Volodymyr Yermolenko

Steppe, Empire, and Cruelty

I. Ukraine, Steppe and the Borderland

When in the early 1840s Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz was lecturing a course called *Les Slaves* (*The Slavs*) at Collège de France in Paris, he had a lot to say about Ukrainians, a large European nation, which, according to different estimates made at that time, was either already long dead, or still unborn.

For Mickiewicz, Ukraine was a "the land of borders" (*pays de frontières*), it has been "a way through which Asian life was entering Europe" and "it is here that two parts of the world (*Europe and Asia – V. Y.*) were opposing each other". It was a "battlefield"; "all the armies of the world were meeting here". Ukrainian Cossacks too were an example of ethnic mixtures: "a mixture of Slavs, Tatars and Turks".

Mickiewicz himself was a mixture, a person with multiple identities. Born on the territory of modern-day Belarus, he begins *Pan Tadeusz* with a famous "Lithuania (*Litwo*), my motherhood" (meaning that old *Lithuania*, whose medieval Grand Duchy united the lands of contemporary Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine). Mickiewicz is now regarded as *the* Polish poet par excellence; but in several Ukrainian cities like Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk or Odesa, you can see monuments dedicated to him.

Mickiewicz's name for Ukraine – "*pays de frontieres*", the land of borders, certainly referred to the very name "Ukraine" which, according to the most widespread interpretations, leads it to the words "*kray*" (a border of the land; a borderland; a land itself) and "*okrayina*" (borderland, frontier).

> **From the 12th century on, this name was used as a designation of the frontier, or borderland, with a Big Steppe, a place where settled European cultures were meeting their nomadic opponent.**

The Steppe was for centuries the provider of dangers to these lands. At different periods, Iranian, Mongol, or Turkic tribes posed this danger of encounter with the Stranger, often violent and pitiless. Contact with the Steppe defined much of Ukrainian history, in which violence and cruelty not only took human lives, but also erased traces of the past: the Steppe devours memories and regularly reinvents itself as a *tabula rasa*.

* * *

When Western European intellectuals and artists, of Mickiewicz's generation or even older, tried to conceptualize Ukrainian lands for themselves, they usually conceived them in terms of a border with the nomadic Steppe, or as the nomadic Steppe itself.

Look at Madame de Stael's account of her short visit to Kyiv in 1812, in her long European journey away from Napoleon. This highly-educated French writer, supporter of the Revolution but opponent of the Emperor, saw Kyiv's architecture as resembling nomadic camps. Here "one sees nothing that would resemble the cities of the West", she says, adding that "the majority of buildings in Kiew resemble tents, and, seen from a distance, the city looks like a camp". For Germaine de

Stael, Kyiv's architecture "took the model of the ambulant houses of Tatars", as if these Kyiv dwellers regarded their houses as temporary, and were ready to leave their place and move to another, without traces or memory.

When seven years later, in 1819, Byron (who admired De Stael's *Corinne*) wrote his poem "Mazeppa", he also made the Steppe and nomadic metaphor the cornerstone of his vision of Ukrainian lands.

Byron tells the story of the young Ivan Mazepa, caught at the Polish court for adultery, tied naked to a wild horse, and sent out into the Steppe. He took this story from Voltaire, but turned Voltaire's few lines about the "young Mazepa" legend into a big romantic epic. What is striking in this story now is how Byron imagined the Ukrainian lands: tied to a horse, Mazepa was riding through Ukrainian Steppe for three days without meeting a single human being, or even any sign of human settlement. Even for the mid-17th century, which Byron describes in his story, this perception of imagined de-population in Eastern Europe was an enormous exaggeration.

Byron's version of this story was a paradoxical turn-around of a big historical drama: the military loss suffered by Ivan Mazepa, one of the greatest Ukrainian hetmans and Cossack leaders, who joined Swedish King Charles XII in his war against Peter I of Russia. After the defeat suffered by Charles and Mazepa at Poltava in 1709, Peter I had his hands untied in developing a Russian expansionist empire in the 18th century, making possible Russia's expansion both to the north and to the south. But Byron missed out that part of the story.

