



Navigating the Public Sphere in an Era of Misinformation

JESSICA ZYCHOWICZ

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ABSTRACT

This text is part of the cluster of article submissions from the “Slavic Studies Goes Public” event held at the University of St. Andrews in January 2020. The author discusses the definitions, challenges, and opportunities of research on post-Soviet Ukraine in the context of Canada-Ukraine history and current relations.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Jessica Zychowicz

Fulbright Program, Ukraine

jzychowicz@iie.org

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In a recent piece for the *Alberta Jewish News* entitled “*Monuments*”, Canadian-Ukrainian author Myrna Kostash remarks: “I have oriented myself as a writer unerringly to the politics of my North American generation. And then I went to Ukraine. Several times. And hereby hangs a tale of two monuments.” When visiting the villages in Western Ukraine where her grandparents were born, Kostash came across monuments to both Soviet soldiers and to OUN-Bandera, a faction in the Second World War-era Ukrainian Partisan Army (UPA). In the article she revisits these monuments, and her family connections to them, in order to grapple with the longstanding “impassioned ‘debates’” in Canada’s Ukrainian diaspora about OUN-Bandera and its leaders’ collaboration with the Nazi regime during the occupation. I share with Kostash her trepidation in venturing any public commentary or opinion on these matters. And, like Kostash, I am also not a historian of the Second World War. Rather, my research focuses on the decade in Ukraine between the two revolutions of the 2000s (Orange and the Revolution of Dignity). In my book *Superfluous Women: Feminism, Art, and Revolution in Twenty-First Century Ukraine* I examine how aesthetics in performance, protest, and virtual environments challenge prior Soviet and Western political traditions concerning the body, gender, and concepts of the public sphere. Nonetheless, like Kostash, whose writings concerning Ukrainian history are far more extensive than mine, I share a critical approach to pointing out divisive approaches in the interests of protecting integrity and standing up for a deeper human connection in the living history I see, hear, and participate in daily; in short, not only do I agree with Kostash’s statements here, but I admire, emulate, and advocate her sense of duty in commenting publicly on difficult subjects in difficult times. When preparing for the workshop *Slavic Studies Goes Public* at the University of St Andrews I began to think more about the current state of research in the context of rising authoritarianism and revanchism around the world.

What does it mean to “go public” in this context?

Using the same rhetoric, but in different aesthetic forms, the UPA monument and the Soviet one are spatial mirrors of a contemporary problem that is as relevant to their physical locations today as to anywhere one might have installed them half a century ago: in the heart of the city of Edmonton in Canada, or at the edge of a village in Ukraine. In stating “I have tried to stay out of this one”, Kostash acknowledges that she is going where others often fear to tread and, in doing so, challenges the increasingly silent majority on an issue of particular concern to ethnic and other minorities amid today’s populism and the rise of the right around the globe. Simply having an opinion on the subject of collaboration can earn one many opponents. In her article Kostash makes clear that she can no longer avoid taking a stand on the issue because, as she says, “Canadians should know better.” She further nuances the category of Canadian by sharing some of her own (Soviet) family history through a retelling of discovering her relatives’ graves in Ukraine: a contradictory mix of Soviet heroes and partisan army fighters.

The piece is as brilliant as it is provocative in salvaging Ukraine from *the* Ukrainian past—or, rather, from those different pasts that have been carved into martyrologies which leave no room for experiences such as Kostash’s own tale of two monuments to opposing forces, each of which is equally synthesized into her own Ukrainian background. Similarly inscribed with heroism, both of these twentieth-century monuments evidence a politics that eclipses any space for either the nuance of living memory, or its institutional opposite—as Kostash puts it, “professional history”. She points to Ukrainian-Canadians who “prefer” the tragic lionization of “the glory of fallen fighters”, calling instead for what Dominique Arel has termed “democratic political memory”.

Observers have noted that accepting uncritically UPA-OUN’s legacy facilitates a dangerous nation-building based in selective history, the exclusion of minority viewpoints, and a particularly harmful silencing of any criticism of the state in today’s Ukraine. Per Anders Rudling traces nationalism in the Canadian diaspora and its migration to and from Ukraine.¹ John-Paul Himka has written extensively on the preservation of UPA-OUN propaganda.²

1 “The OUN, the UPA and the Holocaust: A Study in the Manufacturing of Historical Myths” in *The Carl Beck papers in Russian and E. European Studies*, University Center for Russian and East European Studies, 2017.

2 Summarized in “The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Ukraine” in *Bringing the Dark Past to Light: The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe*, University of Nebraska Press, 2013.

Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe provides a good summary of the resurgence of intolerance in very recent public debates across Europe.³

Such pro-UPA narratives, subsumed into nation-building at the time of Nazi and Bolshevik occupations, have resurged in “normalized” ways in the context of the global slide to the right. These origin myths have served unifying purposes with regard to Ukraine’s war with Russia, but sacred cows of this sort do damage to civil liberties and free speech. Then President Petro Poroshenko’s government in 2018, to the chagrin of some observers chose to *designate a national holiday* in honour of the controversial nationalist leader Stepan Bandera, whose faction of UPA(b) is well known to have widely collaborated with the Nazi regime during the Second World War. Fetishizing such polarizing heroes/victims in contemporary state-building and nation-building only fuels the general shift to the right within Ukraine’s polity and elsewhere, including Russia. The benefits of an independent and economically stable Ukraine, not only for its diverse citizenry—which is multi-ethnic and multilingual—but also for western states and institutions, runs directly counter to the Kremlin’s information war that seeks to sow discord by provoking animosity.

