

It's Russia and Europe That Have a Problem With Ukraine

Article by Paulina Januszewska, Vasyl Cherepanyn

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Vasyl Cherepanyn is the organiser of the Kyiv Biennial, an international forum for art, knowledge, and politics. In this discussion with Paulina Januszewska, he identifies some of the fundamental misconceptions about Ukrainian identity, history, and culture that prevail in Western discourses, particularly in Europe. These misunderstandings, which are often unwittingly complicit with the narratives circulated by the Kremlin regime, have very real consequences for the population of a country at war.

Paulina Januszewska: According to [Russian President Vladimir] Putin, Ukrainians are a threat to Russians, they are puppets being manipulated by the West. What vision of the world is Russia actually waging war on?

Vasyl Cherepanyn: We can talk endlessly about questions of Ukrainian identity. But it leads nowhere to frame the ongoing war as a clash between two completely different civilisations à la Huntington – Russian and European.

Why?

I would not define this in terms of “values,” but rather in relation to the political nature of Putin’s regime, which has always been based on counter-revolution. This is why he smashed all opposition in his country, occupied Crimea and Donbas, and is now trying to eliminate the country of Maidan by physically exterminating its people. But at the same time, he does not cut himself off from the West.

How so?

Russia has become a kind of caricatured reflection of the West. Russians – whether they like it or not – are in large part Europeans, and the project underpinning their country is, de facto, being adopted from an infamous European tradition. What we are dealing with in Russia at the moment is a new iteration of the well-known Western historical phenomenon – fascism.

During Victory Day, however, Putin said that it was the patriotic duty of his compatriots to “remember those who defeated national socialism.”

In Russia, the narrative that was once used for the post-war defeat of Nazism has been altered to legitimise fascist military dictatorship. Putin uses whatever nomenclature suits him in the moment. However, Russian nationalist rhetoric, which holds Russia to be a separate civilisation and denies that it belongs to Europe, is a broken cliché. It only serves to conceal the fact that Russia is economically and politically a peripheral state. But it is certainly not turning its back on Europe. How could it? Otherwise, why seek allies like

[Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor] Orbán there?

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Hungary is ostracised in the European Union and many say that Orbán himself would gladly abolish the EU. So it could be said that he is aiming at the same goal as his Moscow colleague.

At the same time, Hungary remains in the EU. The Kremlin regime, for its part, generously supports right-wing populists across Europe. They are natural allies. Russian oligarchs do business with the West and, one way or another, fraternise with the establishment there and engage with it culturally. The [narrative of] war against Western civilisation is thus a moribund rhetorical void, tailored to the circumstances of the last century. The world has moved on.

Where is the place for Ukrainian identity, supposedly blindly following European values, in Putin's vision?

Unlike Europeans and Russians, Ukraine has no problem with its identity, because it experienced Maidan. When we talk about recent history, it is Ukraine, not any other country, that has had two successful revolutions. That is a precedent in 21st-century Europe. At the same time, it is an unused opportunity for the West. These achievements have manifested themselves visually, politically, and socially in recent years. They are probably the most powerful feats of self-identification and nation-state building that Ukraine has produced in its entire history.

I don't recall anything like this in Europe since the 19th century, in principle. Everything that has been written in recent decades in terms of self-government and democracy, not just by left-wing political theorists, has suddenly become a reality in Ukraine. It is something that you can observe and also participate in, because it is created from the bottom up, by the people and not by the state apparatus. It is arguably the most successful of the global wave of square-occupation movements, all aiming to overthrow dictatorships. In our case, an authoritarian president.

Why is this revolutionism so incomprehensible to Europe?

Europe and Russia have a similar problem. They are afraid of mass movements, which are alien to them. They are a threat to the existing order, to the political visions that have reigned in Europe or in Russia for years. The last episode of national revivals that embraced the idea of societies striving for self-determination was in 1848.

Since the Spring of Nations, there has been a distance, indeed an unwillingness and reluctance on the part of Europe and then the EU, to accept and incorporate politically the products of the revolutions taking place in the east of the continent, which could disturb the calm of the west.

And in Russia?

In Russia, the Orange Revolution and then Maidan were the worst nightmare for the Kremlin regime, so it launched a counter-revolutionary war – i.e. one designed to invalidate the precedent of a people overthrowing a dictator, and to prevent similar events in Kremlin-controlled territories. This also concerned places such as Syria, which essentially was completely cut off from the effects of the Arab Spring.

Putin, keen to retain a fascist military dictatorship, also has a problem with the Soviet heritage.

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In what way?

Whether we like it or not, the Soviet Union had a revolutionary star pinned to its coat, alongside its stupidity and cruelty associated mainly with the Stalinist era (but not only). Putin, meanwhile, hates revolution. After all, in his infamous Crimean speech and justification for the takeover of Ukrainian territories, he criticised Leninist ideas of national self-determination from a century ago. He declared modern Ukraine an incoherent artificial creation of the Bolsheviks that separated it from Russia. In doing so, he undermined Ukraine's acts of sovereignty – both earlier and contemporary.

