lie deeper in the Russian self-perception and that for the umpteenth time in history, Ukraine is a target of classic Russian imperialism, which has changed its stripes and ideologies over centuries, but whose cornerstone remains the idea expressed so aptly years ago by Václav Havel: 'Russia does not know where it begins and where it ends.'

What Havel unhappily noted as our problem with Russia, Putin considers Russia's prerogative. He repeated it a few years ago, when he was handing prizes to kids in a televised geography competition. Putin asked a boy where Russia's border stopped. The boy answered, the Bering Sea, next to the USA. Putin smiled and corrected the boy: 'Russia's borders do not stop anywhere.' There is no reason today to think that he was only joking then. In as much as we know what

Putin has watched and read in recent years, his intellectual nourishment consisted mostly of national-revival authors, who dozens or hundreds of years ago stipulated that the expansion of the Russian world was the objective of every Russian ruler. Not improvement of the living standards of the Russian people; not friendly and trading relations with neighbours; not the 'soft' power of culture; but Moscow as the notional 'fourth Rome', with power and territorial expansion on all 'unprotected' areas far and wide.

Gradually, Russia abused every show of goodwill by Ukraine. It used its tenancy of the Sevastopol naval base, the home of its Black Sea fleet, as a pretext for seizing Crimea. It does not shy away from threatening Ukraine with nuclear weapons, even though it previously made guarantees of its 1991 borders precisely in exchange for Ukraine surrendering its nuclear arsenal.

Western foot-dragging concerning Ukraine's membership of NATO could have been one of the many pieces in Putin's puzzle. On one side of the Atlantic, the chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan in summer 2021, Biden's February 2022 statement that should there be a 'minor incursion', the USA would not intervene in the conflict, and the overall impression that Biden was a weak president, tired by age, whom a third of his nation believed had won unfairly. On the other side of the Atlantic, a new German government led by the traditionally pro-Russian SPD, and the entire EU fully occupied with fighting global warming and promoting the Green Deal, including the irrational German energy policy, which hysterically decided to shut down all nuclear power plants and to balance the numerous new and unstable renewable sources in the grid with growing dependence on cheap Russian gas. Indeed, the Germans were putting their heads straight into Putin's noose.

Europe's guarded and soft response (again, largely at the instigation of the governments in Berlin and Paris) to Russian aggression was already apparent. There was virtually no reaction to the 2008 war with Georgia; following the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas in spring 2014, the West imposed weak sanctions that served as a moral alibi, but the Kremlin, which did not feel them, mocked the gesture. Less than three months after the annexation of Crimea, Angela Merkel was seen smiling with Putin in a VIP box in Brazil at the FIFA World Cup. The NordStream II pipeline grew longer without hiccups and leading German, Austrian, French and Dutch politicians, following their terms in office, with metronomic regularity moved on to the supervisory boards of Russian energy companies. Similarly, French president Emmanuel Macron, pursuing his own plans for strategic EU autonomy under French leadership, constantly talked about abolishing the ineffective anti-Russian sanctions, 'NATO brain death' and his daring vision of a Europe stretching 'from Lisbon to Vladivostok'. No one was banishing Putin from European salons – rather the contrary. Some countries on the EU's eastern border, most prominently Poland and the Baltic states, were routinely called Russophobes and put in their place – after all, their rule of right was not in order and they only recognised two genders! When a Polish foreign affairs minister at one point warned against the NordStream I gas pipeline, describing it as a new Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, more than one prominent German politician tried to pacify me with the following words: 'Calm down. Our relationship with Russia is a normal relationship between supplier and customer. Each country needs the other. It's like an umbilical cord. There's no threat to anyone here.' In their political jargon, Germans called it *Wandel durch Handel*, change through trade. It was

only that Lenin's old maxim, 'The capitalists will sell us the rope with which to hang them', that was forgotten...

And so Putin made a simple calculation and judged that the constellations were ideal for the realisation of old imperial dreams. Today we know that he miscalculated. But it is easy to be wise after the fact and we should admit that we all underrated Ukraine. Putin was not the only one to be wrong about Ukrainians. We too viewed them with scorn, even if we did not drink in Russian expansionism and megalomania with our mother's milk. Indeed, the very etymology suggests disdain: Ukraine means borderland. And those on the borders, on the margins, are often overlooked by some, pillaged and violated by others. In the 20th century alone, nearly 14 million people died in Ukraine from purges, famine and the holocaust, but it took nearly 60 years before the American historian Timothy Snyder carefully added the figures together and loudly reminded the world of the fact. Tsarist imperialists, Soviet Bolsheviks and German Nazis all took it out on Ukraine. And the oligarchic stratum that emerged in the first decades of independence frequently treated their own country no better.

A history full of colonialism and violence has created a nation principally mistrusting of the government. Ukrainians are not 'docile', as shown in both 2004 and 2014 when twice in revolutions of dignity a national awareness and a desire for purification surged. When push comes to shove, the Ukrainian people are able to close ranks and very energetically replace kleptocratic governments. They are no strangers to taking to the streets. Presidents usually only rule for one term and their ratings plummet within a few months. The unyielding Ukrainian character is the very opposite of the Russian mentality, historically formed by the awareness that, in the world's largest

country inhabited by nearly 200 ethnic groups, overseen at all times by an extensive repressive apparatus, a protest by an individual or group means nothing, and indeed is violently crushed. The side effect of the Ukrainian mistrust is poor-quality government bureaucracy, a high level of corruption and other ills that have led not just to domestic plunder of wealth but also to mass emigration, from which the Czech Republic in particular has benefited strongly. Industrious Ukrainians willing to work for low wages and with little dignity have been involved in our economic growth and our country growing richer – that is a simple fact. That too has determined our view of Ukraine, and our mostly pessimistic expectations.

It was on this mistrust of government that Russians built their fundamental premise, which proved to be wrong. They believed that, following the invasion, Ukrainian support for the government in Kyiv would collapse and they would only have to extinguish poorly organised pockets of resistance. This reasoning then led to an arrangement in which the Russian army would probably not be able to vanquish the pugnacious Ukrainians even if it were in perfect condition and everything went well. Just the simple numbers: Putin sent about 150 thousand men to Ukraine, of which some were riot police to 'pacify' demonstrators. Hitler in his time sent two million. During the First Gulf War, the allies sent 900 thousand soldiers to Iraq. The Soviets went to Czechoslovakia with half-a-million service personnel. Ukraine is three times as populous, and the Russians invaded it with an army a third of the size. This shows how much they believed in the Kremlin that Ukraine would collapse like a house of cards.

Yet the Ukrainian mistrust of state power also has its dark side. People have learned to rely on one another, on their hardiness and cunning. At the moment of the attack, they simply closed ranks, and

that included around Zelenskyy, whose ratings before the war were around 30 percent, though this was not a bad number in Ukrainian terms. Zelenskyy's ideological vagueness, which he was frequently rebuked for by his opponents during campaigning, proved an advantage in the war. Various currents of opinion, from Ukrainian nationalists to people who until recently had sympathised with Russia, have been able to rally behind Zelenskyy. When one of the leading separatists, Oleg Tsarov, called upon his erstwhile colleague from the pro-Russian Party of Regions, Oleksandr Vilkul, at the time the mayor of Kryvyy Rih, to turn the city over to Russian troops, Vilkul replied: 'Fuck you, traitor, along with your masters!'

I myself almost gave up on Ukraine at one point. Following the brief surge during the 2004 Orange Revolution, when I often went to Kyiv to share our experiences of transforming our country, Ukraine again started to return to the old ways. The protest leaders quickly fell out and there was so much distrust among them that when, in 2009, the Czech prime minister Mirek Topolánek in the role of the president of the European Council arrived in Ukraine to resolve the gas crisis, both President Viktor Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yuliya Tymoshenko met him at the airport, as neither could bear the idea that the other would spend the entire journey from the airport with the guest in the car alone. Most of the West saw Ukraine as a perpetual problem. There was talk of 'Ukraine fatigue'. At the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, the Germans and the French made it quite clear they did not want Ukraine (or Georgia) in the alliance. Russia interpreted this stop sign not as an accommodating gesture, but as an invitation to attack Georgia. Fourteen years later, President Biden warned about the planned Russian invasion of Ukraine, while also saying that the US would not get involved in the conflict. Today we hear aggrieved

Russian leaders claiming that NATO supports Ukraine with weapons, and that in doing so it prolongs the war; that without this barb, the Russian bear would have swallowed Ukraine a long time ago. That is absurd. But, again, it is too easy to mock this Russian thinking. Others too have underestimated Ukrainian persistence and tenacity.

Ever since the Russian military crossed Ukraine's border, experts have been coming up with categorical statements concerning the future of this war. Only very few of these statements have come true. Who would have thought, back then when we woke up every day asking ourselves whether Kiyv had already fallen, that a few months later Russians would be fleeing Kharkiv and Kherson? That the possibility of liberating Crimea would be discussed seriously? It is no secret that Germany in particular initially rejected any support for Ukraine, for it 'stands no chance and it will all be over in a few tens of hours'. It is no secret that Western leaders offered safe exile to Volodymyr Zelenskyy, while he demanded tanks to defend his country.

It was only after several days of Ukrainian heroism that Polish prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki and Lithuanian president Gitanas Nausėda went to plead the case to Berlin. This was followed by a crucial and courageous trip of the prime ministers of Czechia, Poland and Slovenia – Petr Fiala, Mateusz Morawiecki and Janez Janša – by train directly to Kyiv under Russian bombardment to show not just symbolic, but also practical support to Ukraine in its 'darkest hour'. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe, whose leaders had first-hand experience of Russian expansionism, were the first to supply weapons, munitions and other support. Later, the British, Americans, and, in the end, Germans and French joined them. After Brexit, it seemed for a long time that there was no sufficient counterweight to the German-French axis in the EU. Now, faced with a real

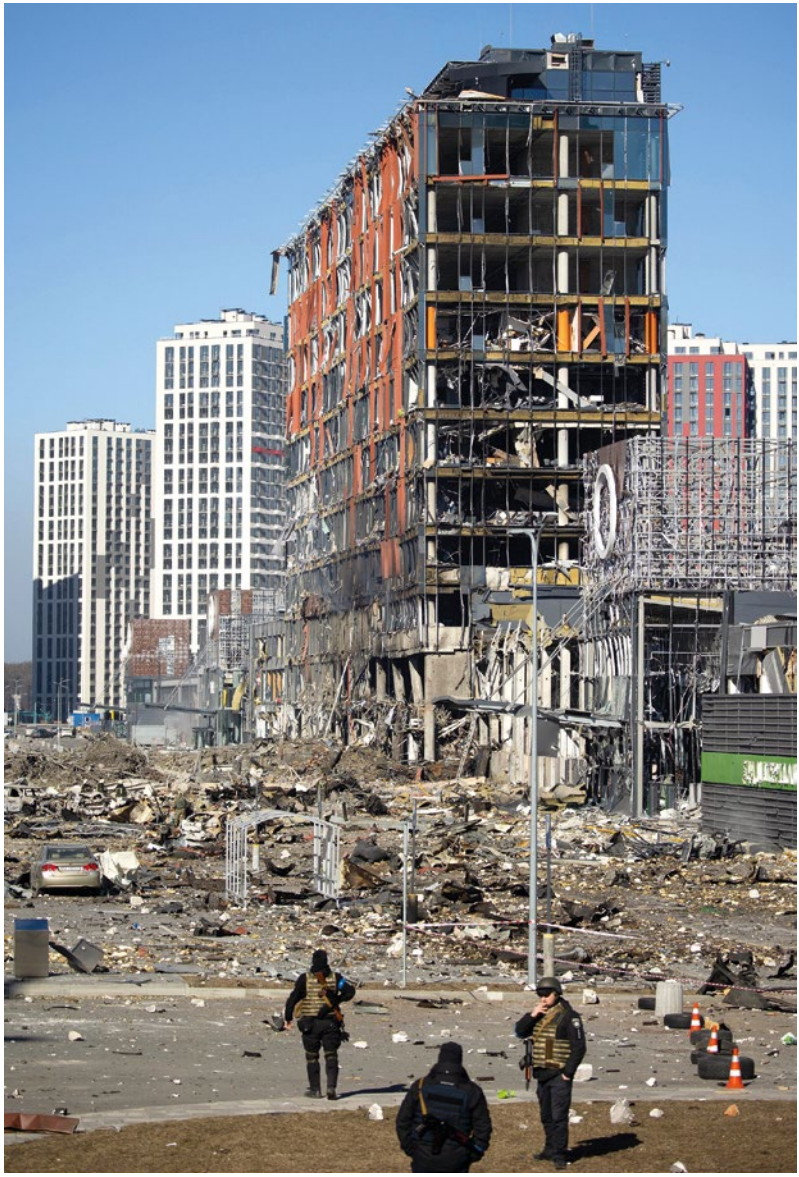
Volodymyr Zelenskyy in a meeting with the prime ministers of Poland, Czechia and Slovenia in Kyiv, 15 March 2022. Reproduced from: Úřad vlády ČR

and existential threat to the whole of Europe, the East-Central European countries have shown that they can play an important role in forming Europe-wide positions.

President Zelenskyy's words, 'I need ammunition, not a ride', resonated in Czech society. It was a poignant nation-building statement for us, whose leaders in the past – whether it was Edvard Beneš or Alexander Dubček – had always accepted the ride and rejected the option of defending our freedom and independence gun in hand. Zelenskyy did not give up, surprising not just the Russians who saw him as a clown from television comedy shows, but also suave Western leaders for whom in recent years words such as 'borders' or 'national independence' were old junk that did not suit our modern, globalism-infused 21st century.

The Russian war has changed this world. It has even woken Germany from its dreams. Chancellor Olaf Scholz published an interesting and sober essay in *Foreign Affairs* in which he discusses *Zeitenwende* – an epochal tectonic shift. One era, characterised by peaceful cooperation in a globally connected world, is ending. A new era is beginning. In the new, multipolar world, the great powers will more carefully pursue their interests and vie for power and influence among themselves. It is therefore paramount to sustain European integration and trans-Atlantic links.

Against the background of the hell of war, Ukraine has come of age – the external attack has united it into one political nation. By its aggression, Russia has proved that history certainly has not reached its end, as many idealists thought post-Cold War. The West has woken up at least a little, our eastern flank has been strengthened as a whole, and we too have received a chance to become a better country. I am genuinely proud that we have been able to manage a powerful flow of refugees, almost Biblical in proportions, mostly of mothers with children, and have stood at the forefront of the countries that are helping Ukraine with weapons to fight in its struggle for survival. Let us put Samaritanism and sentimentalism aside. Russia has once again shown that it is in our national interest to be as far as possible from its borders. Only if Ukrainian independence is defended and the West united, will we have security in the medium term, and Russia will perhaps have an opportunity for self-reflection. We wish them very much this opportunity, but certainly cannot rely on it. Enough of false hopes that we will have the Russia we dream of. Russia remains here, it is not going anywhere, and we must take it as it truly is: without illusions and irresponsible underestimations.



Kyiv, Rotroville shopping centre destroyed by a missile attack, March 2022.
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LETTER FROM KYIV

A Ukrainian philosopher writes to France and Europe from Kyiv under bombardment

Constantin Sigov

(written on 15 March 2022,
first published 7 April 2022)

Dear friends,

I am writing to you from my home close to Kyiv, in a barrage of missiles under which Vladimir Putin from Moscow wishes to bury Ukraine. I am writing to you in French, the language in which I so much liked to teach philosophy during my five-year stay in Paris as a professor at École des hautes études en sciences sociales near Saint-Germain-des-Prés and later during my frequent visits to your 'City of Light', where I established so many friendships dear to my heart. I am writing to you about the return of war, which is devastating my

country and whose roar is now reaching your borders. Naively, we thought that we had banished the spectre of war, at least from the Old Continent. I am writing to you about the urgent need for peace of my people, who have been victims of murderous aggression and driven into exile; who every day mourn more and more dead, yet resist barbarism with all their might. I am also writing about our destiny, common as never before; about a free Europe.

THE RULE OF TERROR

On 24 February at 5am, I was awoken by the thunder of bombardment and so were my neighbours. For some weeks before, the ruler in the Kremlin had been conducting massive and terrifying manoeuvres with the aim of encircling our country. Nevertheless, we wished to believe in our safety, which unfortunately proved very relative. Even on the eve of bombardment, I believed that the prospect of a Russian invasion was simply an evil nightmare, and that it would not ultimately take place. I believed that reason would prevail. But before dawn, we heard explosions so loud that the sky shivered and the earth shook, and no one among us could doubt the cruel certainty any longer. I had been wrong. War is here, fierce, furious and murderous. Ruthless. May our disenchantment serve as a lesson to you that the speeches of militant dictators must be taken literally.

For sure, after Christmas we had attempted to prepare for the worst. The vertigo that overtook us was dreadful in itself. In their families, with their friends and on social networks, more and more Ukrainians discussed travel essentials should a deadly attack come.

Papers and basic medicines? Of course. Clothing and food? Yes, but only in minimal amounts. Don't forget the problem of road blocks, the necessity to use dirt roads and forest trails, to take a backpack rather than a wheeled suitcase. And judge well the load a child can bear, so that she is not overburdened and doesn't slow the tempo.

We couldn't even protect our children from the awareness of danger. During January, in more than a thousand schools throughout Ukraine, the alarm was raised over the threat of bombardment; hundreds of thousands of schoolchildren were evacuated, their parents anxiously hurrying to pick them up. In Kyiv, the same anonymous alarm was sounded repeatedly in the metro and in public spaces, further exacerbating the feelings of fear among the civilian population.

Even before the first tanks rolled into our country, the war had started in a hybrid form, invented and favoured by a former KGB lieutenant colonel in his dream about autocracy over 'All Russia'. Vladimir Putin ceaselessly applies a logic of terror, to which he has already subjected his country and which he intends to force upon the rest of the world. The first fights had to break out so that there would be absolutely no doubt about this; first in our country, then in yours. Today Ukraine is the forward battlefield of a global struggle.

A SYSTEMIC MEMORY LOSS

After 2014 and the Maidan events, the world began to discuss a so-called 'Ukraine crisis', often in confused terms. No one can doubt today that this crisis is actually a 'Russia crisis', fundamentally linked with the nature of Putin's regime.

Why is Kyiv the salt in the eyes of the Kremlin? Why the sudden escalation of the conflict? Why the apparently irrational offensive? The pseudohistorical fantasies haunting Vladimir Putin's head cannot conceal the real and serious threats his regime faces. The truth is that there is a close connection between the dissolution of International Memorial, an association of Russian NGOs, and the launching of hostile action against Ukraine. This connection, which is rarely considered in Europe, might appear paradoxical to you, but to me it seems essential. And it truly is essential.

Perhaps you'd like to ask whether there is, after all, a connection between a ban on collecting data about the millions of victims of Stalinism on the one hand, and an attack on an independent country on the other. The Kremlin makes a taboo out of free access to information about crimes perpetrated under communism. Thanks to Putin, the Red Stalin, who spilled the innocent blood of countless victims, has once again become a White Tsar, which is what he was in 1945, a victor over Nazi Germany in the Great Patriotic War (as Russians mythically describe World War II), the builder of a Soviet empire reaching all the way to the Elbe, the father of nations and Master of the World. Thus, in the mind of his distant yet furious successor, declaring the gulags a crime against humanity is out of the question.

Yuriy Dmitriyev, one of the people involved in Memorial, recently revealed the truth about a Karelian parallel to the Katyń massacre, when he started to exhume the dead in Sandarmokh, executed *en masse* by the Soviet NKVD in 1937–1938. In doing so, he definitively shattered the version proposed by revisionists close to the Kremlin, who continue to blame the Finns for the massacre. Dmitriyev was subjected to all kinds of abuse and persecution and then publicly humiliated when a court of law falsely indicted him of paedophilia.

Dmitriyev's unpardonable crime is that he dared to bring the Soviet Union's dirty laundry into the light and revealed the lie on which Putin's Russia has been built. But in Ukraine, the extermination of two to five million people by famine in 1932–33 is not left to the forgers of the past to handle. Nor are historians there risking jail for their scholarly work in revealing the terrors of the past.

KYIV AS A SCAPEGOAT

The KGB archives in Moscow and Minsk have long been closed again. In Kyiv, by contrast, they remain available to all researchers. Yet the memory of radical evil is not kept solely by scholars. All of Ukraine's inhabitants, of which there are 45 million, today present a crucial testimony for a worldwide Memorial, which countless victims of totalitarianism are calling for.

Ukraine is bringing action against Soviet crimes at a global tribunal. That is why the Kremlin now seeks to destroy and bury it in a no man's land. We are attempting to bring humanity's attention to the fates of those who lived in the 'bloody lands' reaching from the Baltic to the Black Sea, from the Bering Sea to the Sea of Azov. In 1933–1945, fourteen million civilians perished there due to organised persecution, intentional famine and military negligence.

Ukraine, therefore, is enlarging the space of shared responsibility for all that happened at that time. Putin's Russia will not forgive Ukraine for this. Russia seeks to hold Ukraine hostage and accuse it of all manner of sins. Entirely unjust propaganda disseminated by Moscow accuses our country, which has elected a Jewish and

Russian-speaking president, of being in the hands of neo-Nazis and nationalist fanatics. The malevolent or naïve people who spread this manipulation in Europe ought to know that by doing so they associate themselves with the denial of historical facts.

For us, the sovereignty of our country is closely linked with the unalienable dignity of every human being. Our territorial and moral integrity is indivisible. The re-opening of the Russian Memorial cannot be shelved while the struggle continues for the freedom of Ukraine, a country that remembers the periods of inhumanity and gives evidence about them to the whole world. At the same time, it bears witness to the fact that this evil has not yet been banished.

IN A BELORUSIAN MIRROR

According to Putin's regime, accounting for the horrors of Stalinism should be a purely internal Russian affair. Therefore, crimes against humanity should not be tried, but crimes against 'our people' must be dealt with, and their numbers, circumstances and mechanisms must be based on propaganda not history. The dictatorial system established by Vladimir Putin demands that these crimes be considered 'local affairs' outside any jurisdiction but his. He has a big stake in this. If the crimes of the Soviet state can only be tried according to ideologically adjusted criteria, then the murderers of Anna Politkovskaya and Boris Nemtsov in Moscow have a free hand. The impunity of the murderers today goes hand in hand with a policy of a national loss of memory concerning the crimes of the past.

Putin's fear that he will have to face an international tribunal explains why, wittingly or unwittingly, his regime displays such obsessive inertia. The Kremlin's maniacal rhetoric targeting the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation seems nonsensical until we realise that the word 'NATO' conceals the option of a new Nuremberg.

This is pointed out in his own way, as if in a mirror, by Alexander Lukashenko, Putin's accomplice. The Hague Tribunal means nothing to the Minsk dictator as long as his crimes are Belarus's 'domestic affair'. The autocrat sets the country he has seized outside the jurisdiction of the civilised world. He carves out the enslaved territory from the space of humanity. Due to the isolation of the neo-Soviet regime which he established, he gives himself the exclusive right to do evil within its borders.

This evil grows in the shadow of the stupidity of foreign commentators who close their eyes to what is happening 'there', as if it didn't concern us 'here'. The unity of the human race is damaged not just by the malevolent, but also by the fools, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the pastor and theologian tortured to death by the Nazis, warned. Indeed, Bonhoeffer argued that fools are the more dangerous, as their self-complacency protects them from self-destruction.

Alexander Lukashenko certainly is no great hero and it would suffice to remind him of the example of the Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević, arrested and tried after the wars in the former Yugoslavia, and threaten him with eventually meeting the same fate, to cool off his repressive zeal. Before that happens, European leaders should explain to the Minsk satrap that the conflict unleashed by Moscow against Kyiv is not his war, and that it would be fatal for him to send his soldiers to fight alongside the Russian attackers.

What model of relations is on offer to Ukraine from those in Russia and Belarus who are preparing to celebrate the centenary of the Soviet Union in December 2022? It is a domination of unlimited violence, coercion and oppression, which was the foundation of the communist totalitarian system from the outset. This domination is exercised by Putin's regime over Lukashenko's regime and with his cooperation. Ukraine, however, rejects such domination, and attempts to unmask the mutual and reciprocal guarantee that celebrates the evil on which this domination is based.

AN INSTRUMENTAL VIEW OF HISTORY

Vladimir Putin views the world through the prism of the erstwhile Soviet Union. His ambition is to create it again. Everything else that has been written about him is simply literature. His project, of course, will not succeed. But to render it credible, he adjusts historical facts, as one edits a movie. His favourite figures are Lenin and Stalin, the architects of that system, whom he quotes as saying the things he needs to hear. Yet his attempt at reconstruction ultimately destroys the last illusions about these times, showing that neither the proletariat, nor the party – and certainly not the people – but the KGB was the backbone of the Soviet Union.

Vladimir Putin wants to set this machinery in motion again. His own biography commands him to do so. At the time of the Berlin Wall's collapse, he was an agent in East Germany, and when he asked his KGB superiors what the response would be, he received no

answer. Witnessing such a collapse was an existential shock for him. Avenging the Soviet Union is the core of his current programme, and for this, any means will do. He reconstructs history on the basis of knowledge acquired afterwards, and doesn't mind leaving out whole sections that would contradict his vision.

To justify Russia's posture on Ukraine, Putin again plays with history. He takes the mediaeval Kyivan Rus – a state that existed from the ninth to the thirteenth century – to make it a 'Russian' principality. He distorts the diversity of the contemporary Ukrainian nation to turn it into a disparate union of Russian-speaking people in the east and Ukrainian-speaking people of a western orientation. These are not arguments but pretences. Who in Europe would listen to a potentate who in an attempt to redraw the border between France and Germany would reference Charlemagne?

Yet the facts are implacable. I myself come from an ancient Kyivan family where Russian was always spoken at home, though we were fluent in Ukrainian too. Odesa, a Russian-speaking city, looks with displeasure at the tanks that want to roll in under the pretence of defending the Russian language and culture. The overwhelming majority of Russian speakers in Ukraine are horrified that their language affiliation should be identified with support for Kremlin policy, and the east of the country refuses to be exploited as a guise for what is self-evidently aggression.

Despite the jailing of regime opponents, the silencing of the media and the torrents of propaganda, people in Russia continue to protest against this unjust war. In the Orthodox Church, the hierarchy of which the Kremlin overlord has Putinised, my believing friends are starting to protest too and anti-clericalism is on the rise among young people. The intellectuals, artists and activists who have not yet been jailed are

leaving Moscow and St Petersburg for abroad. Putin attempted to exploit history to create enmity and hatred, but he has failed.

PUTIN, MYTH AND REALITY

It seems that Putin has moved on from writing a treatise to justify his illegitimate actions to a hallucinatory monologue. Eight years ago, back in 2014, Angela Merkel saw him as a man 'divorced from reality'. Since then, this separation has become deeper thanks to his strict isolation in a bunker throughout the pandemic. Putin lives in his own bubble and finds it difficult to distinguish his fantasies from his idiosyncrasies.

Let's look again at Putin's televised address of 21 February 2022 in the staged broadcast from the pseudo-session of the Security Council of Russia: this address is insane, in the true meaning of the word. Listening to Putin's words to the effect that Ukraine was deprived of part of its territory, you feel you're hearing a satirical story by Gogol. When the foreign intelligence chief Sergey Naryshkin says that he is in favour 'of both republics, Donetsk and Luhansk, joining the Russian Federation', Putin rudely interrupts him and commands him to pipe down, as if he were a puppet: 'What are you saying? We want to recognise their independence!' Evidently, Vladimir decided to have this public humiliation of his slaves filmed and broadcast so that it would serve as a spectacle for the entire world. Thierry Robin and Fabien Nury, in their excellent graphic novel *The Death of Stalin* that inspired Armando Iannucci's 2017 film, showed that cartoon comedy works best to describe the *modus operandi*, atmosphere and

psychology that has been prevailing in the Kremlin for a century now. And it is precisely this style that is showily demonstrated these days by the actors who claim for themselves the right to decide the fates of a hundred-and-fifty million Russians, their neighbours and, in a broader sense, the whole of Europe.