The propagandistic exploitation of cultural difference by leaders in the regions that make up modern-day Ukraine is not new. Polish–Ukrainian–Russian relations have for centuries been fraught with occupation, war, genocide, and uprisings against the autocrats and totalitarians that have claimed millions of lives in these territories. Over the past five years Polish–Ukrainian relations, in particular, have seen both opportunities and challenges as Poland further opened its borders to Ukraine after the Maidan Revolution of Dignity in 2013–14 (*Figure 1*). Two outcomes of the revolution included increased trade with the EU and a visa-free travel regime introduced in 2017, both cited as major gains by Ukrainian lawmakers, analysts, and academics. Less often cited, however, is the formalization in 2016 of the Anti-Discrimination Law, which forbids the negative targeting of individuals for race, class, gender, or religious reasons and includes several human rights provisions. Despite the passing of the law, *scholars*, the *UN High Commissioner of Human Rights*, and human rights monitoring groups, such as *Amnesty International* and *Human Rights Watch*, list widespread inefficiencies in its enforcement, upticks in hate crimes, and overall backsliding in civil liberties in the post-Maidan period.

Such backsliding coincides with the resurgence of nationalism in this period. The diaspora has played a role in helping emerging sectors of Ukraine’s economy, not only in lobbying for humanitarian aid but also in facilitating profit incentives. One could argue that all of this adds up to a picture of “progress” in post-Maidan Ukraine; however, this would mean overlooking the oligarchs who are also involved in state-building and nation-building processes and whose investments the state works to protect while heralding an image of progress marketed to attract western investors and clientele. This view supports the position that the divisive tensions within Ukraine’s political landscape, including debates on an official language, are reinforced and reproduced by a handful of unchanging political elites, and that oligarchy has kept authoritarianism relatively stable in Ukraine, even after the country gained its independence in 1991. Mikhail Minakov traces these structures in detail.⁴ Lucan A. Way and Steven Levitsky pointed out early on the durability of authoritarian, clan-based power regimes in Ukraine, as illustrated through several comparative cases.⁵

For academics, “the public sphere” in the Ukrainian context remains a challenging concept. The country’s spaces, media, and flows of people have become increasingly transnational since the Maidan Revolution. This transnational project of Ukraine has continued to morph with the shape of mass media, and as the USA, EU, and Canada have offered different forms of support during the Russia–Ukraine conflict. Furthermore, investigations of Russian election meddling and President Donald Trump’s call with President Volodymyr Zelensky at the centre of the impeachment trial in late 2019 both brought Ukraine further into the spotlight as a site for corporate interests stretching well beyond the old definitions that once described a bipolar world.

³ “Conceptualizations of the Holocaust in Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine: Historical Research, Public Debates, and Methodological Disputes” in *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 34(1), Feb. 2020.

⁴ *Development and Dystopia: Studies in Post-Soviet Ukraine and Eastern Europe* (New York: Ibidem Press, 2018).

⁵ *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Ukraine is a critical digital crossroads for the twenty-first century, which is already marked by tendencies towards population control: far-right populist social media, information cyberwarfare, and big data neoliberalism. What this has meant for academics is a tsunami of (mis)information and a sharpening of debates in fields with less immediate policy relevance, such as history. Memory politics grew especially potent in Ukraine following the introduction of a set of *Decommunization Laws* in 2015. Academic work about Ukraine proceeds in the face of a strong undertow from political debates internal to the country and its corrupt government. Such forces pose a threat to not only the quality but also to the accuracy of information and the integrity of the contexts that both academic freedom and free speech rely upon.



Figure 1 “Stop Propaganda: There Is No Fascism Here!” spelled in upturned cobbles on Kyiv’s Maidan Square, visible by drone and satellite, 1 May 2014. Photo by the author.

How can we—authors, scholars, artists, curators, museum workers, cultural administrators, and others—make visible the volatility in the public sphere and bring about its redefinition in the shape of the university, the museum, and the other institutional settings for our work, as we define them, and as an open system inoculated against divisive or intolerant actions?

One method for changing the scope of research are exchanges across a digitally networked society. The network emerging from the *Slavic Studies Goes Public* workshop is a good example of how the university can be shifted to more open systems of communication that are flexible and responsive but still provide a structured environment to guard against the polarization of extra-institutional spaces. The inertia of “slow” projects mired in red tape is a challenge that the ivory tower presents to potential public gain from research. Such inefficiency can be adjusted through partnerships that help to address the difficulties of dissemination.

Networks also trade traditional ways of measuring “impact” or “outcomes” of a project for capacities more focused on processes and dialogue. Adaptive structures are also more pluralist in having to build in mechanisms for measuring a project’s value, since who gets to define “impact” or decide which “outcome” matters is itself a question of attaching social meaning to a set of preconceived guidelines. A flexible format can foster innovation and better strategies for dealing with adversity, especially where populism has opened the door to censorship and revisionism across multiple knowledge-producing apparatuses at the centre of constructing the illusion of a mass public sphere (i.e. media, multinational NGOs, military-industrial contracts, corporate extraction of social and biographical data). For institutions both within academia and cultural production outside of it to achieve autonomy from silent majorities, this means engaging “the public sphere” as a live action, not a means or an end.

One should leave no carved stone unturned as every day new monuments are built, dismantled, and rebuilt.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Jessica Zychowicz

Fulbright Program, Ukraine

Zychowicz
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