



Voices of Ukraine: #4 Ukrainian identity reflected by war

Edwin Bendyk

We will discuss a topic that has been dangerous in recent weeks: Ukrainian identity, which some people deny the existence of. What can be said about Ukrainian identity, based on literature, culture and history, but also insights from everyday life, especially at dramatic times like the recent revolutions in Ukraine and the ongoing war, which has entered a brutal phase?

Let me mention geography, which will be important in our discussion: Vira Ageyeva was born in Bakhmach, Sofia Andrukhovych in Ivano-Frankivsk (which many Poles still think of as “Stanisławów”), Andriy Portnov in Dnipro and Mykola Ryabchuk in Lutsk. Today, this geography has lost its meaning, but it played an important role historically, as we know from the books of Ryabchuk, who at one point wrote about two Ukraines.

The *Voices of Ukraine* series of debates organized by the Batory Foundation ideaForum and the weekly news magazine *Polityka*.

Russian aggression and the war in Ukraine have dominated media coverage in recent weeks. With great suspense, we follow the news from the battlefield each day. We watch in horror as cities are bombed and civilians suffer. The news and the sight of people fleeing war arouse sympathy, resulting in gestures of unprecedented solidarity.

Given the abundance of news and information, the voices of the Ukrainian people often get lost. What makes the Ukrainian resistance so effective, and why is the Ukrainian society so resilient? What goals have the Ukrainians set for themselves in their armed resistance against the Russian aggression? What are the

Before the Maidan, he wrote about the many Ukrainian consciousnesses: anti-colonial, post-colonial, creole. Many years ago, this division revealed that Ukrainian society had not developed a sovereign culture – the culture of society as a whole. This consciousness appealed to various cultural resources. What does this look like now? The starting point is the thesis proclaimed by the man who started this war: that the Ukrainian nation does not exist as an entity separate from the Russian nation. Let us structure this discussion by defining what it really is.

Mykola Ryabchuk

Above all, I wish to emphasise that nobody can decide whether or not this nation or another exists, as that is the nation's own business. Nobody can forbid a group from considering itself a nation and fighting for its rights in one way or another. It is a private matter, like religion and other similar matters. There is nothing to discuss here, especially with politicians who are maniacs.

Regarding the *Two Ukraines*:¹ they actually wrote me and, over the past thirty years, led me to observe what is happening in Ukraine and towards critical analysis. My conception has not changed in terms of content, but the way it is articulated has. It is very difficult to capture these phenomena. At the start of the 1990s, I had a naïve approach, when it seemed to me that, in the east, in pro-Russian Ukraine, nationalisation would result in the catching up of processes hampered there earlier during the Russian Empire, unlike in the Austro-Hungary Empire. I was wrong. That kind of Ukrainisation did not take place for various reasons. I did not take into account the influence of colonial mechanisms on socio-economic life and discourse. I was wrong here.

After ten years, a different radical approach appeared. I exposed myself to criticism of the *Two Ukraines* by colleagues, who rightly accused me of essentialising these phenomena. I am grateful to Yaroslav Hrytsak, Volodymyr Kulakov, the late Oleksandr Hrytsenko, and Andriy Portnov, who revised my conceptions. Their valid comments led me to think about this conception more deeply. With today's reactions to the book on the regions, I have articulated my ultimate understanding of the “two Ukraines” as two ideal types, which – according to Max Weber – exist as abstractions, but not in reality. Reality is

limitations of a peace agreement? What do the Ukrainians want with regard to the European Union, NATO, and other alliances? What is the reconstruction of the country following the war supposed to look like? What will the relations between Ukraine and its neighbouring countries be like?

These are just some of the questions we are going to ask Ukrainian experts, journalists, artists, and politicians. There is no doubt that the future is now being shaped in Ukraine, and, to a great extent, its final form will depend on the men and women of Ukraine. Let's hear what they have to say!

The main topic of the fourth discussion in the series was the question of Ukrainian identity as reflected by the war. What does the war, and especially its newest edition, i.e. the attack of Russia on February 24, say about the identity of Ukrainian men and women? Is the tragedy of recent months, as some argue, another – after the Holodomor, the Executed Renaissance, the Chernobyl catastrophe and the Revolution of Dignity – breakthrough that shapes contemporary Ukrainians? Can it be said that the experience of disasters of almost apocalyptic dimension marked the Ukrainians with special awareness? The discussion took place on May 4, 2022 with the participation of Vira Ageyeva, Sofia Andrukhovych, Andriy Portnov, Mykola Ryabchuk and Edwin Bendyk as the interviewer.

1 M. Ryabchuk, *Dwie Ukrainy* [Two Ukraines], translated by K. Kotyńska et al., Wrocław 2004.

corelated with these ideal types, but it is a matter of correlation, not causation, and this needs to be emphasised.

Ukrainian society really is very diverse. There are diverse groups, regions and identities. Society is subject to fragmentation but not divided. This is very important, because it means that – to use the language of biology – there is no compartmentalisation between various groups. On the contrary: the groups are fluid, they interpenetrate, and this prevents radical divisions. We saw this in 2014, when Ukraine did not fall apart, despite Russia's brutal attack. Now we are observing how Ukraine has endured and become even more consolidated. This has surprised many foreign observers. I read an interview with Ivan Krastev,² who said that Russian aggression shaped the Ukrainian nation. I have been reading these kinds of things for twenty years: Euromaidan shaped the Ukrainian nation, earlier, the Orange Revolution shaped the Ukrainian nation, now the war...

