

Ukraine: We Need New Vocabulary. A Conversation with Kateryna Botanova

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In a moment when everything is burning, painful, and terrifying, it is hard to hold on to a long-term perspective. But if we don't hold on to it, we will lose everything. If we don't think about it, we'll lose future futures—yes, in the plural.

In the following conversation, [Ivanna Skyba-Yakubova](#) from *Dwutygodnik* and Documenting Ukraine grantee [Kateryna Botanova](#) discuss the current Ukrainian discourse on decoloniality, forms of solidarity, and cultural memory. They reflect on how to find a new language under fateful circumstances.

IVANNA SKYBA-YAKUBOVA: We are witnessing two major emancipatory projects—the emancipation that, during the war, allowed women to master military professions, and the emancipatory processes in countries that are gradually, in various ways, emerging from the shadows of empires. Can these processes truly be compared? Historian Yaroslav Hrytsak suggests that Europe itself is an emancipatory project. And can we use a feminist vocabulary, for instance, when discussing decolonization processes?

KATERYNA BOTANOVA: Emancipation, in general, is about having the opportunity, the courage, and the language—essentially, having the vocabulary—to speak about ourselves in a way that reflects who we are and how we feel. I disagree with Professor Hrytsak's assertion that Europe is an emancipatory project. Europe is more of a stubborn interlocutor, often insensitive and blind. It's like a wall you throw a ball against—it bounces back, and you train yourself and your abilities for self-reflection: where you stand in this world, how you speak, and with whom. It's a process of developing these emancipatory capabilities. For me, this has been very helpful in my attempts to communicate with various audiences, both Western European and non-European, about what is happening in Ukraine.

I don't speak about experiences I don't have, as I mostly live in Switzerland. I can't speak from inside Ukraine because I'm not physically there. However, as a critic and researcher, I can discuss artistic practices and, through them, what Ukraine is going through. I've come to realize that feminist vocabulary and emancipatory feminist trajectories are very useful for these explanations.

Other discourses, including the decolonization discourse, are not always helpful because Russia is not commonly perceived as an empire. Consequently, the societies and political entities that were under Russia's or the Soviet Empire's influence are not considered colonies. However, when we use the feminist conceptual framework (which is more understandable and, to a significant extent, more acceptable—though not entirely—in Western Europe and globally), the struggle for selfhood, the right to be oneself, the right to be equal yet different, becomes evident. It highlights the principle

that violence cannot be justified, that you cannot say, “You wore a short dress, so it’s your fault.” It underscores that political decisions about women’s issues cannot be made without women—nothing about us without us. Referencing this struggle is very useful.

Various emancipatory movements worldwide—LGBTQ rights movements, anti-colonialism, decolonization, and racial equality movements—are significantly interconnected and often rooted in feminism. This ability to assert one’s world as a world connected with others, in dialogue with others, yet distinctly a world of different sensations, understanding, and perception, is crucial.

The feminist vocabulary and emancipatory feminist trajectory are incredibly helpful for explaining postcoloniality.

Reflecting on the current situation in Georgia, a striking analogy emerges with shared women’s experiences, where the powerful of this world, from the “big club,” line them up and say, “Don’t provoke the big guy.” But we can amplify each other’s voices if we collectively begin to say that this is the same unchecked evil. Here, I’d like to talk about new lines of solidarity, especially beyond the European context.

As with most uncertain issues, the starting point must be ourselves. To build solidarity, we need to call things by their names. Only then can we understand our vocabularies and perspectives—how they align with others. If we want to create solidarities that help us, they must also help more than just us.

This brings up two very uncomfortable points that the Ukrainian intellectual community needs to address. The situations of our potential “allies” didn’t arise yesterday, yet we have never been particularly quick to support them. Georgia, perhaps, yes—but if we step slightly beyond Europe, where are our alliances? Are we even engaging in solidarity? We cannot take without giving in return.

We are trying to find support in places where we have never truly engaged before. But is solidarity and sensitivity to others even possible when you find yourself in a state of catastrophe?

I don’t think there is a simple or definitive answer to this question. But if we are asking about solidarity, we must find space for empathy. If our sole focus is addressing our own, deeply painful issues, then we should deal exclusively with those. However, in doing so, we risk becoming an insular nation, convinced that we are surrounded only by an ocean and “fighting against the elements.” Yet it’s not the elements—it’s a very concrete political and geopolitical force.

We seek solidarity with those who have also suffered under imperialism. However, before the full-scale invasion, we ourselves didn’t even call Russia an empire because doing so would have raised the question: If Russia is an empire, then who are we? And with that comes the discomfort of confronting shame and the threat of a sense of inferiority.

To build solidarity, we must call things by their names.

