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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Martsenyuk, T. (2023). Visibility of Ukrainian Studies: Mission Possible. *Ukrainian Analytical Digest*, 2, 11-13. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000637349>

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Visibility of Ukrainian Studies: Mission Possible

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000637349

As a public sociologist and educational activist in Ukraine, I am a member of the Public Council of the Inter-Factional Deputy Association “Equal Opportunities” and head of the Group on Education Issues. In the context of this work, I prepared a public statement that was shared worldwide on the current situation with education and Ukrainian studies. Some parts of the text from this statement, originally published in March 2022, have been adapted and updated and are provided below:

Since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, our academic, research, and educational institutions have been forced to stop or suspend their activities. Educators, both men and women, have, just like other citizens of Ukraine, either joined the defense efforts or been forced to evacuate to other regions of Ukraine or other countries.

I am among this group of refugee scholars, sharing my experience of evacuation and my academic mission from exile in Berlin (Martsenyuk, 2022a). The war has caused the deaths of teachers and students, turned many of them into refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), and caused the destruction of university buildings (e.g., Karazin Kharkiv National University, Taras Shevchenko National University).

In parallel with the military aspects, the Russo-Ukrainian war is also being waged in science and education. The Russian government controls science and culture within its borders, seeing them as practical tools for, at first, the made-up “de-Banderization” and “denazification” of Ukraine and, eventually, for destroying the Ukrainian nation. The Russian Union of Rectors issued a letter expressing support for the war and the actions of the Russian president.

In this context, universities are used as so-called “soft power” for influencing Western societies. In Western universities, studying post-Soviet societies is often reduced to studying Russian society and applying the results of these studies to other post-Soviet societies, including Ukrainian society. It is not by chance that the regional centers dedicated to the research of our region are called, among other things, Centers of Russian, Eastern European, or Eurasian studies (like, for example, the Stanford University Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies). The international community holds on to the idea that Slavic studies are inseparable from Russian area studies, which enjoy the leading role there. Western universities have long enjoyed many connections with Russian Universities and academic struc-

tures that actively promote a discourse that serves the Russian government.

What would be an appropriate response of international academic structures to support Ukrainian science and education?

- To support Ukrainian studies as separate direction of regional studies (not as a component of Slavic or Eastern European studies). Such programs already exist in some Western Universities, for example, at Harvard (Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, HURI). It is also essential to allocate more resources to studying the Ukrainian language within such programs, and in international universities in general.
- To support Ukrainian researchers, especially within the context of long-distance programs, as comparatively few of us are able to leave Ukraine and to move to the location of a Western university. For this reason, the facilitation of nonresidential programs is particularly important. A positive example here could be the joint program from the Institute of Human Sciences (IWM, Vienna) and the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute (HURI).
- To support and develop Ukrainian research and educational international partnerships, research projects, magazines, publication of books and results of research, as well as cultural and art projects, etc.

But there remains one question—how could sociology in Europe in general, and Eastern European studies particularly, benefit from more attention to Ukrainian studies? I can reply from my personal research perspective. My research interests are connected with a sociology of gender that also intersects with Ukrainian studies. Using this example, we can ask ourselves the question: why is it important to study Ukraine when we analyze gender structures, and vice versa? Understanding Ukraine, and the fierce resistance of the Ukrainian society against the Russian war, can be based on analytically deploying the gender perspective (Martsenyuk, 2023).

First of all, empirical data collected over the last years in Ukraine, especially concerning the issues of gender equality and diversity, provide the possibility to rethink the Western concepts of gender and nation-building, gender and war. For Ukrainian women and men, their national identity is important, as they have for centuries been fighting for their independence. At the same time, people with strong national identity are supporting ideas of gender equality and rights for LGBT people (Martsenyuk, 2022b). Within the context of existing West-

ern sociological theories on gender, nationalism and war, these two are difficult to reconcile. But the case of Ukraine over its last nine years of war could contribute to the European debates on democratisation and gender equality implementation, processes that are not always necessarily incremental or step-by-step. Certainly, more time is needed to develop further theories to better explain sociological data collected during times of war.

Secondly, it's important to move away from studying the Ukrainian and Russian societies under a common post-Soviet umbrella. As data from the last years demonstrate, these societies are going in different directions. For example, according to public opinion research results in Ukraine, in the “civilizational battle” between “Russky mir” (which promotes patriarchal gender norms and the criminalization of “gay propaganda”) and European values that support diversity and equal rights, the latter is prevailing (Martsenyuk, 2022b). There is good reason to hope that the recent successes in implementing policies of equal rights and opportunities in Ukraine will continue, and prove beneficial for the ongoing Eurointegration process. Indeed, the emphasis on democratic values and a European present and future for Ukraine appears to have contributed to more favorable and accepting attitudes towards LGBT communities and increased respect for diversity in general. Russian society, by contrast, is going in a different direction: “If gender egalitarianism is framed as a failed policy of the past, then traditional family values can be seen as an alternative modernity of the future” (Solari, 2022). The idea of “traditional family values” is based on the patriarchal gender order with very gender-polarized perceptions of femininity and masculinity. As scholar of Russian politics and gender issues Jennifer G. Mathers notices, “Putin’s idea of a strong state requires an alpha male leader because the state itself is highly gendered. The most important, most powerful and most generously funded institutions of the state are those that are most closely associated with masculinity and the same sort

of tough and ruthless behavior that Putin celebrates—most notably the armed forces and the other security services” (Mathers, 2023).