This is nonsense, as the Ukrainian nation has been shaping itself for ages; there has been a modern Ukrainian identity for at least two hundred years. Perhaps, it did not show up very clearly. It always seemed to me that our identity is weak, because ethnic nationalism was weak and did not reach the broad masses, especially rural population. Yet local patriotism has always existed, deep and strong. This showed up during the national liberation struggles of 1918 and 1920, during the partisan warfare after the Second World War, during the vote on independence, during both Maidans, and obviously now. This patriotism became the foundation of shaping civic identity over thirty years of existence within the nation-state. It was also shaped through the influence of "banal nationalism", to use Michael Billig's term, which is why we can speak of a strong civic nationalism in Ukraine today.

At the same time, I am not opposed to closing this topic. We have seen the results of opinion polls: fresh sociological data shows that the Ukrainian foundations really are moving towards greater patriotism and radicalisation. Yet even during this war, 8% of citizens treat Russia and Russians positively and 20% neutrally. 70% have a negative attitude towards the people blessing and leading this aggression. This means that the process has not been completed and we have a serious problem, as a pro-Russian population of even 8% means potential agents. Let us call things by their name: it is easy to recruit this kind of supporters as informants or saboteurs. We must not ignore this 8%, or probably more, as various people claim to be neutral, or are afraid to say they support Russia during the war.

The problem remains. We should not pretend to be consolidated and indivisible already. However, the dynamics are positive. Ukraine has shaped itself as a nation and dynamic processes strengthening civic identity are underway. Sociology shows that the changes in all the ethnic language groups point in the same direction. There are three main groups: Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians, Russian-speaking Ukrainians, and Russians. When it comes to patriotism or their readiness to defend Ukraine by taking up arms, their approach differs. In all the groups, the dynamics are the same: they are all moving towards a more pro-European and more pro-Ukrainian attitude. This is why Ukraine has not fallen apart and, I believe, will never fall apart now.

2 I. Krastev, "Putin Lives in Historic Analogies and Metaphors" [Interview by L. Gorris], *Spiegel International*, 17 March 2022, https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/ivan-krastev-on-russia-s-invasion-of-ukraine-putin-lives-in-historic-analogies-and-metaphors-a-1d043090-1111-4829-be90-c20fd5786288?sara_ecid=nl_upd_1jtzCCTmXpVo9GAZr2b4X8GquyeAc9&nlid=bfjppqhxz&fbclid=IwAR2__JgKN5_tw8RIZHGSp8Bri8IMLtwAVhWTCUHOSF1PSIf06EaPhRxYmRM

Edwin Bendyk

I would like to ask you about the conception of Ukraine and Russia as brotherly nations, which was even picked up by President Emmanuel Macron, for which he was strongly criticised. Vira Ageyeva's works show that, at least in culture, it is not a case of closeness, but conflict. Is it the expression of fundamental difference, or of something known in psychiatry as the "narcissism of small differences", which deepens conflict? How should we view the Ukrainians' distinctiveness from the Russians?

Vira Ageyeva

The conception of brotherly nations was not shaped by the Ukrainians; it was done by the Russians. If we look at how our culture developed, identity is shaped by the imagination of the other – the one we model ourselves on. For Ukrainian culture, that "other" has always been the Russian. If we consider this in the historical context, during the 17th century, Ukrainian intellectuals set out to modernise Moscow and decided to carry this light. They succumbed to the illusion that they could get closer to Moscow and create a unified Orthodox nation with it. Looking at all the attempts to modernise Ukrainian identity chronologically means considering famous moments in history: first the Brotherhood of Cyril and Methodius, then the Old Hromada of Kyiv, Volodymyr Antonovych and the design of Ukraine, the liberation struggles during the 1920s, and so on.

In each of these moments in history, attempts to modernise Ukrainian identity were always associated with a pro-Western and pro-European attitude. These efforts were never Russia-oriented. For example, what did the members of the Brotherhood of Cyril and Methodius wish to achieve? They were striving for a Slavic alliance and federation of Slavic nations to put a stop to Russia's dominating role. I always say that we have the world's most "literary" money, as it is dominated by portraits of writers. Not long ago, we saw posters portraying Taras Shevchenko, Ivan Franko and Lesya Ukrainka in gas masks in the streets of Kyiv. Like in any colonised culture, literary figures played a huge role. Today we rarely encounter a narrative as anti-Russian as that of Taras Shevchenko, which was established in the second half of the 19th century.

Ukrainian literature and culture entered the 19th century with Ivan Kotliarevsky's *Eneid*. There have been many travesties of Virgil, but it has only become a canonical text in Ukraine. Kotliarevsky's *Eneid* is the story of a lost fatherland and the search for it, which is clearly visible in the text, when it refers to the burning of Troy by the Greeks. Kotliarevsky was a nobleman from the Poltava region, who was born during Hetman times and wrote the *Eneid* under the Russian Empire. Writing about burnt-down Troy, he was thinking about burnt-down Baturyn, the capital of the Hetmanate, which was part of living collective memory then. With Kotliarevsky's *Eneid*, and its motif of the lost fatherland that needs to be found and rebuilt, Ukrainian culture entered the 19th century, the century of nationalism. It emerged from the 19th century with a similar motif of Troy, this time in Lesya Ukrainka's *Cassandra*. This was a timely text about the need to use the sword to defend the fatherland, and it remains so. Lesya Ukrainka looks for that sword – and does not find it. In both the 19th and 20th century, the enemy, the other, was the *Moskal* – the Russian soldier.

Any attempts to modernise Ukrainian identity have always had a European and Western orientation – Occidentalism. This is confirmed by all the canonical works. Surprise at the Euromaidan and the Ukrainians' reluctance to be the Russians' brotherly nation is therefore purely the result of ignorance. At the start of the 1990s, the Ukrainian nation was seen as one that had emerged from nowhere. This is solely the result of ignorance. Nothing happens without being rooted in the past – the model of the old Kyiv community, the Kyiv Hromada Society, and the model offered by Dnipro Ukraine. From the

start of the 20th century, a string of intellectuals were able to initiate cooperation between Galicia and Dnipro Ukraine, as Ukraine was already consolidated enough at the time.

