

# The Writers and the Maidan

by Alexander Kratochvil, Prague

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When the Soviet Union was dismantled in the early 1990s, the Ukrainian author and civil rights activist Dmytro Pavlyčko stated with regard to the significance of the Ukrainian national poet Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861): “Our rebirth is taking place under the flags and slogans of Shevchenko”. Even during and after the Orange Revolution Shevchenko played a positive role as an icon for the unity of the then politically and socio-culturally heterogeneous regions. The life and works of Shevchenko are seen in the traditionalist discourse by many Ukrainians as a symbol of the country, culture and history. The classical western Ukrainian author of the 19th century Ivan Franko (1856-1916) and the charismatic representative of Ukrainian modernity Lesja Ukrajinka (1871-1913) hold a comparable, but less influential position as intellectual and moral authorities. With attributions such as prophet (Shevchenko), stone crusher and conscience of the people (Franko), or “chain-breaking daughter” of the Prometheus (Ukrajinka) these authors are given the function of creating a national identity and securing cultural continuity. These three authors are engaged as heroes and identity-creating figures on the basis of a tradition of “national awakening” and “nation-building” which has its roots in the 19th century. This tendency was even intensified during Soviet times because of the educational and propagandistic function of the literature of socialist realism. This tradition shaped a literary discourse, which continuously comprised the national commitment and responsibility of the authors and their works and persisted into the early 1990s.

Due to the numerous restrictions on the Ukrainian language in Tsarist Russia begin-

ning with Peter I. and the creeping Russification of Ukrainian culture and society in the 20th century during the Soviet Union, the cultivation of language always was an important factor for Ukrainian identity. No Ukrainian author could elude this aspect of preserving cultural identity, as the extent to which authors were committed to their language and culture was an important indicator of patriotism in Soviet times and afterwards. However, this patriotism was ambivalent as the Stalinist repressions at the beginning of the 1930s heralded a process through which the Soviet Ukrainian authors generally unconsciously undermined the attractiveness and vitality of the Ukrainian language and literature by preserving Ukrainian literature in the folkloric forms of the 19th century. This was accompanied by an increasing disinterest in the literature and the marginalization of the Ukrainian language as a conveyor of this literature. With a combination of socio-political factors of Russification, this led to an intended loss of prestige of the Ukrainian language and literature as a whole.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the generation of authors born in the 1960s and early 1970s began to question and programmatically deconstruct this discourse surrounding the national and social mission, for example with the carnival literature derived from Michail Bachtin, whose most renowned representative is the internationally known author Jurij Andrukhchovych (born in 1960), or with the prose of Oksana Zabuzhko (born 1960), which deals with gender-related and post-colonial issues and has also been translated into other languages. This generation rejected the social obligations and political functions of writers

all the more because those established authors from the older generation who became politically active in the early 1990s (e.g. Dmytro Pavlyčchko or Ivan Drachč), were unsuccessful and soon appeared to be politically corrupted. The new literature of the Zabuzhko-Andruxhovyč generation of the 1990s was, by contrast, political in the sense that it reflected the specifically national and historical constellations of Ukraine, which emerged during the cultural and political transformations, and revealed the ideological constructs of the past with its metanarratives and aesthetic strategies in a playful manner. These forms of reflection also comprised present works and authors of Soviet and anti-Soviet orientation, which resulted in significant tensions in the Ukrainian literary scene<sup>1</sup>.

The handling of the historical self-image, cultural remembrance and national identification strategies in the second half of the 1990s had a massive impact on the organization and the institutions of literary life in Ukraine. It became decentralized according to regional, socio-political, aesthetic and institutional characteristics<sup>2</sup>. This trend continued into the new millennium. The generation of authors following Zabuzhko and Andruxhovyč belong

1 For example Andruxovyč, Ju. *Rekreaciji*, different editions (printed first in 1992); Andruxovyč, Ju. *Moskovijada*, different editions. (first printed in 1993), Zabuzhko, O. *Polovi dosldžennja z ukrajins'koho seksu*, different editions (first printed in 1996), Irvanec', O. *Rivne-Rovno*, different editions (first printed in 2001).