But, curiously, Byron's Mazeppa story became a scoop, a new legend of his time. The British poet was followed by Victor Hugo and French painters like Gericault or Delacroix, Polish writer Juliusz Słowacki and many others, from Russia to America, who made "Mazeppa" one of the archetypal characters of 19th century European romanticism. For them, it became a story of a "romantic hero" who descends into hell on earth (Ukrainian Steppe), almost dies there but is reborn and gets a new life. A good story, which had little to do with history.

As the 19th century went on, and the "Mazeppa" story was turned increasingly into a story about Tatars, not Ukrainians, it became a symptom of Europe's "Orientalizing" of the European East, in which Ukrainian lands were seen as a desert, a *non-human* space, where human culture meets its alternative, and where cruel violence is possible.

* * *

Jacques le Goff, the famous French historian, once described the mental map of a medieval Western European mind as an opposition between the ordered and safe world of the City, and the disordered and dangerous world of the Forest.

But in the Ukrainian Steppe the opposition might have been radically different: Steppe mythology imagines the Stranger in a different way.

The Forest is a realm of creatures who have *been always been here,* have deep roots, have their eternal possessions and do not tolerate human "invaders". The only option for humans to be able to survive in this world was to have roots themselves, to have a long genealogy and a long history.

Steppe is different: the key danger here comes from those who have *never* been here, who are coming from the outside. The horror of Ukrainian popular culture, exemplified in early collections of historical and political songs put together in the 19th century by Maksymovych, Kostomarov, Drahomanov, Antonovych and others, is directly related to the risk of sudden attacks by nomadic warriors (mostly Tatars), who would torch villages and kidnap people as slaves to be sold on Turkish slave markets.

In the Steppe culture the danger comes not from the "deeply rooted", but from the unrooted, from the nomads.

The only way to beat the nomad, the unrooted, was to become a nomad yourself. This is the beginning of the story of Ukrainian Cossacks, the major founding block of Ukrainian identity.

* * *

When we come back again to the 19th century again, to the imagination of the epoch where people like Madame de Stael, Byron, Hugo or Mickiewicz were writing their stories, we will see how the Forest myth comes back to the European imagination. But contrary to Le Goff's Middle Ages, the Forest was no longer seen as a danger, but as an opportunity, or even as a model.

Opposed to the Enlightenment, the rococo and classicist esthetics of the 18th century, with its admiration for transparency, "civilized customs" and court life, 19th century romanticism brings forests back to the agenda: as the best metaphor for both personal and national identity.

Trees have roots, plants have roots, humans have roots too, 19th century romantics said, from Herder to Chateaubriand, from Mickiewicz to Shevchenko. The early 19th century political philosophy was all about the "botanization" of human nature: humans, as plants, have flowers, fruits, periods of flourishing and decline. They also have national "ecosystems", as we would say today.

Ukrainian literature of the 19th and early 20th century followed this European trend. "Forestization" esthetics reaches it fully during the fin-de-siècle, with Lesya Ukrainka's *Forest Song*, and Mykhaylo Kotsybynksy's *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*. Both these texts, cornerstones of Ukrainian culture, challenged the nomadic Steppe identity, revitalizing old forest mythology of "roots", and "those who have always been here" – and injecting Volhynian and Carpathian forests into the Ukrainian Steppe imagination.

This is an important aspect of how a culture, intrinsically linked with encounters with the Steppe, with the unrooted, was trying to discover or re-invent its roots, its deep past, its complicated rhizomes.

This thirst for roots has an interesting continuation in the Ukrainian literature of early communism. Russian Bolshevik communism was supposed to cut national roots, to perform a global de-rootization of

culture and to make the future prevail over the past. But Ukrainian communist literature was different – as if it tried to combine this new nomadic unrootedness with an earlier romantic search for roots.