Today we hear that the Donbas is not Ukraine, that Kharkiv is not Ukraine – this is funny. The irony of history reveals itself in how, today, Russian-speaking regions are being shelled the hardest and Russian-speaking cities are the most involved in the fighting. Language is a very important factor but not the only one. Today both the invaders and the defenders speak the same language, Russian, but it does not mean that they can communicate.

Edwin Bendyk

The idea, popular among publicists, of an “unexpected nation” that rises up and reveals itself during revolutions has been mentioned here. Mykola Ryabchuk mentioned Ivan Krastev, but the claim that a new Ukrainian nation that had not existed before revealed itself during the Maidans, or during the war, was rather popular. This discussion conveys ignorance and lack of knowledge about what came before. What are we experiencing right now, in terms of the historical process? What kind of moment is it, and what is being expressed? When we speak to Ukrainian experts, the Ukrainians themselves are surprised by many things, such as their resistance to the invasion or their ability to defend themselves. This is not only about the social dimension, self-organisation, but also about the state. Even in the Ukrainians’ consciousness, it was interpreted as rather weak, in terms of its ability to coordinate efforts throughout the country. Yet Ukraine has turned out to be extraordinarily strong, not just in military terms, but in how infrastructure and the banking system have been maintained. It all works and enables things to function in very tough conditions.

What has been revealed, in terms of the historical process? Should we be surprised? Is it a natural consequence of earlier stages?

Andriy Portnov

I am currently lecturing in Germany, so I can intuitively say more about the changes taking place in the Germans’ consciousness than draw categorical conclusions about those in the Ukrainian consciousness. It seems to me that the time for historians to analyse what we have experienced is yet to come. It has not come yet. Right now, we are commenting on current events and the story unfolding, which we are all living through. None of us is Cassandra; we cannot say what will happen tomorrow, the day after, and in the future. We can only speculate.

In this way, I am relativising my views somewhat and can risk a working hypothesis, which is seemingly paradoxical. In my view, this weakness – speaking metaphorically – of the post-Soviet Ukrainian state has turned out to be its strength. Many decisions – about the army, politics and business matters – were made at the local level, which is what enabled Ukraine to survive and resist the invasion during the worst first days of the war, which nobody in the West believed in. I would go even further and say that this concerns the level of national identity that Mykola Ryabchuk – my favourite author writing on the topic, I confess – spoke about beautifully, too.

If Ukraine were a clearly defined, certain and stable community spanning such a large territory, it would lean more towards the horrible and deeply archaic patterns that its neighbour’s ruler invented and recreated. He has recreated Khomyakov and Solzhenitsyn. There is nothing new here; it has been obsolete for so long that it is frightening. In Ukraine, he encountered a diverse, pluralistic and,

at times, slightly disoriented society that found its response to this primitive challenge of external aggression, which boiled down to loyalty to the Ukrainian state.

In Germany, I am trying to push the thesis that, already before the war, Ukraine was a relatively rare example in contemporary Europe of a diverse, pluralistic society capable of responding to horrible, brutal, external aggression. When I say “before the war”, I have in mind 2014, because that is when the war began, and the start of the massive attack. In my view, this is where Ukraine differs from Poland, which is much more homogenous in every possible sense: language, religion, economically and politically. For many years, this kind of homogeneity seemed to us to be the ideal that we aspired to. It turned out that our lack of homogeneity and our diversity came to our rescue.

Edwin Bendyk

In her book *Felix Austria*³ (which was named the BBC Ukrainian Book of the Year), Sofia Andrukhovych invokes a concept alive in Poland, too: the memory of Galicia and mutual relations. How do these experiences – along with the “other”, in the form of Poland and the Poles – exist in the shaping of consciousness? We have spoken about the conflict with Russian culture and the “other” expressed through the Russian empire. Yet the Republic of Poland, as a second empire, is an irremovable backdrop, too. Later, the partitions and references to Austria complicate the whole situation.

How was the book received, not only in Galicia, but in eastern Ukraine? Do readers there understand it, as members of the same nation and the same culture?

Sofia Andrukhovych

This is about different influences on Ukrainian identity. When I was working on the novel *Felix Austria*, in my case, it was about a not-fully-conscious identity. If it can ever be made fully conscious, that is – identity is a matter and structure constantly being shaped, alive, changeable and difficult to capture. I was interested in the subject as one of the many myths that act as a counterweight to the Soviet and Russian influence on Ukrainian identity. Writing the novel, I wanted to deconstruct this myth, too. Perhaps I did not do it sharply or unequivocally enough, but that is what I was after. I used historical circumstances as a kind of decoration then. When the novel was published and I was answering questions about the text, I understood that I had actually been writing about the emergence of identity.

Now I would like to look at the problem of identity more broadly. People tend to be more or less aware of it. They can receive it from their parents, it is shaped by the environment that they grow up in, by the place where they are born and live. At some point, I started wondering why this problem interests me so much. Having lived in Kyiv for over 15 years, I had acquired broader opportunities to observe people from central Ukraine and other regions. Only then, the subject of Ukrainian identity became important for me. My next novel, *Suzirya Kurky*, has a complicated structure; it combines various national traumas and parts of various Ukrainian identities.