Thirdly, in the sphere of public sociology, which I also represent, it is important to hear and understand the voices of the objects of study. Being a scholar from Ukraine, I need to explain to some Western scholars and feminist activist the gendered geopolitical aspects of war: why peace is not possible without victory and justice in the situation of Russia’s genocidal war against Ukraine. In this case, again, the Ukrainian perspective needs visibility. According to Dr. Nataliya Chernysh, a Ukrainian sociologist at Ivan Franko Lviv National University, “new global social movements are emerging, first of all a movement expressing solidarity with Ukraine” (Chernysh, 2022). But Ukrainian scholars and activists ask for “more informed solidarity” (Ukraine Peace Appeal, 2023) and explain that “stopping weapon deliveries to Ukraine now would not lead to “peace by peaceful means,” but rather “offer a pause for Putin’s authoritarian regime to renew its aggression against Ukraine.” Ideas of victimhood of Ukrainian women in the context of the war have also been challenged: “in reality, women also play a key role in resistance movements, both at the front line and on the home front” (Feminist Initiative Group, 2022). Feminist scholars Iryna Zamuruieva and Darya Tsymbalyuk underline that in Ukraine, pacifism kills: “Calling for military support has not come as an easy decision for us. Yet, at this point, a pacifist stance perpetuates ongoing violence. Pacifism kills. Inaction kills. Each day of this war means more and more lives are lost—and not only human lives” (Tsymbalyuk & Zamuraieva, 2022).

To understand all the ideas mentioned above, you need to pay attention to Ukrainian studies. They will help to understand better the gendered dynamics of war, the resistance of Ukrainian society, and may more generally challenge the Western theories connected with the social structure of the relevant societies.

About the Author

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Why Russian Studies in the West Failed to Provide a Clue about Russia and Ukraine

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000637349

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has brought the sobering realization that, even 30 years after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia continues to be a brutal empire. At the same time, after expecting Kyiv to fall in three days, the world has been amazed by the Ukrainian resistance and resilience. How could the international community be so wrong about Russia and Ukraine? We argue that these failures can stem from the ways Russia, Ukraine, and the rest of Eastern Europe are studied in the West and call for a major review of both the quantity and quality of 'Slavic' studies.

As the first step, we collected data on course offerings in the academic years 2021/22 and 2022/23 at 13 top private and public US universities. We focused on courses in Eastern European, Russian and Eurasian (including Soviet and post-Soviet) studies. We selected only the courses offered by undergraduate programs (since they cover many more students than graduate courses) and only those that were actually scheduled (i.e., a sufficient number of students signed up for those courses). To compute aggregate statistics, we classified the courses into five subject areas (language, literature, culture, history, and politics) and several groups over time and space, e.g., Soviet and post-Soviet, Eastern European, Ukrainian, Polish, Baltic, etc. We then calculated the number of offered courses over the last two academic years and examined the share of courses devoted only to Russia, to Russia and other countries, and to Ukraine.

Figure 1 conveys the gist of our findings. 82% of 'Slavic' literature courses are in fact Russian literature courses (the share is even higher if we include Soviet and post-Soviet writings). We understand that Russia is a large country, but it does not account for over 82% of people or literature in Eastern Europe. In other areas the situation is better, but Russia still dominates. For example, just over a third of courses in history focus solely on Russia, but if we count courses that cover Russia together with other countries (e.g., Russia and Eastern Europe—the yellow bars in Figure 1), the Russian hegemony is apparent once again. In fact, some courses effectively treat the USSR as Russia (e.g. "Russia: History of the Soviet Union"). Furthermore, some courses are completely in line with Russian historical narratives, incorporating all East Slavs and the entire USSR into "Russian" history (although some Eastern European and Central Asian nations were occupied by Russia, their histories are quite distinct from Russia's).

These statistics are not driven by a particular university or group of universities. Figure 2 documents that these patterns apply broadly. For example, although the share of Russian literature ranges from a whopping 100% at Cornell University to a "modest" 52% at the University of Chicago, the median share is close to 90%.

Every classification is subject to judgment calls, and we tried to have the Russian share identified as unambiguously as possible to obtain conservative estimates. However, it is informative to examine courses that are related to Russia and group Russia with other countries. To this end, Figure 2 also shows that these courses further boost Russian dominance in all fields except literature, which already focuses almost entirely on Russia.