2 See also Mala Ukrajins'ka encyklopedija aktual'noji literatury. Proekt povnennja demiurhiv. (eds.) Ješkilev, V., Andruxovyč, Ju. In: *Pleroma 3/ 1998*; in greater detail see also Kratochvil, A. *Aufbruch und Rückkehr. Ukrainische und tschechische Prosa im Zeichen der Postmoderne*. Berlin 2013, pp. 53-73; for the restructuring of the literary canon, see. Hundorova, T: *The Canon Reversed. New Ukrainian Literature of the 1990s*. In: *Journal of Ukrainian Studies*, Nr. 26, Summer-winter 2001, pp. 249-270.

to the global millennium generation, which according to the recently debated cover story by the American social scientist Joel Stein in "Time Magazine" is ironically called the "me me me generation". This generation is regarded as apolitical and socially passive. The protagonists in this literature, which is often categorized as pop culture, depict themselves in their environment in a self-centered manner.

However, this self-centeredness is only apolitical, when it is measured with a traditional, institutionally oriented and normative political concept that is linked to parties and ideological programs. Starting from their own interests and a non-institutionally anchored and organized, rather individual commitment, the generation is indeed political in the sense of civil society involvement. The development of civil society is also seen as a way of leaving post-Soviet thinking behind. This attitude is clearly reflected in literature, cinema and music. Irena Karpa (born in 1980) provides an example of this in her novel *Bitches get everything*, in which she describes the experiences of a Ukrainian actor and director; in the novel there are repeated references to the consistently ongoing politicized issue of the usage of the Ukrainian language:

"– 'My sweetheart, you know, if you ever want to achieve anything, you have to eradicate all 'Little Russian' things in you. Stay for a while here in Moscow, visit the theater language course, and assimilate here. .. This is what all actresses from Ukraine did here. Schulschenko, for example ...'

And then everybody – cameramen, producers and directors – started to boast how their mothers or fathers returned to Moscow from Tbilisi, Yerevan, Kharkov, or Tallinn after the war, crammed Russian poems, practiced theatrical language from morning to

night, and strictly forbade themselves from articulating one single word in the provincial languages of the losers that they had left behind.

– ‘And look, they accomplished everything! – yelled someone and drew strong applause.

Trisha smiles amicably [...] – ‘Thank you very much, my dears’, – thought Trisha and grinned widely. You are all really very kind, but I could care less about your recipes for success. Why should I destroy something inside me? I came to create something – myself and something around me. I will go home and build my own empire. This is how everything always begins.’<sup>3</sup>

Like in their literary text, the younger authors also take a different approach in their public appearances than the “Zabužko-Andruchovýč generation”, which appealed to a more intellectual audience in their lectures, essays and newspaper interviews. The younger authors like Serhij Žadan (born in 1974), Irena Karpa, Larysa Denysenko (1973) use more popular, mass media formats including social networks. By participating in concerts, demonstrations, civil disobedience activities, they took on a public relations function and attracted attention to the events. Popular musicians and bands such as the Eurovision Song Contest winner Ruslana Lyzhyc’ka (born in 1973) or Taras Chubaj (born in 1970) and Svjatoslavs Vakarchuk (born in 1975) also have a high profile in this regard.

In the past the artists tended to only seldom state their social or political position. This changed with the 2013 Euro-Maidan at the latest. Both the actors who at the beginning of the protest movement were primarily students or

younger people, as well as the observers of the Maidan movement alluded to their independence from the political parties time and time again during the first weeks and massively defended themselves against being swallowed and manipulated by the opposition parties. In their performances and statements authors and musicians such as Zhadan, Karpa or Ruslana supported this renunciation of the traditional parties and the institutionalized and generally corrupt post-Soviet politics. They assisted the civil society activities surrounding the Maidan movement and the social actions based on the activities of individuals and groups. Thus, Maidan developed its own organizational and social structures during the week-long protests.

Politicians from the established parties as well as the opposition parties lagged behind the potential of civil society as represented by the Maidan, which as Denysenko stated became the “germ cell” of the new Ukrainian politics. There will be no *déjà-vu* of a second Orange Revolution resulting in the restoration of the “old system”, because – in addition to the different political context – the Euro-Maidan is being carried out and organized by a different and younger generation. And they did not take to the streets because of a president and as Andrej Kurkov writes “they do not want their ideas to be packed into the slogans of the opposition parties. They will not let anyone take away their independence and dignity. Therefore it is not their objective to put someone in office, rather to live in a civilized, European Ukraine” (taz, 9 December 2013).