As Mykola Ryabchuk said, Ukrainians differ greatly. I also agree with what Andriy Portnov said about how this diversity has, in a way, turned out to be the Ukrainians’ strength. I would attempt to formulate it as follows: the Ukrainians share an ability to tolerate differences. Of course, radical moods arise at some point and there are examples of certain things not being accepted, but we are able to accept

3 S. Andrukhovych, *Фелікс Австрія*, Lviv 2014 (Polish translation: *Felix Austria*, translated by K. Kotyńska, Wołowiec 2016).

and take in the differences at the same time. Kyiv is an example of bilingualism where it is completely normal to have conversations in which one person speaks Ukrainian and the other replies in Russian. This is an example of how our differences coexist. This is why we are able to stick together.

The novel *Felix Austria* was published in 2014, when the war in the east began. At the time, more people started asking themselves who we are, why everything is happening this way, why this war is underway, and so on. Mutual interest appeared and Ukraine's regions began to take an interest in each other. This did not stem from good circumstances; many IDPs who had fled eastern Ukraine and come west appeared at the time. In this way, this acquaintanceship was made or continued in a somewhat clearer way.

In western Ukraine, my novel was less interesting because readers were familiar with the circumstances and decorations. In the context of the historical period, the novel did not add anything new. However, readers from central Ukraine and other regions were drawn to it. They sometimes complained that the language can be incomprehensible, that the dialectisms create problems, but many of them discovered something new about Ukraine's history for themselves, which they had not identified with earlier. This is how the film adaptation of the novel emerged: it was created by people with no links to Galicia. They were inspired by the idea of seeing Ukraine in a new, different context.

Edwin Bendyk

We have mainly spoken about the conflict with Russian culture, pointing out the difference, and how some Russians do not recognise the Ukrainian nation's distinctiveness. There are also many Russians who view Ukraine kindly and notice this difference. Though they trigger certain problems, too. I am thinking about Dmitri Bykov, who announced in *Novaya Gazeta* that the end of the project of Moscovite Russia has come and that this is the time for Ukraine and Kyivan Rus' to lead. Writing about this, Yuliya Latynina, Yaroslav Hrytsak and Oleksandr Irvanets did not hide their emotions towards Russian intellectuals. They replied that they do not wish to be incorporated into the Slavic world leadership myths that organise the Russian imagination – instead, they want to continue their march towards the West and be a normal Western society.

What myths organise the Ukrainians' imagination, regardless of the diversity discussed here? What kinds of historical moments? The Holodomor? The Chernobyl of 1986 described by Oksana Zabuzhko? The myth of the Heavenly Hundred after the Euromaidan in 2014? What is a carrier of identity that everyone can appeal to without falling into the trap of Russian mythology, which imposes imperial projects?

Andriy Portnov

Unfortunately, all those things described by Dmitri Bykov are very typical. I remember the discussions in Germany with many Russian liberals who said roughly the same. I told them that this kind of thesis negates Ukraine's agency. The task ahead is to take Ukraine's cultural and political agency seriously, not just the fact that Ukrainian statehood exists. That is not enough. It is a matter of accepting that we have a separate, independent Ukrainian culture, a separate historical tradition, and so on. This is obviously a process that will go on. I think that this process will also be continued in Russia, despite the terrifying propaganda. We should not react to Bykov's ideas too sharply, as that adds gravity to that kind of statement.

The factors that unite us are a rather complex issue. For the purposes of our discussion, I will share a thought that might be disputed, but has the right to be spoken. As a historian, it seems to me that historical motifs are not at all what unites Ukraine – and there is nothing bad about this. We have different views on Khmelnytsky or Bandera, we see various figures differently, and that is great. Once, during Leonid Kuchma’s presidency, a national idea, a pantheon of unquestionable saints was supposed to be created. I do not think that is necessary. Of course, a literary canon is different. We have textbooks that present a selection of heroes from the history of literature. It seems to me that contemporary Ukraine, especially in the context of the war, is not defined by a common history or historical figures.

This is interesting for me in purely analytical terms, though. For example, when I listen to President Zelensky’s Easter speech, in which he invokes Kyivan Rus’. This is interesting, because Kyivan Rus’ is actually a problem for the Ukrainian national movement. As recently as the 19th century, some activists believed that more should be said about Kyivan Rus’, while others said the opposite: “Let’s leave Kyivan Rus’ and speak about our nation.” Now President Zelensky is evoking Kyivan Rus’, speaking about Saint Sophia Cathedral and the battle against the Pechenegs. Meanwhile, these are not the things that define our stance on Zelensky and the war, although it is interesting for me as a historian.

Edwin Bendyk

Did any moments – never mind the names of the heroes – offer a breakthrough and reveal this formative process? For example, to echo Oksana Zabukhko, the Holodomor, Chernobyl or the Maidans? How important were they? How did they enable Ukrainians to look at themselves?

Andriy Portnov

In my opinion, moments like the Khmelnytsky Uprising and what Mazepa did by joining the Swedes’ side, or the Holodomor or cultural events, only became relevant in subsequent generations’ consciousness. And that is normal. Their significance only appeared in a different historical context. For this reason, it is obvious to me that, in the same way, only certain figures or aspects of contemporary events will be selected; for example, the defence of Mariupol will be a symbol in national mythology. This always happens.

In terms of history, Galicia has had a very big influence on me; I always say this and am proud of it. My teacher from Lviv, Yaroslav Isayevich, often said: “Andriy, history is just total chaos. Later, from this chaos, academics, writers and politicians select motifs and build, construct a certain historical line.” That was once the case and still is now.