When proletarian writer Mykola Khvyliovy (who called his esthetics "romantics of vitaism") and neo-classicist Mykola Zerov were imagining the place of Ukrainian culture in world history, they were thinking in terms of roots, deep European roots. This is why they revitalized the "Renaissance" metaphor, which in itself implied a strong desire for root-seeking. Khvyliovy's "Asiatic renaissance" and Zerov's "Eurasian renaissance" were attempts to see Ukraine in the 1920s as a country where the European "Renaissance" paradigm spills over to Eurasia. Zerov's slogan "*ad fontes*" ("to the sources") was a new search for *roots*, this time the transnational and global roots of old European culture; but this search for roots was only possible for a generation that felt itself deeply unrooted.

Zerov's friend, writer and archeologist Domontovych wrote a novel entitled *Bez gruntu* (Without Ground), introducing a metaphor later used by Yuriy Sheveliov, one of the most important Ukrainian intellectuals of the 20th century, to name the whole generation as *bezgruntiany,* those who do not have grounds, who lost their roots – but are trying to find them again or reinvent them in global culture. Zerov's "*ad fontes*" meant an attempt to root back Ukrainian culture in the old European Greek and Roman tradition so as to ensure enlargement of this old European civilization further to the East, up to India and China. The Forest, which Ukrainian culture was looking for, was no longer a local ethnic forest; it became a global forest of humankind, a new tree of life.

But the metaphor of the Steppe was strong enough to return. It came back in the 1930s, when the Ukrainian struggle for sovereignty in both the Soviet Union and Poland, was defeated. This was the time when Ukrainian political émigré and thinker of the 1930s, Yevhen Malanyuk, called Ukraine a "steppe Hellas", as opposed to a new "Roman" empire, the "third Rome" of Russia, as reinvented in the Soviet Union.

This definition was also a search for roots. It was a paradox of a nation looking for roots (forest metaphor) in the unrooted (steppe metaphor).

It was also root-seeking in a much more dangerous environment, marked with extreme violence and erasing of traces. This was a time when new violence came to Ukrainian lands, from the Holodomor of 1932-1933 to World War II, when Ukrainian lands, together with lands of Poland and Belarus, were turned into the bloodlands (to use the concept of Timothy Snyder), or bloody Steppe. Ukrainian lands again looked like a borderland with the Big Steppe to which the new communist and then Nazi nomads came and burnt cities and villages to the ground.

* * *

This duality between settled and nomadic identities, between root-seeking and un-rootedness, is one of the keys to understanding Ukrainian culture and history. Interestingly, Ukrainian literature has a unique example of anchoring this duality to one of the founding myths of European culture: the myth of Rome.

Indeed, Roman mythology provides one of the most famous examples of combining the imagination of the settled culture and a nomadic culture. From the times of Virgil, it developed the story of Aeneas, the son of Venus and a Trojan hero, who escaped the burning Troy with his father and his son, and, after long journeys, set up a town on the brinks of the River Tiber in Italy. Rome as a settled *patria* was founded by a nomad; Rome as an empire had its roots in the unrooted.

It is a paradox that Ukrainian modern literature was restarted in the 1790s by Ivan Kotliarevsky with his version of this story. Kotliarevsky's *Aeneid* was a satirical replica of Virgil's *Aeneid*, written in vernacular Ukrainian and presenting Aeneas, his Trojan fellows, as

Ukrainian (Zaporozhian) Cossacks. Despite its ostensible playfulness, the poem had huge political and geopolitical implications.

Virgil's epic was written in the times of Augustus, the first Roman emperor, and was aimed at giving deeper roots to the Roman political project. Aeneas was a Roman response to the Greek Odysseus, told from "the other" side, by those who suffered a defeat in Troy but then "evacuated their patria", as Virgil said. Aeneas was also "upgraded" version of Odysseus: *Odyssey* was a story about the return to roots; *Aeneid* was a story about a nomad who takes his roots with himself; an imperial story created on an emigrant myth.

