

# »It must go on ...«

## First thoughts on European culture in and from Ukraine after everything changed on 24 February 2022



© Patricia Haas

Dr Patrick S. Föhl is an international cultural development planner and cultural management trainer. Since 2014, he has been consistently involved in many cultural development projects of the Goethe-Institut in Ukraine. He is in close contact with many cultural practitioners in Ukraine and incorporates their thoughts and information into this article



Dr Gernot Wolfram teaches as Professor of Media and Cultural Management at the Macromedia University of Applied Sciences Berlin. Since 2009, he has been a member of the culture section of Team Europe of the European Commission in Germany. Along with Patrick S. Föhl and Marc Gegenfurtner, co-author of the »Road Map for Cultural Development in Ukraine«

### What no one wanted to see coming

Something has happened now that no one wanted to believe possible. After eight years of war in eastern Ukraine, on 24 February 2022 Vladimir Putin began a grasp for dominance over the whole of Ukraine in a war of aggression the likes of which we in Europe no longer thought possible. The outcome is uncertain.

Observed from the outside, it elicits a feeling of helpless rage that war is still being used as a means of asserting interests and power. We think of the diversity and grandeur of Ukraine, of its fascinating hospitality, inspiration and refreshing dynamics that are often lacking in our own country. This beleaguered country, with its many, many »masters of transformation,« has worked hard on its liberal development. The morale and strength they demonstrate in reaction to the current invasion of their country is exceedingly admirable.

In view of the disaster, protecting the population and defending against and sanctioning Russia are the focus of

discussions these days. Of course, in the field of culture in particular we must be linguistically precise. The war is not between Russians and Ukrainians. It is part of an autocratic, inhumane Kremlin policy. Many Russian intellectuals and artists are equally horrified by this war and its consequences. Unless they live in the West, however, it is difficult at the moment to get domestic perspectives here that are not immediately persecuted or met with repression.

Although culture is not the first thing we may think of when considering this war, it is a central element in its preliminary understanding. The question of culture is probably one of the triggers of this aggression. In 2021, Ukraine celebrated 30 years of independence. Since the Euromaidan in 2014, it has rapidly developed a strong civil society and a distinct cultural identity. The democratisation, the rapid social transformation and the visible emergence of resilient and independent cultural forms were and are an expression of a self-confident Ukraine that is facing the challenges of the era.

This is particularly evident among the young generation, who combine their affection for their country with a critical view of nationalism, radical forces and corruption. Changing something here, differentiating and kicking against the pricks, were and are important characteristics of Ukrainian cultural scenes. All of these developments would not be to the liking of backward-looking ruling systems. Therefore, the current war is also an attack on the liberal, cosmopolitan and European hopes of a young generation. This perspective has been essential for survival, especially for the LGBTQ community and for the various ethnic groups in Ukraine, for years.

### A brief look back

The aforementioned developments in the area of culture, especially since the Euromaidan, have many intellectual initiators, such as the multiple foundations of NGOs, citizens' initiatives, the first pop-up spaces, transformed youth centres, numerous new cultural venues as well as festivals and an overall increased visibility of Ukrainian art and culture – among other things through social



Фото: Наталія Кармазіна © Goethe-Institut Ukraine

Kulturforum in Sumy mit Akteur:innen aus der Ostukraine und thüringischen Kulturschaffenden im November 2021. Besuch des Land-Art-Projektes im Dorf Mohrytsa an der russischen Grenze; © Foto: Natalia Karmazina

media. There have also been many empowerment projects with the numerous foreign actors including the extensive activities of the Goethe-Institut in Kyiv with Ukrainian partners. One example is the development of a Road Map for Cultural Development in Ukraine in 2015, in which for the first time a common working vocabulary was formulated for all national and international participants to develop projects that would contribute to the decentralisation of art and culture.

One of these projects was »Plan Z,« a cultural strategy for Zhmerynka in the Winnycia oblast, which not only described a comprehensive cultural policy for a small Ukrainian town for the first time, but also initiated many cultural micro-projects in the field of community building with the participation of actors from all over Ukraine, a cultural exchange with the town of Neuruppin in Germany and finally a nationwide conference with mayors of small towns from Ukraine. What was always important in these projects was mutual listening and learning. In addition, there was a

perspective on smaller communities and towns.