Vira Ageyeva

I will return to the thesis about Russian liberals. I would like to cite a prominent Ukrainian writer, one of the leaders of the Ukrainian People’s Republic, Volodymyr Vynnychenko, who, taking into account his own bitter experiences as a politician, once said that Russian democracy always ends on the Ukrainian issue. This was confirmed by 20th century history in its entirety. Russian history rarely and reluctantly recognised itself as an empire. To me it is obvious that an empire is collapsing today, and empires rarely collapse without bloodshed. All the Russian leaders, without exception, have claimed in public and outright – without further ado – that the Russian empire cannot exist without Ukraine. The

loss of Ukraine is therefore the loss of empire status. We are the gates of Europe, a frontline state, we must repel the enemy; we have no other way out.

I would like to highlight two issues. Firstly, the above-mentioned conception of the two Ukraines, in the sense of Galicia versus Dnipro Ukraine. This conception is difficult for me to accept. We can ask: when did Kyiv become the centre of Russian culture? Did we have a prominent Russian literary figure in Kyiv? The immediate reply is Mikhail Bulgakov, but he left Kyiv in 1921. Ukrainian was the language of the street and, in Kyiv, we have a very significant Polish component. Not just in Kyiv, but also in all Dnipro Ukraine; for example, in Uman. All of right-bank Ukraine had a significant Polish component. To establish the Ukrainian People's Republic and create the Ukrainian culture of the 1920s, the Polish *Chłopomani*⁴ also got very strongly involved. Moreover, during the whole Soviet 20th Century, Warsaw was a bridge used by, say, our literary figures during the 1960s, who read European philosophers – Sartre and others – in Polish translation. We should not succumb to the illusion that comes from ignorance, imposed on us by Russian ignorance, that Kyiv was ever a centre of Russian culture. Kyiv was never a centre of Russian culture.

The second issue is our historians' fault. Today, atrocities have taken place in Borodyanka or Bucha – and nobody realised that the Russians are capable of such brutality. Meanwhile, it is nothing new. In 1918, Muravyov did exactly the same in Kyiv as what happened in Bucha and Borodyanka. In 1918, there was a total manifestation of hatred towards everything Ukrainian. Nevertheless, the Ukrainian People's Republic survived. I recall the parade organised outside Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv when the Polish and Ukrainian troops liberated Kyiv from the Bolsheviks. Our most prominent bard at the time, one of our key poets, Pavlo Tychyna, stood on the stand by Saint Sophia Cathedral and promised that we would beat the red rabble. This had an aftermath: later, under the pressure of the Stalinist terror, he submitted an autocritique and wrote socialist realist poetry. In 1918, at the time of the Ukrainian People's Republic, we experienced all the brutality of Russian policy towards Ukraine. At the time, Ukraine lost the war, but managed to save its cultural sovereignty. Where did 1927 come from? Where did 1933 and the famine come from? What about the execution of the intelligentsia? Russia was unable to destroy the Ukrainian opposition in any other way.

Today, we are speaking about differences. People are surprised now – and I am slightly surprised, too – that Russian-speaking Kharkiv, which only recently was unable to decide to take down the statue of Marshal Zhukov, is now defending itself zealously and repelling the enemy in every possible way. Kharkiv, which has finally become Ukrainian. Yet here, too, nothing simply happens. We must not forget that, in the 1920s, Kharkiv was a centre of Ukrainian culture. Ukraine was diverse and experienced a variety of influences. Later, over a hundred years, there were attempts to convince us – and especially our neighbours – that Ukraine has always been just a part of Russia. Yet Ukraine was never fully Russia-oriented; it was Russia that exerted pressure and forced many things to happen.

Our huge task for the future is to work on showing Polish-Ukrainian relations, which were very significant. In the 20th century, we owed a lot to the Poles. I think that Mykola Ryabchuk will confirm just how much literature he got to know in Polish translation. For this reason, we have no grounds to speak of the hegemony of Russian culture in Ukraine.

4 *Chłopomania* or *Khlopomanstvo* (Ukrainian: Хлопоманство) are historical and literary terms inspired by the Young Poland modernist movement and the Ukrainian *Hromady*. The expressions refer to the intelligentsia's fascination with, and interest in, the peasantry in late-19th-century Galicia and right-bank Ukraine (translator's note).

We have already mentioned Chernobyl and the catastrophe of 1986 experienced by the Ukrainian nation. Everybody was well aware who had caused these catastrophes. Who had designed a nuclear power plant next to Kyiv, with its millions of inhabitants. Who shot the Ukrainian cultural elite dead in 1937 – if only Captain Matveyev, who went down in history in this way. Ukraine is very diverse, experiences many influences and is made up of many cultural components. Yet I do not think that history only influences our present to a small extent, as Andriy Portnov said. Here, I think that our family's history allows each of us to reflect. We did not have this in public discussions, but I always knew that my grandmother almost died in 1933, surviving thanks to a handful of silver that they managed to keep. This memory lived on in every family; traumatic experiences were passed on, and the organisers of all of this were aware of it, too. The view that the Ukrainians were hugely dependent on Russia's influence is another illusion imposed by Russia.

Regarding Kyivan Rus', it is worth mentioning Viktor Petrov-Domontovych, one of the most eminent Ukrainian writers to this day, an archaeologist by profession. In one of his novels, he focused on how, in the 1920s, the myth of the Cossacks was subjected to reflection and re-evaluation, and the heritage of Kyivan Rus', but also of Ukraine as part of antiquity – the cities on the Black Sea, the polis, the influence of the route from the Varangians to the Greeks – was introduced into the model of identity. In the 20th century, Ukraine often saw itself in more modern models, as a community on the edge of civilisation. Its place in the history of antiquity, the Western context and Western culture were recalled, while pushing back against Russian influences.

Edwin Bendyk

I have asked about the reception of the book *Felix Austria* beyond Galicia, in eastern and central Ukraine. Yet Sofia Andrukhovych's books have been translated into other languages, prompting reactions from readers in other countries. What is surprising and what is irritating here? To what extent do readers understand that Ukraine is a separate culture? Is Ukraine often confused with Russia?

