



Towards the Freedom-Seeking Mission of the Ukrainian University



Serhiy Kvit

Serhiy Kvit is the Head of the National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance and a professor at the Kyiv-Mohyla School of Journalism. In 2002–2007 he was Dean of the Faculty of Social Studies at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. He founded the Kyiv-Mohyla School of Journalism in 2001 and became president of the Media Reform Centre. In 2005–2011 he was Chairman of the Consortium on University Autonomy. He was rector (president) of the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy from 2007 until 2014. Serhiy Kvit held the position of the Minister of Education and Science of Ukraine in 2014–2016.



What do we know about the challenges faced by universities and intellectuals in the country with a long history of statelessness? In this essay, I address this question by looking at the development of the Ukrainian university. In the post-Soviet environment, institutions that are regarded as higher education entities very often have nothing to do with genuine university traditions. For example, the ability to issue higher education diplomas is not a sufficient condition for being an institution of higher education. However, that is not always obvious in the post-Soviet circumstances. Instead of adhering to global standards of organizational purpose, values and standards, some post-Soviet politicians and academics have a tendency to be proud of the international competitiveness and scientific achievements of the Soviet period, when the totalitarian state spent considerable resources on the needs of the military-industrial complex and communist propaganda. The university communities are thus tempted to stay in the shadow of the narratives created by the colonizer. In this essay, I will explore the implications of this from the viewpoint of decolonization, increased social significance, and, as a matter of fact, (re)establishment of the Ukrainian academia.

Farewell to the Soviet University

My disagreements with the Soviet university began back in 1987, when, as a student, I was defending my right to wear a homemade blue-and-yellow badge (the colors of the Ukrainian national flag). At the time of Perestroika, the Soviet power still labeled the Ukrainian national flag as “fascist”. In addition, I was not allowed by the university library to borrow books by Mykhailo Hrushevskiy, who was a prominent Ukrainian historian and head of the first Ukrainian parliament (1917-1918), as he was labeled a kind of “fascist” as well. The Soviet ideologues did not actually care that Hrushevskiy was a socialist. He was a Ukrainian – and that was a problem.

My final farewell to the Soviet university took place in 1989. The Associate Dean of my Faculty of Journalism, a Communist party member who was born and raised in the USSR, but who had hated the Russian and Communist occupation regime all his life, asked me to help him carry out a huge bust of Lenin out of the university room, as if we were intending to wash it. This was our explanation to those who asked us: “Where are you taking Lenin?” However, as soon as we stepped down in the dark basement, the Associate Dean suddenly said: “Now, Serhiy, just throw it far away!” That was my first, but not the last, destroyed monument of Lenin. At about the same period, optional attendance of university lectures was enacted at the Faculty of Journalism, which allowed students to give up numerous communist (or the so-called “Marxist-Leninist”) subjects, which had previously been mandatory.

Thus, the first pre-condition in the creation of a non-Soviet university was that it should be Ukrainian. Lenin was perceived as the leader of the colonizing and repressive power in Ukraine, and it had to be removed from the national academia, symbolically as well as ideologically. The opposition processes aimed at Ukraine breaking free of the USSR were gaining in strength. In the history of pro-independence movement, it is quintessential that the first open public meeting in Kyiv was organized in 1988 by “Hromada” (in Ukrainian literally meaning “community” or “the whole society”), an informal, illegal, but no longer underground student organization. Among other political claims, the rally demanded the restoration of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy.

The memory of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, founded in 1615 and closed in the first years of Soviet rule in the mid-1920s, was so strong that it was absolutely obvious to the Ukrainian intellectuals that this higher education institution had to be restored. In 1992, the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy was re-established and enrolled its first students. In symbolic terms, this was the first time in modern history when the new Ukrainian discourse defeated the (post)-Soviet discourse. It became a Ukrainian university, where Ukrainian was not a declarative and tokenistic term anymore.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kyiv-Mohyla Academy became the experimental platform for practically all innovations implemented in Ukrainian higher education, including the first bachelor, master, and Ph.D. programs; two (Ukrainian and English) languages of instruction; a unique system of entrance testing, which later served as the basic model for the creation of external independent testing at the national level; the cross-disciplinary terms of admissions to master programs; as well as a range of university policies (e.g., on academic integrity, internationalization, comprehensive university autonomy, anti-corruption, etc.), which were new benchmarks for the reforming Ukrainian academia.