This form of mental and verbal decline has apparently affected the entire Kremlin. The fact that the Russian foreign affairs minister has started to deploy vulgarities drawn from convict jargon has no parallel, not even in the Stalin era. This is a violation of established diplomatic practice. The semantic elements of communication and behaviour have changed, including among Russia's leaders. Their decline is accelerating, though this could have been predicted.

By bombarding the historic centre of Kyiv, which is older than Moscow's and which Putin always celebrated as 'the cradle of Russia', this Soviet-style dictator reveals himself as the man without inhibitions and scruples he is.

When in 2015 I warned my Paris friends about this danger, some of them thought I was exaggerating. They thought that the tensions were only temporary. Unfortunately, it has been proved that I was not exaggerating: Vladimir Putin wants to break with the post-1945 international system. In other words, he wants to do away with the priority of human rights.

NUCLEAR VERTIGO

What has befallen us now is worse than the 1986 Chernobyl disaster. The lies of the regime were so evident then that millions of people

opposed it. Today our rulers are not in thrall to any ideology. Yet despite that – and this is a terrible mystery – the monstrous corpse of the Soviet regime has been brought to life again in Moscow.

What has befallen us is worse than Chernobyl because the Kremlin overlord is evidently losing his mind. He is a Nero, burning his land, his people and his neighbours. His arrogance knows no bounds and he does not have a care for the fate of his fellow citizens. Without any concern whatsoever, he watches his soldiers becoming cannon fodder – all the more reason for him not to be bothered by Ukrainians dying today, nor Moldovans nor the French tomorrow. He thinks that he is surrounded by countless enemies and his only concern is to destroy as many of them as possible.

Now his mask has come down and Europeans – even the most blinded – can no longer suck up to him. Vladimir Putin lied to Emmanuel Macron's face throughout their five- or six-hour-long talk. He despises human beings and denigrates European leaders whom he considers feckless and impotent. Only at the last minute did they finally understand that they are dealing with a gangster whose words seek not to capture reality but to twist it according to his own objectives. For this irredeemable liar, truth does not exist; only power is important.

There is therefore no guarantee of him not ordering from his Kremlin bunker a tactical nuclear strike against Kyiv, the more so if his gigantic land and air offensive comes to deadlock. This horrifying option cannot be ruled out in a situation in which his tanks have encircled the Ukrainian capital, which refuses to open its gates and strikes back, blow after blow. For Putin it would be merely a replacement of one weapon with another.

If, however, Vladimir Putin is one hundred percent certain that the nuclear powers would destroy him, he will not dare. The West

must speak resolutely, not succumb to fear when faced with such a perspective; it must make it clear that we are stronger. In short, it must reject blackmail. If Kyiv were to become a victim of nuclear attack, any other European city could follow sooner or later.

Most Europeans are not at all ready for a hot war, even without a nuclear intervention. They cannot imagine sleeping in a cellar or living in a metro station. When I watch recent discussions on French television, I feel that their participants consider themselves inhabitants of a different planet.

There is another thing that eludes them. Should Russian firepower hit one of the many Ukrainian nuclear power plants, the environmental disaster that would follow would not stop at our borders. What could not be prevented in 1986 would perforce repeat itself in 2022. Russia does not need a nuclear attack to create nuclear panic – even if it ultimately blamed Ukrainian artillery for the disaster. The truth is that the confidence with which Europeans have long looked into the future is already losing its justification.

TRIAL BY WAR

One cannot expect humanity from an army that, concerned about the spectre of an epidemic, follows the order to leave the bodies of their dead to decompose in the mud and then chuck them into mass graves. A dignified posture prevails on the Ukrainian side. There is no looting of shops or scuffles at railway stations. In Kyiv, there are longer queues of blood donors at hospitals than cars at petrol stations.

I have not seen any hysteria anywhere – not around me, nor in the crowds, the media or social networks.

It is difficult to express this adequately – I don't want to sound exalted or histrionic. Certainly, it is not calm everywhere, but old disputes and transitory emotions are now set aside. Everyone realises that all gestures must be focused towards helping others. To me this awakens a memory of 2014: on Maidan people suddenly gave much more attention to everyone they met. As during that 'Revolution of Dignity', when the desire to show civility and courage was stronger than everything else; as on yesterday's barricades; so too today Ukrainians try to stand upright. The difference is that this time the front does not only run through some boroughs of the capital; it runs throughout the entire country.

We have understood that this is a matter of life and death, requiring clear positions and simple gestures. I have been within five metres of rolling Russian tanks. Obviously, the faces of passers-by show their emotion, but there is no enthusiasm for war nor intoxication of hatred. There is simply the awareness that a fire is raging and that it must be extinguished; that together we must procure water from wherever we can – that's perhaps the most precise metaphor. I'll give a concrete example of this sovereign calm. A Russian armoured vehicle approaches a village. Its population offers food to the soldiers in the vehicle; they are hungry because their supply lines are dysfunctional. While they eat, one of the villagers discreetly pours sugar into the fuel tank. The vehicle will not go any further. This is how you can stop the machinery of war. Only practical and sober decisions can surmount fear. This holds true everywhere, in France as much as in Ukraine.

RESISTANCE

By violence and fear, Putin hopes to achieve his goal of Russian flags flying above the Kyiv City Hall, Khreshchatyk Street and Maidan Nezalezhnosti. In the buildings in this neighbourhood, whose cellars still remember KGB interrogations, FSB agents would torture opponents, passers-by rounded up to intimidate others, and the last foreign reporters to remain in the country. Let's not forget Russians and other former Soviet citizens, who opted for freedom and settled in Ukraine; the Putin authorities already have the arrest lists. From Kharkiv to Odesa, the occupation forces will do what they have been doing for seven years in Donetsk.

The Ukrainian philosopher Ihor Kozlovskyy spent seven hundred days and seven hundred nights in the prisons of the eastern militias. In an interview I conducted with him he told me about the countless physical and mental sufferings to which he was exposed. His torturers sought to force him to surrender his dignity. He resisted by insisting on his inalienable right to remain a human being.

During the torture, Kozlovskyy remembered that the Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, a victim of Nazism, once described conscience as an 'inner God'. In becoming aware of the perspective of such a witness, one can see what happens in even the most terrifying situations as if it were coming from the outside: 'You receive blows,' says Kozlovskyy, 'you're bleeding, but suddenly you smile. And you realise that you no longer fear death. They can no longer break you. You're not in their power anymore, you have walked to the other side and you're not afraid. *You've seen yourself.*'

The fundamental source, energy and ferment of resistance is individual and collective courage. When tested, this courage may certainly

melt away like snow in the sun, but it can also grow. War is very difficult work; we are aware of that in Ukraine today. The physical and psychological pressure on everyone is enormous. Yet from Kharkiv to Kyiv to Lviv, and even in Paris, we all must sign up for this task, and devote all our moral and physical powers to it. The curtain of illusion that allows us to believe that conflicts are only occurring somewhere far away may be torn at any moment. Violence can penetrate every nation and every house. If we are to prevent this catastrophe, we must not gloss over its possibility. We must not lose courage, but encourage ourselves and others.

TOMORROW IS TODAY

As Ukrainians, we have come to believe that we now have no choice but to fight; and not just here in Kyiv but also by your side in Paris and Brussels. Why? Because we all face the same dangerous adversary who is capable of anything. Ukraine's application to join the European Union has been registered, but we must act fast. Faster. Ukraine certainly already belongs in Europe. Now all Europeans must realise this, that Ukrainians truly belong to Europe and its civilisation.

The dangerous adversary knows Western fears well and is able to exploit those threats that are most likely to frighten Western populations. For instance, he might float the possibility that Beijing will support him. However, like a seasoned poker player Putin likes to bluff. The truth is that the Chinese foreign affairs minister has repeatedly declared that his country recognises the integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine. That is the official position and it is clear.

The consequences of Russian bombardment. Photo from the Czech government's visit to Kyiv, 31 October 2022. Reproduced from: Úřad vlády ČR

Europe must clarify its own position, and here everything depends on the mobilisation of nations that constitute Europe. There are moments when anonymous people feel called to convey a historical message to political leaders. If solidarity prevails in public opinion in France, its government will be less timorous. That will encourage the country when faced with other challenges, be they concerned with the economy, politics or migration. In this difficult hour, truly, much depends on every one of us.

This war will either renew and strengthen France and Europe, or it will throw us back into the cruel past. Either Ukraine, France

and all European countries will embody a new ethos – a new model of behaviour of sterner moral fibre – or we will become a dumb herd.

The Kremlin ideology wants to convince us that baseness is still better than war, but when in 1938 Chamberlain returned from Munich, where he and Daladier threw Czechoslovakia at Hitler's mercy, Churchill told him: 'You were given the choice between war and dishonour. You chose dishonour and you will have war.' If every one of you, wherever you stand, becomes a new Churchill, then all France will help Emmanuel Macron to become a new Churchill too.

Our country, Ukraine, defends the values of democracy, liberty and justice, the values which Europe avows. If Europe remains united in this crisis, its self-esteem will rise. Human dignity is now at stake. And if Europe is in danger, then it is primarily because it does not have a sufficiently just and strong notion of this dignity.

That, dear friends, is perhaps the main thing I wanted to say to you. Now it is time for me to close this letter. It is 15 March 2022, dusk is falling and I am awaiting the return of my son Roman. My wife and daughter found refuge in Italy, but Roman remained to serve as interpreter for foreign journalists who continue their courageous work of investigation and testimony. Every morning when he leaves, I hug him good-bye, because I am not sure he will be back in the evening.

Not far from here passes one of the main access roads to Kyiv, along which Vladimir Putin's tanks will drive once his artillery has crushed us with its shells. They are marked with the mysterious letter 'Z' of the Latin alphabet, as if announcing some final solution or ultimate apocalypse. Let us together ward off this prophecy of radical evil hovering over our world.

In its form and content, this letter gives me the unique opportunity to exercise my right to look others in the eye and say 'you'. I talk to them in their beautiful native tongue, the language of humanity, of which we have not yet been deprived and where a word is answered by a word, not by a shot. When the power supply, the internet and all connection with the world are cut off, we are deprived of the basic option, the fundamental gesture of sending a letter. For some, these are mere images, topics for discussion; for us, this is life, our entire life. They want to turn us into a mass of humanity called 'them'. Nothing more. Sometimes with sympathy, at other times with hatred. But the besieged cities, the hostage-cities, deprived of light and the possibility of communication, must be addressed as 'you', and not described as 'them'. You, Mariupol. You, Chernihiv. You, Kharkiv. You, Kyiv. Numbers don't matter here; we, Kyivans, Ukrainians, human beings, have a chance to liberate ourselves as long as there is someone who'll address us as humans, who'll take your lines into their hands, who'll hear your voice and through it your country also. Perhaps that's why it is so important for me in the morning to leave the cellar where I have been spending all my nights since the beginning of the war and the bombardment; to step out of there and hand this letter to you; conveying the testimony of resistance that can paradoxically unite us here and now. The voice that breaks free between these lines, and your voice are so important for us to hear now.

Victory Day military parade in Moscow, 2018.
Reproduced from: Wikimedia Commons

RUSSIA MISUNDERSTOOD AND INCOMPREHENSIBLE

Kateřina Hloušková

There is a profound misunderstanding in Western countries' relations with Russia and in Russia's relationship with the West. Russians do not understand the West; the West does not understand Russia. This is because the West applies its own patterns of behaviour to the country and believes it can judge it according to its own positions on freedom, law, security and wealth, which it considers universal. This is a fundamental mistake that, from the very beginning, leads us astray and prevents us from seeing Russia as it truly is. Then it logically follows that we fail to understand why, while the West continues to rejoice over the disintegration of the Soviet Bloc seen as the destruction of an Empire of Evil, two-thirds of contemporary Russians express regret over it. We wonder how it is possible for 70 percent of Russians to assess Stalin as a positive figure of Russian history, and cannot believe our own eyes when we read that Muscovites are

seriously considering reinstalling the statue of Feliks Dzerzhinskiy, the bloody executioner, in front of the Russian secret service headquarters. We fail to understand why what we considered as definitely overcome – Cold War rhetoric, spies, agents, poisonings and plotlines that seemed lifted from the early Bond novels – are coming back. I am convinced that the answer lies in understanding the Russian thought, history and geography which have been forming this country for centuries. There are no shocking revelations here; indeed, we often forget many fundamental premises so it is worth reminding ourselves of them from time to time.

'Every great people believes, and must believe if it intends to live long, that in it alone resides the salvation of the world; that it lives in order to stand at the head of the nations, to affiliate and unite all of them, and to lead them in a concordant choir towards the final goal preordained for them,' wrote F. M. Dostoyevskiy, one of the main preachers of Russian messianism, in his *Diary of a Writer*. Precisely in this spirit, the great Russian rulers, Peter I and Catherine II, gradually encircled Moscow with enormous lands stretching from the Arctic southwards through the Baltics to Ukraine, then to the Carpathians, Crimea, Black Sea, Caucasus and Caspian Sea, behind the Urals, further and further east to the Sea of Okhotsk and then back north up to the Arctic Circle. Most Russians see these lands as their 'natural' borders, providing them with a feeling of security and implying power and strength. Whenever a piece falls out of this puzzle, they become nervous.

'The disintegration of the Russian empire can be compared only with the break-up of the Gondwana and Pangea supercontinents,' says a Russian geopolitics handbook, *Khrestomatiya po geopolitike i geokulture Rossii*. This perfectly illustrates the exceptional

importance the issue of the post-imperial or post-Soviet space and influence has in Russian thinking. It was also once aptly expressed by Václav Havel: 'Russia does not know where it begins and where it ends. Recalling its various historical borders and the territories where it was present in its Tsarist or Soviet incarnations, it believes them to be its own.' If we realise this irrefutable fact, it no longer comes as a surprise that what we see as the victory of justice, they see as reprehensible evil. Yes, these are the same Russians – or their descendants – who to this day commemorate the enormous and often entirely unnecessary loss of life during World War II, people who lost their relatives to the Gulags, were physically and mentally abused according to the despotism of their leaders, cowered fearfully, learned not to have opinions and to survive in conditions hard to imagine for most people in the developed world. But injustice and suffering does not mean as much for them as it does for us in the West. Personal sacrifices, discomfort and fear are amply compensated by their belief in being part of something truly extraordinary – a powerful empire predestined to do great things. Ordinary Russians will reconcile themselves to almost anything, but not to a weak Russia.

A GIANT WITH FEET OF CLAY

Encoded in the Russian desire for dominance and recognition is an indelible feeling of the nation's own insufficiency, weakness and vulnerability. Indeed, if you do not have much confidence in your own strength and abilities, you need others to believe in them all the more. Russia has an inkling of how vulnerable it is and how serious

its problems are; yet it makes an effort not to see it, and in order for this to work, it needs its neighbours not to remind Russia of the fact and accept its 'great game'.

Russia is the largest country in the world, occupying some 17 million square kilometres and extending over 11 time zones, yet fewer than 146 million people live there. The population density is eight per square kilometre, with the majority living in the European part of Russia, in the so-called central part and in large cities. Outside the central part, the majority of the population is not ethnically Russian and they do not feel a particular loyalty to Moscow. They see Russians as *de facto* former colonisers who are in retreat – and that should be taken literally. The religiously Orthodox, ethnic Russia is dying out, inexorably. The birth rate among ethnic Russians is catastrophically low, and the life expectancy is low too – a mere 65 years for men and 75 for women. The Far East and Siberia too are losing their existing populations, and the Chinese are making inroads, physically but most importantly economically. While young, educated Russians in particular are leaving for the West (according to a mid-2021 survey by the Levada Centre, up to half of young Russians would like to emigrate), Central Asian labour is pushing into Russia. With its greater natality, the Muslim proportion of the population is increasing steadily.

About 75 percent of Russia's territory is in Asia, but only 22 percent of its population live there. Though potentially rich in mineral resources, for many reasons many deposits are practically inaccessible. The summers are short, the winters long; the production and importing of foodstuffs, and the options for travel, are very limited. Only two railway lines go west to east, both close to the southern border; north-south connections are rare, often the same as centuries

ago (i.e., watercourses), and enormous territories are without any standard roads; the country lacks ports and links with global maritime trade. The biggest ports such as Vladivostok and Murmansk are frozen for several months a year. Since the disintegration of the USSR, Russia was merely Ukraine's tenant in Sevastopol, the port established under Catherine II; that was one of the reasons why Russia annexed it in 2014, along with the rest of Crimea. Yet despite this, the crucial gateways to the world's oceans – the Bosporus in the south and the Skagerrak in the north – are controlled by NATO, specifically, by Turkey, and Denmark and Norway respectively. Meanwhile, access to the Pacific is controlled by Japan and South Korea. In other words, Russia lacks the essential development potentials: human resources, communications and supply routes. In the west and south-west, its way is blocked by the EU and NATO, while the Chinese are gradually penetrating the West Siberian Plain; in the north and south Russia is held in check by natural conditions.

The economic situation is similarly bleak. It is no secret that Russia is strongly dependent on exporting its natural resources. The trends are alarming. While at the beginning of the millennium raw materials accounted for about 45 percent of the country's exports, ten years later the proportion had grown to nearly 66 percent and has further increased since. Today, up to four-fifths of Russian exports by value are natural resources – that is, commodities without any added value – while the share of high-tech products decreases steadily, from 11 percent at the turn of the millennium to less than five percent today. Mining, oil and energy companies play first fiddle in Russia and the country is substantially dependent on foreign capital.

With some exceptions in armaments, industry is not competitive. Small and medium sized enterprises, the backbone of a normal

market economy, contribute about 15 percent of Russia's GDP – in Western Europe the figure stands at around 40 percent. The explanation for this dismal situation is to be found in the orientation of the main political and economic actors, who are focused on the 'easy money' from exporting minerals, neglecting other sectors of the economy. Time, too, works to Russia's disadvantage. The developed world is turning away from fossil fuels; it is successfully seeking replacements in the form of renewable resources, and is improving energy performance. If Europe succeeds with its Green Deal, it will be a catastrophe for the Russian economy. Whatever the Russian political elite's views of the matter, this is not a foundation on which a great power can be built. Yet although we observe in Russia a phenomenon described by economists as the 'natural resource curse', which is more typical of developing countries, Russia has one ace up its sleeve: it is the only country under the 'resource curse' that has nuclear weapons.

Clearly, to successfully develop a country under these conditions is exceptionally difficult, if not impossible. That is why Russia has always been an autocracy, in which the economy was never separate from politics. Private property is contingent on and subject to the interests of political power, and cannot therefore become a pillar of independence. Russia has never had a true middle class; the rich elites either identify with those in power or are destroyed. Indeed, individual freedom is not highly valued. Rather, Russians tend to identify with a vision represented by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, for instance, and yearn for a unifying metaphysical idea with roots in messianism, the bearing of suffering and the subjection to higher aims – from this they also derive belief in their moral superiority over the atomised, materialist West. According to polls in recent years,

The first McDonald's in the USSR opened in Moscow in January 1990. People queued for hours to purchase a hamburger. Photo: Rare Historical Photos

only a third of respondents wanted democratisation, and even fewer approved of market reforms.

The words of one of the richest oligarchs, Oleg Deripaska, aptly express the subjugation of private property to central power and the ethos of sacrifice for higher goals. Deripaska let it be known that, should it be necessary, he would gladly provide his property for the benefit of the Russian state. He is well aware of how, and thanks to whom, wealth is acquired and maintained in Russia. Like the tsarist *dvoryanstvo*, or nobility, which in exchange for obedience and loyalty

exploited the land granted to them, the present-day oligarchs know how to behave. Even those 'just below the top' mean nothing and can be removed at any point. Russia was never held together by a rule of law with its underlying principle of fair's fair – but without it, all freedoms and rights are mere fictions.

The conditions described above have formed and continue to form a society that can only become wider but not deeper. Geopolitical ambitions can only be satisfied by territorial expansion, the spreading of an influence that has force as its principle and violence as its method. Linked with this is a deeply felt conviction that a space once brought under control may never be relinquished. Russia has never shed its characteristic imperialism and autocracy and probably never will. Its history is one of variously strong autocracy in which people lacking personal liberty and responsibility will not and perhaps cannot respect anything but a strong-arm policy. Even today's Russians request authoritarian leadership and protection, because when the grip of power is loosened, what follows is not freedom but anarchy, not an entire society growing richer but predatory individualism. This was made very clear in the 1990s, which for most Russians were such a terrible nightmare that they preferred to reconcile themselves with, or even welcomed, a return to the established ways.

If the principle of life is strength and aggression, inevitably everything around seems inimical and the very manifestation of any difference is assessed as an attack and a direct threat. One's own paradigm is projected on to the positions of others – it takes one to know one. That, however, is only part of the explanation for the Russian positions on the world around them. The fact that it is something of a tradition for Russian leaders to emphasise the need for constant defence against an external enemy, also allows them to divert attention

from domestic problems. This is a recipe tested through the centuries, one that they are unlikely to give up any time soon. When – often by its own doing – Russia or the Soviet Union found itself in isolation and felt under threat, it always reached for the 'besieged fortress' argument: the fortress must be defended at any cost and the perpetrators subsequently rightfully punished: the West is attacking, Russia defends itself. This was the typical Cold War rhetoric, which is now undoubtedly back, and with it a 'general secretary' – Putin.

PUTIN, BELOVED SAVIOUR

Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin certainly is no standard Western-style politician, as many wished to see him, but nor is he a deranged, lonely villain. Putin knows exactly what he is doing, or at least, for a long time, he knew what he was doing. He can perform, can curry favour. Most Russians (and not only them) truly believe in and stand behind him. His journey to the top was cynical and unscrupulous, but in the Russian context, his popularity is understandable and must not be underestimated. To understand this popularity, we need to look back in time.

In the late 1980s, when the collapsing USSR was headed by the 'young man' Gorbachev and Putin was in the KGB ranks in East Germany, the Soviets had already tired of looking out for bright tomorrows and succumbed to the spell of a Western lifestyle. They wanted change and Western affluence, but they certainly were not joyful about the arrival of the Russian form of 'democracy', and if some were, it did not last for long. All was in disarray, the former

superpower lost much of its territory and prestige, the state apparatus was not able to ensure even an elementary functioning of its institutions, the economy was in ruins, people lost their jobs, pensions went unpaid. On the street, it was the survival of the fittest; in business, those not squeamish about going far beyond the edge of the law struck paydirt. During the 1990s, a period full of arbitrariness, violence and incredible chaos, a few hundred pushy people became absurdly rich, and a few tens of millions were impoverished further. Under Yeltsin (1991–1999) common people in Russia fared much worse than under Brezhnev (1964–1982). While under Brezhnev they often gazed at empty shop shelves, under Yeltsin the shelves were full of things they couldn't afford, and it's much harder to reconcile oneself to that. So this is liberty? This is democracy? You can stuff it!

When it looked as if it couldn't get any worse, the Chechens made themselves felt. Chechnya is a tiny country which, like many other much larger Caucasian countries, wanted independence and to govern itself. Yeltsin, however, decided not to let it go. He thought there had been enough decline already; that he could easily cope with this minuscule opponent. All was to be resolved by a swift action that would demonstrate to the world how the Kremlin would deal with anyone with similar ideas in the future. It seemed pretty clear: Russians outnumbered Chechens 85 to one and they had the entire Soviet military arsenal at their disposal. However, Russian soldiers were demotivated and demoralised, Soviet military machinery was often operational only in theory, and the Chechens, by contrast, were fanatically determined. Thus the impossible came true – the Russians lost the First Chechen War (1994–1996). They cured the frustration created by failure by enormous brutality. When they repeatedly failed to conquer the capital, Groznyy, they decided to flatten it from

a distance, including the population. This in many respects atrocious war brought enormous international ignominy on Russia and humiliated it further. It was too much for Russians, until recently proud citizens of a superpower. They desperately wanted someone who would stop all of this, who would restore their lost dignity to them and remind them that they were a nation of victors over Napoleon and Hitler, the nation that first conquered space.

It was precisely at this point that Putin appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. Small, inconspicuous, initially even timid, Vladimir Vladimirovich started to perform miracles. First he arranged for the fortune of war to return to Russia. He exploited the incredibly complicated religious, national and social situation in the sorely tried Caucasus to his benefit; out of the traditionally feuding Chechens, he chose the Kadyrovtsy clan and, in exchange for the promise of future comfortable government, convinced them to side with Russia. Russia went on to win the so-called Second Chechen War, in its later stages called the war in the northern Caucasus (1999–2009). It was also victorious in the other conflicts it embarked on, with the world graciously looking on: in Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014) and Syria (2015–2017).

But Putin did not win Russian hearts solely with his successful military forays; he also arranged an 'economic miracle'. In the very first year when he became prime minister (1999, and subsequently president in 2000), the sustained decline of the Russian economy stopped, and the GDP embarked on a rocket trajectory, for eight years in a row. Though this was temporarily stopped by the 2008 economic crisis, growth later continued. During Putin's first term (2000–2004), Russian GDP nearly doubled. This was a fascinating leap (though admittedly from a very low baseline), but its foundations were shaky.

Russia opted for the easiest and quickest route – exports of mineral resources. It was enormously lucky to hit an exceptional period when the prices of these commodities (for global reasons and without Russian influence) increased unprecedently. At the time of Putin's rise to power, a barrel of oil traded for 17 dollars; ten years later, for 111 dollars; and even during the period of crisis it did not fall under 60 dollars. An economy so enormously dependent on mineral exports, admittedly, is typical of developing countries, and reliance on such trade was somewhat humiliating for a nation that had good quality universities and capable people. But who cared as long as living standards improved? Russians felt that their state was once again, and at last, being led by someone who knew how.

Putin also realised other Russian dreams – he sorted out the mafia, cracked down on omnipresent violence and turned chaos into a new order. He entered into a simple agreement with the powerful nabobs: I do not care about your deals, as long as you are sufficiently loyal, but I will come down hard on anyone seeking to exercise any political influence. Most of them agreed, and those who did not (Mikhail Khodorkovskiy and Boris Berezovskiy) served as examples to deter the others. Corruption has always been, and apparently always will be, ubiquitous in Russia, but if it is run by people loyal to the ruling regime, it is unpunishable. Most ordinary Russians probably know this, but either do not care, or understand it as a necessary price for relative peace and modest prosperity. But this is potentially a weak point, and that is why Putin has always tried to ensure that the public know as little as possible about corruption. That is why the journalist Anna Politkovskaya lost her life – in addition to the stupendous brutality of the Russian forces in Chechnya, she also described corruption in the government and security forces. This is why drugs were found at

the home of Ivan Golunov, a journalist who uncovered corruption in the Moscow city administration. This is why Sergey Magnitskiy died, a lawyer who publicly accused a group of high officials of embezzling state property. This is why Boris Nemtsov and Aleksandr Litvinenko died, and Aleksey Navalnyy was poisoned and jailed.

Elections became a farce; political opponents became targets. The regime visibly turned harsher, but most Russians as well as Western countries were not particularly bothered. The West did not respond; it had other priorities. Washington left Russia to Europe, and Europe saw in Russia a big market and most importantly the mineral riches. Western European countries interpreted the end of the Cold War as the extinguishing of the threat to them; should one nonetheless appear, well, then America and NATO to the rescue. When Putin realised that nobody was actually interested in Russia, that its former greatness would not come back, and that he simply could not compete with Western democracies on their own playing field, he at least made a pretence of greatness. He decided to convince people (originally and primarily his own domestic audience) that Russia under his leadership was again so strong that it had 'become a problem'. This is why Russian media were once again swarming with CIA agents, who against the will of the local populations instigated various pink, orange or tulip revolutions; why modern 'Ukrainian fascists' started to cleanse ethnic Russians in their country; why NATO provoked and threatened a Russian Federation desirous of peace. In the parallel universe of its own propaganda, Russia grew stronger proportionally to the power and aggression of its virtual enemies. And this was another of Putin's triumphs. Putin restored to Russians that which alongside the lost pride they missed the most – an enemy. A common enemy whom they could blame for all their frustrations: the West.