Sofia Andrukhovych

Sometimes, readers come to a reading without knowing much about Ukraine; they want to find out more. Yet things are changing when it comes to knowledge about Ukraine. Especially in recent years, after the Orange Revolution and the Revolution of Dignity, people know much more about the country. Sometimes, I encounter stereotypes; I am asked about the Ukrainian language and Russian, about the conflict with the nationalists, about radical views in Ukraine, about the influence of Russian culture, and to what extent Ukrainian culture can exist at all without Russian culture. However, I have been fortunate to meet people who did not articulate these questions aggressively. I tried to reply then, always explaining – each of us should try to formulate things in a way that is easier to understand. This is always an opportunity to understand oneself better. This kind of reflection helps us better understand our own history, the situation's complexity and adversities, while becoming more certain about specific issues.

Edwin Bendyk

How are cultural figures reacting? Serhiy Zhadan said that he is incapable of writing; he is helping and organising defence efforts in Kharkiv. Andriy Lubka responded in a similar way. Oleksandr Irvanets tried to describe what was happening, until he had to flee Irpin. Some are trying to bear witness.

How can this be assessed? To what extent does the war already have some kind of artistic expression, whether in literature or other art forms?

Sofia Andrukhovych

This situation will surely become a major source of creativity in various arts. Right now, events are moving very rapidly and I know from my own experience how difficult it is to create. Especially during the first month, when there was a sense of helplessness and how words cannot communicate anything, cannot convey anything; how you might not even have the right to create when people are suffering and dying. This changes with time and you realise that, regardless of how weak the attempts are, you cannot escape them anyway. It is a need; both creators' and society's. Artistic work will only begin to emerge after a certain amount of time, once there is some distance from what is happening now.

Right now, events are being documented. I am writing essays. I am writing sketches of meetings, observations about people's stories. I am simply collecting, accumulating and, in some way, trying to process this, to the extent that it is possible at the moment. I was struck by what I found out about certain Ukrainian artists and photographers from various cities in Ukraine. The whole milieu gathered in Ivano-Frankivsk, even though they are very different, independently from each other, to work on the subject of trauma and of the death of Ukrainians, as well as on the death of the people who came to kill Ukrainians. This is about different attitudes to death and an attempt to find deeper things.

Everywhere, the media is repeating that people must not take photos, especially of objects linked to the army. Most people pay considerable attention to this; you cannot simply take photos when you are in the right mood. One Ukrainian photographer, who got rid of his way of expressing himself, began to seek ways to exist now and live through what is happening. He makes collages out of photos that already exist in the media; in his own way, he is processing them and telling a story about what is happening now.

Edwin Bendyk

I would like to return to the theme of a historical process that is difficult to capture as it is happening because it is chaotic. Yet in 2013, on the Maidan, I was aware that we could see what was happening. Of course, nobody knew what the Maidan's outcome would be and that a massacre would take place in February 2014. The following could be seen: the process of building awareness, discovering each other, and discovering that Russian-speaking Ukrainians think about Ukraine in the same way as those who came to the Maidan from the west. It could be seen that, in various *sotnyas*, they form a single political nation. Do you see a new way of understanding yourselves and new elements of truth about this identity now, too?

Mykola Ryabchuk

This is undoubtedly a gradual process of national maturation and building self-awareness. As I have already said, this process has deep, old foundations, as nobody got rid of local patriotism; it has always existed and is, to a large extent, exactly what we are seeing in south-eastern Ukraine. Suddenly this Sovietised and Russified population – as it seemed to us – is opposing Russian aggression very bravely, with major sacrifice. It should be remembered that every revolution was a minority

movement. A small percentage of Ukrainians took part in those events and not even an overwhelming majority supported them.

The history of independent Ukraine is an interesting phenomenon that shows how this active, charismatic minority has pushed Ukraine forward, towards Europe, and gradually pulled the majority onto its side. How that minority became the majority. If we chart events from 1990 or 1991 onwards, when there was little of this conscious Ukrainianness: just 20-25%, roughly a quarter, of the votes were for Chornovil, against the renewed Soviet Union envisioned by Gorbachev. That was how our active civil society could be measured then. Colossal changes took place, which were visible in 2013-2014 and are now irreversible. Through self-identification, the minority is becoming the majority in the political sense of the word.

In principle, I agree with everything that has been said here. I would just like to rectify that I do not believe that Galicia was better than the Dnipro region or *vice versa*. I merely believe that Galicia had better conditions for national and cultural development. Yet I am aware that the modern Ukrainian project started in the east, in Kharkiv, where the Ukrainian intelligentsia was. The descendants of the Cossack elders, who became the aristocracy and were Russified, but retained significant pro-Ukrainian sentiment, were there. And that is where that movement began: collecting songs and folklore, publishing dictionaries and writing in the modern Ukrainian language, starting with Kotliarevsky. The project began there, but it could not develop because it was blocked by the Russian empire. For this reason, Ukrainians-awakeners had to publish in Galicia and go there for work.

Galicia played the role of a training ground, but the idea could not be born there, as there were only peasants; there was no big layer of Ukrainian aristocracy like the one that had survived in the east, with its heritage and tradition. We were carrying out an eastern Ukrainian project that Galicia accepted. Galicia borrowed eastern Ukrainian names that did not exist there. When, towards the end of the 19th century, the theatre in Przemyśl put on Kotliarevsky's play *Natalka Poltavka*, they had to translate the names – Natalka was changed to Marichka, because the Galician audience did not understand this foreign name.