He is trying to thwart new popular movements by intervening in the other former Soviet republics under the banner of the mock-NATO Collective Security Treaty Organisation. The January intervention in Kazakhstan is a prime example of this. This is precisely why Putin cannot stand us: because we have built the strongest identity and autonomy following the collapse of the USSR. But he is paradoxically strengthening it himself.

Is that how you see the current invasion too?

After the initial shock on 24 February, Ukraine responded almost immediately with resolute, all-encompassing opposition to the violation of its integrity. This military uprising was in part spontaneous, but we also knew that there was a struggle built into the revolution that had already been going on for eight years. We knew that sooner or later we would have to fight for it.

We already saw in Maidan that change does not only happen in a non-violent way. Today, unfortunately, we are paying a huge cost with the unimaginable scale of cruelty shown by the Russian side. In these circumstances, inaction by the West is unacceptable.

It is not idleness, though.

Western Europe, and above all its ruling class, remains unready to embrace the experience of eastern Europe – not only Ukraine's, but even Poland's. It is illegible to them. The division of the continent, as we all knew for years, basically never ceased to exist. That is why in

Germany, the Netherlands, or France a blind eye is turned to what is happening today in my country or yours.

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From 1989 onwards, it was thought that all transformations would take place naturally and spontaneously, that the states liberated from Soviet rule would smoothly assimilate the West's political-social-economic package (with the emphasis on the latter). Nonetheless, eastern Europe was still treated as a semi-periphery in order to maintain a degree of neutrality towards Russia, with which the EU does business.

But this strategy – one mainly of cold calculation and economic gain – is already running out of steam and shows the weakness of the European project. And it is also the driving force behind Russian propaganda, which should basically be seen as a military offensive via the media. The information creators, journalists, etc., working for the Putin regime are essentially soldiers. They simply operate on a different front. Meanwhile, Europe – from behind a supposedly demolished wall – watches the escalating cycle of Russian crimes in Ukraine.

But Europe and the US have imposed unprecedented, solidarity-based sanctions on Russia. They are supplying Ukraine with financial aid and weapons. Sometimes faster, sometimes slower. What should they do? Attack Russia?

It was symptomatic indeed how quickly the Ukrainian call for a no-fly zone became virtually utopian. Now, even a request for necessary armaments, which have been stored in Western warehouses for years, is often “mission impossible.” We cannot even expect the West, with all its capabilities, to show enough courage to step in and prevent further atrocities. We know very well the “no NATO intervention” argument, but how does this inertness affect the state of democracy as such? What does observing the unbearable do to the condition of European societies? Or is Ursula von der Leyen and Josep Borell's visit to Bucha, surrounded by the corpses of the tortured and killed Ukrainians in black bags, bearable? What would then be unbearable? More corpses? Without bags? Russia's use of chemical weapons? A tactical nuclear strike?

The least the EU must do now in political terms is immediately grant Ukraine official European membership. That's the most needed political step to counter Russia's war of aggression in order to protect not only Ukraine but also a united Europe as a peace project built on the outcomes of World War II. With Ukraine, the European Union will be different – and it should be! Without Ukraine, the EU will lose not only its future, but also its own past, and there will be neither Europe, nor peace.

Russian crimes also include the destruction of the achievements of Ukrainian culture. You are a co-creator of this culture, in particular as the head of the Visual Culture Centre in Kyiv. What mark have the last few years left on culture?

Enormous. I should say that the peculiarity of our culture is that it cannot be detached from a particular socio-political context. This is reflected in the artistic directions taken and the way art is made in general. In the 1990s, Ukrainian artists drew heavily on the waves of the late USSR. But since the first Maidan in 2004, they have shaped their own trends. We are also distinguished by the fact that our culture has primarily been created by Ukrainian society and not by the state.

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Does Ukraine lack supportive cultural institutions for artists?

It has some, but they are only in their infancy and they do not determine what culture looks like. Some have simply come from grassroots initiatives. Instead, a huge role has been played by collective action, self-organisation, and political engagement. Art is coming off the walls of museums and out into the street. In fact, it is present in all kinds of spaces and in a wide array of forms. Or, to put it the other way round, it is everywhere and does not always find its way into institutions. Artistic endeavours are closely linked to the documentation of real events and to activism. They are also very present in the visual layer shown in social media or public art – from posters, to performances, to various forms of manifestos or protest actions. This ensures that curators and artists are neither individualists nor “art people.” They are citizens and activists who are forming a community and acting in its interests. This would not be possible without the revolutionary experience, which, in addition to its very serious nature, is also extremely creative. It is a very fruitful field for artistic experiments.

I know that in the context of the war this question may sound controversial. But can the last eight years in Ukrainian culture then be called a time of rebirth?

Definitely yes, which does not mean that it has been a renaissance devoid of challenges and difficulties. I think it has also been accompanied by a great deal of authenticity that outweighs the creation itself. It comes from a unique experience and manifests itself in a sort of visual counterattack against external adversity. Hence the great explosion of interest in documentary film and its various hybrids.