This makes Kotliarevsky's *Aeneid*, and Ukrainian modern intellectual culture that began with it, a big political paradox. Kotliarevsky did not make a eulogy to the empire (the Russian Empire in his case), but satire against the empire. At the same time, he drew a direct parallel between the Cossack myth and the Roman myth. Just as the Romans were initially political emigrés evacuating their fatherland and re-starting it from scratch on some empty hills on the brink of the River Tiber, Ukrainian Cossacks were hoping to do the same. Zaporozhian Sich, the Cossack Troy, was destroyed by the Russian Empire in 1775; and Kotliarevsky's epic could have been read as an indirect hint that the new Cossack Aeneas will soon be able to set up a new kingdom, one capable of challenging the Russian Empire.

Interestingly, it is Ukrainians, and not Russians, who made the Aeneas story a foundation of their literature. Despite the fact that the metaphor of "evacuation of patria" would have worked perfectly for a Russian imperialist takeover of Kyiv's medieval cultural and political heritage, the Russians never fully used it.

From the times of Peter I, Russia was seeking a new imperial symbolism: Peter created the Russian Empire, and built a new city, St. Petersburg, as the new "St Peter's city", i.e. a new Rome, continuing Russia's claim to be the Third Rome. This imperial project had a direct impact on the Ukrainian political project: the empire presumed

expansion and centralization, which left no room for the autonomy of the Ukrainian Cossacks. Russians didn't use the Aeneas metaphor, however, maybe because, in Russian eyes, the story of Troy-Kyiv or Troy-Sich had to be erased, not preserved.

Anyway, modern Ukrainian literature started with a text that anchored the new culture in the old Roman (and European) myth, but, at the same time, injected it with a rebellious laugh.

II. Republic against Empire

Putting a Roman story at the beginning of Ukrainian modern literature was no coincidence.

> **It integrated Ukraine into one of the key controversies of European history: a debate between the Republic and the Empire.**

Virgil was a witness, and a genius propagandist, of one of the most important twists in this history: an era when the Roman Republic, with Caesar and especially his posthumously adopted son Augustus, Virgil's patron, was becoming an Empire.

The dilemma between the Republic and the Empire is simple: it is focused on the question of origin of power. The republican paradigm states that power stems from below, and has a bottom-up decentralized nature: it is a compromise, or a contract, between free citizens or communities. The republican project is pluralist.

The imperial paradigm states, on the contrary, that power stems from above, and has a top-down centralized nature: it is a gift from God, or any other Absolute Entity (nature, nation, race, class, etc.), and, therefore, cannot be challenged or restricted. Ultimately, there can only be one empire on the Earth.

One of the key historical points of meeting republican and imperial paradigm in Eastern Europe was the history of Ukrainian Cossacks

and, in particular, Bohdan Khmelnytsky's Cossack rebellion against Polish Rzeczpospolita in the mid-17th century.

This rebellion was a republican antithesis to two imperial projects: the Roman Catholic project, which was re-defining itself in imperial terms in the 16th-17th centuries, and the Muscovite (later Russian) project that was also trying to define itself in imperial terms at that time.

Khmelnytsky's rebellion started in 1648, the year when Europe's Thirty Years War, the most drastic religious conflict, was over. The end of this war was a symptom of the failure of the ambition of the Roman Catholic Church to oppress the Lutheran "schism" born in the early 16th century. But this Lutheran upheaval, aside from its moral and religious grounds, also had an anti-imperial tonality. Catholic Rome of the early 16th century, with Borgia, Della Rovere, Medici popes, had the ambition of becoming a reborn Roman Empire which would conquer the world through faith, and not only through the sword. Julius II, during whose reign Michelangelo and Raphael created their famous frescos in the Vatican (and Luther came to Rome and saw it as a new Babylon), saw Julius Caesar as his model. During his rule, ancient Roman topics, images and emotions flooded the Roman Renaissance.