RUSSIA WILL GO AS FAR AS WE LET IT

The entire bizarre theatre of an encircled Russia, sabotage on the part of the fascists and the maidans orchestrated by them were also motivated by efforts to prevent a potential Russian 'colour' revolution. There was a fear that ordinary Russians might notice that things could change; that countries which started from the same or even a worse baseline, could achieve economic and other uplift, thus exposing the Russian regime to awkward comparisons. But a Moldavia held in check by the occupied Transnistria; a Georgia destabilised by South Ossetia and Abkhazia; and a Ukraine divested first of Crimea and then degraded by the proclamation of the *soi-disant* republics, can achieve only very limited growth. The fact that under various pretexts Russia maintains tensions and chaos in these areas is an insurance policy against them setting a 'bad' example to Russia.

We have allowed ourselves to be lulled into a false sense of security that Russia was Europe, that it was (a specific and quite problematic, but still) a democracy, that Russian leadership was pursuing the same things as Western states were. We fell prey to the deception that geopolitical perspectives were no longer important, and that historical antagonisms were overcome and replaced by collaboration and trade. We believed that, like all Western democracies, Russia would not risk any deterioration in the living standards of its population, that it would not jeopardise its economic interests, that mutually advantageous trade deals were a better guarantee of lasting peace than national armies and military pacts. But none of this was true and this self-deception might cost us dearly. Peace, stability, rising living standards, the enforceability of law, justice, solidarity, a strong

civil society – all of these are the domains and fundamental needs of Western democracies primarily based on a strong middle class. It is us, the middle class, who largely determine the policies of European democracies, and who is the maker and guarantor of our familiar environment. But what rules, stability and principles may hold in a country where the middle class is lacking? Finally we have to admit that Russia lacks that upon which we stand – it is missing a corrective, an internal opponent, it does not have to show consideration. Deterioration of living standards, growth of unemployment, environmental devastation, poor quality healthcare, inefficient education, poor law enforcement, corruption – these are major spectres for Western democracies, but everyday reality in Russia. Annexations of other countries' territories, militaries operating without any grounding in international law beyond one's own borders – unimaginable *faux pas* for the West, but a 'legitimate' way of promoting Russian interests. Please, let us finally open our eyes! Russia will go as far as we let it. Whoever it was ruled by, this country has repeatedly confirmed that it only understands force and fear. I do not see a single piece of evidence pointing to the contrary now. Russia simply is not a polished gentleman who naturally respects fair play. It is a giant with clay feet, a hulk to which we must not make concessions.

This is a shortened and edited version of two pieces first published in Czech in *Kontexty* 3/2021 and 2/2022.

Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia unveil a memorial to Prince Alexander Nevsky in the Pskov Region, Russia on 11 September 2021. Reproduced from: Profimedia.CZ

RUSSIA AS A SAVIOUR OF THE TRADITIONAL WORLD?

Andrzej Nowak

Why are there movements in the West that consider themselves conservative, yet look hopefully to a country controlled by a former KGB officer? Why are there those who see a morally wrecked country that has the highest abortion rate in Europe as a sanctuary of Christian values? Recent weeks provide us with a guide to uncovering the real essence of Putin's system, since the Kremlin leader can at any point reach for rhetoric from the opposite end of the spectrum, as he does now when he calls for a war against Polish anti-Semitism and xenophobia.

I believe that it is this contradiction, embodied in the most recent events, that reveals the essence of Russia's political system. I am not speaking now of Russia as a nation, as a historical community, but of the political regime that exists in Russia. Its essence is absolute cynicism. Not some ideology, but absolute cynicism. This regime is

able and willing to plead any ideologically consistent argument that will help it achieve its sole objective, which is absolute power. It is a power over others exercised in an imperial manner.

Those who believed in Vladimir Putin as a knight in the last crusade, the defender of the Cross, the saviour of conservatism, and in a broader sense a protector against the hegemony of political correctness, have to swallow the fact that at the same moment Putin may consciously and intentionally invoke the key taboos of political correctness – as in his campaign against Polish anti-Semitism and xenophobia – and pretend that he is doing so in the name of the entire progressive humanity. After all, the KGB and its successor, the FSB, have been investing in both right- and left-wing political parties in the West for decades. In doing this, Putin refers to a single scheme: what unites these movements is not communism or conservatism, but anti-Americanism. Have a look at Russia Today. A right-winger will find on that TV channel attacks against the LGBT cult, the foundation of political correctness. But above all, what he will find there is America, the number one enemy, for American imperialism is indeed the arch-enemy – this is something the entire world's left agrees on, from Chile to Paris, from the Sorbonne to Cambridge to Harvard.

I argue, therefore, that, confirmed by recent events, the essence of this regime is its practice of absolute cynicism, which is not unintentional and aimless. It has its aim and that is to serve power. This system has exhibited an incredible durability and renewability throughout the many centuries of Russia's political history. It has nothing in common with Christianity, as it is based on statolatry – the deification of the state. If you look at the two historical figures most celebrated by contemporary Russian propaganda, they are

Peter the Great on the one hand, who built the 'true miracle' of St Petersburg on the bones of tens of thousands of his serfs, and a strong Russian army, and J. V. Stalin on the other, not because he was a Marxist and a communist – that aspect is made entirely marginal – but because he created the most efficient instrument of power and rule over others, over the world. Nobody ever created anything better in Russia. Peter was as efficient as Stalin, but Stalin went further and made it more perfect. And the only thing that matters is that the state is at the centre of it all. An imperial power worthy of its name, in line with the meaning of the word *imperium* in Latin: the power to command. It is a Roman way of exercising power in the army. This word is not concerned with the sphere of politics but of the army.

It is worth asking whether this system, which is constant in Russian history and renews itself time and again, is an emanation of something deeper: the specific traits of some civilisation or national spirit? Yet here we find ourselves on the very risky ground of speculation. This question has fascinated many Polish authors in the past. One of them was Feliks Koneczny, a Polish philosopher of history, who divided the world's nations into civilisations that differed chiefly in the various arrangements they had in relations between the individual and the whole. He believed Russia's system of civilisation was an emanation of the Turanian civilisation, that is, a direct continuation of the Mongol and Tatar traditions of the Great Steppe, with the ruler standing above law and ethics, and an instrumental, syncretic approach to every religion. Here we might also mention Zygmunt Krasiński, one of the great poets of Polish Romanticism, who wrote a number of outstanding analyses of Russia and incidentally was the first to associate the country with the

then-nascent communism – some seventy years before the Bolshevik revolution broke out. Krasiński argued that the source of Russian specificity was closely linked with the Orthodox theological tradition, specifically a small difference in the Creed that caused the disunion of Christianity in the Middle Ages. Whereas the Latin Creed contains the word *filioque*, which sets the equality between Father and Son, Orthodoxy lacks this element. By contrast, it emphasises the subordination of Son to Father, that is, an inequality of the divine persons in the Holy Trinity. Let us leave the details to theologians, but in any case for Krasiński this unwillingness to confess equality, and hence also harmony, within the Holy Trinity, is symbolic of Russian thought. Here he also finds the source of the deification of power – power that is absolute, paternalistic and patrimonial, which is already a term of political science. Another outstanding thinker and expert on Russia, Marian Zdziechowski, disagreed with this, arguing that there are a number of humanist elements linked with Christ's mission in the Christian tradition, including the Russian initial tradition, linked with the baptism of the Rus; 'humanist' not in a Renaissance, but a Christian, sense. Of course, many beautiful pieces of evidence of this can be found in Russian culture, and I must admit that Zdziechowski's perspective is close to mine, yet it is also true that towards the end of his life Zdziechowski had to abandon hopes he had had in the early 20th century – that a development and victory of that element of 'good Christianity', if I can put it thus, was possible in the Russian Orthodox tradition. Zdziechowski emphasised that the evil in the Russian tradition was linked with the Byzantine political heritage. This is about the deification of the state and the subjection of religion to the state, but Orthodoxy was not always like this, not even in Russia. Zdziechowski hoped that these

Patriarch Kirill and Vladimir Putin at the patriarchal residence in Peredelkino outside Moscow, 8 September 2010. Reproduced from: Wikimedia Commons

Orthodox roots could emancipate themselves, cast off the Byzantine yoke. In the last years of his life, he experienced disappointment as he witnessed the totalitarian, Soviet Russia making the power of the state so absolute that it would have been unimaginable in the Tsarist times.

Krasiński, Koneczny and Zdziechowski, these three thinkers offer various answers to the question which you have posed as convenors of this conference. Is Russia a Christian country? In some sense, Russia has Christian roots. It was baptised, it yielded saints whose holiness is indubitable. And certainly there are Christians in Russia, there are Russians who are Christians. It would be deeply unjust if we were to deny this. Yet our practical experience of Russia as a polity is such that these saints and these Christians do not make decisions about its character. This character is consistent and coherent, and has the opposite effect. It is an anti-Christian country, because it subjects Christianity to the state. Even the Orthodox religion is merely a part of the machinery of the state. Patriarch Gundyayev, a former KGB colonel, and Tikhon Shevkunov, the main 'curator' of religion, are first of all state officials serving the cult of the state.

Can we link the hope for change in Russia with the fact that there are martyrs in this country too? They existed not only during the communist times but also in that regime that has established itself in Russia since 1991. Could Providence act through these people, even if they are now so weak, or are we to reconcile ourselves to Russia being condemned to eternal recurrence of the same scheme? Independently of how any would answer this question, I am ready to defend the argument that the current political system in Russia has nothing in common with Christianity. In its utmost cynicism and its willingness to lie to an extent difficult to imagine in other systems – where, after all, lies are also used, because the propaganda of any great state lies in various measures – it is a consistent and complete denial of Christian ideals. The system of the Soviet falsehood, further developed in contemporary Russia, is so maximalist, so blinding, that we must ask ourselves how it is possible at all for someone to subvert

reality in such a way as witnessed, for example, in Putin's most recent election campaign. This is only the latest in a series of proofs that we are dealing with an essentially and fundamentally anti-Christian regime, which can only be endorsed by those who understand the political right as a cult of power. This system can attract by one thing only – a power that boasts that it can do anything.

Lecture delivered at the conference 'Putin's Russia, Christianity's false hope', 21 January 2020

Vladimir Putin in 2018 immersing himself in the icy waters of Lake Seliger at Epiphany, a feast celebrated by Orthodox Christians on 19 January. Reproduced from: Wikimedia Commons

President Vladimir Putin, Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia lay flowers at a monument to mothers of the victors during a visit to the Orthodox Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces, consecrated to the Resurrection of Christ, on the Day of Memory and Grief near Kubinka, Moscow region, Russia. On 22 June 2020 Russia marked the 79th anniversary since Nazi Germany troops invaded the USSR during World War II. Reproduced from: Profimedia.CZ

VIRGIN MOTHER OF GOD, BANISH PUTIN!

The Russian Orthodox Church needs its own 'special operation' to demilitarise, desovietise and denazify

Josef Mlejnek Jr

The war in Ukraine has not only brought much misfortune and suffering – it has also thrown up many contrasts. 'Brothers and sisters, we have just prayed to the Virgin Mary. This week, the city that bears her name, Mariupol, has become a city of martyrs in the terrible war ravaging Ukraine. Before the barbarism of killing children and innocent and defenceless citizens, no strategic reasons hold: the only thing to be done is to cease the unacceptable armed aggression before cities are reduced to cemeteries,' said Pope Francis on 13 March 2022 in one of his responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.[1]

'You know, I remember these words from the Bible: "There is no greater love than when someone gives up his life for his friends",' was how Putin paraphrased the Gospel of John only a few days later in front of a packed Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow at a celebration of the eighth anniversary of the annexation of Crimea. He meant the Russian soldiers who had fallen during the 'special military operation' in Ukraine. 'They help each other, support each other and when needed they shield each other from bullets with their bodies like brothers. Such unity we have not had for a long time,' praised the Russian president.[2]

Understandably, Russia's aggression has been resonating strongly in churches throughout the world, and has been particularly eruptive on Ukraine's religious scene. And arguably, the long dispute within the Orthodox Church concerning Ukraine's autocephaly (independence) – more precisely, the historical and political essence of this dispute – is one of the main reasons for the Russian invasion.

AN ORTHODOX SCHISM

The city of Mariupol received its current name in the late 18th century, officially to honour Russian Tsarina Maria Feodorovna (originally Princess Sophie Dorothea of Württemberg), the wife of Tsar Paul I, but actually it was more likely named after the Greek settlement of Mariampol in Crimea, whose population was forcibly removed at the time into the present-day Mariupol. They took with them an icon of the Mother of God, now referred to as the Mariupol or Crimea Icon. The original disappeared during the Stalinist rage, and whether the

later copy kept in Mariupol will survive Putin's rampage is an unanswered question. Before the war, most of the churches in the largely Russian-speaking port city of half a million people belonged to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), abbreviated to UOC MP, a part of the Russian Orthodox Church. But that certainly did not mean these were gatherings chiefly of Russian nationalists, let alone of advocates of Ukraine's 'unification' with Russia. Indeed, the city population's doggedly heroic resistance to the aggressors provides the best testimony of their position.

Only a few churches in Mariupol came under the autocephalous (independent), and strongly nationally oriented, Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU). Throughout Ukraine, Russian aggression has been strongly counterproductive, as even that segment of the Ukrainian Orthodoxy that until then recognised the authority of Moscow has started to secede. With horrible clarity, the destruction of Mariupol has demonstrated the senselessness of the Russian action, motivated in part by the purported religious proximity of Russians and Ukrainians, allegedly justifying their unification under the Kremlin sceptre. About two-thirds of Ukrainians profess Orthodoxy, and about a tenth support the Greek Catholic Church, which though recognising the authority of the Pope, uses the Byzantine rite.[3]

According to the head of the autocephalous OCU, Metropolitan Epiphanius of Kyiv, every bomb, missile and bullet of the Russian aggressors definitively busts the myth of a 'Holy Rus' and a 'triune [Russian] nation'.[4] Here Epiphanius refers to an essentially imperial concept, developed from the 19th century onwards, according to which the Russian nation consists of Russians, Belarussians and Ukrainians, but it is the Russians of Moscow, or the Great Russians, who play the first fiddle in this ensemble, despite proclamations

of equality. Both Vladimir Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) rely on a modern version of this concept.

In early 2019, Epiphanius's OCU was granted autocephalous status (independence) by Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, which the ROC refused to recognise. Orthodoxy has a complicated structure; roughly speaking it is a confederation of autocephalous churches, and the formal leader, Patriarch Bartholomew I, certainly does not enjoy powers comparable to those of the Roman Catholic Pope. Bartholomew had to justify the recognition of OCU autocephaly by a certain historical and legal interpretation of Eastern European ecclesiastical realities in the 17th century. And beyond the Patriarchate of Constantinople, which is one of the autocephalous churches, the new Ukrainian Church was recognised before the war only by the Patriarchate of Alexandria and the Churches of Greece and Cyprus. The others of the fifteen or so autocephalous Orthodox Churches were still (before the Russian invasion) hesitating and waiting. The Serbian Orthodox Church, a close ally of Moscow, explicitly refused to recognise the OCU. The reason for saying 'fifteen or so' is that the autocephaly of some churches is disputed in Orthodoxy, and the exact number therefore cannot be determined.

On 21 February 2022 in a speech in which he showed willingness to recognise the independence of the separatist republics in eastern Ukraine, Vladimir Putin included the Ukrainian church schism – i.e., the split of the Ukrainian Orthodoxy into an independent church and a church subject to Moscow – and the alleged infringements by Ukrainian authorities of the rights of UOC MP believers and priests on his list of anti-Ukrainian rebukes.[5] Thus the schism was in fact one of the reasons for the war.

However, the UOC MP responded to the war in ways that largely went against Putin's intentions. In a session at St Panteleimon Women's Monastery near Kyiv on 27 May, its leadership officially expressed its disagreement with the position of Patriarch Kirill on the war in Ukraine and declared independence. Point 4 of the official UOC MP resolution says, 'The Council adopted appropriate amendments to the Statute with regards to the administration of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, all of which testify to the full independence and autonomy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.'[6] However, it is not entirely clear what exactly this proclamation means, because independence (autocephaly) is granted to a new independent church by the Mother Church (thus for the UOC MP this would have to be done by the Russian Orthodox Church, and this certainly did not take place) and the act should also be recognised by all the other autocephalous churches, including the Patriarchate of Constantinople. The proclamation avoids the term 'autocephaly'.

The UOC MP leadership was largely pushed to issue its Solomonic declaration of independence, worthy of 'The Clever Farmgirl', by practical circumstances: many parishes left for the OCU; some UOC MP priests and bishops continued to refuse to mention Kirill as the head of the church during services; and a Sword of Damocles in the form of the threat that the Ukrainian authorities would simply ban it as it had a direct link with the aggressor's headquarters. Yet especially after what the Russian military has been doing in the eastern and south-eastern – predominantly Russian-speaking – areas of Ukraine, where the UOC MP had the most support, it is difficult to imagine it will fully return to the bosom of Moscow.

The path to the full unification of Ukrainian Orthodoxy will be quite complicated, even thorny. The cited proclamation of the UOC

MP, which wants to persevere as a strong organisation, does call for dialogue with the OCU, but it is also strongly critical of it, for instance by saying, 'It is especially unfortunate that the recent actions of the Patriarch of Constantinople in Ukraine, which resulted in the formation of the "Orthodox Church of Ukraine", only deepened misunderstandings and led to physical confrontation.' That 'physical confrontation' seems to refer to the 'tug-of-war' between the two entities over church buildings (parishes).

A WAR OF MIDDLE EASTERN CHARACTERISTICS

Ukraine is crucial for the Russian Orthodox Church. Although the UOC MP, a relatively autonomous part of the ROC, saw a sharp decline in popularity in opinion polls after 2014, it still remained Ukraine's largest Church in terms of the number of church buildings, priests and monasteries. And contrary to popular belief, it also had a pro-Ukrainian patriotic wing, which did not join the new autocephalous church in 2019 for a combination of canonical, political, economic and personnel reasons. However, alongside it, there was also a pro-Russian wing, the camp of the proponents of the concepts of the 'Russian world' or 'Holy Rus' in its ideologised, nationalist and imperialist form, whose proponent was and is the ROC patriarch and Putin's staunch ally, Kirill.

Since 24 February 2022, Patriarch Kirill has continued to stick closely to the official line of the Russian state. As he said in a letter to the acting general secretary of the World Council of Churches,

The interior of the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces during its solemn consecration on 14 June 2020. Reproduced from: Russian Ministry of Defence, mil.ru

the conflict's 'initiators are not the peoples of Russia and Ukraine, who came from one Kievan baptismal font, are united by common faith, common saints and prayers, and share common historical fate'. Rather, the West is to blame, constantly pushing NATO and its structures towards Russia's borders and also attempting 'to "re-educate", to mentally remake Ukrainians and Russians living in Ukraine into enemies of Russia'.[7] In the passage quoted, Kirill succinctly captures

the very core of the ideological and historical identity of his church, and of Putin's contemporary Russian Federation. Both Russians and Ukrainians derive their origins from the Kyivan Rus, from its Christianisation in the 10th century, although, of course, each of the two nations interprets the historical story in its own way. The Ukrainians see the Kyivan Rus as the basis of their identity and distinctiveness, but the Russian Empire, including the present Russian Federation, considers itself the only rightful heir of the Kievan tradition in both its state and church dimensions. From this perspective, Ukrainians are only a somewhat different folkloric variation of the Russian nation, essentially without the right to their own fully sovereign statehood or full ecclesiastical identity.

In April 2009, at a meeting with Ukraine's prime minister Yuliya Tymoshenko during her visit to Moscow, Kirill, already then the ROC patriarch, declared: 'I am deeply convinced that the religious factor plays a very significant role when it comes to Russia and Ukraine. We are countries bound by a single tradition, a single history, a single Church. [...] For the Russian Orthodox Church, Kiev with its Hagia Sophia is our Constantinople; it is the spiritual centre and southern capital of Russian Orthodoxy.' Russia and Ukraine 'together constitute the pillars of the Orthodox Eastern Slavonic civilisation'.[8] In summer 2009, Kirill went on a journey to Ukraine, during which he said, 'Kiev is our common Jerusalem. The very first thing that came into my mind after I was appointed to the patriarchal seat was to visit the Holy Land of Kiev.'[9]

The original Jerusalem and the Israeli 'Holy Land' are the cause and the theatre of one of the main global conflicts today. Where Holy Land and Jerusalem are brandished, shooting usually soon follows – if it does not actually happen in parallel with the verbal fireworks. A holy war often flares up. It is no different in the case of Ukraine. The

claim to Kyiv is at the very core of the Russian neo-imperial ideology, intended to justify or legitimise the broader great power aspirations of the Russian state. 'Kyiv as Jerusalem' really does contain the potential for unleashing World War III.

THE SABBATH IN LUZHNIKI

On the eighth anniversary of the annexation of Crimea, there was a great celebration at Moscow's Luzhniki Stadium – a rally combined with a concert. It caused speculation as to the extent to which the audience, numbering in the tens of thousands, attended of their own free will or were coerced. Russian television interrupted the live broadcast of Putin's speech, allegedly because of the boos of some in the audience. It broadcast it in its entirety, with full applause, only from a recording. It was at Luzhniki that President Putin quoted the Gospel according to John.

Also heard at the Luzhniki Sabbath was, for instance, the pop-rock song 'Donbas is behind us', with the following chorus:

> Half the sky is flame
> Half the sky is smog
> Donbass is behind us
> And God is with us!
> Half the sky is flame
> Half the sky is smog
> Russia is with us
> And God is with us![10]

'Donbass is behind us' alludes to 'Nowhere to retreat – Moscow is behind us!', famous words from 1941. Penned in 2020, the duet by Natalya Kachura and Margarita Lisovina is reputedly rather popular – although at Luzhniki Viktoriya Dayneko had to substitute for Lisovina, who reportedly was expecting a child in Donetsk at the time. The song's popularity resulted in an official video,[11] shot in part on the site of the Memorial to Donbass Liberators in Donetsk (i.e., in the separatist Donetsk People's Republic). Although it is the liberators from German Nazis that are referred to, the video creates a direct link between the 1943 event and the new 'liberation' of the Donbass from alleged Ukrainian fascists in 2015, specifically of the city of Debaltseve. In February 2015, the Ukrainian military suffered a heavy defeat, when it was encircled in the 'Debaltseve Pocket' and had to retreat.

In particular the mentioned clip mirrors Putin's current historical and ideological interpretation of the 'denazification operation in Ukraine', which he directly connects with World War II (the Great Patriotic War), seen as a 'sacred war', an epoch-making struggle between Soviet (Russian) Good and German (now Western, fascist-Ukrainian) Evil. This was illustrated by the slogan on the stage in Luzhniki: 'For a world without Nazism'.

Vladimir Putin does not conceive of the war in Ukraine as a mere regional conflict, with Russia defending its local interests. This is truly a global conflict, a struggle between a pure, 'Holy Rus', an allegedly more spiritual and morally advanced Orthodox civilisation, and a spoilt, materialist and hedonistic West. Russia has long posed as a bastion of traditional values internationally and sought to appeal to many Western conservatives. Mariya Zakharova, the press secretary of Russia's foreign affairs ministry, said at the Luzhniki rally: 'We are

a country and a people that calls its sons and daughters boys and girls. We refuse to refer to humans in the neuter gender.'[12] Similarly, Patriarch Kirill characterised the Russian 'special operation' as a clash that has a metaphysical dimension to it, a global battle of values for the preservation of God's Order. Russia allegedly must protect the righteous Christians in the Donbass, subjected to genocide because, among other things, they refused to hold gay pride parades.[13] 'We are a country and a people who cherish and protect peace, and fight against evil, because darkness is the absence of light and true freedom is freedom from evil. We can't be scared because we live in love and faith. With God,' Zakharova also said at Luzhniki. The question, of course, is which god she had in mind.

A KHAKI-COLOURED FAITH

In 2020, near Kubinka close to Moscow, a bizarre, monumental building was erected in the Patriot Park, close to the Tank Museum and the Shooting Range – the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces.[14] Reaching a height of 95 metres, it ranks among the tallest Orthodox churches in Russia and the world. The architectural style has been described as 'Russian' or 'Russo-Byzantine', but is simply a mechanically applied style of old Russian churches. In 1990s Czechia, similar bad taste was described as 'businessman's baroque'.

Officially dedicated to the Resurrection of Christ, the three--billion-rouble investment has given birth to a peculiar mutant that uses Christianity essentially as a decorative shell. In reality, it is to venerate the official Russian military-nationalist-pseudo-religious

Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill view a model of the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces in 2018. Reproduced from: www.kremlin.ru

cult that could perhaps be branded Kirillism-Putinism. Incidentally, Sergei Shoigu, the defence minister, is alleged to have exerted a substantial influence over the design.[15]

What is primarily adorated here is the Great Patriotic War or more specifically its official depiction in propaganda. The cathedral was completed in 2020 – the 75th anniversary of the end of the war – and its belfry is therefore 75 metres tall. The architecture incorporates several instances of such numerical symbolism – for example, the diameter of the drum of the main dome is 19.45 meters, referencing the year the

war ended. The stairs leading to the cathedral and its floor are made of cast iron with the addition of half of a ton of melted-down guns and tanks, trophies from Nazi Germany. The shrine is surrounded by a large museum of war called the 'Path of Memory', which among other things houses peculiar relics: Hitler's uniform and cap.

One of the mosaics is dedicated to the participants of wars in which the Soviet Union and Russia have been involved since 1945. The caption starts with the 'civil war' in China and the war in Korea, continues with such items as the 'military conflicts' in Hungary (by which the year 1956 is meant) and Czechoslovakia (1968) and culminates with 'coercing Georgia to peace', the struggle with international terrorism in Syria and the re-annexation of Crimea. However, it also deliberately leaves space for the future. It is no coincidence that Roman Shlyakhtin, writing in *Kommersant* in November 2020, presciently described the building as 'the temple of the future war'.[16]

The solemn consecration was originally planned for 9 May 2020, but due to Covid-19 was postponed until June. Surprisingly enough, Vladimir Putin did not show up on 14 June, apparently fearing infection. He was to have his own mosaic in the cathedral, together with Sergei Shoigu and other luminaries, for the successful operation in Crimea. But ultimately the Church, allegedly acting on the order of the president himself, abandoned the design; as it did for the depiction of Stalin, who was to appear in a mosaic portraying the victory parade in Moscow in May 1945.

Irrespective of this – both mosaics are allegedly complete, but not yet on show – the words of Alexei Lidov, an art historian and expert on Byzantine iconography, hold true: 'the end result of all this is not an Orthodox church. It is a church which speaks not of God, but of

the triumph of sacralized power, and – since Stalin's authority was far from Christian – of power that does not in the least need to be Christian.' In his article for the website *Religion Unplugged*, Lidov, who works in several Russian scholarly and cultural institutions, compared the decorative style inside the building to socialist realism, to the décor of the Moscow metro stations built under Stalin's rule. 'People entering this church,' wrote Lidov, 'will not be praying to the suffering God, but to victorious power, a sort of "heavenly generalissimo". And from the perspective of social psychology it is interesting that many people are quite comfortable with this sort of understanding of Christianity, with the love of God soothingly transformed into the veneration of power.' Although the project of the cathedral has received a turbulent response, and even resistance among some in Russian society, it is according to Lidov a sign of the times, and clearly reflects the contemporary Russian religious consciousness, or the deepest spiritual crisis.[17]

In the end, Vladimir Putin only visited the cathedral on 22 June 2020, the 79th anniversary (i.e., not a major one) of Germany's attack on the Soviet Union, that is the anniversary of the beginning of the war in 1941 described in Russia as the Great Patriotic War. World War II actually started in September 1939 with the joint attack of Germany and the Soviet Union, allies at the time, on Poland (the Germans struck on 1 September, the Soviets on the 17th). The first two years of the war, therefore, do not show the Soviet Union in a very flattering light, which is why Russia even today maintains its own interpretation of historical events.