There has been a series of paradoxical occurrences of this kind. This project was consistently carried out in the west, in eastern Ukrainian form. Even the Cossack heritage was accepted, even though it was completely hostile to the Uniate population of Galicia, because at one point – let's call things by their name – the Cossacks slaughtered them. For them, they were greater traitors and enemies than the Catholics. All this is complicated and complex. Ukraine is interesting precisely because it is diverse and capable of creating something original, unique and alive out of this diversity, which we are in awe of. When everyone was writing about the dysfunctionality of this state and identity-based divisions, it turned out that, while Ukraine really is fragmented, it is not divided. I think that this is the biggest paradox and our biggest success. We have just one caveat: I believe that we should not succumb to the other extreme and euphoria. Of course, we have problems – huge ones still lie ahead of us. That is unavoidable. I have written about this in many texts: we are heading in our own direction and, regardless of all the zigzags, everything is happening normally and we will win.

Edwin Bendyk

I would like to move away from history and seeking the sources of identity in the past, and invoke the subject of our previous debate, where we spoke about plans for the future.⁵ What should Ukraine look like after the war? This is not just an intellectual debate; specific projects are being discussed. The Verkhovna Rada's committee for economic development has adopted the assumptions of the plan presented by Deputy Prime Minister Yulia Svyrydenko. To what extent can this thinking about the future be seen in culture? Does it explain Ukrainians' optimism, visible in sociological surveys, as they look to the future with hope, convinced that Ukraine will win? Can this be explained by looking at what is happening in Ukrainian culture? What kind of culture does it point to?

Mykola Ryabchuk

I do not attempt to prophesy anything about culture, as this is a secret – even mystical – sphere. Culture has developed in much worse circumstances; it will therefore develop now, too, regardless of the circumstances. Our culture has obtained the authority that it was lacking at every level of society, but it has also expanded to genres where we had a deficit earlier. In recent years, Ukrainian culture has managed to fill the gaps in genres, which is an excellent sign. Today, I observe how, in the international media, Ukraine appears not only as a political reality or state capable of defending itself and fighting, but also as a country of culture. More and more articles about Ukrainian artists and literature are being written, which was not the case earlier. Right now, practically all the Western media outlets feel a need to publish something about Ukrainian theatre or culture. This kind of material makes me very happy. It is a significant phenomenon that enables Ukraine to be discovered in a different way.

In terms of political development, we have a huge opportunity ahead of us, but, as we know, Ukraine never loses an opportunity to waste existing opportunities. This is such a sad saying, but I do not want to complain here. I would like to believe that this time, we will use the opportunity, the credit of trust in the authorities and the state. Ukrainian institutions have never been so trusted. This trust was always rather low, but support has suddenly appeared, and so much of it. The time has finally come to use it. I have lived in an independent Ukraine for thirty years and am constantly hoping that these people will appear: people who are not only interested in making themselves and their entourage rich, but also in leaving some kind of trace in history. This should happen sooner or later; if presidents and political elites are changing constantly, then, statistically speaking, someone will eventually want to become a historical figure, not just have a few more millions. Perhaps that will happen this time. It should happen.

Edwin Bendyk

I agree, there is no way of foreseeing how culture will develop; this is probably the most complex and unpredictable system of all. Yet to what extent does what is happening in culture help understand the future and look to it with hope? Or, on the contrary, to what extent does apocalyptic sentiment dominate? As I mentioned, society is reacting surprisingly positively. Viewed from the outside, nothing would point to this level of optimism. However, this energy is coming from somewhere and here culture matters.

⁵ *Voices of Ukraine #3: Ukraine after the war* [Edwin Bendyk, Andriy Dlihach, Hennadiy Maksak, Maria Repko, Yaroslav Zhalilo], Warsaw 2022, <https://www.batory.org.pl/publikacja/voices-of-ukraine-3-ukraine-after-the-war/>.

Sofia Andrukhovych

I would first like to repeat what Mykola Ryabchuk said about not being charmed, as this optimism and high results in opinion polls are surely linked to the dramatic events in Ukraine, which are triggering huge emotions. Right now, we all remain affected in a certain way, which leads to maximalist views about the future and ourselves. It would be worth calming ourselves down, too. Our desire to look to the future with hope is understandable. Looking at it differently is pointless. In my opinion, Ukrainian culture currently faces the challenge of hard work. Everything will have to be digested. Everything happening at an emotional level, all the traumas we are experiencing, must be subjected to reflection, named, thought through.

I would like the maximalist approach, the radicalisation of expectations, statements and sentiment, to take on many nuances and shades again, so that not everything is black and white. So that Ukrainian artists and cultural activists – and all of us, too – can finally move away from an unequivocal way of seeing reality and return to a more realistic way of experiencing, a more nuanced perspective on reality. This obviously includes unpleasant, self-critical ways, too.

Vira Ageyeva

I would like to speak about three issues.

Firstly, it is difficult to speak about optimism. The very word offends me. A few of the people closest to me have found themselves on the front, so it is difficult to speak of optimism. However, we should speak about hope for the future. I will give you an example. For decades, we had a Russian Drama Theatre named after Lesya Ukrainka in the centre of Kyiv. For years, I sought to convince Kyivan society that this is a disgrace and insult for Lesya Ukrainka. I tried to change it; there were even a few projects, but it did not work out. Recently, walking along Bohdan Khmelnytsky Street, I saw a new, monumental plaque: Drama Theatre named after Lesya Ukrainka. It took bombs and missiles for the theatre itself to reflect and changed its name. For me, this is a sign of what will happen next: people will distance themselves from Russian culture and, for several generations, the influence of Russian culture will decline.