After approximately three weeks of demonstrations and protests, the moment arrived at which the representatives of the protest movement realized that the Maidan demands can hardly be met without including opposi-

<sup>3</sup> Karpa, I. *Bitches get everything*. Charkiv 2007. pp. 184-185 (Translation AK)

tion politicians. Thus, the Ukrainian writers ultimately lent their voice to the opposition politicians for the formulation of a first political action program, which stated the short-term and medium-term objectives of the Maidan movement and called on Jacenjuk, Tjahnybok and Klitschko to finally act in a convincing way on the basis of a clear-cut program. The Agenda 5/12 was prepared by Irena Karpa and Viktorija Narizhna and immediately signed by several thousand people. Members of all generations joined the call, and subsequently the younger and middle-aged authors met in a literal and figurative sense on Maidan Square. This resulted in additional initiatives (e.g. on social networks with the popular ironical comments of Jurij Vynnychuk, the media appearances of Zabuzhko and Zhadan, which had legal consequences, or Andruchovyč's Open Letter to Foreign Media).

The Agenda 5/12 can be divided into a catalogue of demands with three foci. The first pertains to social issues such as the protection of the protesters from police violence as well as the release of the political prisoners. The second point concerns the political system and demands for the government to resign, the signing of the association agreement with the European Union, a new electoral law, a lustration law as well as demands for a change to the constitution regarding the powers of the president. The third point appeals more to the emotional level and explicitly calls on opposition politicians to do their work as politicians and present a reform program for the first year of government. The proponents of the agenda expressed their wholehearted support to the opposition politicians.

The point in time for the Agenda 5/12 was well chosen, directly before the mass mobilization on the second Sunday of December on which the "March of Millions" took place in

Kiev. In the authors' view the enormous power of the protest definitely required an action and reform program for the time after Maidan. They stated that a Plan B and Plan C would probably also be necessary, in case there are riots and police crackdowns and a state of emergency is declared. All of this had been ominously looming in the air for weeks. The writers now gave the cues to their politicians. They stressed that "despite their deep antipathy towards Janukovych they do not want his head, rather wish to have their own country back for themselves, a country in which there will be no place for figures such as Janukovych and Asarov as well as for Titushky<sup>4</sup> and thugs from the Berkut special unit."

The authors emphasize how poorly the ruling politicians deal with the state entrusted to them and the people and how they view the state and its people as resources for their personal enrichment like in some form of stone-age capitalism. According to them, Janukovych is someone who since taking office has acted like an occupier of Ukraine who stops at no one and nothing. This "occupier" came to power due to the failure and weakness of the Orange politicians.

The total rejection of the current political regime by so many and primarily young people is a revolt against political incompetence and the arrogance of power. After the bloody police crackdown on peaceful demonstrators in late November on Maidan Square, Larysa Denysenko directly addressed Janukovych in writing: "You have no lifeline and no line of

4 Strong, younger men, who were partially hired on short notice by government-related organizations or by the Party of the Regions, in order to provoke riots during the peaceful demonstrations against the Janukovyč government or to directly attack smaller groups of government critics or individual persons.

destiny anymore. The youth of this country has risen against you. You have no future anymore.”

In recent years in Ukraine, authors from the younger generation such as Karpa, Denysenko and Zhadan have tackled issues of identity, cultural remembrance and individual position in a globalized world. In addition to the already mentioned novel by Karpa *Bitches get everything*, their works include, for example, Denysenko with her novel *Echoes* about a young German woman, who follows the tracks of her grandfather during the Second World War in Ukraine or the novel by Žadan *Vorošilovhrad* (translated recently into German). The students’ and young protesters’ rigid rejection of the political exploitation of the Euro-Maidan demonstrations, which were joined by large parts of the population of central and western Ukraine, and the organization of the Maidan as a field for social action by groups independent of the state is an expression of a civil society mindset aimed at a reconfiguration of Ukrainian politics. This mindset was also defined in the “Agenda 5/12 of the authors as a mission for policy-makers. It appears as if the authors and intellectuals had abandoned the traditional role of writers in Ukraine as a voice and prophet of the people as attributed to Taras Shevchenko in the 19th and 20th century. The authors are hardly interested in a national, political ideology with a social mission anymore. With their text and media appearances they are more focused on civil society themes and take a stand against the post-Soviet politics aimed at retaining power, which today’s – or actually yesterday’s – political elite represents. Zhadan described the youth at the Euro-Maidan as the “non-lost generation”, which is pitted against cannibals - “cannibals” who could simply eat up their opponents within the boundaries of dialogue.

Yet what these opponents will do with the cannibals is not entirely certain”. And that is a reason for hope ...

*translated by Michael Dobbins*

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