

Mykola Riabchuk

At the Fence of Metternich's Garden

Essays on Europe, Ukraine, and Europeanization

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Mykola Riabchuk

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Introduction

As early as 1918, the prominent Ukrainian historian Mykhailo Hrushevsky, who then headed the short-lived Ukrainian People's Republic, published a cycle of political pamphlets under the characteristic title "On the Threshold of the New Ukraine." There, he tried to outline the basic principles and parameters upon which the nascent Ukrainian state should be built. He covered the army, culture, and government bureaucracy, as well as the various aspects of Ukraine's international politics, quintessentially defined in the title of one of his essays as "Our Western Orientation."

As a professional historian, he could easily prove that, for centuries,

Ukraine had been living the same life with the West, experiencing the same ideas and borrowing cultural models and resources for its own culture building. Yet, he knew also that since the end of the 18th century Ukrainian contacts with the West "had weakened and declined under the pressure of forceful russification of Ukrainian life; and Ukrainian life and culture had been drawn into a Russian, Greater Russian, period." As a result, "19th-century Ukraine was torn from the West, from Europe, and turned to the North, pushed forcefully into the deadlock-grip of Great Russian [imperial] culture and life. All Ukrainian life was uprooted from its natural environment, from the historically and geographically determined way of development, and thrown onto Russian soil, for destruction and pillage [Hrushevsky 1991: 141-144].

"Return to Europe," therefore, was seen by a leading Ukrainian nation-builder as a return to the norm, a fixing of historical injustice and perversion, a healing of a developmental pathology. Such a romantic approach emerged naturally from modern Ukrainian nationalism which, from its emergence in the first half of the 19th century, had to emphasize Ukraine's 'otherness' vis-à-vis Russia. This meant, in particular, that Ukrainian activists not just praised the alleged Ukrainian 'Europeanness' as opposed to evil Russian 'Asianness'; they had to accept the whole set of Western liberal-democratic values as 'natural' and 'organic' for Ukrainians (yet 'unnatural' for Russians).

Ukrainians built their claim to 'Europeanness' upon medieval and early-modern rather than modern history:

The Kievan State combined a predominantly Eastern, Greek, Byzantine religious and cultural tradition with a predominantly Western social and political structure ... Political Byzantinism remained totally alien to Kievan Rus ... In pre-Mongol Rus, as in the medieval West – and in contrast to Byzantium and Moscow – political and ecclesiastical authority were not fused, but remained distinct, with each of the two autonomous in its own sphere. A social system characterized by contractual relations, a strong regard for the rights and the dignity of the individual, limitation of the power of the prince by a council of boyars and a popular assembly, autonomous communal city life, territorial decentralization of a quasi-federative nature – all this gave the Kiev polity a distinct libertarian imprint. And this libertarian, essentially European spirit also characterizes Ukrainian state organizations of later epochs. The Galician-Volhynian state of the 13th and 14th centuries evolved toward a feudal structure, and full-fledged feudalism, including feudal parliamentarism, may be found in the Lithuanian-Ruthenian state of the 14th through 16th centuries. The Cossack State of the 17th and 18th centuries possessed a system of estates (*Staendestaat*). It was not a coincidence that in the 19th century, during the epoch when Ukraine was politically assimilated to the Russian Empire, all-Russian liberalism and constitutionalism found its strongest support in the Ukrainian provinces of the Empire [Rudnytsky 1987: 8].

Another Ukrainian historian, the Byzantologist Ihor Sevchenko, has also argued that “the West’s influence on parts of Ukrainian territory began before 1349, acquired considerable intensity after 1569, and continued over the vast expanse of Ukrainian lands until 1793. When we take into account the impact of Polish elites in western Ukrainian lands and the right bank of the Dnipro, this influence can be seen to have continued until 1918 or even 1939.” He admitted, however, that “this West was, for the most part, clad in the Polish *kontusz* ... and its principal cultural message in the decisive turning point between the 16th and 17th centuries was carried by the Polish variant of the Counter-Reformation” [Sevchenko 1996: 3–4, 6].

Sevchenko’s analysis had led him to what for many Ukrainians was an unpleasant conclusion; namely, that as soon as “neo-Byzantinism, the cultural mainstay of the tsardom of Moscow, lost out [and] the new Russian Empire began to import its culture from the West on a large scale ... it was that empire that soon provided its Ukrainian dominions with Western values.” In sum, “an important

general characteristic of Ukrainian cultural contacts both with the 'East' and with the West [was] the lack of direct access to original sources during long stretches of Ukrainian history. Ukrainians received cultural values from abroad through intermediaries ... The Ukrainian secondarity [sic] carried a certain weakness with it" [Sevcenko 1996: 8].

This perhaps explains Hrushevsky's phrase about the "deadlock grip of Great Russian culture," into which Ukraine had been arguably pushed since the 18th century. It was not a matter of Russian culture per se, which had eventually become rather vibrant, attractive and hospitable for many Ukrainian newcomers. It was a problem of "secondarity" that became an unavoidable, inescapable fate of the stateless nation dispossessed of its upper classes. Since then and until recently, Ukraine has been ruled by a territorial rather than the national elite, and this important fact determined its subsequent (under)development. It was only in 1991 that independent Ukraine's leaders recollected Hrushevsky's idea of the "return to Europe," and Hrushevsky himself returned to the national pantheon of the founding fathers of the new-old nation.