Russia was and remains an empire. It is the successor to the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Ukraine’s relationship within this empire is highly complex and tangled, and it must be discussed. Until we began to cry out in pain and to declare that a horrifying neo-imperial struggle was happening here, the so-called “Global West”—the decision-making center for whether to provide us with weapons—was not even looking in this direction. This is because Western Europe is built on an imperial legacy. Not only has it not shed this legacy, but it also has no intention of doing so.

An imperial legacy is not just about literal possession of other lands, territories, and peoples. It is also about control over knowledge—about how we speak about one another. It is about control over resources. For instance, the fact that France has formally left West Africa does not mean it has relinquished control over natural and human resources. France still maintains control over the financial systems of much of West Africa to this day.

It is somewhat awkward for empires to oppose another empire, as they are similar to a certain extent. Yes, the West consists of formal democracies, while Russia is an authoritarian regime. The West has a tradition of emancipation, while Russia essentially does not. However, neither Western Europe nor the United States wants to imagine scenarios of Russia's collapse. The breakup of Russia is seen as terrifying, incomprehensible, and unnecessary to anyone. In this way, we return to a situation resembling the scenario of 1991...

You recently signed an open letter written by a community of intellectuals and published in *The Guardian* which states that “it is very naive to assume that appeasing Russia’s demands will resolve the war or help de-escalate it. Impunity for Russia’s war crimes in Syria, Georgia, and Ukraine has only emboldened the Kremlin.” The authors of the letter question how far the escalation will be allowed to go before Western democracies dare to stop it.

Our letter was a response to another open letter, also published in *The Guardian*, signed by scholars from various academic circles and think tanks in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe. That letter argued that the war must be stopped and essentially suggested surrender. Among its signatories, there wasn't a single expert with any substantive academic connection to Ukraine. Instead, many were associated with think tanks and universities specializing in Russian or Eurasian studies.

We responded from the position that there is a large international community of people who have been working on Ukraine for a long time—some of Ukrainian origin, others not—in various universities and institutions. From our perspective, we said, “You do not have the right to dictate how this should be resolved.”

This academic and public gesture is very significant. It's another instance of the principle “nothing about us without us.”

The Canadian scholar of Ukrainian descent, Myroslav Shkandrij, points out that among the Indigenous peoples of Canada and the U.S. there are those who actively support Ukraine. At the same time, they are fighting against their own governments—governments that are currently our allies—creating what he calls an ethical loop.

According to him, this solidarity in the Canadian context is rooted in historical parallels. Indigenous children were once taken away from their families to be re-educated and re-indoctrinated. When Indigenous communities hear stories about the abduction of Ukrainian children, they feel a certain kinship. It's horrifying, but it also illustrates where lines of solidarity can emerge. This might offer a lesson on the importance of speaking openly about even the most horrifying and traumatic experiences, of course with respect for those who have lived through them. Along these lines, unexpected, painful, but meaningful connections of support and understanding can be built.

This is, unfortunately, not a new confrontation between the realpolitik of money and power and a longer-term strategy. Trump's victory in the U.S. might mean an end to our support. But imagine if the Indigenous peoples—First Nations of the U.S. and Canada—continue to advocate for and emphasize the Ukrainian issue. They feel not only a connection but also recognize that the force

killing us is killing them too. Not specifically Russia, but the systemic power that decides whose lives matter and whose don't.

This might not provide immediate help, but it could offer significant support in the longer term.

The force that kills us, that decides whose lives matter and whose don't, also kills them.

In a moment when everything is burning, painful, and terrifying, it is hard to hold on to a long-term perspective. But if we don't hold onto it, we will lose everything. If we don't think about it, we'll lose future futures—yes, in the plural.

The plurality of futures is an idea I encountered in the works of the brilliant Senegalese writer and philosopher Felwine Sarr, as he reflected on the futures (again, plural) of Africa. There isn't a single Africa, but the idea of Pan-Africanism—a sense of shared identity amid vast differences in experiences—is profoundly significant. He argues that the paths to the future that Europe has drawn for Africa are not ones they must follow. Instead, Africa must and can imagine entirely different futures that are more connected to their own societies. From those imagined futures, they can select scenarios that resonate most with their societies and move toward them in time and space.

Something similar could happen in Ukraine. Someone must imagine these futures. It's a thankless, utopian task, often dismissed by society because the present is ablaze. Understandably, if we don't extinguish this fire now, we won't be able to think about the future on this scorched ground. But if no one remains to think about the future, we will wake up in a country where not only is there no democracy, but there is nothing left at all.

This creates yet another tension—a radical simultaneity. We are forced to think about many things at once, and we cannot postpone them. If we delay, we will wake up tomorrow in a vast intellectual and societal void. If no one remains to think about the future, we will wake up in a country where not only is there no democracy, but where there is nothing left at all.