An interesting parallel between Catholic Rome and Orthodox Moscow, the two major poles defining 1648 Khmelnytsky's rebellion, is that they both took the Turkish takeover of Constantinople in 1453 very seriously. For Muscovite political mythology, it was a pretext to create a mythology of Moscow as the Third Rome (started by Metropolitan Zosima in the late 15th century and developed by monk Filofei in 1520s). But for Roman popes and intellectuals of the same era it meant a different thing: if Constantinople, a "second" Rome, fell, a real Rome should be again the first one, and the *only* one.

The century and a half that followed from Luther's "95 Theses" of 1517 up until the end of the Thirty Years' War, was the era of the great religious controversy between the Roman new imperial project, and the Protestant anti-imperial project. Rome wanted to become a new empire, visible in architecture, arts and richness; Protestantism was

an attempt to oppose it with the anti-imperial and rebellious force of *sola fide*, "faith alone", i.e. the power of the Invisible.

But throughout the late 16th and early 17th century protestants were not the only target of Roman imperial ambitions. In Eastern Europe and in particular Polish Rzeczpospolita, these ambitions were directed against the Orthodox Church. To survive, it replied to Rome using Rome's weapons: militarily, by developing a Cossack military force, and intellectually, by creating the Academy (now called Kyiv-Mohyla Academy) and educating generations of people able to compete intellectually and rhetorically with Catholic Jesuits.

When the republican-imperial struggle in Western Europe ended in 1648, it re-started in Eastern Europe, with Khmelnytsky's rebellion. Khmelnytsky, just like European protestants, also won this battle against the newly-imperial Rome, creating anti-Roman (anti-Catholic) Cossack Ukraine as a political entity, but also putting it under the protection of the Muscovite tsar. Thus, Khmelnytsky cut off part of Ukrainian lands from one imperial project (Roman Catholic) but integrated it into another (Muscovite) political project that was gradually defining itself as a "Third Rome" and moving towards an imperial identity. Paradoxically, it was Ukrainian Kyiv-Mohyla intellectuals like Theophan Prokopovych who helped their northern suzerains to better formulate their identity and their goals, which gradually turned the apocalyptic and inward-looking Moscow-Third-Rome concept into a modernized expansionist concept of the Russian Empire under Peter I.

Ukraine was, therefore, born between two imperial projects, between the two versions of the old Rome: Roman Catholic and Third-Rome-Orthodox-Muscovite. It struggled against the former, it helped to create the latter, and then it struggled against the latter.

Later Ukrainian history, from Mazepa to Shevchenko, from the Ukrainian People's Republic to the Holodomor, was a series of dramatic attempts to squeeze the republican project into confrontations between different empires, and to maintain a republican island in the stormy imperial ocean.

III. Hedonism and Asceticism

We have already seen how Ivan Kotliarevsky, the founder of modern Ukrainian literature, carried out an ironic trick by putting Ukrainian Cossacks into Roman costumes.

In a sense, this was a satire not only against the Russian Empire, but against the imperial idea in general. Virgil's image of Aeneas based the Roman imperial expansionist identity on his refugee unrootedness, while Kotliarevsky did the reverse trick: he turned a refugee, a wanderer, a vagabond, into the image of an anti-imperial republican project.

But Kotliarevsky's poem had other important implications. Apart from drifting into the core of Europe's key political controversy, that between the Republic and the Empire, he also touched upon an important nerve of Europe's psychological and ethical controversy: the debate between hedonism and asceticism.

The Ukrainian *Aeneid* presented a modern, and now classical, version of the mentality of Ukrainian Cossacks: both hedonist and ascetic, joyful and rigid, hard drinking and asexual. Kotliarevsky may have hinted that the Cossacks were, in their humorous and careless nature, hedonists; but were also ascetic in their readiness for suffering and eagerness to heroically accept pain, deprivation and eventual death.