From then on, there were many other approaches, all of which are very well documented, most of them in several languages.<sup>1</sup> Most recently, the Cultural Leadership Academy Ukraine, in which 15 Ukrainian trainers taught more than 300 cultural actors throughout Ukraine in cultural development and cultural management in a five-stage module system within two years. The academy was flanked by (digital) international networking journeys, national conferences and individual coaching. The aim was, among other things, to increase the self-efficacy and self-confidence of the participants, to strengthen a collective cultural identity and to network with each other and also with international partners. As a result, many alumni have gained more influence in their jobs (e.g., in cultural administration), the first

<sup>1</sup> For an overview, see [https://www.goethe.de/resources/files/pdf208/goethe\\_cultural\\_leadership\\_academy\\_champion\\_of\\_change1.pdf](https://www.goethe.de/resources/files/pdf208/goethe_cultural_leadership_academy_champion_of_change1.pdf), last accessed: 27.2.2022.

international projects are underway and overall, a very active network has emerged. In the meantime, the CLA is regarded beyond the country's borders as a prototype of a contemporary, multi-layered empowerment approach in the field of cultural transformation »made in Ukraine.«

#### What's happening now?

The expansion of the war to the whole of Ukraine has brought unimaginable suffering to the people in a very short time. Moreover, cultural professionals are in particular danger, as the invaders know how powerful the arts and culture are as reflective pillars and stimuli for free societies and that is precisely where they are attacking. The refugee movements alone are tearing many actors away from their work, putting projects on hold or destroying the infrastructure for their further development. The consequences are incalculable.

Against this background, we might ask whether the work of the last few years was in vain. If you speak with

cultural professionals on the ground, you encounter distinct positions: »Now more than ever.« »The current situation confirms how important the last few years have been.« »It must go on.« »After a short ›break‹, we'll get back on track.«

As authors of this essay, we would like to emphasise that we are not interested in quick analyses, as they can now be read and heard everywhere. The principle of listening, of making the voices on the ground audible are particularly important to us (we won't mention any names here, however, in order to protect the people on site).

Of course, the first priority is the protection of life and limb. Many cultural professionals currently have to seek refuge in other regions. NGOs such as the youth organisation STAN in Ivano-Frankivsk are acting as shelters for cultural professionals who have been forced to leave their homes. The country's theatres and opera houses from Chernihiv to Odessa are functioning as places to provide food and first aid, but also making their infrastructure and manpower available to the Ukrainian army. Museums, such as the sports museum in Zaporizhzhya, are being converted into bunkers.

Overall, we are observing overwhelming solidarity, cohesion and willingness to help in Ukrainian society, supported by a strong collective cultural identity.

Cultural identity is literally existential here. People know that this is also an attack on their language, their views and values. Russian President Vladimir Putin referred to language and history several times in his speech shortly before the

war began. That which is new, different, cosmopolitan, the desire for a culture that can be part of international discourses, seems to be a particular thorn in his side. The great propagandist narrative of the alleged contradiction between East and West, between Europe and a pan-Slavic cultural space, is focused in Ukraine like in a burning glass. In our experience working with Ukrainian cultural professionals, diversity and openness to exchange and encounter without blinkers and preconditions were almost always present and a central value reference.

#### What can be done next?

In the midst of this crisis, a problem becomes apparent that can be observed above all in Western societies, especially in Germany: Tangible knowledge about contemporary artistic and thus also (cultural) policy developments in eastern and south-eastern Europe is still »specialised knowledge« and thus scarce. The same often applies to basic knowledge about geography, history and everyday culture east and south-east of Germany's borders.

Although Ukrainian authors and literary works have been translated into German in large numbers, and many foundations and institutions, such as the Goethe-Institut, have launched exchange and transformation projects, discourses from Ukraine and countries such as Poland, Belarus, etc. are not frequently heard in educational discourse, not to mention in textbooks, talk shows and cultural programmes. When it is reported, it is problematised. Those obvious associations that many other countries and cultures trigger in the cultural memory in this country still seem to be stuck somewhere behind the mouldered Iron Curtain.

The fact that some of the most important Yiddish authors of the twentieth and nineteenth centuries worked in Kyiv, that Michael Bulgakov lived there (whose house could possibly also fall victim to the bombs), that many important museum concepts have emerged in Kyiv since 2014 (how to save cultural assets from the Donbass, etc.) indicates that an intellectual Europe is under attack. But what resonance do these dimensions have within us? How distant, foreign and exotic is this terrain that is now in the glare of the world spotlight?

Our consternation must not only be political. Attention wears out quickly in the modern media age, as we all know. A long war, such as the one the British Foreign Secretary sees coming, also means, in the worst case, suffering becoming commonplace. But cultural interventions can make it clear from the start that they are broadcasting different images and words than BBC, CNN, Deutsche Welle or social media platforms. They give a voice to that which resists habitual images. And they promote exchange, which in the best case is visible.