When you mentioned children, I thought to myself that I am completely unprepared to speak with citizens of the Russian Federation. But perhaps I might eventually speak with, say, the Yakuts. Because their story, too, is about stolen children, about horrific boarding schools, and about destroyed communities whose way of life was obliterated without anything offered in return. Yet, I'm not sure if there's anyone there to speak with or what we would talk about.

There are people. I don't know much about it, unfortunately, but I'm making an effort to learn. In Russia's Asian regions there are strong activist communities. Some of them had to leave Russia at the beginning of the full-scale invasion, for obvious reasons. Others have stayed. I don't know to what extent they are politically influential—likely not very much. Nor do I know how visible they are locally. But I know they exist, and I think that's incredibly important.

These communities are attempting, in various ways—including on social media—to voice their experiences. There's an excellent Instagram account called Asians of Russia. The way they share their experiences—of discrimination, resistance, and emancipation—is almost therapeutic.

The word "Buryats" in Ukraine has, for obvious reasons, become almost an insult. The units composed of people from these regions committed crimes during the occupation. So, on the first level, there is a lot of disgust and anger. But somewhere deep down the historical experience of these people, who were annihilated and driven to despair, is remembered. It's interesting to wonder if resistance movements will emerge there and if

the “global community” manages to act in this direction...

I'm afraid that we won't get support from the global community here. Neither Western Europe nor the United States wants to see the collapse of Russia because that scares them much more than the reality that exists now. Regarding the Buryats, I would like us to understand that any essentialization—attributing certain inherent characteristics to a group of people—is dangerous. It's not the Buryats who are killing; it's Russian citizens, put in inhumane conditions, who are doing it. This is not an excuse or explanation, it's just an understanding that Russia is the country that forces many of its citizens—especially the poorest, the least privileged—to do what they do because they have no other choice. It doesn't make it easier or better for us, but it's important to understand.

Another story that I've been thinking about lately, and which has started to be discussed in Ukraine recently, is the story of Central Asia—how the movements trying to rethink their history have started to strengthen there. They no longer view Russia as a modernizer or a force that brought light, literally meaning electricity, but as a force that destroyed the way of life and people who carried knowledge and tradition.

I recently spoke with a colleague from Kyrgyzstan. She said, “We can't call this decolonization because as soon as we use that word Russian security services will get involved. We are researching family histories. Through them, we talk to different people, different groups about how these family histories were destroyed, broken. We're starting to remember, write them down, discuss, make films, create art projects about what life was like before the Russian Empire, about what we lost.”

Any empire always brands traditional ways of life as primitive, pre-modern, undeveloped, backward. But this was the way people lived, and it was forcibly taken and destroyed. Without asking if they even needed this modernity, or if they were ready to pay the price.

This is a very grassroots, personal way of looking at it. We are talking about family history, and we must admit that there are blanks in our history which we want to fill. And the tragedy of the Soviet Union—and here, there are many commonalities between us and other communities that were part of it—is that for a long time we didn't even see these blanks, thinking they didn't exist. And what was there—a huge traumatic experience, one that is often almost impossible to approach.

Historically, there is great potential for solidarity, support, and understanding here. And these people feel that the war happening in Ukraine now is also happening for them.

You once said that while working in the contexts of the Amazon and Western and Southern Africa you learned a lot from the people you worked with there -in particular, how much knowledge there is about the land and its importance, about the significance of our connection to it. This is undoubtedly pre-modern knowledge, but modernity did not save us from anything, did not protect us from anything, and largely did not explain anything. We stand in the gaping maw of war, and war is a deep-rooted archaic force. I often observe resistance to this topic, a fear of the concept of “blood and soil”—not only among Western colleagues, but also, for example, among Serbian ones: “Oh my God, seriously, in 2024 you seriously want to talk about the land?”

The idea of modernity as a good thing is another powerful mythology that European civilization has built around itself—because when you build your power, this power must be based on certain ideas. And it's the belief in progress and the power of humans to overcome nature, to conquer it, and thereby to improve life. That's how you can explain everything that happens. You have to believe in something. The complexity of this situation is that, on the one hand, the scientific revolution and progress are of course very important things. They have changed a lot and given a lot... But in the

very moment we continue this sentence and want to say, “given to humanity,” we need to stop and ask ourselves whom are we including and whom are we excluding from this humanity? Because it gave to one part of humanity and catastrophically took away from another. And this other part of humanity is so much larger than the part which won that if we want to be honest with ourselves, we must ask about the price of this progress and the people who paid for it.

Ukrainian history in this situation is very interesting and complex because Ukraine, to some extent, both gained and lost a lot from these benefits of civilization.