It's a bit like video in the Poland of the 1990s. In Ukraine's post-2014 cultural landscape, marked by a military and propaganda attack from Russia, documentary cinema and visual arts occupy a lot of space. By recording reality, they play an important role in reliable storytelling. This has also allowed artists to show alternative forms of narrating to the mainstream media. In this sense, Ukrainian culture has developed lots of important instruments that can now be used by artists in western Europe, where state patronage allows art to be detached from other contexts or shapes it for its needs.

Is there also a therapeutic element in the work that Ukrainian artists do?

In a post-Soviet country, reworking the past seems inevitable. Ukrainians have a rather complicated relationship with their Sovietness, which is reflected in the culture. It does not surprise me that this is so difficult for those in Europe to understand, including in progressive circles. The Western Left and the Eastern Left are not only two different concepts, but also different attitudes and experiences.

What do you mean by different attitudes?

Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the East European left, where it's sensible, like in Poland, rather follows the political principle best expressed by Australian aboriginal activists: "If you have come here to help me, then don't waste your time, but if you have come here, because your liberation is bound up with mine, then come, let us join in the struggle together." Whereas the Western Left has fallen victim to its own narcissism and dogmatic fetishism. Challenged by Russia's unprovoked war of aggression, it has resorted to a typical Trumpian argument of "both sides are guilty," accusing NATO and the US of making it all happen. In an exemplary Westsplaining mode, the Western Left has been so obsessed with its own bubble that it couldn't even imagine that there might be a much worse imperial villain than its usual set of hateful idols.

But shouldn't we be looking for common ground here?

I think we can identify that. But we are not quite able to accept the differences. However, in this respect, it seems to me that the Ukrainian cultural milieu is doing its homework. In the field of education, it is developing ways of approaching the Soviet past, especially concerning the period from the 1920s – that is, the era after the October Revolution – as well as the socialist modernism of the 1960s-80s.

In trying to critically examine our history we find, on the one hand, that we are victims of a new phase of Russian imperialism, and on the other, that we must try to understand the choices and decisions of Ukrainians from that time. This work on the past is also a theme that Ukraine has tackled in the global arena as well – at international exhibitions, biennials, and festivals.

The difference is that in the West, as an artist, you have the unwritten privilege of doing almost anything you want. You can cross certain boundaries and call it transgression, because you are making art and that's it. And there's a certain social consensus around that argument. In Ukraine it looks a bit different.

How so?

When you work in the cultural field, you are actually working in the general societal field. It is much more toxic and prone to attacks and violence.

Like in 2014, when you were beaten outside the Kyiv metro by right-wing radicals.

Yes. We can pretend that we are just artists or curators, but that doesn't change the fact that the actions of most of us have some kind of social and political agency. Our work is not done in a vacuum and it can hold us accountable. This teaches not only courage but also humility and has its pros and cons.

I think that in the West's heavily institutionalised culture, sometimes this protection afforded to culture – removing it from the rules of “ordinary” reality – acts a bit like a golden cage. It's not that artists aren't bound by any rules, but the rules are different and set by patrons.

Patrons?

Even artistic acts of political transgression will prove ineffective and useless in the real world if that is what a patron or a certain institution wants. On the one hand, this way you don't have to worry about your safety on a daily basis. On the other, if you go too far, your protector will call you to order. To paraphrase Kant: you can think what you want, say what you want, as long as you obey the official statutes and the hands that feed you. It reminds me of a scene from the Old Testament.

With Adam and Eve in paradise?

Indeed. God says that you can basically do anything you want in the garden, but don't eat the fruit from one tree. In the case of modern culture, whose modus operandi has always been dictated by the West, this tree is often politics. When someone reaches for the forbidden fruit, i.e. gets involved in politics, they lose their innocence and agree to have a bit of “dirt” on them.

For this reason, Ukrainian artists may appear more muckraking than their colleagues in the West. But although this exposes them to negative consequences and reactions, it also loosens them up artistically. And this couples strongly with the thought of the contemporary Left.

Because it is the only field in which it has any agency?

We are in a situation where so-called big politics in the West is ruled by neoliberal technocrats alongside right-wing populists. In such a world, you have a kind of soft-framed culture, i.e. one that doesn't have a direct impact on our lives. So yes, the Left should use the art space for grassroots change.

What is next for Ukrainian culture?

It will not perish. Ukrainian artists and cultural practitioners have a much greater capacity for survival than most. It's not just about acting in the face of danger, but also the ability to overcome such mundane hardship as a lack of funding for their projects. We have never received money from the government or local authorities. It has never been recognised that culture is something the state should invest in, and only recently has this changed a little. So we have had to look for funds elsewhere. Thanks to persistence, it is working. For me, this remains the greatest reason for admiration and pride in Ukraine. I believe that because of the conditions in which it has taken shape, Ukrainian culture will have great staying power.

*This interview was originally published in the book *What Will Grow from a Pocket Full of Sunflower Seeds?* published in Poland by Krytyka Polityczna and subsequently republished online.*



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