There are plenty of good examples of how this can succeed, such as Damascus in Exile, a pop-up space by the Goethe-Institut that brought the institute, which had been closed due to the Syrian war, back to life in 2016. Within a month, discussions, workshops, film series, installations, exhibitions, concerts and performances took place. Such a place could also be created for Ukrainian artists and cultural professionals who are already in Germany or are expected to arrive here soon.

Ukrainian art and culture in general ought to be made (more) visible, both digitally and analogue. In Germany, too, places need to be created or opened so that this diversity can be experienced. In addition to presentation, mediation and exchange, it is simply a matter of (temporary) preservation until this rich cultural life is possible again in Ukraine itself. Otherwise, there is an immediate danger that cultural assets will be destroyed and extinguished. And for a very long time. The experience with the war in Syria in 2015 has unfortunately shown that public interest quickly dies out after the initial hype. But cultural exchange needs staying power. It needs

»Dear friends, apart from the skies, there is only one common space that is not divided by state borders or front lines and is available to all people: the cultural space. But culture, as the most peaceful and important instrument of international and national dialogue, can only fulfil its role if it is skilfully managed and if there are sufficient numbers of creative people who are aware of its goals and tasks. Culture is a vast tapestry woven by millions that grows out of the collective work of individuals and groups, out of thousands of projects and undertakings. In our time, when culture has become the most important force counteracting hatred and aggression, its importance in the modern world cannot be underestimated. Cultural managers outstrip many politicians, often bringing a much greater understanding of the social, even national political impact of culture. [...]«

*Andrei Kurkov, excerpt from the foreword to the Road Map for Cultural Development in Ukraine*

places that bring people and ideas together even after the international media have moved on.

It is therefore now a matter of providing places for the practice of art (rehearsal rooms, studios) when cultural professionals have to flee to Germany – as well as digital spaces and platforms that enable permanent exchange and reflection as well as assessment of the current situation on the ground. The emergency aid announced by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media is also a good sign – hopefully many municipalities and states will follow suit with funding, but also with concrete offers of participation on the ground. Once again, however, we will have to be careful not to think in terms of pure project logic. Talks, coming to terms with what has happened, what is now happening with the suddenly broken connections, need time and patience. Therefore, we advocate here for investment in formats like *Damascus in Exile* to create a *Kyiv in Exile*.

Being disconnected from one's former place of activity is dramatic. In our experience, only places that take up something of what has been lost, that can be visited, that form a point of contact, can lead to proper visibility. In such places, people from Germany can also acquire information, can experience proximity, language, music, poetry, performances, books and films that can give us a deeper insight into what is happening on a daily basis. This conflict, it seems, will leave deep scars on the European cultural landscape. Culture needs time and patience to attend to, understand and reflect on such processes. This is what we should have learned from 2015: We need to conduct in-depth discourses instead of following the dictates of day-to-day politics. It is possible that cultural policy in Germany can also open a new chapter here.

#### » Outlook «

We deliberately put the word »outlook« in inverted commas. So far, nothing substantial can be said here, as no one can seriously predict the developments of the coming weeks, months and years. But the fact is that a great many people, including many cultural professionals, will come to Germany and seek dialogue. This will be a challenge linguistically, associatively and culturally, since, as we mentioned above, many referen-



## АКАДЕМІЯ КУЛЬТУРНОГО ЛІДЕРА:

ПРОВІДНИК ЗМІН  
В КУЛЬТУРНІЙ  
СФЕРІ УКРАЇНСЬКИХ  
ГРОМАД

## CULTURAL LEADERSHIP ACADEMY:

CHAMPION  
OF CHANGE IN THE  
CULTURAL SPHERE  
OF UKRAINIAN  
COMMUNITIES



ces to Ukrainian culture are practically unknown to the general public. We will also need to address the question of how Russian cultural professionals who are critical of Putin and Ukrainian cultural professionals can exchange ideas without being divided by the maelstrom of politics. And a learning process will be needed in Germany, like the great European narratives that, as we know from media and politics, will prove themselves in the »hard slog« of concrete political discussion. We believe what the Ukrainian writer Andrei Kurkov wrote in the Road Map for Cultural Development in Ukraine is true: that the cultural space cannot be divided by state borders and front lines. It is the antidote to nationalist

discourses and bogeymen. Artists can create a different conversation – if we let them. That may sound idealistic. But there are enough examples, especially in successful projects of German cultural policy in recent years, that give this statement a realistic basis.

Despite the unimaginable situations on the ground, five of our Ukrainian friends and colleagues proofread this text overnight. We owe them a great debt of gratitude and our thoughts are with them.

Translation by Faith Gibson with the kind support of the Goethe-Institut ■