Still, the "return to Europe," although proclaimed officially as Ukraine's major strategic goal, was neither completed during the first decades after independence nor were any significant steps made in that direction besides political declarations and some very feeble and incoherent reforms. Some blame the West for not being interested in Ukraine's "return;" some blame Russia for effectively obstructing its efforts; some blame the Ukrainian leadership for paying lip-service to the idea while doing nothing to accomplish it; and some blame the Ukrainian people who, by and large, have not proven to be as 'European' as many Ukrainian intellectuals would like them to be.

All these arguments (or excuses) are serious enough to be examined in more detail, and I address each of them in this collection of essays that have been written mostly within the past 15 years. This time-span coincides with some very important and often dramatic changes in both Ukraine and its neighborhood. On the one side, Ukrainian civil society that had always, since perestroika, been an important political actor to be counted with, for the first

time appeared not just noticeable but victorious, during and in the aftermath of the 2004 Orange revolution. It failed ultimately, but set a new level of political competition and a new agenda for years to come. On the other side, the year 2004 marked the 'big bang' enlargement of the EU that erected de facto a new wall at Ukraine's western borders and deepened the feeling of abandonment and alienation. It coincided also with consolidation of an authoritarian regime in Russia and growth of a Kremlin 'assertiveness' that eventuated in gas, trade, and cyber wars with neighbors, military invasion of Georgia, and large-scale intervention in Ukraine.

Throughout all those years, I published many articles in periodicals, besides my primary (or parallel) academic activity. All of them were driven by two overlapping desires – to react directly to the events, developments, and problems that required, I felt, an immediate intervention; and to reach many more people than a scholarly article can ever do. Certainly, I could not avoid some academic terms and concepts, but all the time I tried to make the texts readable and comprehensive for any person with a high school diploma and not necessarily with a university degree. Here, I have selected only the articles that address Ukraine's 'European affair' – a painstaking but fascinating process of both its cultural and political 'Europeanization'. The process has both domestic and international aspects, both historical and contemporary dimensions. All of them are complex and all are intricately intertwined.

The title of the book refers, ironically, to the notorious Chancellor Metternich's quip that Asia begins presumably at the eastern fence of his garden (or, as another apocryphal version maintains, at the end of the Viennese Landstrasse). It hints at the garden of Eden – as many non-Westerners see the West, but also the Millennium-old garden of European culture and civilization that includes also specific political and social practices and institutions. It hints also at the Zbigniew Herbert's classic book *A Barbarian in the Garden* (1962), and at the popular slogan of Mykola Khvylovy, one of the leaders of the short-lived Ukrainian national revival of the 1920s (the "executed Renaissance"), who called on his compatriots to develop "psychological Europe" within Ukraine and among Ukrainians.

This is not a compassionate praise for Europe in Herbert's or Denis de Rougemont's style but rather an argument why Ukraine, existentially, cannot afford a move into any other direction; what obstacles, outside and within, it encounters; and how ultimately to overcome them. I compiled the book as a story of both exclusion and inclusion, of walls and fences but also of a longing for freedom and quest for solidarity. I wished it to be a book on different ways of being a 'European' — at both the collective and individual level — despite various challenges or, perhaps, thanks to them.

It consists of three parts that cover, respectively, the 'international' aspect of Ukraine's 'European affair', the 'domestic' part, and, so to say, my 'personal' part. Most of the articles were written in either Ukrainian or English and published usually in both languages but also, occasionally, in Polish, German, or Russian. The essay "How I Became a 'Czechoslovak'" broke records, being translated into a dozen languages including Farsi, Slovene, and Catalan, but it was rather exceptional.

I eschewed the temptation to make any substantial changes so as to look more perspicacious than I was 10 or 15 years ago, but I cut some passages to make the texts less repetitive. Also, I indicated the dates when the texts emerged and, in some cases, when the events in question occurred. All the essays are included in the collection with the permission of the original publishers. I am honored to list all of them, and express my deep gratitude to the European syndicate of cultural periodicals *Eurozine*, the Polish bi-monthly *New Eastern Europe*, the online quarterly *Russkii Vopros*, the quarterly *Aspen Review*, the web-platforms *Open Democracy* and *Transitions Online*, and last but not least, to the journal of studies in Polish Jewry *Polin* that commissioned a professional translation of one of my essays — the only one in this book rendered in English not by myself. The translator Marta Olynyk deserves full credit for her masterful work, as well as the editor of this volume Dr. Andrew Sorokowski. Special thanks to Dr. Andreas Umland, who encouraged me to complete this collection, to Dr. Ksenia Kiebusinski, who perfectly guided my work at the University of Toronto library, and to Ms. Jana Oldfield, who sheltered me generously for a few

months when I was suddenly locked down in Toronto during the quarantine.

Ironically, the coveted “return to Europe” acquired for me a new, unexpected meaning. It became even more desirable but also even more based on strict rules and exact procedures. There are not only accession criteria but also absorption capacity to be counted with. There is little doubt that all the postcommunist states, including my own, need some ‘quarantine’ before being fully admitted into the ‘European family’. But genuine efforts are needed on both sides to facilitate the convalescence, and to fully complete the clearance and adaptation. I wish my book to contribute a bit to this process.

Toronto, April–May 2020