I have been asked what should be done with the statue of Pushkin in Odesa. In my opinion, nothing. A kind of “pushkinopad” [the toppling of statues of Pushkin] has begun. And what should Odesa do? Odesa should remind itself that it had Hollywood on the shore of the Black Sea; that, in the 1920s, it underwent a huge Ukrainian renaissance. In this way, Odesa will have its national myth. Every major Ukrainian city should remind itself of its Ukrainian history. We should tell ourselves about our culture, because we know very little about it. We did not have a cultural policy, but we should. We should explain to the Donbas why a huge number of dissidents came from there in the 1960s; most of them, including Vasyl Stus,⁶ were from the Donbas. We should tell the whole world about us – this is our duty. I hope that we win and this happens.

Andriy Portnov

I will not speak about the future. I have noted that, in Ukrainian history, this moment of waiting for a miracle is nothing new. We experienced it during the Orange Revolution and the Maidan, as well

⁶ He was born in Podolia (a historic region located in the west-central and south-western parts of Ukraine and in northeastern Moldova), but the family moved to Donetsk (note from the editors)

as the election of President Petro Poroshenko, which was also seen as a miracle. We hoped that Poroshenko would quickly end the war and solve all the problems. Later, we saw Zelensky's election as a miracle. This waiting for a miracle keeps returning to us, in a different context, of course. In my opinion, this is good information. This hope is our resource. Yet the question remains: what will our political elites do with this? I think we should monitor this both internally and from the outside. This is my feeling as a citizen of Ukraine.

In terms of culture, I like what Mykola Ryabchuk said. A window of opportunity has opened now. I do not think it will last indefinitely, but it currently exists. I will use a specific example. My German friends published a translation of the novel *The City* by Valerian Pidmohylny, which sold out within a week. If the book had been published three months ago, few people would have bought it. Right now, we should use this window as effectively and wisely as possible. If someone has translations of the works of Viktor Petrov-Domontovych, Mykola Zerov, Oswald Burhardt or other Ukrainian literary figures ready, they should publish them right now, because the window remains open and we must use this opportunity. If we miss this opportunity, it will be too late. The context will become less favourable for us. I would like to stress this once more, directing my words to all my friends in Ukraine and beyond: we should take advantage of this situation. I hope it works out.

Edwin Bendyk

With this, our discussion is coming to an end. May this window be open as wide and as long as possible – and be used in the best possible way. May this result in victory for you and for all of us, as this is not only a war between Ukraine and Russia; the conflict has a much bigger dimension, which many things depend on. May this tragedy end as quickly as possible.

Vira Ageyeva (Віра Агеєва) – literary scholar and doctor of philology associated with the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. Winner of the Shevchenko Prize (1996) and the Petro Mohyla Prize (2008). Member of the BBC Book of the Year jury. Co-founder of the Kyiv Institute of Gender Studies. Many of her works focus on gender identity and the complexity of relations between the sexes, but she is also a recognised researcher on 20th century Ukrainian prose, especially by members of the Executed Renaissance.

Sofia Andrukhovych (Софія Андрухович) – Ukrainian writer, translator and essayist. Author of the books *Літо Мілени* (Milena's Summer, 2002), *Старі люди* (Old People, 2003), *Жінки їхніх чоловіків* (Wives of Their Husbands, 2005, Polish edition 2007), *Сьомга* (Siomha, 2007), *Фелікс Австрія* (Felix Austria, 2014), *Сузір'я Курки* (Hen Constellation, 2016) and *Амадока* (Amadoka, 2020). Co-editor of the *Chetver* literary journal and translator of books by Manuela Gretkowska, J.K. Rowling, Nick Davies, Gregor Dallas, Peter Taylor, Jennifer Egan and Ayn Rand. Winner of the Smoloskyp Poetry Award (2001), the LitAkcent of the Year award (2014), the BBC Book of the Year (2014) and the Joseph Conrad Korzeniowski Literary Prize (2015), among others.

Edwin Bendyk – head of the Stefan Batory Foundation. Journalist, publicist and writer. Until recently, he ran the science section of the Polityka weekly. He lectures at the Graduate School for Social Research at the Polish Academy of Sciences and Collegium Civitas, where he was one of the founders of the Centre for Future Studies.

Andriy Portnov (Андрій Портнов) – historian, essayist and editor. Professor of Ukrainian History at the European University Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder), director of the PRISMA UKRAÏNA – Research Network Eastern Europe centre for analysis in Berlin, member of the Ukrainian PEN Club and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Osteuropakunde. He has written six monographs and over 200 articles, chapters and book reviews. His research focuses on the Polish-Russian-Ukrainian triangle of history and memory, genocide and memory, Ukrainian and Soviet historiography, the Ukrainian emigration in interwar Europe, the partitions of Poland, and the Russian Empire's Ukrainian policy.

Mykola Ryabchuk (Микола Рябчук) – poet, writer of prose, literary critic, translator, specialist on culture and political scientist. He is known for his analysis and essays on Ukrainian politics, national identity and history from a postcolonial perspective. Honorary president of the Ukrainian PEN Club, researcher at the Institute of Political and Ethnic Studies at the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, and lecturer at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv and the Centre for East European Studies at the University of Warsaw. He has received the award for best article of the year several times, and *From Malorossiya to Ukraine* and *Two Ukraines* were named “Book of the Year” in Ukraine. Winner of the Polish-Ukrainian Reconciliation Award (2002), among others. In 2022, he was awarded the Shevchenko National Prize.

Stefan Batory Foundation

Sapieżyńska 10a
00-215 Warszawa
tel. (48-22) 536 02 00
fax (48-22) 536 02 20
batory@batory.org.pl
www.batory.org.pl

Publication is licensed
under the Creative Commons
Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0
Poland Unported Licence (cc BY-SA 3.0)



Translated by Annabelle Chapman
Edited by Nestor Kaszycki
Warsaw 2022
ISBN 978-83-66544-73-4