The term 'Great Patriotic War' harks back to the Patriotic War, that is the defeat of Napoleon's Russian campaign, which ended in December 1812 with the destruction of the French *Grande Armée*,

which began with more than half a million men (numbers as high as 675,000 have been cited) and ended with barely a few tens of thousands. Most succumbed to hunger, frost and typhus. In terms of national makeup, this was a truly European army, with just over a hundred thousand ethnic French serving. That is why, in Russia, Napoleon's campaign was sometimes described as the 'invasion of twelve languages'; in any case, it contributed to the birth of modern Russian nationalism, with its natural anti-Western slant. As an act of gratitude for averting the French invasion, the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour was eventually built in Moscow, to which the aforementioned armed forces cathedral is in a way connected. For its time, the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour was truly magnificent – it could accommodate seven to ten thousand believers, according to various sources. It comes as no surprise that it took nearly fifty years to build. Involved in decorating the interiors were the best Russian artists of the period, including Viktor Vasnetsov, Vasiliy Vereshchagin and Vasiliy Surikov. The construction was accompanied by disputes concerning its architectural merits, with its eclecticism, overall monstrosity and excessive decoration singled out for criticism. Part of the cathedral was conceived as a gallery (or a gallery and museum) commemorating the triumph over Napoleon. The cathedral therefore also served as a memorial – visitors could acquaint themselves with the names of participants (commanders) in the 1812 war, and see mementoes of the period. During the Russo-Japanese War and World War I the cathedral also served as a special information centre where people could learn the names of the fallen.

The Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, according to the historian Orlando Figes, 'half war museum and half church' and a 'monument to the divine mission of the Russian monarchy',[18] was consecrated in

The Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces in Kubinka close to Moscow. Reproduced from: Wikimedia Commons

May 1883, the day before the coronation of Tsar Alexander III. Beyond a place for religious services, it was also a site of national celebration.

Stalin had it blown up. The cathedral was meant to be replaced by a monstrous Palace of the Soviets, surpassing the tallest structure in the world at the time, the Empire State Building in New York City. The war buried these plans. Nikita Khrushchev embellished the empty site with the enormous circular Moskva Pool. After the fall of the Soviet Empire, a replica of the cathedral was constructed, thanks to significant support from President Boris Yeltsin and the mayor of Moscow, Yuriy Luzhkov. Although construction companies linked with the two politicians made tidy profits, whether the Russian soul, depressed by decades of communism, profited spiritually is another

question. We might well ask whether a sanctuary was built in Moscow that was actually dedicated to something else entirely than Jesus Christ, namely the Russian imperial mixture of nationalised religion, intense jingoism and militarism made sacred.

SACRED WAR TURNED INSIDE OUT

Started by Yeltsin, the reconstruction of masonry and ideas was carried on enthusiastically by Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Kirill. The Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces in Kubinka vividly reflects this development, as compared with the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour it has pushed the religious aspect further into the background, and foregrounded the military and belligerent aspects. Military green prevails and the towers resemble missiles. Inside, variations on ancient icons are interspersed with battle scenes, or the two are mixed; on the stained glass ceiling, visitors see not angels, but Red Army military orders from the Great Patriotic War. Yet perhaps no wonder; that war was officially described as sacred, certainly in the 1941 song 'The Sacred War', described by Winston Churchill as a 'secret musical weapon':

> Let noble wrath
> Boil over like a wave!
> This is the people's war,
> A sacred war!

A mosaic in the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces in Kubinka near Moscow dedicated to the participants of wars in which the Soviet Union and Russia have been involved since 1945, including the 'military conflict' in Czechoslovakia in 1968. The list ends with the 2014 annexation of Crimea, but space has been left for other operations. Reproduced from: Konstantin Buzin's Facebook page

Thus goes the chorus of this impassioned and devastating secular hymn, which continues to be in the repertory of the Red Army Choir and upon hearing which audiences in Russia often stand to attention.[19] When in 1941 Stalin began to feel the noose tightening around his neck, he very nearly crawled back to the cross. His regime no longer so furiously opposed the church services and processions that took place in the besieged Leningrad and elsewhere. In 1943, Stalin officially restored the Orthodox Church, which he had virtually exterminated – tens of thousands of priests fell victim to his terror. He understood the Church's moral and mobilising potential. But the Church paid a huge price for this in the form of total submission to the Communist authorities. Especially for senior dignitaries, cooperation with the KGB became the rule, and this remained true until the end of communism. The Soviet regime also involved the subjugated Church in the propaganda struggle for peace and sent Church officials to capitalist countries for one purpose or another, including one Vladimir Mikhaylovich Gundyayev, codenamed Mikhaylov, who eventually became patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church in 2009. Putin and Kirill are actually buddies from the same firm (now operating under the initials FSB), Putin representing the secular arm, Kirill the spiritual one. This is yet another in a long series of degradations of the noble Byzantine idea of symphony, or harmony of State and Church.

The legacy of the Great Patriotic War is understandably still strong in the Russian collective consciousness today. It has a natural basis, and the heroism and suffering of ordinary people during the war years certainly cannot be denied. However, from the outset it has also been fed by propaganda, and the propaganda construct of the Great Patriotic War made sacred constituted a fundamental

pillar serving to legitimise the Soviet regime after 1945, a pillar that was more load-bearing than class struggle.

Putin's regime has drawn on these tendencies, resuscitating them and breathing new life into them, but it is more like the life of a viral infection of some kind. And he exploits them fully with respect to Ukraine too, with Russian propaganda since 2014 portraying the fighting in the Donbass as an analogue to the struggle with fascists, now no longer German but Ukrainian, supported by the immoral, spoilt West. The alleged special operation in Ukraine has now received the same ideological camouflage that looks insane from a distance, but in the long-term Russian propaganda context appears entirely logical and rational, with a good chance of a positive response from a substantial segment of the population.

Yet nevertheless, it is purely a propaganda construct. Actually, it is the Russian army units that have behaved like fascist hordes in Ukraine. And especially if the war drags on for a long time, truth will out in Russia. Now the Ukrainians are putting up a heroic resistance. They are waging a 'holy war', a Great Patriotic War of their own, which will hopefully finally liberate them from the shackles of the Russian empire. It is in fact Russia that should undergo denazification, even an exorcism, which will eradicate the cult of war and imperial nationalism from Russian churches and souls.

Indeed, back in 2012, the Pussy Riot girls started on this with the 'punk prayer' in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, which began with the words: 'Virgin Mother of God, Banish Putin! Banish Putin, Banish Putin!'[20]

1 Papež k Ukrajině: 'Jménem Božím vás žádám, zastavte tento masakr!' *Vaticannews.va*, 13 March 2022 [accessed 9 August 2022]. Available from https://www.vaticannews.va/cs/papez/news/2022-03/papez-jmenem-bozim-vas-zadam-zastavte-tento-masakr.html. English wording adopted from 'Mariupol became a city of martyrs of a fierce war ravaging Ukraine', *Golos Ukrainy*, 14 March 2022 [accessed 15 August 2022]. Available from http://www.golos.com.ua/article/357155. However, with some of his later positions and statements on the war in Ukraine, Pope Francis has created much embarrassment, to put it mildly. For instance, the supposed gesture of reconciliation during an Easter procession at Rome's Colosseum, with a Russian and a Ukrainian woman carrying the cross together, erased the moral difference between the aggressor and the victim, according to critics. The Pope was also criticised for attempting dialogue with, rather than condemning, Patriarch Kirill, one of the chief ideologues of Putin's current regime, as well as for quoting an unnamed head of state arguing that NATO too was to be blamed for the war erupting, as it needlessly 'barked at Russia's door'. However, the Vatican's relationship with the Orthodoxy, Russia and Ukraine is not the subject of this chapter.

2 O Kryme i spetsoperatsii na Ukraine. Glavnoye iz vystupleniya Putina v Luzhnikakh. *RIA Novosti*, 18 March 2022 [accessed 9 August 2022]. Available from: https://ria.ru/20220318/putin-1778888167.html. English transcriptions adapted respectively from 'Russian President Putin speaks at Crimea celebration event – BBC News', *YouTube.com*, 18 March 2022 [accessed 16 August 2022], available from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ss9A4qrzgrY&t=7s, and 'Putin spoke to a packed Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow to celebrate the eighth anniversary of the annexation of Crimea', *bne IntelliNews*, 20 March 2022 [accessed 16 August 2022], available from https://intellinews.com/putin-spoke-to-a-packed-luzhniki-stadium-in-moscow-to-celebrate-the-eighth-anniversary-of-the-annexation-of-crimea-238603/

3 For more detail see Osoblyvosti relihiynoho i tserkovno-relihiynoho samovyznachennya ukrayins'kykh hromadyan: Tendentsiyi 2010–2018. Razumkov Centre, 26 May 2018 [accessed 11 August 2022]. Available from: http://razumkov.org.ua/uploads/article/2018_Religiya.pdf

4 Kozhna rosiys'ka bomba ostatochno vbyvaye mify pro 'russkiy mir' – Epifaniy. Ukrinform, 6 March 2022 [accessed 9 August 2022]. Available from: https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-society/3421577-kozna-rosijska-bomba-ostatocno-vbivae-mifi-pro-russkij-mir-epifanij.html

5 Obrashcheniye Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii. President of Russia, 21 February 2022 [accessed 10 August 2022]. Available from: http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828

6 Resolutions of the Council of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of May 27, 2022. Website of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, 28 May 2022 [accessed 17 August 2022]. Available from: https://news.church.ua/2022/05/28/resolutions-council-ukrainian-orthodox-church-may-27-2022/?lang=en

7 Response by H. H. Patriarch Kirill of Moscow to Rev. Prof. Dr Ioan Sauca. *World Council of Churches*, 10 March 2022 [accessed 10 August 2022]. Available from: https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/response-by-hh-patriarch-kirill-of-moscow-to-rev-prof-dr-ioan-sauca-english-translation

8 Patriarkh Kirill i Yuliya Timoshenko boleye poluchasa besedovali 's glazu na glaz'. NEWSru.com, 29 April 2009 [accessed 9 August 2022]. Available from: http://newsru.com/religy/29apr2009/patr_timo_print.html

9 Quoted from Lydia S. Tonoyan & Daniel P. Payne: The Visit of Patriarch Kirill to Ukraine in 2009 and its Significance in Ukraine's Political and Religious Life. *Religion, State and Society,* 2010, Vol. 38, No. 3, p. 257.

10 'Donbass za nami'. Moskva. Luzhniki. YouTube, 18 March 2022 [accessed 9 August 2022]. Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7B73-gJKYvA

11 'Donbass za nami'. Ofitsial'nyy klip. YouTube, 15 May 2021 [accessed 9 August 2022]. Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMj5qD0sJ6Q

12 Vystupleniye Marii Zakharovoy v Luzhnikakh 18 marta 2022g. YouTube, 18 March 2022 [accessed 9 August 2022]. Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x5qVFeFLivM

13 Patriarshaya propoved' v Nedelyu syropustnuyu posle Liturgii v Khrame Khrista Spasitelya. ROC website, 6 March 2022 [accessed 10 August 2022]. Available from: http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5906442.html

14 The cathedral has its own website: https://ghvs.ru/

15 Aleksandr Kotlomanov: Glavnyy khram Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiyskoy Federatsii i novoye pravoslavnoye iskusstvo: problema stilya. *Gumanitarnyy nauchnyy vestnik*, 2020, No. 7, p. 206.

16 Roman Shlyakhtin: Khram budushchey voyny. *Kommersant*" , 19 November 2020 [accessed 9 August 2022]. Available from: https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4566204

17 Alexei Lidov: Inside The $100 Million Russian Church Meant To Honour Putin, Stalin And War. *Religion Unplugged*, 8 May 2020 [accessed 9 August 2022]. Available

from: https://religionunplugged.com/news/2020/5/8/100-million-russian-church-honoring-stalin-and-war-to-open-soon

18 Orlando Figes: *Natasha's Dance. A Cultural History of Russia.* New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002, p. 183.

19 'Svyashchennaya voyna', YouTube, Ansambl' imeni A.V. Aleksandrova / Red Army Choir, 14 July 2020 [accessed 11 August 2022]. Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IrIE0NsAZQI

20 Pussy Riot-Punk Prayer.mp4. *YouTube*, 10 March 2012 [accessed 11 August 2022]. Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALS92big4TY

Masked members of Pussy Riot feminist punk group perform during their 'flashmob'-style protest inside Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. The girls were marched out of the cathedral by guards. Moscow, 21 February 2012.
Reproduced from: Profimedia.CZ

RUSSIA'S CULTURAL EXODUS

Ivana Ryčlová

As Russia returns to the Soviet past, an era in which there was no room for culture unless it nodded to the regime, the intelligentsia are faced with an old, painful dilemma: to stay or to leave? Leave and obtain security and freedom of expression, or stay in solidarity with one's nation? This is one of the most topical issues in Russia today. Let us look at it in the light of the two decades of the anti-Putin opposition's futile struggle for freedom of speech and society.

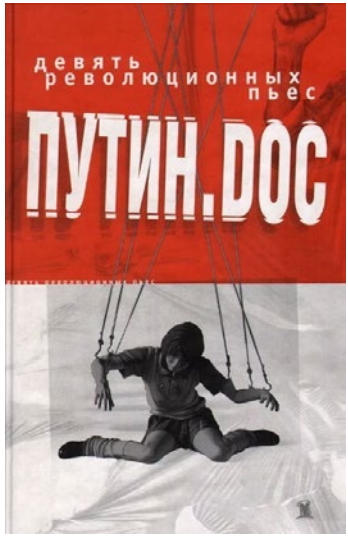
When Vladimir Putin was elected Russian president in May 2000, nobody could have guessed that the period of his rule would join the other dark eras of contemporary Russian history, including the Bolshevik Revolution, the Gulags and the Stalinist terror. The entire Western world believed that Russia would never again deviate from the course towards a democratic society embarked upon in the *perestroika*. Yet from the vantage point of today, it was only a brief

intermission for evil to take a breather and, personified in the figure of Vladimir Putin, continue in the general line established by Lenin and Stalin. Unleashed by Putin in February 2022, the war against Ukraine has exposed this fact in its naked truth. The ideological demagoguery and propaganda have been restored to their places. The list of the enemies of the Orwellian empire, in which war is called a special operation, is growing longer. Whether described as foreign agents, traitors or spies, names of people are published by the media every day. The social stratum which we habitually call the scientific and cultural intelligentsia forms a substantial part of the persecuted.

PUTIN.DOC

Already during his first term, President Putin was criticised for eliminating a free media market in his country and for his authoritarian manners. These and other maladies were pilloried by a group of young, non-conformist playwrights in a satirical volume *Putin.doc: Nine Revolutionary Plays* (2005). It was nearly four hundred pages of satire so scathing and vilifying that, seen with today's eyes, it is a wonder the volume was published at all. The introduction was by Pavel Rudnev. The very fact that Rudnev, an eminent figure in Russian theatre studies, sponsored the book in this way, turned it into a cultural event of exceptional importance. The blurb said, 'The plays collected in this book are so politically sharp that probably few theatres will decide to put them on stage. [...] In each play, you will see the authors' positions on the current government, on politicians and politics and on the difficult situation Russia finds itself in.'[1] It is generally true

that political satire accompanies society's dissatisfaction with how it is being ruled. The object of the critique here, President Putin, did not respond with any measures that would lead to positive change, and continued with his creeping return to the Soviet type of governance, accompanied by a renaissance of KGB practices.



The cover of the satirical volume *Putin.doc: Nine Revolutionary Plays*

One of the first signs that the Stalinist screws were being put on Russian society was the murder of *Novaya Gazeta* investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya in 2006. The liberal, scientific and cultural intelligentsia was much disconcerted by the act, which indicated that domestic developments were taking an undesirable turn. In Politkovskaya's *Russian Diary*, published in 2007, a year after her death, we read, 'I have been thinking a lot about why I rip into Putin so much, why I got so sick of him that I wrote a book about him. Indeed, I am not his political opponent or competitor; I am simply one of Russia's citizens. An ordinary 45-year old Muscovite who lived through the Soviet Union at its stage of advanced decay in the 1970s and 1980s. And I certainly do not want to live in that again...'[2]

The situation in the country started to be alarming after Dmitriy Medvedev came to the presidential office. It was evident that ex-president Putin continued to determine Russia's political course from his prime ministerial seat, and he did not attempt to conceal this fact.

In the middle of Medvedev's four-year term, in March 2010, a massive campaign, entitled *Putin must go*, emerged as a manifestation of society-wide defiance. Calling on Putin to leave the political stage, the campaign was launched by the 70-year-old Muscovite mathematician and political analyst, Andrey Piontkovskiy, who was also the main author of an open letter demanding Putin's resignation. Tens of thousands of people involved in Russian culture added their signatures. One of the first people who read the letter, and who made minor stylistic changes to it and signed it, was Viktor Shenderovich, a screenwriter, journalist, dramatist and television presenter, but most importantly a human-rights advocate and a major critic of Putin. The *Putin must go* letter said, among other things:

> It is obvious that Putin will never voluntarily relinquish power in Russia. His fierce determination to rule for life is no longer motivated solely by a thirst for power but also by fear of being held responsible for what he has done. For the Russian people it is humiliating and for the country it is fatally dangerous to have a ruler like Putin. This is a cross that Russia can bear no longer. As the Putin group feels on shaky ground it could at any moment move from repression against individuals to mass repression.[3]

Other figures who, alongside 153,000 Russian citizens, signed the letter were the former Soviet dissidents Valeriya Novodvorskaya, Vladimir Bukovskiy and Yelena Bonner (who in 1968 had protested in Red Square against the occupation of Czechoslovakia), the chess grandmaster Garry Kasparov and the liberal politician Boris Nemtsov, who was murdered in 2015.

VIRGIN MOTHER OF GOD, BANISH PUTIN!

The call for Putin to go went unheeded; rather, the following year his position was bolstered by the victory of the pro-Putin party, United Russia, in the State Duma elections. A massive wave of protest – the largest since the fall of the Soviet Union – spread throughout Russia in late 2011 in response to the rigged elections. The squares of Russian cities boiled with popular outrage. One of the most shocking manifestations of resistance against the unloved ruler who refused to give up power was the scandalous performance of three young women of the punk protest group Pussy Riot at Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. Clad in colourful balaclavas, they entered the largest Orthodox church in the world and attempted to perform their 'punk prayer', *Virgin Mother of God, banish Putin!* in front of the iconostasis. They managed to do so only partially as they were immediately apprehended by guards and marched outside. Beyond expressing the desire that Putin should relinquish rule over the country, the lyrics denigrated Russian Patriarch Kirill and other Orthodox Church leaders, who were accused of supporting the autocratic president. The fragment of the performance, which only lasted for a few minutes, resulted in the arrest of the Pussy Riot members, who faced a jail sentence of up to seven years for hooliganism. A hateful media campaign, supported by opinion polls in which people demanded the harshest possible punishment for Pussy Riot, suggested that the wheel of history had truly turned back to the Soviet years.

The Pussy Riot trial, which started on 30 July 2012, was one of the most closely observed events worldwide. The 're-elected' president Putin supported the verdict – a custodial two-year sentence for

The scene from *BerlusPutin* production by Varvara Faer, based on Dario Fo's play *L'Anomalo Bicefalo* (*The Two-Headed Anomaly*), performed at Teatr.doc. Moscow, 25 April 2012.
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all defendants. One of the Pussy Riot members, Yekaterina Samutsevich, was acquitted on appeal. The other two sentences – two years in a general-regime corrective colony for Mariya Alekhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova – were upheld. The human-rights organisation, Amnesty International, described both women as political prisoners. In the Pussy Riot trial, the Putin regime made it conspicuously clear that democracy was far off, and that its evolutionary strategy was to go back in time.

THE TWO-HEADED ANOMALY

Free artistic platforms were gradually silenced, entirely in the spirit of the Soviet era. For instance, the non-state Moscow theatre Teatr.doc had to cease its activities. It all started in February 2012 with the staging of *BerlusPutin*, an adaption of the *Two-Headed Anomaly*, a play by the Italian satirist and Nobel Prize for Literature laureate, Dario Fo. As performed by Teatr.doc, the two-headed anomaly was a monster – created by sewing together Berlusconi and Putin – that lived in the Putin household. The programme notes said: 'It is a play based on top-secret facts about Lyudmila and Vladimir Putin's relationship. You'll see a biting political satire in the spirit of Italian street theatre traditions.'[4] In 2013, the staging of *BerlusPutin* by Moscow's Teatr.doc was nominated for the Golden Mask award for the best piece of experimental theatre that year. It was unique in that the writer and director, Varvara Faer, varied the show throughout, adding new scenes that responded to current developments. The main idea of the buffoonery that made its audiences cry with laughter was that the head of state treated his wife in exactly the same way as he treated his country. Unfortunately, only 54 people could see the show each evening – that was the auditorium capacity at Teatr.doc. In other Russian regions, the staging of the adaptation of Fo's *Two-Headed Anomaly* was quietly forbidden.

Russia's return to Soviet times has already been discussed, so I may not need to comment on the fact that the theatre's dissolution was not prevented by an open letter by the British playwright Tom Stoppard. In his October 2014 piece addressed to the world's cultural community, Stoppard wrote: 'With sorrow one cannot help noting that the battle for freedom of expression which had been won in the past has to be

fought again by this tiny theatre. As the government's grip tightens on the mass media, Teatr.doc's uncompromising stand has marked it out for its enemies.'[5] The fate of Teatr.doc was finally sealed on 31 December 2014. During a screening in support of the Ukrainian director and former political prisoner of the Russian regime, Oleh Sentsov, the police barged into the auditorium, interrupted the film and seized the projection equipment. In January 2015, Teatr.doc, whose creed was to reveal and document the truth – hence the abbreviation doc in its name – ceased to exist. What was the official reason, you might wonder? Why was it shut down? Moscow's city hall would not extend the theatre's lease on its premises in an apartment-block cellar. This is exactly in line with the practices of the communist regime. Back then, the real reasons for dissolving theatres and cultural institutions that were seen by the authorities as too free were also concealed behind administrative excuses.

ARRESTS JUST LIKE UNDER STALIN

The arrest of the stage and film director Kirill Serebrennikov in August 2017 provided another sign that the regime would not treat free-thinking artists with kid gloves. It was done precisely in the Soviet way: at night in St Petersburg as the director was returning to his hotel from the shoot of his film *Leto*.[6] If you know the history of Soviet Russia, you'll notice that the scenario used to arrest Serebrennikov was all too redolent of the arrest of another director, Vsevolod Meyerhold, who fell victim to Stalinist terror in 1940: that, too, was at

night, in St Petersburg, when Meyerhold was returning to his hotel. The difference was that he was not coming back from a film shoot but from the All-Union Conference of Stage Directors. But let us leave the conspicuous historical parallel aside and look at what was in store for Serebrennikov. The next day, 23 August 2017, the court placed him under house arrest and forbade him from using the internet or his mobile phone. Russian and international artistic circles were shocked by this.

Admittedly, Serebrennikov had been needling the ruling set in Russia for a long time: in 2011, he opposed Putin's return to the presidential office; from 2013 he advocated that sexual minorities ought not to be denied the right to exist; and in 2014 he opposed Russia's annexation of Crimea. Serebrennikov's arrest, the search of his house that preceded it in May 2017, the police raid on his theatre, Moscow's Gogol Centre – all of this was seen as a strong signal that the ultra-conservative circles and the Orthodox Church claimed control over the cultural life of the nation. The pretext for depriving the director of his liberty was that he embezzled a 200-million-rouble state subsidy intended to popularise modern art.[7]

Russian opposition linked the Serebrennikov case with the upcoming presidential election, scheduled for March 2018. In a comprehensive response to the event for the Dozhd television channel, the opposition leader and presidential candidate Aleksey Navalnyy said: 'The main reason for Serebrennikov's high-profile arrest was to ensure that other national artists would not pose problems and would quickly endorse Putin.'[8] Speaking from his own experience, Navalnyy believed that Serebrennikov was arrested on trumped-up charges. He also pointed out the sad truth: most artists and sportspeople actively helped to reinforce the system that exerted pressure

on Serebrennikov. 'Being financially dependent on state funding and subsidies, they are loyal to the powers that be. We must appreciate all the artists who are able to overcome their fears, are courageous and do not conceal their opinions,' Navalnyy commented of the situation.

A SOFT SCENARIO WON OUT

At the time of Serebrennikov's arrest, Viktor Shenderovich, noted above in connection with the *Putin must go* manifesto, was sceptical: 'Kirill is a world-class director and this is a clear signal ahead of the election: if the repressive apparatus decides to get rid of you, not even worldly fame will protect you.'[9] Many famous actors, directors and writers spoke out in Serebrennikov's defence, including Boris Akunin, a popular author of historical crime fiction. He too noted the circumstances of Serebrennikov's arrest, redolent of the dark era of repression and persecution. 'The arrest of people of such calibre will create an international outrage, and hence needs approval from the top. [...] Let's call a spade a spade: Director Meyerhold was not arrested by the NKVD but by Stalin. Director Serebrennikov was not arrested by the Investigative Committee. He was arrested by Putin.'[10]

In April 2019, after a year and a half of solitary confinement at home, Serebrennikov was released from house arrest by a Moscow court, but ordered not to leave Russia. His defence counsel, Irina Poverinova, said to a BBC journalist that the court's decision meant there was 'no reversal in this case, only a small favour'.[11] If convicted,

the director could face up to 10 years in prison. Closely watched by the media in Russia and internationally, the dramatic trial had a very peculiar outcome. In June 2020, the Moscow City Court found the director Kirill Serebrennikov and two other defendants, Yuriy Itin and Aleksey Malobrodskiy, guilty of embezzling a multimillion state subsidy, but did not send them to jail, although the prosecution asked for custodial sentences ranging from four to six years for all defendants. Serebrennikov, a critic of corruption, bureaucracy and the head of state, walked away with a three-year suspended sentence. He pleaded not guilty and appealed against the verdict.

Serebrenikov's treatment elicited a wave of solidarity among Russian artists, and many colleagues abroad also condemned his prosecution. There is no doubt whatsoever that this was a political trial and testified to a return to the Stalinist Soviet Union. Serebrennikov was freed but apparently only because a 'soft scenario' had won out. Dmitriy Drize, *Kommersant*'s political commentator, after Serebrennikov walked away from the trial in June 2020, expressed the hope that 'soft sentences' were the beginning of social liberalisation for the cultural opposition. 'Serebrennikov is free – the tension is gone. There's a reason to breathe a sigh of relief. Thank God, they did not go to the extreme. Nothing remains but to wish that the events around Serebrennikov are the beginning of a new thaw – for things to ease off, and not just in culture.'[12] Unfortunately, Drize's wish did not come true. Let us complete this account of the Serebrennikov case by saying that after Russia unleashed its attack on Ukraine, the director left Russia and settled in Paris.

GOODBYE, RUSSIA!

Let us now move from theatre and drama to the field that is closest to me – literature. Observing the situation for wordsmiths in Russia now, we see that those whose international repute allows them to live elsewhere are not staying in Russia. For several months now, the most active anti-Putin writers have been commenting on developments in their country from abroad. They have a very justified reason to do so – their personal safety.

Among those who providently left Russia even before Putin's army invaded Ukraine in February 2022 is the poet, political commentator and world renowned literary scholar Dmitriy Bykov. Bykov has been a critic of the Russian leadership including President Putin for many years, and could be described as one of the fiercest. In 2012, together with the politicians Aleksey Navalnyy, Boris Nemtsov and Dmitriy Gudkov, he was elected in an electronic vote by citizens to the 45-strong Opposition Coordination Council. His intense opposition activities were the reason why, in April 2019 during a flight from Yekaterinburg to Ufa, the Russian secret service attempted to poison him. All the clues pointed to this. Showing signs of acute poisoning, Bykov was taken to hospital on landing. When he woke up from coma, the writer said that it might have been an attempt to poison him, but did not insist on this version. 'I do not think anything bad about my opponents,' he said.[13] When, a year later, an attempt was made to poison another opposition figure, Aleksey Navalnyy, in the same way – the symptoms of poisoning were identical for the two men – Bykov changed his opinion.