The Challenges of Comprehensive University Autonomy

After the Orange Revolution (2004), the concept of comprehensive university autonomy was shaped by a Consortium on University Autonomy, which included reform-oriented representatives of eight universities from different regions of Ukraine, committed to embracing academic, financial, and administrative self-sufficiency. The idea was promoted through the Law of Ukraine “On Higher Education”, which was drafted by the intellectual community with the support of Ukrainian civil society. The law represented opposition to Viktor Yanukovich’s authoritarian regime, which was advocating stronger business relations with Russia; it also counteracted legislative revisions enacted by the Russian chauvinist Dmytro Tabachnyk, minister of education and science in 2012-2013. The process of adopting the new law, as designed by grassroots academics, was a tiring battle. The law was promulgated by the Verkhovna Rada (Parliament) of Ukraine only after the victory of the Revolution of Dignity in 2014.

Presently, every step in developing the higher education system of Ukraine is directly and indirectly viewed through the lens of implementing comprehensive university autonomy. This movement is widely supported. It is seen as a safeguard against corruption, as the importance of reputation comes first. Comprehensive university autonomy is also used as a means of internationalization, quality improvement, and fundraising at Ukrainian HEIs (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Ukraine Office, 2017).

However, the university transformations are taking place in a market-oriented economy, and in the context of global neoliberalism. Notably, in Ukraine there is no clear understanding of the peculiarities of the neoliberal approach. Opponents of university autonomy include politicians and bureaucrats who are supporters of the Soviet-style power of “manual control” over HEIs by the Government. Indeed, the implementation of comprehensive university autonomy, with all its market rhetoric of competition, self-regulation, and institutional responsibility, undoubtedly represents a challenge for such politicians – they do not understand the importance of education for the future of society.

In seeking liberalization of the university, which in the past promoted strict ministerial control over social and economic discourses and professional development needs, Ukrainian intellectuals had to identify a means to create a new mission of the contemporary Ukrainian university, enabling it to exist in the new reality, in which the national economy had been in deep and permanent crises of transformation and was unable to support a “free-floating” system of as many as 1200 higher education institutions. To succeed, the Ukrainian university needs a thoroughly sophisticated concept of “comprehensive university autonomy”, as I have argued earlier (Kvit, 2020).

Clash of Ideologies and Political Context

It has been very interesting to observe a left-wing discourse returning to the Ukrainian political agenda. This time, the discourse is claimed as being modeled after the Frankfurt School traditions (Litovchenko, 2014). Yet, it is rather aggressive in its opposition to the national liberation discourse, despite the seemingly obvious fact that de-colonization is extremely vital in Ukraine's struggle against the undeclared war and Russian aggression since 2014. The neo-Marxist rhetorical criticism of modern authoritarian regimes does not remove its historical affinity with various "progressive" and alternative concepts of the past, including the traditions of the 1917 Russian revolution and the "Marxist and Leninist" infringements on the "just order" (Kvit, 2019, June 13). Also, the neo-Marxists uncritically shy away from the fact that Soviet communism was nothing if not a reincarnation of ordinary Russian imperialism. The post-Soviet versions of neo-Marxism, which are typically extremely intolerant of other opinions, ignore the postcolonial nature of the Ukrainian liberation tradition. The neo-Marxists re-activate their habitual rhetorical clichés, including accusing Ukrainian liberation movement participants of "fascism" (Welcome back to the USSR!)

At the same time, even supporters of market-based approaches to educational reforms tend to perceive the "leftist" demands as justified, because of "academic freedom," which gives equal consideration to ideological discourses – presumably the only way to create a high-quality education in Ukraine. I dare to suggest that such an approach to the marketplace of ideas, although customary for the Western context, is very problematic in "embattled Ukraine" (Kvit, 2015; Oleksiyenko, Terepyshchyi, Gomilko & Svyrydenko, 2020). Unfortunately, the anti-Ukrainian rhetoric, as promoted by Russian propaganda and pro-Russian forces, creates a challenge to the concept and practice of the modern research university, as it is known in the discourse of international higher education (Altbach & Salmi, 2011). To implement a freedom-oriented project of higher learning, the vulnerable Ukrainian state needs a powerful strategy for ideological and organizational capacity-building, and economic resources to mobilize this strategy. However, the state is lacking a strategic vision.

Talk of neoliberal reforms in Ukraine continues to sustain the rhetoric of the "transition period". The permanence of this rhetoric is advantageous for many political forces, above all, for Ukraine's oligarchs. Thirty years after the collapse of the Soviet economy and higher education system, we still have not developed a new model of the Ukrainian university. The Ukrainian state power is still weak – postcolonial. At the same time, the Ukrainian nation is fighting against a powerful aggressor, that is, authoritarian chauvinist Russia. Ukraine must mobilize its society and implement reforms in extremely difficult circumstances. In this environment, enabling ubiquitous freedom means empowering the adherents of the "Russian World" to support Putin's efforts in occupying and destroying Ukraine.