One of the festivals I worked with was dedicated to the Amazon, and it was opened by one of the most important Brazilian leaders of Indigenous peoples—the political activist, philosopher, and writer, Ailton Krenak. He speaks about how the separation of culture and nature, the opposition of culture and civilization, the notion of nature as some primary archaic chaos that needs to be organized and subdued, is nonsense—that is, the child in the mother’s womb cannot oppose the mother because without her the child simply cannot survive. Humans and nature are one whole. For the Indigenous peoples of the Amazon, and actually for all the Indigenous peoples who have survived until now, this separation is impossible.

And when this separation is impossible, then a person cannot harm nature. You cannot harm something without which you cannot exist. You start to think, “Well, yes, this is actually very natural, this is how it is. There’s no need to turn rivers back, dry swamps, and irrigate deserts.” The wonderful idea of stopping the expansion of the Sahara and planting green corridors is also a very destructive and violent way of showing that we can do this differently. Even if this approach comes from very humanitarian considerations about containing the growth of the desert, we need to save people. Will this approach not mean the loss of even more people and the complex ecological system which exists between the environment, non-human creatures, and people?

When I started talking about this to my colleagues in Ukraine around 2019 or 2020, they told me, “What are you talking about? This doesn’t concern us at all. The issues we face are completely different.” Then the full-scale invasion began (though we should have been talking about this since 2014 because Southern and Eastern Ukraine were already experiencing an invasion), and with it a gigantic ecological catastrophe that we will deal with for generations to come. While I pointed out this issue in the Amazon and in Sub-Saharan Africa, I didn’t pay attention to it here. Now we know that losing your home is not just losing a house or even losing memory and artifacts. A photo album, books, my memory remain. This memory, however, is part of a landscape. You lose this landscape, that starts to feel like a physical part of you. This topic has appeared in the works of Ukrainian artists during the war.

In the second half of 2022, curator Natasha Chichasova and artist Kateryna Aliynik, both from the part of Eastern Ukraine which was occupied even before 2022, said that when we talked about and mourned the loss of the landscape as part of ourselves, we were not heard, not understood. But in 2022, suddenly everything became so obvious. It became impossible to oppose it because it became clear that home is not just a piece of land, home is not just a foundation and four walls—home is part of the body, part of culture, memory, family, and this loss is the loss of part of the body. Now we begin to talk about it, write about it, live it through artistic works because it’s impossible not to talk about it. We are trying to find images, words, feelings to talk about it. What are we talking about though? We are talking about the fact that the land is more than just land; it’s not a resource, it’s not just soil. The land is an important part of cultural identity, cultural memory. But if we speak this language now to our colleagues in Western Europe, they will ask, “Friends, what kind of archaism is this?”

Let’s legitimize and introduce the concept of “pre-modernity” into our space and perhaps even

rename it—because “pre-modernity” means something that existed before modernity, which is supposedly an achievement. We need to find new lexicons, we need to legitimize them, accept them, and integrate them into our own.

Katya, we talked about solidarity, and the exhibition you’re currently curating at the Jam Factory in Lviv is called “Structures of Reciprocity.”

This story is four years old. We started the project at the end of 2020 at the invitation of the [Jam Factory](#). It was meant to be a project that would open the space and was initially called “Organic Communities.” It was about Ukrainian post-pandemic society in a global context: Here we are, a society deeply affected by the lack of community, lack of reality, lack of connections with each other and with the world, after the COVID-19 pandemic; a society that, alongside the pandemic, is experiencing a war and realizing that this war is not ending (we understand that we are at the frontier, but in 2021 we didn’t understand in which direction this frontier is moving or whether there is a solution to the situation); a society that is part of a huge environmental catastrophe which we cannot ignore but don’t want to pay attention to because, once again, everything is burning here. So, how do we speak to ourselves? How do we speak to others? What experiences from other communities can we live through, observe, internalize, so that the interaction within the community—because society is made up of many different communities—can be more careful, more cautious, more attentive? After the full-scale invasion, we realized that we cannot leave any work or any idea behind. The context has changed so radically and terribly that the only thing we can keep is our attention to the community, to how we interact with each other.

This exhibition is about communities and interaction, about how very different Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian communities and societies, in a state of extreme challenge, great trauma, and immense pain, find the strength to support one another, and about the power of mutual support—when we understand that on the one hand we can rely on each other, but on the other hand, we understand that if any element falls out of this structure, it will fall apart, too. We must learn to value this and draw strength from it.

Interview by Ivanna Skyba-Yakubova; Translated by Kate Tsurkan; This conversation was recorded for Radio Khartiya, as part of the series “[The Purple Dragon](#)”. The article was first published in [Ukrainian](#) and [Polish](#) and came out of the collaboration between the IWM and the Polish online magazine [Dwutygodnik](#).

Kateryna Botanova

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