With his wife and new-born son, Bykov left Russia in autumn 2021 for a lecture tour in the US. When the 'special military operation'

Dmitriy Bykov. Photo: Radio Liberty, Roman Zhukov (RFE/RL)

was launched, he postponed his return home. In May 2022 in an interview for ct.news.ru, he assured his supporters that he would return to his homeland upon completing his lecture tour. 'I think there'll be radical changes in Russia in the second half of this year, so I am hopeful of coming home. I am not afraid to return [...] I'll return, have no doubts! I certainly do not intend to remain abroad forever, even if the life here is quieter.'[14] As of September 2022, however, it seems he may have changed his view.

Another key figure of cultural opposition is the already-mentioned human-rights advocate, dramatist and satirist Viktor Shenderovich. He left Russia in late 2021. This was at the time the authorities added him to a list of foreign agents and a court in St Petersburg ordered him to pay 1.1 million roubles in damages to Yevgeniy Prigozhin, an oligarch close to Putin, for calling him a criminal and

a murderer. Prigozhin's lawyers also asked for Shenderovich to be prosecuted for libel, which would permit his arrest. In January 2022, Shenderovich announced he decided not to return from Israel, where he had gone before the New Year (he has dual citizenship – Russian and Israeli).

In early March 2022, Viktor Shenderovich and other émigré cultural and political opposition figures founded the Russian Anti-War Committee. This launched a project, symbolically called *Ark*, which aimed to aid representatives of cultural opposition who found themselves in exile.

Berlin is traditionally a centre for Russian émigrés. In March 2022, the prose and screen writer and human-rights activist toughened by Soviet times, Lyudmila Ulitskaya, took refuge in the city. She had been a dissident since the 1970s, when she was sacked from the Academy of Sciences for lending her typewriter for copying *samizdat* literature. Ulitskaya is fearless and tough in her opposition to Putin's regime. For instance, as the vice-president of the Russian PEN Club, in April 2014 she opened the anti-war congress, *Ukraine-Russia: Dialogue*. Its closing document says, 'We are concerned that Russia is transforming into a closed, aggressive country, whose policy violates international law [...] The responsibility of intellectuals and cultural figures intensifies at critical historical moments. We are prepared to do everything we can to end the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.'[15] At the time, Ulitskaya expressed the hope that common sense would help the intelligentsia in the two countries to defeat nationalism.

Russian state media described Ulitskaya as a traitor to her own country for her opposition to the Russian-supported war in eastern Ukraine. 'Culture suffered a harsh defeat in Russia and people of culture are unable to change the suicidal policy of the state,'[16] she

wrote in an essay for the German weekly *Der Spiegel* in August 2014. Two years later, nationalists attacked the writer in Moscow. Twenty--five hooligans in paramilitary uniforms with Saint George's ribbons poured paint on the woman, then aged 73.

In spring 2022, Germany welcomed Lyudmila Ulitskaya with open arms. She has her readership there. In 2020, she was awarded the prestigious Siegfried Lenz Preis for her prose, of which more than two-and-a-half million copies have been sold in German translation. In an interview given at her Berlin apartment shortly after arriving, she said, 'I have to learn how to live anew, from scratch, and change my habits and stereotypes.'[17] She has not abandoned writing, however.

EPILOGUE

Putin's regime has forced a mass exodus of all who disagree with it. This is a re-run of a situation that Russia has experienced several times over the past hundred years. The best of the human potential which this country – so proud of its culture – has, is leaving. But that does not mean the end of Russian literature, cinema, music, theatre or other arts. Russian culture continues to exist, it is only moving abroad. And we have to wait until its bearers settle in. As the writer Dmitriy Bykov said in an online interview from his exile in the US, 'They start with a disadvantage but I believe they'll bring something new to the world'.[18]

1 *Putin.doc. Devyat' revolyutsionnykh p'yes*, 2005 [Accessed 26 September 2022]. Available from: https://garagemca.org/programs/library/catalogue/L33055

2 Kniga Anny Politkovskoy poluchila prestizhnuyu literaturnuyu premiyu, 25 November 2007 [Accessed 27 September 2022]. Available from: https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2007/11/29/30880-nemtsy-chitayut-russkiy-dnevnik

3 Putin dolzhen uyti, 2010 [Accessed 27 August 2022]. Available from: https://web.archive.org/web/20161108060802/http://www.putinavotstavku.org/

4 Political Monster 'Berlusputin' Menaces Moscow Theatergoers, 16 February 2012 [Accessed 26 September 2022]. Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNhVZc6KCbo

5 For the English wording of the letter, see Tom Stoppard podderzhal 'Teatr.doc', 25 October 2014 [Accessed 25 September 2022]. Available from: https://www.colta.ru/news/5142-tom-stoppard-podderzhal-teatr-doc

6 Taking place over one summer in 1980s Leningrad, the story of the movie is that of the legend of Russian rock, Viktor Tsoy. His 1986 song *Peremen* (Changes) became the informal anthem of Russian opposition.

7 The project serving to support modern art was called Platform. It was to be realised by a theatre group called the Seventh Studio, of which Serebennikov was founder and artistic director. In 2011, the Seventh Studio, which was based at Moscow's Gogol Centre, received a subsidy of 200 million roubles from the Ministry of Culture. According to investigators, Serebrennikov and his collaborators claimed fictitious costs and illegally enriched themselves. They denied the charges.

8 Telekanal Dozhd', 25 May 2017 [Accessed 30 August 2022]. Available from: https://tvrain.ru/teleshow/videooftheday/navalny_o_serebrennikove-435597/?utm_term=435597&utm_source=twi&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=instant&utm_content=tvrain-main#0_8__12419_985_0

9 Pobedil tak nazyvajemyj mjagkij scenarij, 26. 6. 2020 [online]. [Accessed 2 September 2022]. Available from: https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4396378

10 'Serebrennikova arestoval Putin' – Boris Akunin, 22 August 2017 [Accessed 1 November 2022]. Available from: https://fakty.ua/ru/243818-serebrennikova-arestoval-putin---boris-akunin

11 Režiséru Serebrennikovovi soud zrušil domácí vězení, 8 April 2019 [Accessed 1 September 2022]. Available from: https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/kirill-serebrennikov-moskva-soud-domaci-vezeni-reziser_1904081215_cha

12 'Pobedil tak nazyvayemyy myagkiy stsenariy', 26 June 2020 [Accessed 2 September 2022]. Available from: https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4396378

13 ‘Sledit’ za Bykovym nachali za god do otravleniya’, 9 June 2022 [Accessed 2 September 2022]. Available from: https://www.currenttime.tv/a/31299096.html
14 Dmitriy Bykov iz Ameriki, 19 May 2022 [Accessed 16 September 2022]. Available from: https://ctnews.ru/post/dmitriy-bykov-iz-ameriki-v-rossii-dva-vida-sporta-mechtat-uehat-i-boyatsya-vernutsya
15 Dokumenty, prinyatye po itogam kongressa ‘Rossiya-Ukraina: dialog’, 28 April 2014 [Accessed 17 September 2022]. Available from: https://philologist.livejournal.com/6097292.html
16 Lyudmila Ulitskaya: ‘Evropa, proshchay!’, 20 August 2014 [Accessed 17 September 2022]. Available from: https://www.svoboda.org/a/26541088.html
17 Lyudmila Ulitskaya: otnosheniya mezhdu russkim i ukrainskim narodami, 31 March 2022 [Accessed 17 September 2022]. Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XE1m-0y-Q7k
18 Vlast’ dukhovno mertvykh lyudey, 3 August 2022 [Accessed 17 September 2022]. Available from: https://www.svoboda.org/a/vlastj-duhovno-mertvyh-lyudey/31972499.html

Volodymyr Orlovskyy: Harvest, 1882 (detail). Ukrainian country, golden fields of grain and blue sky, colours of Ukrainian national flag.
Reproduced from: *National Art Museum of Ukraine*, catalogue, Kyiv 2003

WHERE DID UKRAINE COME FROM?

Andrzej Nowak

Where did Ukraine come from? The answer to this question is to be found in the period 1554–1658. The reason we ask is evident. We now see Ukraine in a new light. We do not doubt that the war its people are now waging is a struggle for their and our freedom, and hinging on the outcome of this war is not only whether there will be a Ukrainian or a Moscow government in Kyiv, but also what kind of government there will be in Warsaw, and who will control Europe. And that is the reason we should concern ourselves with Ukraine, pay it closer attention and think about where that historical commonwealth came from and what importance it had, that commonwealth that emerged out of us, and grew next to us.

WHY IS UKRAINE SO IMPORTANT FOR RUSSIA?

Before we look back at history, let us ask why Ukraine is so important for Vladimir Putin today. The methodical model of imperial conquest in the name of the greatness of the Moscow Empire and the internal enslavement of its subjects remains immutable. In the early 2020s, Russia can extend its existence as an empire only by gobbling up Ukraine. This is also the reason Vladimir Putin has overtly launched his fight for the empire. This is not madness on the part of a leader of the Kremlin cabal gone wild; the Russian president has realised the problem faced by the historical Russian Empire, in whose mission he seems genuinely to believe. With its population of about 140 million, Russia currently faces a fundamental defeat of its imperial project, because more than 20 percent of these 140 million are Muslims. In the east, Russia is neighbour to its current patron, China, to which it is currently in a position not too different from that the one Belarus now has vis-à-vis Russia. Lukashenko's place is analogous to Putin's, when we consider the latter's position with respect to the real 'tsar' who resides in Beijing. In order to strengthen its position vis-à-vis its superior Chinese patron and avert the threat of internal Islamisation, which is due to take place in the next 20 or 30 years, Russia needs its Slavic brethren, as it falsely describes Ukrainians and Belarussians. The 'Russkiy mir', or 'Russian world', is to serve to achieve this end. What Russia lacks most is people, not missiles and bombs.

This can be seen in the course of the war so far. Russia lacks the infantry to occupy and link further cities. It is simply short of people. This also explains a phenomenon that seems an incredible anachronism to us. According to estimates cited in Western media,

800,000 inhabitants of eastern Ukraine have already been captured and resettled in the immense spaces of Russia – even Sakhalin Island has been mentioned. It was not Stalin who devised this tactic, it is not a communist invention, even if it was applied in the Soviet Union with particular brutality. It dates to the period of Ivan the Terrible and later tsars and tsarinas including Catherine II. When Moscow invaded Lithuania in 1654 – the territories of present-day Lithuania and Belarus – it commandeered a quarter of the Belarusian population. Russians did not murder these 25 percent; they exported them, because they needed them. There is nothing absurd about such mass resettlements, they do not have to be explained by reference to the savage methods of an autocratic power; they are a conscious and intentional policy of resolving the problems of a power that needs people. This is about deracinating and resettling people, so that in 10 or 20 years, or perhaps only after three generations, they will repeat what the great Russian Romantic poet Lermontov, who hated the Russian Empire and wanted to de-Russify it – because even such Russians exist – wrote when he captured the meaning of the imperial policy: 'And the time will come when you will say: yes, I will be a slave, but a slave of the tsar of the whole world.'

It is this promising prospect that is to be fulfilled through further sacrifices. How many Poles who have been Russified for generations are there in Russia? Installed by Stalin, the commander of the Polish communist army, Rokossovskiy, did not appear in the country out of the blue. And after all, even the creators of Russian culture, composers such as Stravinsky and Shostakovich, were descendants of Poles who became Russians because of imperial policy. They too celebrated the tsar of the whole world. So that imperial tactic is not absurd; it has its sinister logic and criminal methods by which it is implemented.

The main object of its logic is now Ukraine. If the millions of terrorised Ukrainians, who truly do not love Russia and will not love it in the next few years, discover that the West failed to help them, and if their resistance is broken, in one, two or three generations they will reconcile themselves to their fate. True, they are fighting today; but their sons and grandsons will ultimately become good subjects to the tsar. But with an Ukraine with some 40 millions of its people making up the Ukrainian state and a historical commonwealth for many centuries, it will not be easy for Russia.

SELF-GOVERNING FREEDOM AND UNIVERSITIES

Why it is so? Why is Ukraine so important for Russia? And why don't the Russian tsars' designs on their 'brothers' work out? The most succinct answer to the question of where Ukraine came from might be as follows: Ukraine is a daughter of Rus, reared by the Polish--Lithuanian Commonwealth (Rzeczpospolita), who rebelled against her stepmother, Moscow, who deprived her of her name and wants to confiscate everything from her. This is precisely where Ukraine has come from. It is that Ukraine which, under this name, emerged in the 17th century. Previously, at the very beginning of the shared history of Belarusians, Ukrainians and, to some extent, Russians, there was the Rus, which is justifiably called the Kyivan Rus, as Kyiv was a throne city and a centre; not perhaps a second Rome, but a second Jerusalem, because after the christening of Volodymyr the Great in 988, Kyiv was considered the Christian capital of eastern Slavs. This

shared cradle of statehood of eastern Slavs disintegrated under the onslaught of the Mongols; but also due to internal disputes, and ultimately the heirs to the traditions of the Mongol empire distributed it among themselves. On the one side, a political system created by Moscow; on the other, Lithuania joined by Poland in a Commonwealth that opened the world of the Kyivan Rus to the influences of the Latin civilisation, which arrived through Poland – to the Lithuanian Rus (i.e. Ruthenia, today's Belarus and Ukraine), because nearly all of Belarus and Ukraine in the 14th and 15th centuries became part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Via Poland came Western civilisation, which modified and complemented the Ruthenian tradition, reshaping it anew. These influences have their symbols. If you visit Kyiv – and I hope that this will soon be possible again – you can encounter a monument that is definitely worth seeing. Close to the bank of the Dnipro River stands a Monument to Magdeburg Rights (town privileges). This is not a Polish discovery or invention. Allowing the burghers to exercise autonomy, the Magdeburg Rights were adopted by Poland in the 13th and 14th centuries from the West, from the German countries. In the 13th century, Kraków was among the cities re-established under this statute, and in the early 16th century, Kiyv was reformed in the same way. Kyivans commemorate this in a major celebration: they became Europeans in the good sense of the word, i.e. people for whom freedom and self-governance are of the foremost importance. In Minsk, they had a similar monument, but I do not know whether it is still standing. It appeared there in the 1990s, when Belarus sought to bolster its independence.

A second, even more important, symbol of that freedom has its fundamental justification in the Greco-Roman tradition, which came via universities and Jesuit colleges such as Vilnius University founded by Stephen Báthory – the first university in the Grand Duchy

of Lithuania. This is the justification of freedom as the most important value in political life. It is an inner, civic freedom, which is mirrored in the culture of contract. We do not have 'natural' lords above us; we merely agree among ourselves and enter into a contract. We choose our rulers, but it may be that, in a short time, we will govern the present rulers – this follows from elections. Cossacks came together in a council, at a meeting place, where everyone had the right to vote and when all together voted a hetman. They elected the man who would rule them, as long as the members of this community, the free Cossacks, wished it to be so. Gradually, a constantly improved system of self-governance was developed, which was increasingly inspired by the example of the Rzeczpospolita, for instance, in that a senate of sorts – a council made up of colonels – developed around the hetman. Each of the regiments elected its own colonel. The regiment was like a political 'self-governing unit', and this did not diminish internal discipline in this military organisation in any way.

The designation 'Ukraine' appeared alongside the free Cossacks phenomenon, which gradually formed in the second half of the 16th century. It first appeared in an official document in 1590 – the Sejm in Warsaw adopted a resolution to restore order to the Niżowcy army and Ukraine. The Niżowcy were Cossacks, named after lowlands behind the Dnipro, on the southern part of the river. This was the time when this region, the cradle of the Cossacks, was named Ukraine. The concept then described a territorially very limited area including the Kyiv and Bracław voivodeships; in no respect did it touch Podolia or Volhynia, and at the time it would not have occurred to anyone to associate it with Red Ruthenia where Lviv was located. These were discrete, historical lands, while the term Ukraine appeared precisely as a place name for an area where a free, independent community was emerging, which

Anonymous master: Cossack the bandura player.
Reproduced from: *National Art Museum of Ukraine*, catalogue, Kyiv 2003

scrupulously defended its liberties, but which could also be used to defend the frontiers of the Rzeczpospolita. The word 'frontier' is crucial here. A land, a region, an end, a frontier. It is a frontier both with Moscow and with the Ottoman Empire and its vassal, the Crimean khan. In its territory, the brave Cossacks developed their martial virtues. This was a school of proud independence of people aware that they deserved their freedom because they had a weapon in hand, and that their courage and organised form not only defended themselves but could also serve the Rzeczpospolita. The growing pride of the free Cossacks derived from their phenomenal fighting skills. The famous Cossacks expeditions (*chadzki*) to the southern shores of the Black Sea, not just to Constantinople but also to Sinope and other Turkish ports, occasionally caused diplomatic difficulties to the Rzeczpospolita. In the north, the Cossacks on their expeditions journeyed as far as the White Sea.

Alongside the Polish hussars, they were the main combat force in the Rzeczpospolita armies, fighting Russia and attacking Moscow in 1617. The main strike force, which in 1618 assaulted the walls of the Kremlin, was made up of Hetman Petro Konashevych-Sahaydachnyy's Cossacks. This great Cossack army of 30,000 fighters was of paramount importance in defending the Rzeczpospolita against the invasion of the army of Sultan Osman II at the Battle of Khotyn in 1621. In this battle, there were as many Cossacks as the remaining defenders – Poles and Lithuanians – put together. This was an exceptionally important moment of brotherhood-in-arms, saving the Rzeczpospolita.

YOU DO NOT MAKE TREATIES WITH THE TSAR

Where was the breaking point? How were the bonds between the nascent Ukraine and the Rzeczpospolita torn? From the beginning, the coexistence of the Cossack fighters and the aristocratic political nation of the Rzeczpospolita suffered from two points of friction. The first was the division into the 'elder' privileged and the younger subjected. Irrespective of what language they spoke and what their lineage was, the nobility of the Kingdom of Poland jealously guarded this difference and did not want to admit full equality between themselves and the mass of the Cossack fighters who sought it.

The second reason was religious. The Cossacks were not particularly pious. They were seen as people indifferent to God, as they earned their living essentially by killing in combat. The process of escalating religious strife began with the establishment of the Patriarchate in

Mykhailo Kryvenko: A Cossack going to war. A woman bids farewell to her husband who is leaving to defend Ukraine, a reality in many past centuries as well as today. Reproduced from: *National Art Museum of Ukraine*, catalogue, Kyiv 2003

Moscow in 1589, to serve – much as Kirill serves Putin today – the actual ruler of Russia at the time, Boris Godunov, as an instrument of expansion and for the subjugation of all Orthodox believers, including those in the Rzeczpospolita. The king of the Rzeczpospolita, Sigismund III, responded by proposing a Union, which was entered into seven years later in 1596 in Brest. The Union of Brest was to preserve Orthodoxy

in terms of rite and tradition, but place all Orthodox believers in the Rzeczpospolita under the authority of the Pope in Rome. Nearly all Orthodox bishops in the Rzeczpospolita recognised this Union. However, some of the Ruthenian Orthodox magnates, of which there were still plenty in the Rzeczpospolita at the time, were not satisfied with this solution. Furthermore, dissatisfaction with the Union, instigated by Moscow, gradually penetrated into the world of the Cossacks. Even such an important authority as the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra, a holy centre of Kyivan, Russian and Ukrainian Orthodoxy, appealed that Orthodoxy had to be protected from the Union. This meant that the political and social strife was enlarged with a religious dimension. The temptation to turn to Moscow appeared at the same time. After all, Moscow was the Orthodox third Rome, and had an Orthodox tsar.

This idea is linked with the most fatal decision taken by Bohdan Khmelnytsky, the leader of the largest of a series of the Cossacks uprisings that had been occuring since the late 16th century. After six years of mixed success in his disputes and struggles with the Rzeczpospolita, Khmelnytsky decided that he would resolve the whole matter to his advantage by submitting himself to Moscow. This happened in January 1654 in Pereyaslav. The tragic lesson for Ukraine started with the Pereyaslav Agreement. Here I would like to remind readers what this first clash between Ukraine raised by the Rzeczpospolita and the culture of the Moscow tsarist autocracy looked like. Khmelnytsky, who incidentally communicated with the tsar's messengers via interpreters (this needs emphasising, as some people claim today that Ukrainians and Russians spoke the same language), turned to the tsar asking him to receive the Cossacks under his patronage. He assumed, as did his colonels, who entrusted him with the negotiations, that the tsar's envoy, Vasiliy Buturlin, would affirm on oath the conditions for Ukrainian or

Cossack autonomy within the new tsarist empire. But here he received an answer that shocked him and his fellow colonels. Buturlin answered:

> In the Moscow state (gosudarstvo), the subjects swear that they will serve and advise the great sovereign (gosudar) and will sincerely wish him all good. And there never was and never will be swearing in the name of the tsar. You, hetman, are not in a position even to talk about this in any way, because every subject is obliged to trust his gosudar. And you, hetman, and the Zaporozhian army must consider what you have asked the tsar to do has been done, and trust the great gosudar as if he swore on the Gospel. And the great gosudar will nurture you in love and care and protect you from your enemies.

This was a shock for Khmelnytsky, because he assumed that everything would be as in the Rzeczpospolita, that he would negotiate a treaty with the tsar as he previously did with the king. But the tsar's envoy answered: 'There was, is, or will be no such thing with us, that the sovereign should enter into any agreement with his subjects. That is why you are his subjects.' This was the essence of the message that Ukraine heard when it decided for Moscow. But it was not Ukraine but Khmelnytsky who opted for Moscow, and this also needs emphasising. The greatest Ukrainian poet, Taras Shevchenko, whom we Poles may in some sense describe as a figure analogous to our Mickiewicz, and who truly does play such a role for the Ukrainians, wrote that had Khmelnytsky's mother known that her son would one day enter into a treaty with Moscow in Pereyaslav, she would have strangled him in his cradle. This is a response by Ukraine's loyal son to what followed from the Pereyaslav Agreement: Ukraine's complete, total servitude.

Mykola Ivasyuk: The entry of Bohdan Khmelnytsky in Kyiv.
Reproduced from: *National Art Museum of Ukraine*, catalogue, Kyiv 2003

It was not just Shevchenko who responded in this way some centuries later – some in Khmelnytsky's entourage were of the same view. Among them was Colonel Ivan Bohun, known from Henryk Sienkiewicz's *The Trilogy*. He is a historical figure, one of the most important Cossack commanders of the era, unfortunately for many years fighting against the Poles, consistently and effectively, with deadly consequences for us. But when he heard what Khmelnytsky also heard at the time, he said, 'I will not serve such a ruler.' He rebelled. Some other colonels responded in the same way and refused obedience to the tsar under such conditions. They had become used to freedom and wanted to defend it. In the enormous Kyiv, which had a population in the dozens of thousands at the time, some 460 people swore allegiance

to the tsar. Kyivans wanted no agreement with Moscow, let alone any form of servitude. Furthermore, and this is an important aspect that must be emphasised, as we often fail to realise it, the metropolitan of Kyiv at the time, and hence the head of the Kyiv Orthodoxy, Sylvester Kosiv, opposed subjection to Moscow. He was aware that the Moscow Orthodoxy was not true Orthodoxy, that it was entirely subordinate to a despotic power, contradicting the essence of Christianity. In indignation, he rejected the demand of the tsar's envoy, Vasiliy Buturlin, that he swear allegiance to the tsar. The Pereyaslav Agreement, from which it follows that Ukraine should be subjected to the tsar, has from the beginning resulted in uprisings. According to Moscow, it should remain in force forever, as it is advantageous to her. Indeed, Moscow continues to refer to it today, reminding Ukrainians that they themselves submitted themselves to Russians: Was it not your great Bohdan Khmelnytsky in Pereyaslav who swore allegiance to the tsar, and the annexation of Ukraine to Moscow? What they ignore in Moscow is precisely that aspect of rebelling against an act of servitude, which followed from the Pereyaslav Agreement.

THE LAST ATTEMPTS AT REVERSAL

Khmelnytsky reconciled himself to the loss of Cossack freedom conceived as independence of the state, because he understood that under Moscow's domination there would be no free Ukraine, but he could no longer back away – that's how far his hatred of the Polish nobility took him. In 1657, however, Khmelnytskyy died and Ivan Vyhovskyy, a dauntless Cossack educated like many others in a Jesuit

college, became his successor who was to take care of the Hetman throne until the adulthood of his son, George. Let us not forget that the Cossack elite were noblemen, people educated according to the same model, and in the same schools, as the Polish or Lithuanian nobility. At Jesuit colleges and sometimes also in the only Orthodox academy which existed at the time, the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. A graduate of these schools, Ivan Vyhovskyy understood that it was high time to correct the mistakes that had been made, and to return to the Rzeczpospolita. This is why, acting on advice from colonels and the representatives of the Cossack masses, in Hadiach he heard out the proposal of Polish envoys sent by John II Casimir Vasa, a proposal for the Polish crown, Lithuania and Ruthenia to enter into a new agreement, a free agreement of equals. I cite here the speech of the Polish envoy Stanisław Bieniewski, delivered to the Cossacks:

> The Poles and Muscovites have been fighting over Ukraine for almost a decade. The Poles refer to it as their fruit and limb, and the Muscovites describe a property of another as their own. Our land, drenched in blood, is perishing, the fields are desolate. Finally, by the grace of God, it came to pass that you, recognising your error, and we, forgiving your error, both bowed down in peace. And the good king and father longs for you to throw off the yoke of slavery and return to the ancient freedoms. May the churches flourish with their rites, the cities with their trade and the land with its peace. You have tasted the rule of Poland and Moscow; you have tasted freedom and enserfment. You said the Poles were bad, but now you will surely say the Muscovites are worse. What prompted the Ruthenian people to go to Moscow? Faith? But the Muscovite has a different faith. And he rapes and believes as the

> tsar commands. Holy Fathers appointed four patriarchs, but the tsar appointed a fifth under his sovereignty, which even the ecumenical councils were not allowed to do. You revere the clergy and the unbending jurisdiction of the church, but the tsar, a secular potentate, disposes of the clergy according to his will. He deposes metropolitans and installs new ones in their place. And how does he act in secular matters? You have known nothing of the kind under Polish rule. You must obey strict orders. You used to elect your elders; now the Muscovites want to impose their servants as your rulers. And those you like, they want to take their lives. The tsar takes all the profits for himself; he does not allow the poor Cossack to drink liquor, mead or beer. He commands you to wear Moscow fur coats and bast shoes. He wants to eradicate the ancient customs and perhaps does not even consider you human. He would like to cut out your tongues so you will not speak and gouge out your eyes so you will not wonder. He will keep you until he has beaten us Poles with your blood, but then he will push you to Siberia and populate Ukraine with his serfs. Save yourselves while there is still time. Make a deal with us; let us save the common homeland that is calling to you. I did not give birth to you for Moscow; for Poland I raised and nurtured you. Be my children, do not turn renegade.

The Cossacks assembled in Hadiach received his speech enthusiastically, the agreement was passed, and later the Sejm in Warsaw approved it too. This was in 1658. Unfortunately, too much blood was spilled, and as it was marvellously described by Henryk Sienkiewicz, ‘hatred poisoned fraternal blood’; but above all ambitions flared up and internal divisions increased, not among Poles but among Cossacks, among the elite of the nascent Ukrainian nation. Purposely provoked

Mykola Samokysh: The combat of Maksim Kryvonis and Prince Jeremi Wiśniowiecki.
Reproduced from: *National Art Museum of Ukraine*, catalogue, Kyiv 2003

by Moscow, this fissure had the most terrible consequences for Ukraine. The Cossack community was thus divided, with one wanting to be a hetman under Moscow and another wanting to remain true to the Hadiach Agreement and come as a hetman under Poland. Thus there was a division into two hetmanates, a western and an eastern one, the latter subjugated to Moscow. At the time, the Rzeczpospolita was exhausted from multiple wars, which were destroying it more than World War I and II together. And it was precisely this exhaustion that was the reason the Commonwealth was not able to carry through the outstanding vision of the Hadiach Agreement, and nor could the internally divided Cossacks support it with all their might. This is how the tragic division of Ukraine occurred. In 1667, Kyiv came under the rule of Moscow, formally on the basis of an agreement with the Rzeczpospolita, supposedly for only

a brief period of time, but after that Moscow impressed on its rule over Kyiv a permanent validity for long centuries. The Cossacks nonetheless did not forget the schooling by the Rzeczpospolita and their freedom. Five years after the Truce of Andrusovo (1667), separating the eastern part of Ukraine, which the destroyed and weakened Rzeczpospolita ceded to Moscow, Filip Orlik (Pylyp Orlyk) was born. He came from a religiously mixed family (his father a Catholic, his mother an Orthodox) with Bohemian roots. In time, he opted for Orthodoxy and became an important advocate and spokesman for the rights of the Ukrainian nation. He was the primary associate of Ivan Mazepa, the hetman of eastern Ukraine. Many people have heard of Mazepa; indeed, Byron and the German Romanticists wrote about him. European culture depicts him as a symbol of a rather wild, uncouth rebellion, but a rebellion nonetheless carried out in the name of freedom, against servitude, symbolised by Russia and Tsar Peter I. Born into the Polish nobility, both Mazepa and Orlyk were educated at Jesuit colleges and embodied the memory of the Rzeczpospolita among the Cossack leaders. Their struggle for the independence of Ukraine, waged against Peter I in an alliance with Charles XII of Sweden, ended, as is well known, in 1709 in defeat at the Battle of Poltava. The battle turned Peter, Moscow and Russia into an empire controlling the whole of Eastern Europe.