The idea of creating an independent state and Ukrainian university does not, and should not, imply defiance of modernization efforts, because of problems with neoliberal interpretations of the global competition of ideas. The rejection of the neoliberal discourse of competition tends, however, to underpin the rejection of modernization in Ukrainian society. On the one hand, it is revealed in a careless attitude towards the implementation of the best international models of quality assurance in higher education. It also transpires in neglecting or depreciating the diversity of institutional models: e.g., teaching universities, polytechnics, community and vocational colleges. On the other hand, it can be traced to the avoidance or inability to establish a modern research university in Ukraine that would be internationally competitive.

The modern Ukrainian university should start from the priorities facing the independent state of Ukraine today. It should serve the purposes of intellectual mobilization in defense of the values underpinning the traditions of Western democracy, for which millions of Ukrainians died over the last century and are still dying today in Crimea and Donbas. Only then could the freedom-seeking values of a Ukrainian university be

considered holistic and universal. Only then would it address the most typical needs of the contemporary Ukrainian society.

However, the foremost priority must be Ukrainian independence. If Ukraine does not withstand Russian attacks, it will turn into a part of the “Russian World” with its characteristic authoritarian models of political culture (Kvit, 2019, Oct. 26). In other words, an up-to-date Ukrainian political model, including a new Ukrainian university, is incompatible with any extreme right-wing (authoritarian rejection of pluralism) or extreme left-wing (authoritarian “politically correct”) intolerance. In the context of war with an imperial revanchist power, it is essential to ensure the pluralism that primes society for decolonization, prevents the questioning of the status of the Ukrainian language, strengthens public institutions, and guarantees the rule of law that protect the national security of independent Ukraine.

What Kind of University Mission Does Ukraine Need?

It should be natural for Ukrainian universities to combine such concepts as nurturing national leadership and ability to interact globally, radical modernization (westernization and internationalization), implementing the university’s social mission, as well as shaping an ambitious agenda for the development of a national state, which would be capable of ensuring the effective realization of democratic rights and freedoms, economic prosperity and sustainability.

Most importantly, Ukraine must abandon (post) Soviet traditions of self-isolation, and Ukrainian intellectual discourse must become global and contextual.

References

Altbach, P. G. & Salmi, J. (eds.). (2011). *The Road to Academic Excellence: The Making of World-Class Research Universities*. Washington, DC: The World Bank.

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Ukraine Office (2017). *Higher Education in Ukraine: Agenda for Reforms*. Accessed at <https://bit.ly/2PehpZm>

Kvit, S. (2020). Higher education in Ukraine in the time of independence: Between Brownian motion and revolutionary reform. *Kyiv-Mohyla Humanities Journal*, 7, 141–159.
<http://kmhj.ukma.edu.ua/article/view/219666>

Kvit S. (2019, June 13). Ukraine in the struggle for independence in the age of post-truth. *Kyiv Post*,
<https://bit.ly/3m8MJ7Z>

Kvit S. (2019, Oct. 26). A perspective on ‘fake news’. *Kyiv Post*, <https://bit.ly/3digpvk>

Kvit, S. (2015). *The Battlefield of Civilizations: Education in Ukraine*. Kyiv: Kyiv Mohyla Academy Publishing House.

Litovchenko A. (2014). Critical sociology of the Frankfurt School: Between science and ideology. *Sociological Studios*, 1 (4), 24-29 <https://bit.ly/2O1CHsD>

Oleksiyenko, A., Terepyshchyi, S., Gomilko, O., & Svyrydenko, D. (2020). ‘What do you mean, you are a refugee in your own country?’: Displaced scholars and identities in embattled Ukraine. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 1-18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2020.1777446>

To cite this article:

APA Style: Kvit, S. (2021). Towards the freedom-seeking mission of the Ukrainian university. *Universities & Intellectuals*, 1 (1), 30-35.

Harvard Style: Kvit, S. 2021. Towards the freedom-seeking mission of the Ukrainian university. *Universities & Intellectuals*, 1 (1), pp. 30-35.

Chicago Style: Kvit, S. "Towards the freedom-seeking mission of the Ukrainian university". *Universities & Intellectuals* 1, no. 1 (2021): 30-35.

MLA Style: Kvit, S. "Towards the freedom-seeking mission of the Ukrainian university". *Universities & Intellectuals* 1.1 (2021): 30-35.