PYLYP ORLYK'S LEGACY

Mazepa died shortly afterwards and the banner of Ukraine's freedom was picked up by Hetman Pylyp Orlyk. In 1711 in Bendery, he issued *The Treaties and Resolutions of the Rights and Freedoms of the*

Zaporozhian Army, sometimes characterised as one of the first written European constitutions, although it does not meet many of the requirements placed on modern constitutions. Be that as it may, it was a document that organised Cossack freedoms entirely in the spirit of the Rzeczpospolita civic traditions. In a 1712 manifesto to Europe's rulers, Orlyk wrote:

> Cossacks are backed by a human and natural right, one of the main principles of which is that a people always has the right to protest against oppression and to demand the restoration of what has been taken from them unjustly and with the superiority of force. International law demands that aid be granted in the extreme cases when citizens are oppressed. This is justified and fair and in agreement with the obligation imposed by Christianity and even humanism: to intercede on behalf and urge the restoration of states that suffer from oppression simply because they placed their faith in an alliance.

These words were actually written in 1712, but they sound like someone wrote them today, in 2022. Let us remember that Ukrainians placed their faith in the Budapest Memorandum, under which in the early 1990s they gave up their nuclear weapons, chiefly under pressure from America, which aimed to have only one partner, that is, Russia instead of the Soviet Union. The United States, United Kingdom and Russia together coerced Ukraine into giving up its nuclear weapons in exchange for a guarantee of its territorial sovereignty and of the integrity of its borders, confirmed by the allies, the USA and UK. This was in 1994. We know that 20 years later, Crimea, Donbas and Luhansk were 'trimmed off' Ukraine. The guarantors, who had formally signed the Memorandum

and therefore had made a pledge, did not provide any aid to Ukraine at that time. They do provide aid today. There is therefore some moral, some positive lesson from this experience. The USA and UK would probably not be providing this aid if there were not a particular circumstance noted by Pylyp Orlyk in his 1712 manifesto. Orlyk appealed to Europe to 'limit the Moscow state, which might shortly home in on European freedom'. This is precisely the point; this is why the countries of Western Europe, of the Latin, Western world, must help Ukraine. Not only because of the moral obligations on which they previously defaulted, but in their own interest, with respect to the geopolitical reasons that follow from the fact that if Russian expansion is not stopped in Ukraine, the Russian empire will carry out its overall plan. And its overall plan does not stop in Ukraine, nor in Poland; it concerns the whole of Europe. The 'Russian world' must draw people from Ukraine and Belarus so that Russia might develop its imperial game in Eurasia and within its own state. Yet Putin needs Europe as a whole, as an economic reserve force that is needed if Russia in its relationship with China is to extricate itself from a position similar to that Lukashenko has with Russia today. There is nothing insane about this, it makes sense: this is a plan implemented by Russia deliberately and cold-bloodedly. Ukraine is an heir to a noble tradition of freedom – certainly, this freedom may be abused and it may be transformed into a riotous anarchy, as has been the case in Ukraine's history more than once. We are aware of that. But what I have in mind now is a freedom whose spirit accompanied by courage is so awesomely represented by Ukrainians now, a freedom to which we may be grateful for providing a turning point in history.

This is an edited version of a lecture delivered in Kraków on 23 April 2022.

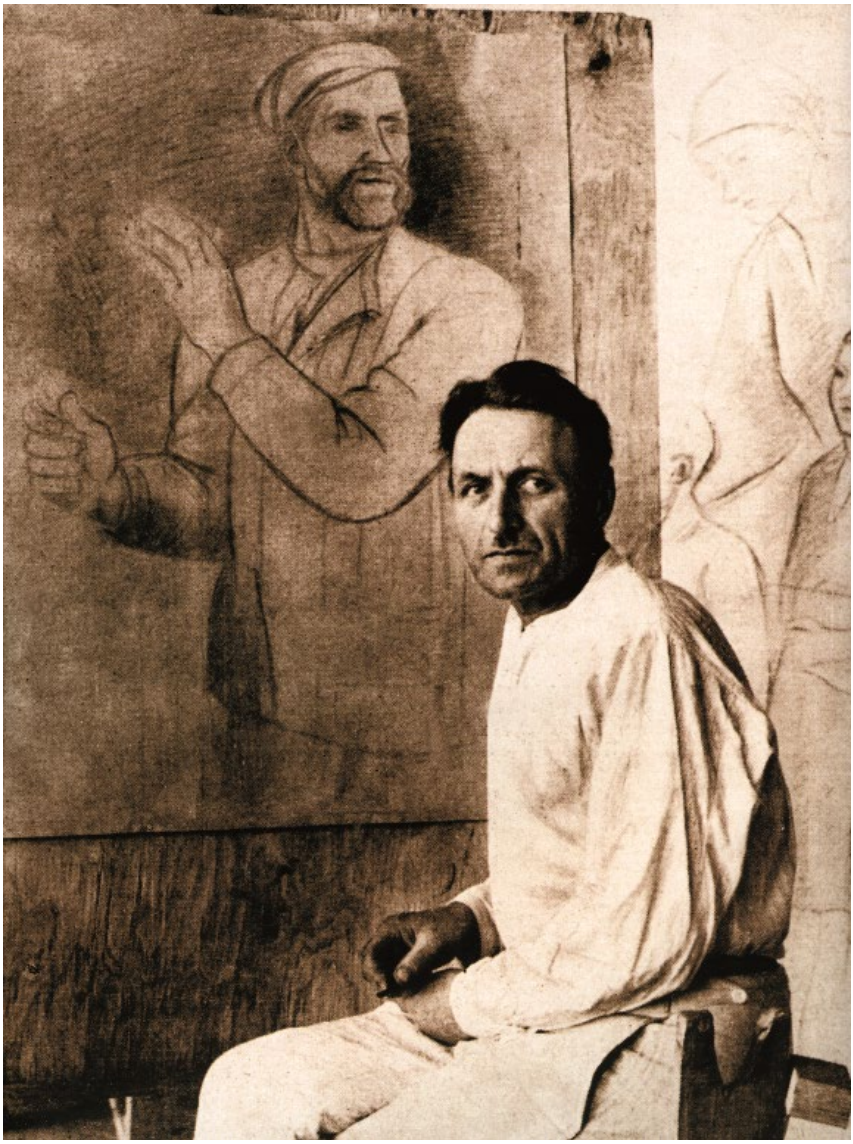


Figure 1. Mykhaylo Boychuk, 1928. Reproduced from: Vita Susak: *Mikhaylo Boychuk* (2010), Izdatelstvo Oranta: Moscow

INDIGENISATION POLICY, THE GREAT TERROR AND THE LIQUIDATION OF THE UKRAINIAN CULTURAL ELITE

The case of Mykhaylo Boychuk and his Kyiv School of monumental painting

František Mikš

A hundred years ago, on 30 December 1922, Ukraine finally lost its chaotic and bloody struggle for independence – which started after the collapse of tsarist Russia in 1917 – and became a part of the newly established Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). However, this was not the end of its struggle for emancipation, which continued in culture and education in particular. A crucial role was played in this by the policy of indigenisation (*korenizatsiya*), also called Ukrainisation, launched by Moscow in 1923. To avoid their government being seen as nationalistically and linguistically oppressive, as the

old tsarist regime had been, the Bolsheviks decided to give the Soviet nations a measure of cultural and national autonomy. Thus, Moscow sought to bring the growing process of national revival in the republics under control, to harness its energies for the construction of socialism, and to compensate its vassals to some extent for their loss of real political sovereignty. Last but not least, Moscow attempted to convince Western public opinion that these countries were developing harmoniously and freely.

In practice, indigenisation meant that ethnicity was taken into consideration more when building the party apparatus; there was an emphasis on the equality of languages; Ukrainian universities were founded and a network of education institutions of all grades established, including centres entrusted with eradicating illiteracy, which was staggeringly high compared to Russia and affecting more than three-quarters of the population (Figure 7). Cultural institutions, publishing houses, journals and newspapers in the Ukrainian language were founded; teaching national history was emphasised in curricula; and the flourishing of folk culture and Ukrainian national art was supported. The Soviet leadership promoted 'national content in Soviet form'. In combination with the New Economic Policy, proclaimed by Lenin in 1921, this partial relaxation of Russifying and centralising pressures played an important role in the Ukrainian cultural revival – some authors even write about a 'Ukrainian renaissance of the 20th century'.

In the late 1920s, once Stalin had consolidated his power, Moscow's policy changed considerably and there was renewed turning of the screws and centralisation. Many in the Ukrainian intelligentsia – teachers, writers and artists – fell victim to the subsequent brutal purge, conducted as part of a fabricated campaign against the

'nationalist deviation' in the 1930s.[1] In this study I focus on a less well-known school of monumental painters, also known as the Boychukists, active in Kyiv from the late 1910s until the 1930s, and their founder and leader, Mykhaylo Boychuk (1882–1937; Figure 1). The tragic fates of these artists demonstrate how difficult and hopeless was the Ukrainians' struggle for their own distinctive culture, and how Moscow purposely liquidated their cultural and intellectual elite.

Terms such as 'Russian avant-garde', 'Russian Futurism' and 'Russian Cubo-Futurism' are often used in art history, though they are highly misleading and have frequently been questioned.[2] The main reason is that these movements were not Russian but ethnically diverse, with Armenians, Georgians, Jews, Poles and especially Ukrainians involved alongside the Russians. Many of the Russian avant-garde painters were of Ukrainian origin, had lived and worked there for some time, and took their inspiration from, and in some form endorsed, the Ukrainian tradition. It will suffice to mention the brothers David and Vladimir Burliuk, Vasyl Yermilov, Alexandra Exter, Sonia Delaunay, Aristarkh Lentulov, Kazimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin to realise to what extent the Russian avant-garde can be described as a Ukrainian one. A similar statement could be made about Russian dance and theatre art, film and literature of the period.

The Boychukists are not often discussed in connection with the Russian avant-garde, because, unlike many of its representatives (Cubo-Futurists, Constructivists, Abstractionists and Suprematists), they did not seek radically to break the connection with the old art and create something fundamentally new. They found their inspiration largely in Byzantine and Old Slavonic ecclesiastical monumental paintings, icons, Ukrainian book engravings and folk art (Figures 2 and 3). They sought to create a modern and distinctive

Ukrainian nationalist style, and this proved fateful for them. In 1937, the leading figures of the school were designated 'Ukrainian nationalists' by the Bolsheviks, tried on fabricated charges and executed; many of their pupils ended up in the Gulags. Barbarically, all of their monumental murals were destroyed, and so were most of the other paintings. Their works are studied today only through old photographs, preparatory sketches and a few preserved paintings. As far as I know, there is no parallel case in history of a national painting school being so thoroughly wiped out (its members murdered or jailed) and its works despoiled.

MYKHAYLO BOYCHUK AND THE NEO-BYZANTINE SCHOOL

Mykhaylo Boychuk was born in 1882 in Romanivka in what is today the Ternopil region in western Ukraine, at that time part of Austria--Hungary. He drew as a child and his artistic path started to develop thanks to a visual arts teacher who noticed his talent. In 1898, he left for Lviv, where he studied painting with Julian Pankiewicz; after that, he briefly developed his drawing skills at a private arts school in Vienna. In 1899–1904, he studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków, where he witnessed the Polish cultural renaissance of the Young Poland movement, which inspired him to think about his own national culture and the future of Ukrainian arts. He kept in touch with the local Ukrainian community as well as Poles interested in Ukrainian culture, and participated in art exhibitions in Kraków and Lviv. Most likely during this time the idea matured in him that the

Figure 2. Mykhaylo Boychuk: Prophet Ilya, 1912–1913, wood panel, tempera, National Museum in Lviv. Reproduced from: Vita Susak*: Mikhaylo Boychuk* (2010)

Figure 3. Mykhaylo Boychuk: A Ukrainian Woman, early 1910s, National Museum in Lviv. Reproduced from: Wikimedia Commons

impulses and inspiration for the development of distinctive Ukrainian painting were to be found in Byzantine art.

In 1904–1905, Boychuk's brief studies in Munich were interrupted when he was drafted into the Austrian army. Like many other painters, in spring 1907 he travelled to Paris to develop his skills, and there joined the Académie Ranson, recently founded by some members of the post-impressionist group, Nabis. Thus he directly witnessed the birth of modern art, which influenced his future artistic and educational direction. Boychuk experimented and sought organically to merge the new painting style with traditional elements of Byzantine culture and Ukrainian folk art. In 1909, two of his paintings were chosen for the Salon d'Automne in Paris. Boychuk was involved in the local community of Ukrainian artists and gradually attracted a group of like-minded students who met at his studio. In addition to traditional themes, he sought to revive earlier techniques of painting as well as a mediaeval, collective way of working and artistic fraternity. Egg tempera rather than oil; collective rather than individual work; a return to, rather than a negation of, historical heritage – these were the main principles of his teaching in a nutshell.

In 1909, Boychuk established his own painting school, called the Neo-Byzantine School, or Revival of Byzantine Art (Figure 4). A year later their works were exhibited in their own hall at the spring Salon des Indépendants. Beyond Boychuk the show featured works by Mykola Kasperovych and Sofia Segno. Their original style was noted and praised by many leading critics, and reported by newspapers in Paris, Kraków, Lviv and St Petersburg; Guillaume Apollinaire was among those who wrote appreciatively about the works in his regular reports from the show. In the French metropolis, Boychuk became acquainted with the young Polish painter Sofia Nalepińska, who

Figure 4. The Neo-Byzantine School in Paris. Sitting in the front on the right is Mykhaylo Boychuk, Sofia Nalepińska behind, Sofia Segno next to her in the back on the right, Mykola Kasperovych standing on the left. Paris, 1910. Reproduced from: Yaroslav Kravchenko: *Shkola Mykhayla Boychuka. Trydtsyat' sim imen* (2010)

initially also studied at the Académie Ranson associated with the Nabis. Later Nalepińska became Boychuk's devoted pupil and wife.

Boychuk's school of revival of Byzantine art did not last for long; it ended with his departure from Paris in 1910. It did, however, herald his future artistic and educational activities in Ukraine. As he himself argued: 'We're a school of Byzantine revival, because our culture is influenced by the Byzantine culture [...] When we return home, we shall give another name to what we are doing.'[3] Upon his return to Lviv, Boychuk worked on restoring murals at the Holy Trinity Church in Lemesh in the Chernihiv region and led the restoration of the iconostasis at the Cathedral of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin in Kozelets. As previously in Paris, he assembled young, talented artists to create his own school, but his efforts were marred by the outbreak of World War I. When Lviv was occupied by the Russian army, Boychuk, an enemy alien (Austro-Hungarian citizen) was interned in the city of Uralsk in today's Kazakhstan and later in Arzamas, in the Nizhny Novgorod region. After the February 1917 revolution and the fall of the tsarist regime, Boychuk returned to

Ukraine and settled in Kyiv, where he was involved in restoring the frescoes at the Saint Sophia Cathedral.

In March 1917, shortly after the collapse of the tsarist regime, a Central Council of Ukraine (interim government) was founded in Kyiv and the country embarked on its complicated, bloody and futile journey towards independence. The Ukrainian intelligentsia pinned great hopes on a national and cultural revival; Ukrainian newspapers were published; Ukrainian schools and various cultural institutions were opened. The first head of the Central Council, the historian Mykhaylo Hrushevskyy, and the education minister, Ivan Steshenko, supported the foundation of the Ukrainian State Academy of Arts,[4] which was ceremonially opened in December 1917. Boychuk became one of the eight founding members of the faculty and led a fresco and mosaic studio. The path to the fulfilment of his dream of reviving Ukrainian art and creating his own monumental art school seemed open.

KYIV SCHOOL OF MONUMENTAL PAINTING

As mentioned above, unlike the modernists, Boychuk placed great emphasis on tradition. He paid special attention to composition and asked his students to carefully examine the legacies of the great works of the past, from Giotto and proto-Renaissance artists to Byzantine icons and murals, and take their inspiration from them. In Kyiv with his pupils, he studied the mosaics and frescoes at the Churches of Saint Sofia and Saint Michael, visited the collections

Figure 5. Sofia Nalepińska-Boychuk: Hunger, 1927, woodcut, 27 × 20 cm, National Art Museum of Ukraine. Reproduced from: *National Art Museum of Ukraine*, catalogue, Kyiv 2003

Figure 6. Sofia Nalepińska-Boychuk: Pacification of western Ukraine, 1930, woodcut, 25 × 23 cm, National Art Museum of Ukraine. Reproduced from: *National Art Museum of Ukraine*, catalogue, Kyiv 2003

in the local museums and explored the books and other materials in his extensive private library. Particular emphasis was placed on figurative drawing which, Boychuk believed, should be based on the experience of earlier generations. He asked his students to eschew extremes; to be inquisitive yet humble; to respect the mediaeval style of working; and to be able as individuals to blend into the collective. 'Don't worry about losing your individuality. Individuality will come to the fore once you mature into a master,' he exhorted his students. Boychuk claimed that team efforts, not individual caprices, led to true knowledge and success, and encouraged his students to learn crafts – rug making, ceramics, upholstery, majolica and engraving.[5]

Figure 7. Vasyl Sedlyar: In a school to eradicate illiteracy, 1929, tempera on paper, 31 × 48 cm, National Art Museum of Ukraine. Reproduced from: *National Art Museum of Ukraine*, catalogue, Kyiv 2003

Many talented artists who supported Boychuk's efforts to edify Ukrainian art at home and internationally joined his school. One of his earliest pupils, Oksana Pavlenko, later remembered that their enthusiasm was so great that when the city was shelled by heavy artillery during the civil war, they did not bat an eyelid and continued to draw and paint. An extensive book by the Ukrainian art historian, Yaroslav Kravchenko, *Shkola Mykhayla Boychuka*, offers portraits of 37 of Boychuk's principal collaborators and pupils.[6] Among the closest and most important was Mykola Kasperovych, already mentioned, who since the joint exhibition of the Byzantine revival group at the 1910 Paris Salon had been considered one of Boychuk's most talented pupils. Kasperovych taught at the Kyiv Academy from its foundation and in 1921

became a professor there. He was celebrated not just as an original painter – unfortunately, only fragments have been preserved of his oeuvre – but also as an experienced restorer, who laid down the foundations of scholarly restoration in Ukraine. In 1922, Boychuk's wife, Sofia Nalepińska-Boychuk, joined the Academy, leading the xylography workshop. She is mainly known for her expressive woodcuts depicting scenes from the tragic lives of Ukrainian peasantry (Figures 5 and 6).

Among the school's first students was Boychuk's brother Tymofiy, 14 years his junior, who was involved in the school's many restoration works as well as in making new frescoes. Certainly he was a very talented artist; but in 1922, aged only 26, he died of tuberculosis. Then there was Vasyl Sedlyar (Figure 7), a painter of monumental and other works, teacher, designer and ceramicist, who in 1923–1930 led the Technological Institute of Ceramics and Glass; and Ivan Padalka, also a co-artist of many monumental paintings, educator, designer and illustrator, who later, in 1925–1934, worked at the Kharkiv Art Institute. Further students included the already mentioned Oksana Pavlenko, Antonina Ivanova, Mykola Rokytskyy and Okhrim Kravchenko, on whom more below.

BOLSHEVIK REVOLUTION AND THE INDIGENISATION POLICY

Although icons and Byzantine art – and, later, socialist realism – are often talked about in connection with the Boychuk school, actually it was peasant themes and idealised scenes of rural life that prevailed in their works, with the aim of reviving and cultivating the Ukrainian

national tradition. Not coincidentally, then, the apple tree heavy with fruit and women in folk costumes collecting the harvest, sometimes with children, often featured in their paintings and indeed became symbolic of the school. We find similar themes not just in the works of Mykhaylo Boychuk and his brother Tymofiy (Figure 8), but also in those by Antonina Ivanova, Sergey Kolos, Okhrim Kravchenko, Ivan Padalka, Oksana Pavlenko, Mykola Rokytskyy and others.

Idealised Ukrainian folk motifs also appear in most of the large murals created by the Boychukists. These were political commissions and were expected to meet revolutionary objectives. In March 1919, for instance, they decorated the Kyiv Theatre of Opera and Ballet with enormous allegoric panels celebrating Ukrainian peasantry for the first congress of Ukraine's Regional Executive Committees. In spring of the same year, they won much recognition for 14 large allegorical murals with Ukrainian folk motifs in the Lutsk regimental army barracks in Kyiv (destroyed in 1922), which are documented in period photographs. This trend persevered even after Ukraine definitely lost its struggle for independence and in late 1922 became part of the USSR. In 1927–1928, for example, Boychuk and his students created a prized set of frescoes for the Peasants' Sanatorium in Khadzhibey Estuary near Odesa. As we see from the preserved photograph of the fresco *A peasant family* (Figure 9), created with Antonina Ivanova, they continued to feature peasant themes, an idealised Ukrainian countryside and the simple, uncomplicated world of labour, although especially in comparison with the school's earlier work (Figure 8) we discern a major shift and an obvious ideological commission.

Despite some relaxation of the Russifying and centralising pressures brought by the indigenisation policy, the situation of Boychuk and his school was by no means easy. They often had to fight for

Figure 8. Tymofiy Boychuk: At the apple tree, 1919–1920, tempera on cardboard, 54 × 40 cm, National Art Museum of Ukraine. Reproduced from: *National Art Museum of Ukraine*, catalogue, Kyiv 2003

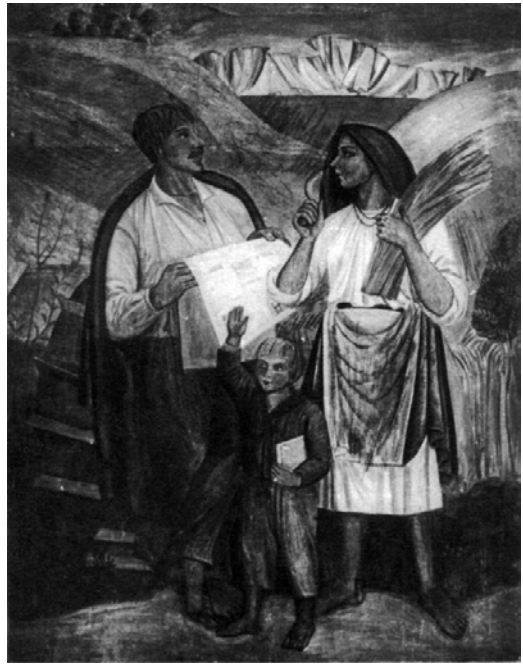


Figure 9. Mykhaylo Boychuk and Antonina Ivanova: A peasant family, fresco, 1927–1928, Peasants' Sanatorium in Khadzhibey Estuary near Odesa, period photograph. Reproduced from: Yaroslav Kravchenko: *Shkola Mykhayla Boychuka* (2010)

their approach to painting and make the necessary compromises. From the outset, they were accused of stylisation, decorativeness and, above all, archaism. 'You paint modern workers like saints on icons. There is a mismatch here. It would be the same for Ramses II to speak on the telephone or for a contemporary tailor to make a tuxedo for Jesus Christ,' Kazimir Malevich allegedly said to Boychuk.[7] To counter these criticisms, in 1925 Boychuk's supporters founded the Association of Revolutionary Art of Ukraine, where Vasyl Sedlyar and Ivan Vrona served as the main theorists. The association was involved in a pointed ideological dispute with the Association of Artists

of Revolutionary Russia, which promoted Soviet supranational heroic realism as the paradigm for painting and argued that it was the Peredvizhniki movement and Russian realist painting school, not Byzantine art and local folk art, that exerted the decisive influence on the development of Ukrainian art.

From November 1926 until May 1927, Boychuk, his wife Sofia, Ivan Padalka and Vasyl Sedlyar went on a working tour to Germany, France and Italy to discover the most recent trends in crafts and technology. In Germany, they visited the celebrated Bauhaus school in Dessau, in France the porcelain works in Sèvres, in Italy they studied majolica manufacture in Faenza, Urbino and Gubbio, and ceramics in Sicily. Their works were shown at international exhibitions in Amsterdam, Brussels, Florence and Venice. On the journey back they stopped in Vienna and Prague, where they delivered several lectures. Of course, their trip to the West earned them severe rebuke at home, and later it served as one of the reasons for their arrest.

GREAT REVERSAL AND THE GREAT TERROR

In the late 1920s, Moscow's policy changed quickly. The rise of Ukrainian national culture and decentralisation increasingly vexed the Bolsheviks, and though they themselves first initiated it, they now openly opposed it. In 1929, Stalin terminated the New Economic Policy, the Ukrainian countryside was violently collectivised and 'dekulakised', a process that climaxed in the Great Famine of 1932–1933. There was also increasing repression of Ukrainian intelligentsia and

the first fabricated trials were held, aiming, as the word went at the time, 'to bring the Ukrainian intelligentsia to its knees'. Understandably, Boychuk and his close collaborators did not evade criticism, which was two-fold: they were described as Ukrainian nationalists, as well as formalists who rejected the achievements of socialist realism. In 1929, the Soviet press launched a campaign uncovering the 'reactionary background' of the Boychuk School and its covert hostility to the Soviet Union – by restoring feudal art, they were allegedly supporting a return to feudalism in the country. The terms 'Boychukism' and 'Boychukist' became dangerous slurs.

To escape the growing campaign against him, in 1930 Boychuk moved to Leningrad, where he taught at the Institute of Proletarian Art. The next year, however, the Bolsheviks forced him to return to Ukraine and he knew the noose was tightening. In autumn 1933, Boychuk made a desperate attempt to save himself by issuing a public declaration of conformity that denied all that he had been striving for so far: 'Each of us, and I in particular, must clearly and decisively say on whose side we stand – on the side of socialist realism or the past. I am on the side of socialist realism and against what is called Boychukism.'[8]

Although fallen from grace, in 1933 Boychuk and his students received one last large commission – to decorate the Chervonozavodskyy Ukrainian Drama Theatre in Kharkiv, then the capital of Ukraine. These were to be the last monumental paintings of the school, now fully compliant with the new ideological and aesthetic stipulations set out by the Bolshevik power. Two large frescoes in the main foyer, *Celebration of harvest at an agricultural cooperative* by Boychuk (Figure 10) and *Industrialisation* by Vasyl Sedlyar, each 5.5 × 6 metres in size, depicted the achievements of the new workers' and peasants' state and scrupulously adhered to all the principles of

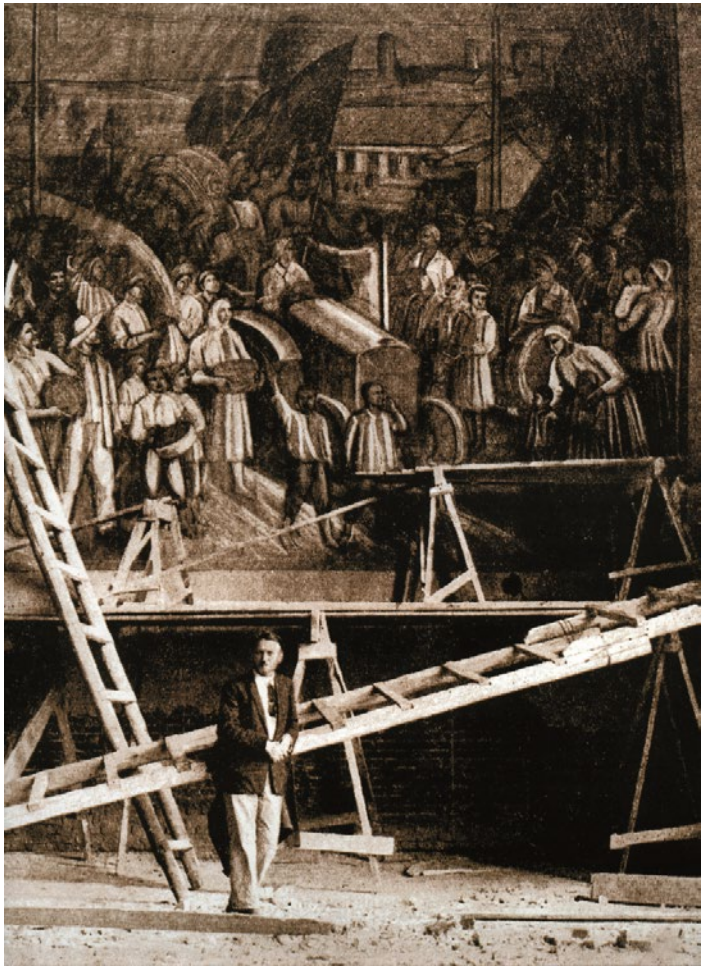


Figure 10. Mykhaylo Boychuk in front of the mural *Celebration of harvest at an agricultural cooperative* at the Chervonozavodskyy Ukrainian Drama Theatre, 1935. Reproduced from: Vita Susak: *Mikhaylo Boychuk* (2010)

socialist realism. They were completed in 1935, but this compromise was of no use to Boychuk and his pupils.

Ivan Padalka was the first of the Boychukists arrested by the NKVD in late September 1936, followed two months later by Vasyl Sedlyar, Mykhaylo Boychuk and his wife Sofia on the night of 25/26 November. The official reason was a charge of alleged espionage, based on

their creative journey to Germany, France and Italy in 1926/1927. In December 1936, after interrogations and torture, all accused confessed that they had been actively involved in a 'Ukrainian nationalist fascist counter-revolutionary group'. Mykhaylo Boychuk, Ivan Padalka and Vasyl Sedlyar were shot on 13 July 1937. Boychuk's wife Sofia met with the same fate five months later, on 11 December 1937. Some of Boychuk's students disappeared in the Gulags, others had to leave their homes and abandon their art, still others were able to flee abroad. All of the large murals by the Boychuk School, and most of their paintings, were destroyed. The pitiful little that has been preserved only emerged from museum storerooms and started to be exhibited in 1991.

EPILOGUE

One of Boychuk's talented students, who spent ten years in Bolshevik Gulags in Ural and Siberia, but survived and later continued to work, was Okhrim Kravchenko (1903–1985). Most of his early works were destroyed, but in his later paintings, for example the beautiful and poetic *Motherhood* (Figure 11), we feel the echoes of the Boychuk School and can form a notion of the direction this school would likely develop, had it not been forcibly liquidated. In 1972, Kravchenko painted the powerful *Famine in Ukraine. Sorrow* (Figure 12), in which he is coming to terms with the tragedy that affected his family, among many others. The contrast of the 'worlds' depicted on these two canvases could not be greater. *Famine* depicts the Virgin as a Ukrainian woman in a black dress tied with a white shawl with

Figure 11. Okhrim Kravchenko: Motherhood, 1959, tempera on canvas, private collection, Poland. Reproduced from: Yaroslav Kravchenko: *Shkola Mykhayla Boychuka* (2010)

Figure 12. Okhrim Kravchenko: Famine in Ukraine. Sorrow, 1972, Holodomor Museum, Kyiv. Reproduced from: Yaroslav Kravchenko: *Shkola Mykhayla Boychuka* (2010)

fine embroidery. In the background, we see the scenes of suffering of Ukrainian peasantry during the famine of 1932 and 1933 – dying, undernourished children, emaciated men and skeletal women with drooping breasts, the digging of graves and lowering of coffins. Until the end of communism, only a handful of people knew about the canvas: 'The picture was always in the corner of the studio, hidden from

foreign eyes. My father showed it only to friends and work associates,' remembers the artist's son, the art historian Yaroslav Kravchenko. Today the painting is housed at the Holodomor Museum in Kyiv.[9] Since February 2022, the scenes of death and suffering it depicts have once again become the reality in Ukraine.

1 For example, according to available data, nearly 200 subversives were uncovered in senior positions in the education sector alone; in literature, 89 writers were executed, 212 were forced to cease writing, 64 were banished to Siberia and 83 emigrated. Similar purges were pursued in all other areas of Ukrainian life, from industry to the army. See, e.g., Olexandr Bojko and Vladimír Goněc: *Nejnovější dějiny Ukrajiny* (1997): Jota, Brno, pp. 90–91.

2 Among those who dispute the term 'Russian avant-garde' are Tomáš Glanc and Jana Kleňhová in their *Lexikon ruských avantgard 20. století*, Libri, Prague, 2005. See Tomáš Glanc's introduction, section 'Co je ruské?' [What is Russian?], pp. 23–26.

3 Yaroslav Kravchenko: *Shkola Mykhayla Boychuka. Trydtsyat' sim imen*, Maysternya Knyhy: Oranta 2010, Preface, p. 17.

4 The Academy was later renamed the Kyiv Institute of Plastic Arts (1922–1923) and in 1924 the Kyiv State Arts Institute. Today it is the National Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture.

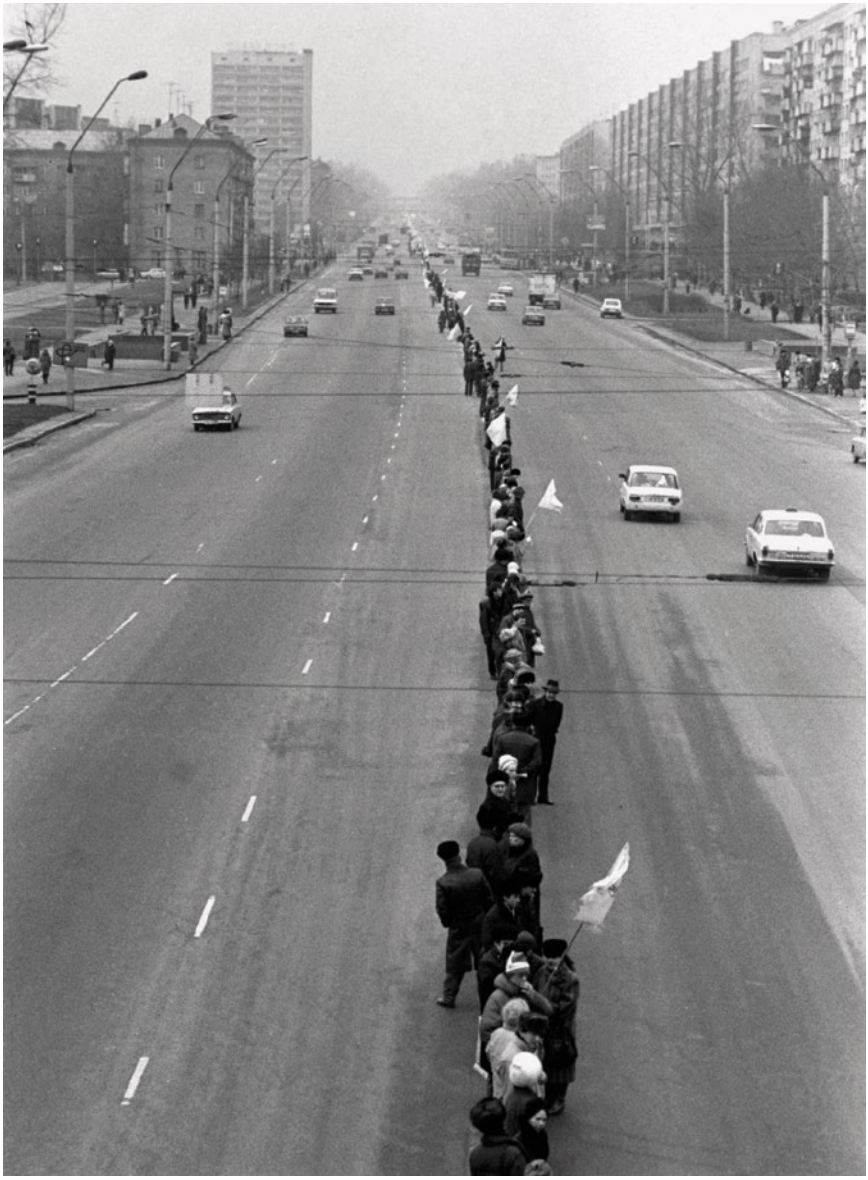
5 See, e.g., Liudmyla Kovalskaia: Mykhailo Boichuk and the Ukrainian Monumental Art, in *Ukrainian Modernism 1910–1930*, National Art Museum of Ukraine, Kyiv 2006, pp. 111–114.

6 Yaroslav Kravchenko: *Shkola Mykhayla Boychuka. Trydtsyat' sim imen* (2010).

7 https://uaview.ui.org.ua/artist/Boichuk-Mykhaylo

8 Yaroslav Kravchenko: *Shkola Mykhayla Boychuka. Trydtsyat' sim imen* (2010), Preface, p. 24.

9 See https://holodomormuseum.org.ua/en/tema-pro-holodomor/famine-in-ukraine-sorrow/



On 21 January 1990 to commemorate the declaration of Ukrainian independence in 1918 and 1919, more than 300,000 Ukrainians formed a human chain approximately 482 km long from the capital Kyiv to Lviv in western Ukraine. Reproduced from: Wikimedia Commons

THE PERPETUAL MOTION OF UKRAINIAN INDEPENDENCE

Josef Mlejnek Jr

On 24 August 2021, Ukraine celebrated the 30th anniversary of its independence. A fleet of Antonov aircraft flew over Kyiv, dominated by the majestic six-engine An-225 *Mriya*, the largest civilian cargo aircraft in the world. Although it was developed in the 1980s to serve the Soviet space programme by transporting its components including orbiters, it became a symbol of the independent Ukraine. The Antonov company used it globally to carry outsize freight, which filled its coffers. In Ukrainian, *mriya* means a dream. In February 2022, however, the Russian occupiers destroyed *Mriya* at its home airport in Hostomel near Kyiv. Since then, Ukraine has been fighting fiercely so that its dream of independence should not perish under the tracks of Russian tanks.

In a modern industrial society, state sovereignty understandably depends on machinery and technology, but of course not just

on these. Ukraine's machinery over the past three decades has been idiosyncratic and frequently improvised. It often bears the traces of its Soviet legacy, yet it also reflects the will to overcome it.

> The 'kravchuchka' has become a 'kuchmovoz':
> Our native land is advancing.
> Ignoring the frosts and the forecasts,
> It is holding on.

This is how Ivan Drach, a poet, screenwriter, dissident and politician, and a major figure in 20th-century Ukrainian culture, described the 1990s reality in Ukraine in a poem entitled 'Ukrainian perpetual motion or the engine of Ukrainian independence'.[1]

A kravchuchka is a solid two-wheel hand barrow, which lugs a big carrier bag, a sack or a box. So it is actually a granny trolley, but not the kind used for ordinary shopping, as that would be too fragile. It could not survive the Ukrainian reality. Easily foldable and transportable, a kravchuchka can, and indeed must, carry up to 100 kilograms.

Following the collapse of the Soviet economy, many in the former empire had no choice than to try to earn their living formally by small-scale trade, locally as market smallholders, or go bigger and carry various, usually consumer, goods from Europe, Turkey or even China. The borders remained, but they were no longer impenetrable walls covered in barbed wire. And the boundary between legal trade and smuggling was murky and opaque. These traders – both men and women – were dubbed 'shuttles', because they were redolent of the shuttle constantly going back and forth in the weaver's loom, from one edge of the cloth to the other. They had to carry their goods on their own, or cram them on some sort of public transport vehicle.

Two livelihoods
on two kravchuchkas?
Photo: Unian

Often they journeyed, burdened with enormous bags, and dragging a loaded kravchuchka behind them. This was not a purely Ukrainian phenomenon, but the legendary two-wheel cart received one of its most common designations when Leonid Kravchuk became the first Ukrainian directly elected president, under whose multi-year rule its use rocketed. Kravchuk entered public consciousness with his phrase, 'We have what we have.'[2] What he meant was that the new, independent Ukraine was not exactly abundant in wealth; his phrase became legendary, not least as a popular ironic commentary on the deteriorating economic situation. When Leonid Kuchma replaced Kravchuk in the presidential office, the change in power in Ukraine was reflected in the renaming of the handcart, as reflected by Ivan Drach in his poem. However, the new name did not stick, and kravchuchka remained kravchuchka.

Several monuments have been erected to kravchuchka users: at least three in Russia; one each in Belarus and Kyrgyzstan, and

certainly no fewer than two in Ukraine. Since 2013, a pensioner with a kravchuchka, welded from sheet metal by Anna Kiselev, has been standing on Rusanivska Embankment in Kyiv. But the role of the kravchuchka in recent Ukrainian history has been perhaps best captured by a bronze statue at the entrance to the marketplace in Sloviansk in Donetsk Oblast.[3] A young man with a hunted look and a large shoulder bag pulls the handcart loaded with two full bags, stepping over a crevice that deliberately and symbolically splits the two-metre pedestal. His university diploma is sticking out of his back pocket, but under the new circumstances that is worth only the paper it is printed on. The legend on the pedestal says: 'To the first entrepreneurs of the 1990s'. When it was unveiled in December 2006, the sculptor, Aleksandr Shutkevich, hoped that the work would remind people of the difficult times in Ukraine and serve as a tribute to those who overcame the crisis of the last decade of the 20th century.[4]

Of course, Drach comments upon the kravchuchka and kuchmovoz era with irony, but even then, he expresses the essential characteristics of his nation: a dogged persistence, even indestructibility, an ability to face harsh circumstances with gruelling toil, but also ingenuity and, in fact, a humble and unshowy bravery. These are the same traits that Ukrainians are now demonstrating as they battle the Russian aggression, and it is thanks to them that they have been able, albeit with the help of some Western countries, to hold off the Russian onslaught. Not just Vladimir Putin, but also many Western analysts, have had to re-arrange the pieces on their strategic chessboards.

There are other machines, or vehicles, that aptly represent the first three decades of Ukrainian independence. They certainly include the marshrutka, a specific synthesis of taxi and bus, again a phenomenon spread throughout the post-Soviet area. Various

vehicles – often smaller minibuses – go on their regular routes, but at irregular intervals. They stop at particular places, but you can also hail them like a taxi. The rate per ride is fixed and low, independent of the kilometres travelled, and is paid either directly to the driver or relayed via the hands of other passengers until it gets to the person behind the wheel, usually reaching them reliably, as does any small change passed back to the passenger. Having emerged as a response to the collapse of public transport after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, marshrutkas established themselves firmly in the transport market.

UKRAINE AS A PRODUCT OF COMMUNISM?

On the eve of the 1 December 1991 referendum, in which more than 90 percent, on a 84-percent turnout, voted for Ukraine's independence, Ukrainian TV broadcast a feature, *Holod '33 (Famine '33)* about the 1932–1933 famine, made by Oles Yanchuk after Vasyl Barka's novel *Yellow Prince*, first published in exile in 1962.[5] Watching the movie will induce depression even in those who have not yet encountered this form of mental distress, as it follows in detail a family dying of hunger (only one child, the son Andriy, survives), without neglecting to note a case of cannibalism, which, driven mad by hunger, many people resorted to at the time.

Certainly one could object that this was a piece of very peculiar 'political marketing', with this particular work being shown on television on the eve of an absolutely crucial vote on the

country's independence. But then Ukraine certainly is a peculiar country, thanks to its history, including the famine.

Each major disaster, including a famine, has its 'posthumous life' or presence – often variable – in the collective memory, in identity, in politics, in disputes about its interpretation. Described in Ukraine as the Holodomor,[6] Stalin's artificial famine of the 1930s was for long a total taboo in the Soviet Union, an event about which one had to be silent. From the outset, crowds of deniers, including even in the West, concealed it behind a dark curtain. It was only Gorbachev's glasnost, and especially the emergence of an independent Ukrainian state, that turned the Holodomor into a pressing topic of public debate in Ukraine. Of the leading politicians, it was Viktor Yushchenko, brought to the presidential office by the 2004 Orange Revolution, who really started to memorialise the famine. He was among those who sought to anchor the Holodomor in the Ukrainian collective memory as a tragic event forming Ukrainian identity and constituting one of the foundational blocks of Ukrainian national consciousness, the very notion of Ukrainianness. In Ukrainian society, its memory ought to play a role similar to the part played by the Holocaust in the Jewish consciousness. Although the comparison is apt in the number of casualties – in the millions – the legacy of Holodomor does not act as such a strong formative force as the Holocaust does in Israel.

'What, even Donbass voted in favour?' was how Boris Yeltsin allegedly responded to the results of the 1 December 1991 referendum, which confirmed the declaration of independence on 24 August. The Russian president initially did not want to believe the results – yet they allegedly also finally convinced him that the Soviet Union had to be dismantled.[7] Although nationalism was useful to Yeltsin when he needed to break up the Soviet structures, not least to consolidate

his power, the independent Russia attempted from the outset to keep the other Soviet republics in its sphere of influence – if not more. The current Russo-Ukrainian conflict can thus be interpreted as something that in various forms has been going on for all of the past 30 years.

Vladimir Putin has long believed that Russians, Ukrainians and Belarussians essentially constitute one historical nation, from which Ukrainians should have not seceded. He formulated this view also in an extensive piece, 'On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians', published in summer 2021 on the website of his office.[8] He considers the independent Ukraine and Ukrainian identity as essentially contemptible products of communism, because in 1991 a constituent republic of the Soviet Union made itself independent within the borders that it acquired as part of the domestic politics and foreign conquests of the Soviet state.

Yes, contemporary Ukraine certainly reflects the legacy of frenzied 20th century history, but in this respect it is no different from contemporary Russia. That country too fumbled and sought its identity with difficulties. Its leadership around Vladimir Putin intended to find this identity in the revival and development of a great power and imperial status. That is also why from 1991 Russia made efforts to keep Ukraine as a planet in the Russian solar system, rotating around the Kremlin sun. And when a combination of political and economic means failed to achieve the desired goal, it resorted to brute force. First, in 2014, it pared off Crimea and some parts of eastern Ukraine, and then in February 2022 launched a frontal attack.

Certainly, in 1991, Ukraine too was a country that in difficulties sought its own role and identity under new circumstances. Politics and the economy were essentially controlled by the *nomenklatura* cadres and their networks. Except for Cossack leaders such as Bohdan

Khmelnytsky and the unsuccessful attempts to establish a Ukrainian state in the turmoil of the civil war on the territory of the erstwhile tsar's empire after 1917, Ukraine lacked a deep tradition of its own statehood. The Ukrainian nation, however, certainly did exist, although its historical pilgrimage to date could have been likened to the Way of the Cross. In 1991, a strong Ukrainian identity, understandably linked with the use of the Ukrainian language, was mainly represented in the western parts of the country, while the east was marked much more by Sovietisation and Russification. The three decades of independence certainly strengthened the population's Ukrainian identity, mainly in the sense of modern nation-building, and this was not done on a purely linguistic basis. It was the result of natural development in relatively free circumstances and of deliberate state policy, but in the last eight years also of a response to the growing Russian pressure.

THE CRUISER *UKRAINA* AND DEINDUSTRIALISATION

Many Russians found the loss of the *Moskva* cruiser this spring really hard to bear. On social networks they published photographs of the sister ship, the *Slava*-class missile cruiser *Ukraina*, which has never been finished and for years has been decaying in a shipyard in Mykolaiv, Ukraine. One of the ways to vent their anger was by frequently sharing on social networks posts such as the following: 'She is not going anywhere, she does not float at sea, she is leaking, rusting, falling apart, stinking, taking up space, requiring large investments.

Her fate is predetermined – she will be cut into pieces, melted down and nobody will ever build a new *Ukraina* again. And everybody will forget about her. Not even Neptune needs her. I can hear the *Moskva* cruiser telling her: "We're going to heaven, but you're just going to die."'[9]

Yet the rusting *Ukraina* was innocent in this. It is a relic of the Soviet Union – its keel was laid down, first under the name *Komsomolets* and later *Admiral Flota Lobov*, in Mykolaiv in 1983, the same year that they finished her older sister, *Moskva*, which under its original name *Slava* served among other things as a floating base for the Soviet delegation at the epochal summit between Mikhail Gorbachev and George Bush Sr in Malta in December 1989. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, most of the Soviet Black-Sea fleet (over 80 percent) was passed to Russia (the definitive agreement was signed in May 1997), but the Russian fleet continued to be based on Ukraine's territory, in Sevastopol, Crimea. Ukraine received the already mentioned unfinished cruiser as part of its share.[10] It was named *Ukraina* by an act of parliament, but there were no funds to complete the construction. It continued to deteriorate. *Ukraina* never moved anywhere, but, as we shall see, it is in many respects telling.

Ukraine, especially its eastern part, was one of the bastions of Soviet industry, including its strategic segments. In addition to coal mining and steel production, eastern Ukraine produced, for example, intercontinental missiles, aircraft engines, aeroplanes, passenger cars and trucks, and large warships. All Soviet aircraft carriers, for instance, were built in the Mykolaiv shipyards – after 1991, one of them ended up in India and three, including one unfinished, in China, which was thus able successfully to build on the Soviet (or Soviet-Ukrainian) technological legacy.

Understandably, the dissolution of the Soviet Union dealt a heavy blow to Ukrainian enterprises, but at least some of them managed to keep afloat thanks to trade and cooperation with Russia. This was essentially broken by the conflict that erupted with the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Ukrainian businesses were not very successful in penetrating Western markets for a number of reasons, including the obsolescence of their manufacturing and technology and their oligarchic and Mafioso ownership structure. Yet despite – or indeed because of – this, Western aid since 1991 would have as one of its aims to reverse the trend of unhealthy deindustrialisation of the Ukrainian economy, in which agriculture, raw materials and semi-finished products increased as a proportion, to the detriment of high-added-value branches of industry.[11] For instance, the Antonov firm, which produced the monumental *Mriya* aircraft, has not manufactured much since 1991.

Ultimately, this process evidently weakened the country's sovereignty. Indeed, it is difficult to consider as fully sovereign a state that is, in the best case, an assembly shop, a producer of food and raw materials, and a supplier of cheap labour in the form of millions of guest workers.

The Ukrainian self-propelled howitzer, Bohdana, could tell you a thing or two about this. There is only one. When the war broke out, its development had reached the prototype stage, and this was being tested. One of the reasons for the delay was the economic problems of the KrAZ truck manufacturer, on whose chassis Bohdana is mounted. Bohdana did join the battlefront, but its current whereabouts are unknown. In June 2022, its shells, fired from the coast, allegedly helped to drive the Russian occupation forces off Snake Island in Black Sea,[12] which was taken in the early days of the conflict thanks to assistance provided by the *Moskva* cruiser. The Ukrainian defenders at the time

The unfinished cruiser *Ukraina* that continues to decay in the Mykolaiv shipyards. Photo from 2008 or 2009. Reproduced from: Wikimedia Commons

told the cruiser's crew to 'go fuck yourself', uttering one of the legendary phrases that framed the war.

Had Ukraine had a modernised and functional industrial base, it could have hundreds of Bohdanas (or something similar) in its arsenal – in short, good quality heavy military equipment of its own make in large numbers – and its army would pose a deterrent that might have prevented Russia from attacking. Incidentally, the *Moskva* was finally sunk by Ukrainian anti-ship Neptune missiles, still mostly at the testing stage of development. Originally, they were supposed to be carried by KrAZ trucks, but due to the financial and technical difficulties of their domestic automobile plant, Ukrainians had to use Czech Tatra trucks.[13] We Czechs would be pleased about this if it were not a matter of patching up a big problem.

A NUCLEAR POWER?

Ukraine certainly is a nuclear power in terms of energy, but due to the Chernobyl disaster, it has also seen the dark side of obtaining energy from the atom. The Chernobyl power plant operated until 2000, when President Kuchma issued the order for unit 3, the last one still in operation, to be shut down. After the disaster in unit 4 in April 1986, the other reactors were kept working due to shortage of electricity in the country. Unit 2 was shut down following a fire in 1991, unit 1 ceased electricity production in 1996.[14]

The Zaporizhzhya nuclear power plant, around which the Russian occupation forces this year started an incredibly hazardous game, is the largest in Europe. Five of its units were built under communism, the sixth in the 1990s. Beyond that, there are also the Khmelnytsky, Rivne and South Ukraine nuclear power plants. Before the war, Ukraine generated about half of the electricity it consumed from nuclear.[15]

In the 1990s Ukraine could have become a nuclear power also in the military sense. While in Czechoslovakia and other former Soviet satellites the break-up of the Soviet Union was a joyful relief, Western politicians suffered from new nightmares. One nuclear power could have given birth to four – Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan.[16] There was a particular risk of tactical nuclear weapons being used in wars in the post-Soviet area or falling into terrorists' hands. The West, therefore, definitely preferred to keep Russia as the sole successor nuclear power, and to democratise the country and lay foundations for a market economy.

At the time the Soviet Union fell apart, Ukraine was home to not just substantial stockpiles of nuclear munitions, but also strategic

intercontinental missiles and bomber bases. Ukraine did not, however, have access to the codes that would allow them to launch the missiles. What it did have, as one of the centres of Soviet strategic industries, was many top specialists in the field.

After its independence, Ukraine became the third largest nuclear power in the world, following the USA and Russia. Its 176 intercontinental missiles surpassed the French, British and Chinese arsenals, even if they could not be launched by order from Kyiv. Russia, understandably, wanted Ukrainian denuclearisation, but so did the West, which made it quite clear to the Ukrainian leadership that should it insist on maintaining its nuclear arsenal it would be internationally isolated. Ukraine put security guarantees by superpowers as a condition of its denuclearisation, but the German foreign affairs minister Klaus Kinkel described it as 'the naughty child of Europe' for this demand in late 1993.[17]

The Ukrainian state finally surrendered its nuclear weapons following a 1994 agreement with Russia, the United States and the United Kingdom. In the Budapest Memorandum, the latter three countries pledged never to attack Ukraine by nuclear or conventional weapons, or threaten it with aggression, and unconditionally to recognise and respect its political independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as the inviolability of its existing borders, and that they would not exert economic pressure on Ukraine.[18] Twenty years later, during the Russian annexation of Crimea, the flashy-looking document became a worthless piece of paper.

Apart from some small financial compensation from the USA, Ukraine received nothing for its willingness to give up its nuclear arsenal; or more precisely, it ultimately received a humiliating slap in

the face. Lack of money also *de facto* prevented it from operating the strategic bomber planes inherited from the Soviet era. For instance, the Russian fleet of six Tupolev Tu-160 aircraft, nicknamed 'White Swans' or 'Putin's Swans', was in the late 1990s strengthened with eight Ukrainian machines, handed over to Russia in partial payment of a gas bill. The rest of the originally 19-strong fleet of Ukrainian Tu-160s was scrapped, under a US programme to dismantle the former Soviet nuclear arsenal and Soviet-US disarmament agreements. The Ukrainian strategic bomber base in Pryluky was also a victim of the agreement. A sole Tu-160 remains in Ukraine – as an exhibit at a museum in Poltava.[19] The Russian Tu-160s, probably including those original Ukrainian machines, have been involved in the Russian invasion in 2022 and bombed Ukraine's cities.

The issue of any other country having a nuclear arsenal is of course very ticklish. Furthermore, particularly during the 1990s, the Ukrainian political leadership and military command were made up of post-Soviet cadres, that is, officials brought up and educated in the Soviet Union, whose mentality was far removed from Western political and military standards. Yet Russia, then preferred by the West, was no better.

For some time, the Ukrainian leadership considered the option of giving up nearly all of its nuclear arsenal, apart from a few warheads and missiles to carry them, to serve as a sort of minimal deterrent. In any case, its own nuclear arsenal would probably have protected the country from Russian aggression better than Western promises.

TWO LEONIDS FROM THE APPARATUS: KRAVCHUK AND KUCHMA

To date, the Ukrainian political scene has usually reflected the somewhat chaotic tangle of the interests of various oligarchic clans, when the need to exercise control over the major sectors of the economy was implemented by setting up political parties of convenience, corruption and abuse of justice. Not infrequently, harsher means were used. Thus, until recently, the Ukrainian political cycle has followed a trajectory of frustration – revolution – hope – disappointment – frustration.

The directly-elected president's office has always been the focal point of the political system, although its powers have been substantially amended several times. Until the 2004 Orange Revolution, Ukraine was often described as a super-presidential or hyper-presidential regime;[20] since then, it has been classified – except for the Viktor Yanukovych era – as a semi-presidential system. Ukraine's politics can thus be presented by means of a gallery of its presidents so far.

The first directly elected Ukrainian president, Leonid Kravchuk, held office from December 1991 to July 1994, when social unrest over the dismal economic situation led to early parliamentary and presidential elections, in which Kravchuk lost his seat. In the Soviet Union, he had been a senior figure in the party apparatus, including as the chief ideologue of the Communist Party of Ukraine. Later, however, he was involved in the processes of Ukraine's independence and the revival of the Ukrainian nation. On 8 December 1991, having just been elected president, he signed on Ukraine's behalf the Belavezha Accords that established the Commonwealth of Independent States, which ended the Soviet Union. Kravchuk's descent informed his

pro-Ukrainian positions: he was born on 10 January 1934 in a peasant family in western Ukraine, where the Ukrainian language was historically firmly grounded, and which continues to be a bastion of Ukrainian patriotism to this day.

The second Ukrainian president, Leonid Kuchma, also emerged out of the communist apparatus. For a time he even served as director of a factory manufacturing Soviet ballistic missiles in Dnipropetrovsk. Kuchma mainly attracted votes in the eastern parts of the country, not least by promising to put the Russian language on an equal footing with Ukrainian. Once in office, however, he understood that Ukrainian statehood could hold only if there was also a Ukrainian identity, different from the Russian, and that it would need to be pervasively present throughout Ukraine. Indeed, Kuchma even published a book, *Ukraine Is Not Russia*,[21] first in Russian in 2003 and then in Ukrainian the following year, and considered the creation of the Ukrainian nation the chief task after independence. Perhaps it would be more apt to say 'completing the nation-building process' – after all the horrors of the 20th century, the rule of the Soviet, Russifying nationalism, and in consideration of the challenges brought by the 21st century in a territory made up of many parts with often colourful and very different histories.

However, the second Ukrainian president only started to learn the Ukrainian language after he was elected into office, and even though he allegedly made some progress, he still spoke in a very idiosyncratic style, much mixed with Russian.[22] Yet in this, he was not different from many people living in his country. For instance, Yuliya Tymoshenko, twice prime minister, and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy only learned fluent Ukrainian especially to further their political careers. Prime Minister and President Viktor Yanukovych

also attempted to speak Ukrainian, but the results became the butt of jokes in Volodymyr Zelenskyy's cabaret Kvartal 95.

Kuchma's rule ultimately resulted in the establishment of a regime with strongly authoritarian traits. The change of this regime in 2004 required the first major Ukrainian civic revolution, dubbed Orange, after the party colours of the presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko.

VIKTOR AND YULIYA OR A TRAGIC ORANGE ROMANCE

Viktor Yushchenko originally belonged to the network of the governing clans. He was the governor of the National Bank of Ukraine and was involved in introducing the Ukrainian currency, the hryvnya. In 1999, when Kuchma was president, Yushchenko even became prime minister, and a very successful one: he was able to improve the economic situation and access to public welfare including pensions. But he also tried to break up or at least disrupt the oligarchic Mafia structure, which effort understandably met with resistance, and his growing popularity was a thorn in Kuchma's side. On 26 April 2001, Yushchenko's government collapsed, coincidentally, or by the irony of fate, on the anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster. The event entered recent Ukrainian history as a 'political Chernobyl'.

Until 2000, Yuliya Tymoshenko served in Yushchenko's cabinet as deputy prime minister for fuel and energy. Later she was his loyal associate in the Orange Revolution, only to become his fierce opponent shortly thereafter.[23] The heated duel between the two

main faces of the Orange Revolution was instrumental in it ending in disillusion.

Viktor Yushchenko spent the 2004 presidential election campaign in great pain and with his face disfigured by dioxin poisoning. The case was never properly investigated but it seems likely to have been an attempt to get a dangerous candidate out of the way. Another, somewhat more 'humane', instrument was the rigging of election results in Yushchenko's duel with the prime minister, Viktor Yanukovych, later infamous for his authoritarian tendencies and support for close cooperation with Russia.

Yushchenko was raised to the presidential office by the first Maidan (the word means a square in Ukrainian), the Orange Revolution in which his supporters in Kyiv's Independence Square, standing in frosty conditions and sleet, through defiance achieved their objective: a re-run of the second round of the presidential election – this time the votes were counted properly. At that time, perseverance and indomitable will to resist first celebrated success in politics, though this was only temporary.

Yushchenko was born in Sumy Oblast in north-east Ukraine, where Ukrainian was spoken much more than Russian. This is one of the reasons why while in office he took great care to strengthen Ukrainian national traditions and mould a modern national consciousness, as well as shepherd Ukraine's pro-Western political orientation. But the rivalry between him and Tymoshenko, who since the 1990s as an entrepreneur substantially controlled the gas industry, and was hence dubbed the 'Gas Princess', after some time returned Viktor Yanukovych to power. Though Yushchenko appointed Tymoshenko prime minister in 2005, he removed her after a few months. And in August 2006, he appointed as prime minister his rival

from the presidential election, Yanukovych, who was closer to him than 'Lady Yu'. However, Tymoshenko returned as prime minister following success in early parliamentary elections in 2007.

Yanukovych then managed to win presidential office in 2010. A representative of the Russophone eastern part of Ukraine or more precisely the local oligarchic clans, under the political umbrella of the Party of Regions, in the second round of voting he beat Tymoshenko, who mainly drew her votes from the western part of the country, which was not enough to defeat Yanukovych – not least because the Orange camp was riven by internal strife. Yushchenko disappointed the hopes pinned on him, taking only slightly over five percent of the vote in the presidential election.

Tymoshenko, who complained about electoral fraud, also suffered in the election from the impact of the global financial crisis, made more acute in Ukraine by a dispute with Russia concerning gas supplies and prices. Although the gas war ended with an agreement signed by Tymoshenko and Putin, it increased the price of the commodity dramatically. In 2011, Tymoshenko paid for her signature with a jail sentence, following a politically manipulated trial.

FROM RUSSIFICATION TO EUROMAIDAN

Although neither the majority of politicians in Yanukovych's party, nor most of the people who voted for him, wanted direct unification with Russia, they did favour closer cooperation with the country and for Russian to be made equal to Ukrainian. The geopolitical shift was

distinctly manifest at Yanukovych's inauguration, as shortly before it, the Metropolitan of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), Volodymyr, had conducted a prayer service with the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), Kirill, who publicly blessed Yanukovych at the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra,[24] a historic monastery on the UNESCO World Heritage List. This was the first time that the ROC patriarch had participated at the inauguration of the head of another state, and was understandably criticised by Ukrainian officials.

Under Yanukovych, the *Ukraina* cruiser continued to fall into disrepair in Mykolaiv, although – and this is symptomatic – the completion of the ship by a joint Ukrainian-Russian effort was mooted at the time.[25] In summer 2010, however, it lost its name *Ukraina* through an act of parliament.[26] With his Russian counterpart, Dmitriy Medvedev, in April 2010 in Kharkiv Yanukovych signed an extension of the lease of Sevastopol, Crimea as the HQ of the Russian Black-Sea fleet, due to run out in 2017, until 2042 with an option for another five years.[27] Typically, this was in exchange for cheaper Russian gas, which Moscow has often used – and not just with respect to Ukraine – as a powerful political weapon. Nonetheless, in subsequent years the price Russia charged Ukraine for gas increased anyway.[28]

Yanukovych's presidential mandate can certainly be described as an era of renewed linguistic and cultural Russification. The Western vector nonetheless remained in play, in the shape of an association agreement with the European Union. Frustrated by poverty and corruption, Ukrainians, especially those from the western half of the country, saw this as the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. Although the government adopted the draft agreement in September 2013, in November it refused to sign, primarily due to economic pressure exerted by Moscow.[29] This caused a wave of protests, the

second and so far the biggest Maidan, also called Euromaidan. It was a spontaneous uprising by society organising itself, which was not discouraged either by the cold or the violence of the state's repressive apparatus. The main square in Kyiv was transformed into a large, improvised, fortified encampment, literally a fortress, whose bellicose spirit was redolent of the hoary Zaporozhian Sich. Besides the fighting spirit, a collaborative atmosphere prevailed in Maidan, with representatives of nearly all political, religious and opinion currents in Ukrainian society able to pull together.[30] Not coincidentally, the events at the time were called a 'Revolution of Dignity'. But the eastern part of the country saw it more as a coup.

In February 2014, live ammunition killed dozens of demonstrators, causing such a wave of resistance that Yanukovych preferred to flee to Russia, which then tried to provoke a 'Russian Spring' to win nearly all of eastern and south-eastern Ukraine. Yet the Moscow strategists had misjudged the willingness of Russian-speaking Ukrainians to join the Russian Federation, and in fact underestimated their Ukrainian patriotism. Crimea and part of eastern Ukraine did come under Russian control, but this was effected by armed violence, not by the will of a majority of the population.

ARMY, LANGUAGE AND FAITH OF THE CHOCOLATE KING

In the early direct presidential election in May 2014, Petro Poroshenko won in the first round – this was shortly after Maidan, Viktor Yanukovych's fall and Russia's occupation of Crimea; fighting was going on

in eastern Ukraine. Ukrainians pinned enormous hope on the controversial oligarch: that he would end the war, improve the economy and clamp down on corruption. It is for his confectionery corporation, Roshen (the name is concocted from his surname: poROSHENko), that he was dubbed the 'Chocolate King'. Yet he could not meet the excessive expectations of Ukrainian society, no matter how hard he tried. Sweet hopes turned bitter and Poroshenko tanked in polls, not least because it was alleged that he moved his business into a tax haven.

Certainly, with Poroshenko's election, the era when Moscow's favourite could succeed in Ukraine in mostly fair elections – as Viktor Yanukovych did in 2010 – came to an end. In Crimea and the eastern part of Ukraine, Yanukovych himself and his Party of Regions long enjoyed the support of 50–90 percent of the electorate. When the disputed peninsula and parts of the Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts were 'spun off', the chances of a pro-Russian candidate achieving an overall majority in Ukraine decreased. The annexation of Crimea and the fighting in eastern Ukraine also boosted Ukrainian patriotism, detracting some in his former electorate from casting their votes for someone like Yanukovych. The Kremlin then had no strategy at hand for a change in power apart from a putsch or military aggression, or a combination of both.

In 2019, Poroshenko unsuccessfully attempted to defend his seat using the slogan 'Army, language and faith'. In this, he undoubtedly summed up the three greatest Ukrainian successes achieved after 2014 for which he could take credit, though they were, of course, not due to him alone.

Let us start with the army. In 2014, this was a corrupt and essentially dysfunctional institution. Many observers of the fighting in Donbas noted the sad fact that the Ukrainian soldier was at greatest

'I feel they offered us sweets, but did not give us anything. What do we actually have? Only empty packaging – the leftovers', the Ukrainian artist Darya Marchenko summed up the disillusion of the developments five years after Maidan, when she commented on her portrait of President Poroshenko, *The Face of Corruption*. Poroshenko owns the confectionery corporation Roshen and is dubbed the 'Chocolate King'; Marchenko created his face from the wrappers of sweets manufactured by his firm. The chocolate bars serving as background are made of shell casings. Photo: Zoya Shu for 'Strana.ua'

risk not from a pro-Russian separatist or a Russian 'little green man', but from his own commander, who had bribed his way to a commission and had hardly a notion of how war ought to be waged. People showed little interest in serving in the armed forces, and many avoided them for the reasons stated.

The same certainly cannot be said of the resolve to defend the country. Testifying very tellingly to this are the entirely crucial actions of many Ukrainian volunteers, both male and female, who

often stepped forward to fend off the separatist or outright Russian attacks, especially in 2014. Volunteer military units appeared and many people helped in the rear, for instance by organising fundraisers to purchase equipment for the military.

This was when the phenomenon of vernacular or homemade (or home-converted) vehicles for military purposes was born. These have various names, such as people's armoured vehicles and wunderwaffle. They are often called banderomobiles after Stepan Bandera, admittedly a problematic historic figure though venerated by Ukrainians simply as a fighter for national and state independence. Upon hearing 'Bandera', the images that come to mind for a Ukrainian are plainly different from those in our own minds.

Especially in 2014–2015, many volunteers applied admirable amounts of their craft, invention, elbow grease and savings, giving rise to a numerous and colourful fleet of improvised military vehicles, often converted from civilian cars, that served in volunteer military units. The broad gamut runs from slightly modified passenger cars to heavily armoured vehicles converted from lorries. Indeed, the Ukrainian military was very poorly equipped at the time, lacking materiel (both combat and logistics) and suffering from a poor-quality officer corps as noted above. Thus, fairly understandably, there was much improvisation.[31]

The frustrating state of the armed forces did, however, provoke change and reform. Although the Soviet-era weapons mostly remained, what changed fundamentally was the work with human resources. Ukraine started to build an army of the Western type, where initiative and creativity on the battlefield, rather than the blind following of orders emanating from somewhere above, is what is required from nearly all components in the military hierarchy. In 2022,

it is the Russian soldier for whom his own command is the greatest enemy.

Certainly, language has been one of the most pressing issues in Ukrainian politics and society since 1991. The sole official language since 1991 has been Ukrainian, with the exception of Crimea, which was granted autonomous status and where Russian became the second official language. The Russophone eastern and south-eastern parts of the country, however, demanded that Russian be put on equal footing with Ukrainian, and the position of Russian in the media and education, especially in areas where Russian speakers had preponderance, became a subject of political dispute. The language law, adopted in 2019, aimed to develop Ukrainian and to embed it more in society; for centuries, Ukrainian was suppressed by the tsarist empire, and, with the exception of the 1920s, also by the Soviet communist regime. Parliament only adopted it after Volodymyr Zelenskyy was voted president, in an atmosphere of concern that Zelenskyy would again open the gate to Russifying influences. Indeed, Russian was his mother tongue, and he made most of his films and comedy sketches in Russian. In the campaign, he clearly advocated a harmonic co-existence of the Russophones with those who used Ukrainian in their everyday lives.[32] At election time, some in the Ukrainian intelligentsia even saw him as a potential instrument of Russian hybrid war. The Russian invasion of February 2022, Zelenskyy's actions during it and the response of Russian-speaking Ukrainians, resolutely defending their country, showed that such concerns were unfounded, and that a strong Ukrainian identity not primarily based on language was possible. Indeed, Zelenskyy was born and bred as a Russophone Ukrainian citizen of Jewish extraction.[33]

Poroshenko's greatest success, which he duly promoted in the election campaign, was the granting by the Patriarchate of Constantinople of autocephaly, or independence, to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) – something in which the president truly was instrumental. The Russian Orthodox Church claims Ukraine as its canonical territory; the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), abbreviated UOC MP, was before the war the largest Ukrainian church in terms of the number of priests, churches and monasteries. Its popularity has been in decline since 2014, however, and the current Russian aggression has essentially forced it to break free from Moscow.[34] In a speech on 24 August 2018 on the 27th anniversary of Ukrainian independence, Petro Poroshenko described the independence of Ukraine's Orthodoxy as absolutely essential. Autocephaly, he argued, went beyond religion, and was 'of the same importance as strengthening the army, protecting the language and the struggle for membership of the European Union and NATO'. It was 'another strategic landmark' in Ukraine's historical course, and an important component of Ukrainian independence.[35] Thus Poroshenko placed the protection of the Ukrainian language and the development of an independent Ukrainian church structure on the same level with membership of NATO and the EU.

MAIDAN ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

In the second round of the 2019 presidential election, Volodymyr Zelenskyy steamrollered his competitor, taking over 70 percent of the vote, while Petro Poroshenko took about a quarter (and scored

Armoured fuel tanker adapted in 2014 from a Ural 4320 truck and named Lilya, after the Mykolaiv teacher and mother of three children who contributed 1,000 hryvnas which she could hardly afford to spare. Lilya supplied fuel to Ukrainian armed forces battling with separatists. Reproduced from: Serhiy Kaminsky's archive, *Ukrainska Pravda*

The legendary Pryanyk (Gingerbread) armoured vehicle of the Azov battalion at the Kyiv Old Car Land festival in 2016. Reproduced from: Facebook page of Old Car Land festival

major successes only in the western regions). Zelenskyy in any case achieved a historically record high share of the vote in Ukrainian direct presidential elections, and his score was exceptional even internationally. What is more, the elections avoided major fraud and machinations, something that certainly had not been the case in Ukraine in the past.

The massive wave of popularity that has accompanied the comedian Zelenskyy's political career can be seen as another Maidan, as a safety valve letting out some of the steam of pervasive discontent with the situation, five years after the 2013–2014 Revolution of Dignity. Despite all the above-mentioned positive aspects of Poroshenko's five-year stint as president, faith and language are after all intangible assets and in peacetime the army may seem merely a voracious gobbler of public funds.

Dignity is difficult to maintain in a country with a poorly functioning economy, where corruption continues to flourish and millions leave to work abroad. As guest workers, however, they find it very difficult to establish families, so the bleak economic situation has been detrimental also to the demographic situation. While in 1991, on declaring independence, the Ukrainian population was nearly 52 million, by 2013, before the annexation of Crimea and the formation of the separatist republics in the east, it had fallen to only 45.6 million. As of 1 January 2022, there were about 41 million people in Ukraine (without Crimea and Sevastopol).[36]

What President Zelenskyy showed clearly was that Ukraine had not evaded the massive development of information technology. The foundations for his success were laid in artful work on social media, which was where he primarily communicated with voters, posting not just professionally shot videos but also improvised selfies, almost

always accompanied by a brief and succinct political message. He deftly mixed various forms and genres and put his show business experience to good use in politics.

Although variously dismissed as a 'comic', 'clown' or 'entertainer', during his acting career he was no mediocre variety-show joke-teller. With his Kvartal 95 ensemble, for many years he ran a popular satirical cabaret revue skewering Ukrainian politicians. Thus he was at home in politics, and what it is more he successfully managed the show business ensemble himself. In the comedy television series, *Servant of the People*, he portrays the high-school history teacher, Holoborodko (Green Horn), who becomes president and starts to rid Ukraine of all ills and evils.

Did the 13 million or so people who voted for Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the second round believe that the virtual reality of the series would spill over into actual reality? Or did they, somewhat desperately, want to believe it? In his campaign, Zelenskyy promised to fight corruption and bolster the rule of law, but so did nearly all of his competitors. There were also promises of direct democracy, which always find a hearing among people angered with the political class. Zelenskyy was in favour of Ukraine joining the European Union and NATO – through a referendum. Most importantly, he created the impression that he was someone new, different, not corrupt, irrespective of the fact that for many years he was evidently supported by the controversial oligarch, Ihor Kolomoyskyy – Zelenskyy's successful shows ran on the 1+1 television station, owned by Kolomoyskyy. Zelenskyy, of course, was a risky bet for Ukrainians. Yet what choice did they have? For many years, only risky bets have been available to them. This one apparently paid off, even if Zelenskyy the superhero is not perfect, and did not avoid making mistakes, particularly before the war.

In February 2022, Zelenskyy and his country found themselves at a fateful crossroads, and he acted in a way that thwarted the plans not just of Vladimir Putin, but probably also of most Western politicians. Russian paratroopers tried to storm the presidential palace, with his wife and children among those inside, but Zelenskyy responded to the American offer of evacuation with a line that became legendary: 'I need ammunition, not a ride.'[37] Zelenskyy unequivocally placed himself at the helm of Ukrainian resistance and captured public opinion abroad – certainly in Europe and the United States. He has become a global media celebrity, a hero of an action movie that unfolds not on the screen but in reality. Without him and his actions, Western countries would probably only provide medical supplies; Czechia and Poland a few old tanks. And though Ukrainians would certainly wage an intransigent partisan war, Russia would probably have captured a much bigger chunk of Ukrainian territory, thus forcing Ukraine and the West to the negotiating table – that would essentially be a victory for the Kremlin. It was only a sustained, heroic and highly publicised Ukrainian resistance, and the pressure of public opinion, that pushed Western countries to provide extensive supplies of military equipment – in fact, to invest in Ukraine's defence – thus shifting the development of Russia's war in an unexpected direction. The outcome of the war, of course, remains open, but it would not have the characteristics it has in autumn 2022 had the 'comedian' Volodymyr Zelenskyy not fully exploited the 'machine' of modern information technology and social networks.

MRIYA AS PHOENIX

In the last few years before the war, Ukraine attempted to sell the dilapidated *Ukraina* cruiser to anyone who would tow it away, and complete, modernise and introduce it into service. In 2018, for instance, Brazil was in the game, but in the end, the contract was cancelled.[38] And so *Ukraina* continues to deteriorate and its photographs are used by angry Russians as a virtual whipping boy, as we have seen above.

Under Presidents Poroshenko and Zelenskyy, the prevailing position has been that Ukraine would not complete *Ukraina*, as it would cost a lot of money that poor Ukraine lacks, and the combat value of the ship, even if finished, would be debatable. Indeed, since the occupation of Crimea, when Russians stole most of Ukraine's fleet, Ukraine with the help of Western experts has started to reform its navy.[39] Especially in the first phase, the focus was on improving coastal protection – which needed smaller patrol boats and anti-ship missiles, not expensive and quite vulnerable behemoths. The sinking of the *Moskva* cruiser by Ukrainian Neptune missiles shows that Ukraine chose the right direction under the circumstances.

Now one can at least buy *Ukraina* as a 1:700 scale plastic model kit made by the Chinese firm Trumpeter in a hypothetical finished version called *Vilna Ukraina* or 'Free Ukraine'.[40]

In this major war of today, technical improvisation and the involvement of popular or civic initiative continue to be strongly present. There are fundraisers and drives to bolster the logistics of the Ukrainian armed forces with as many automobiles as possible, passenger cars as well as lorries, vans as well as pick-ups. Ukrainians are buying them in second-hand dealerships throughout Europe. Small-scale producers, often technically gifted and skilled

'Beauty will not bear it!' – Mural by Kostyantyn Kochanovskyy in the city of Rivne – an answer to Vladimir Putin's early February statement on Ukraine, before the invasion, when he used the idiom 'Like it or not, you have to bear it, my beauty.' Reproduced from: Kostyantyn Kochanovskyy's Facebook page

enthusiasts, continue to try to help the army. Typically, the fruits of their labours are buggy cars, able to fulfil a number of roles over difficult terrain. Ukrainian defence is substantially a matter of the economically poor civil society, with its obstinate efforts to extract as much as possible from the limited means available. Our attention is focused on the American rocket launchers or the US, French or German howitzers, without which the Ukrainian army will not be able to drive out the aggressor – but neither will it be able to do so without the thousands of volunteers willing to sacrifice not just their last hryvnya, but even their lives.

Ukraine is still being born, now in a great war, and hence in enormous pain and suffering. We are witnessing a remarkable paradox. While the second Ukrainian president, Leonid Kuchma, in the 1990s considered the formation of the Ukrainian nation, or completing the nation-building, as the main task, Russia's President Vladimir Putin

has inadvertently managed to achieve it. A new Ukraine is being born, different from the pre-war one. We do not know exactly what it will be like, but it will be inhabited by tenacious, inventive, free-thinking and brave people, essentially indestructible people. Even *Mriya* will fly again, because Ukraine is a perpetual motion machine.

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30 The Maidan atmosphere is grippingly depicted in Evgeny Afineevsky's 2015 documentary feature *Winter on Fire: Ukraine's Fight For Freedom*.

31 Ukrainian people's armoured vehicles are mapped out in detail in Serhiy Kaminskiy book *Narodni pantsernyky*, DrimArt, Kyiv 2021.

32 According to an early 2021 survey by the Social Monitoring agency, nearly half of Ukrainians preferred to speak Ukrainian at home, a little over 27 percent in Russian, and nearly a quarter in both languages. See Mayzhe polovyna ukrayintsiv rozmovlyayut' u pobuti lyshe ukrayins'koyu movoyu – sotsopytuvannya. *Interfaks-Ukrajina*, 4 March 2021 [Accessed 20 September 2022]. Available from: https://ua.interfax.com.ua/news/press-conference/728166.html

33 Zelenskyy is the subject of Gallagher Fenwick's book *Volodymyr Zelenskyj – Ukrajina v krvi*, Euromedia, Prague 2022. The French original is *Volodymyr Zelensky: L'Ukraine dans le sang*, Éditions Du Rocher, Monaco 2022.

34 The dispute over Ukrainian autocephaly was in recent years the most significant line of conflict in the entire Orthodox religion. Understandably, the Russian Orthodox Church condemned it sharply, and the current war has a strong religious subtext. This is because Russian nationalism and imperialism leans on a vision of a Moscow-led Orthodox civilisation, and the full church independence of Ukraine thus substantially undermines the Russian imperial aspirations.

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36 Resident population of Ukraine as of 1 January 2022 by age group. *Statista.com*, 18 August 2022 [Accessed 20 September 2022]. Available from: https://www.statista.com/statistics/1006655/ukraine-population-by-age-group/

37 Though the authenticity of the phrase is difficult to prove, it became famous because it so well captured Zelenskyy's position on the war at the time. Cf.: Glenn Kessler: Zelensky's famous quote of 'need ammo, not a ride' not easily confirmed. *The Washington Post*, 6 March 2022 [Accessed 20 September 2022]. Available from: https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/03/06/zelenskys-famous-quote-need-ammo-not-ride-not-easily-confirmed/

38 Nedobudovanyy raketnyy kreyser proektu 1164 mozhut' peredaty Brazyliyi. *Ukrainian Military Pages*, 15 August 2018 [Accessed 16 September 2022]. Available from: https://www.ukrmilitary.com/2018/08/cruiser-1164.html

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40 Ukraine Navy Vilna Ukraina. Slava-Class-Cruiser. Trumpeter. *Scalemates.com*, undated [Accessed 20 September 2022]. Available from: https://www.scalemates.com/cs/kits/trumpeter-05723-vilna-ukraina--104349#

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Probably no other Czech print medium has paid as much attention to the growing imperial ambitions of Putin's Russia and the events in Ukraine as *Kontexty*, a political and cultural review published since 1990. The aim of this book is to provide a deeper understanding of the histories, cultures and ways of thinking of Russia and Ukraine, their mutual relationship over the centuries and the current trends in the development of both societies. The book offers a rich collection of articles and studies by authors who have been examining these issues in the long term, whether on the pages of *Kontexty* or elsewhere. It includes essays by, among others, Petr Fiala, the prime minister of the Czech Republic, Alexandr Vondra, former Czech minister of defence and currently a member of the European Parliament, Constantin Sigov, a Ukrainian philosopher and Andrzej Nowak, a renowned Polish historian.

'I hope this book will help us to understand better what is going on in Ukraine today and its causes; most importantly, how we can avoid making mistakes and underestimating risks that threaten our security.'
Petr Fiala, prime minister of the Czech Republic

'Enough of false hopes that we will have the Russia we dream of. Russia remains here, it is not going anywhere, and we must take it as it truly is: without illusions and irresponsible underestimations.'
Alexandr Vondra MEP (ECR)

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