Indeed, the controversy between hedonism and asceticism has been one of the key questions of European modernity since at least the Renaissance.

The Renaissance of the 15th-16th centuries, apart from renewing the principles of ancient art, also regenerated ancient hedonism. The rediscovery of Epicurus, Ovid, Apuleius, of a naked body and erotic literature, brought hedonism back to European culture after centuries of oppression.

By contrast, 16th century reformations, both Protestant and Catholic, can be interpreted as an ascetic backlash. New asceticism and religious devotion marked 17th century Baroque, but the 18th century, especially

in France, was a time of a new hedonism: rococo painting, libertine literature, rediscovery of the human body and frivolous emotions. 19th century romanticism began, by contrast, with the anti-hedonist counter-revolution: the great themes of suffering and expiation, history moving through cleansing catastrophes, and long stories of punishment leading a human being from sin to virtue, were major topics of the "long" 19th century – up until the hedonist revolution of the early and especially mid-20th century.

Looking through this hedonist/ascetic cycle, Ukrainian history seems to be an animal on one leg: what it lacked was the hedonist element. The hedonist Renaissance revolution left it deaf: the 15th and 16th centuries were marked by gradual loss of autonomy, which "Rus'" lands enjoyed under the medieval Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and which it was losing under Polish rule, with the aristocracy increasingly taking over Catholic identity. The rebirth of the old "Rus'" culture, and its gradual "translation" into an Orthodox-Cossack "Ukrainian" culture, took place only in the 17th century, during the ascetic Baroque.

Again, the "hedonist" 18th century was marked by the gradual loss of autonomy of the Ukrainian "Hetmanate" within the Russian Empire, from the Battle of Poltava in 1709, to the destruction of the Sich in 1775. The rebirth of Ukrainian culture took place in the 19th century, with its renewed ascetic and semi-religious language.

Even more importantly for understanding today's developments, Ukraine also missed the hedonist revolution of the 20th century.

In this 20th century, especially the postwar half, Western Europe was increasingly seeing progress as a hedonist project of enlarging the space for pleasure. After a long history of elitist hedonism, Europe finally let this hedonism spill over to the masses.

For the Soviet Eastern Europe progress, on the contrary, meant an ascetic, or even masochistic project of achieving great things through great suffering. Despite promising happiness for all in the future, Marxism was essentially an ascetic doctrine. This

asceticism was only radicalized on Russian soil: throughout the history of the Soviet Union the seeking of pleasure was considered a symptom of *petit bourgeois* attitude. Instead, the practices of mass killings, sending people to Gulags or sacrificing them *en masse* on the war front was considered moral and justified – only because it serves the interests of history and its messianic class, the proletariat. This specific proletarian morality was essentially a 19th century idea: it implied that progress *needs* suffering, that it devours victims, like a pagan deity, and that these victims are the only fuel that can push society forward. Thus, the asceticism of early communism was gradually becoming a new political sado-masochism: a belief that in life you should either commit violence or suffer from violence.

This sado-masochism did not disappear from post-Soviet societies. From the 1990s on these societies had a shock invasion of pleasure and hedonism from the West (primarily through consumerism); but strangely enough this hedonism did not replace earlier sado-masochistic trends. As pleasure was still considered to be *rare*, the only way to get it was to take it from someone else through force.

This explains important traits of post-Soviet societies and their attitudes towards violence. It makes clear, for example, why Russia is now considering the world only in terms of power politics, expansion, annexation and invasion: it feels the pleasure of taking its pleasure from someone else by force (in one of my essays I called this Russia's "zoopolitics"). This also explains why Ukraine still finds it very hard to combat corruption: in this highly predatory post-Soviet world, when pleasure can be always taken away from you, or when you can lose your life to a predator that wants your pleasures, the only way to protect yourself was to *buy* security. Corruption is a way of buying security, of individualizing security in a society where no-one feels safe, and when sadism is still seen as the only way to proper hedonism.

IV. Beyond Survival

> **Settled culture versus the nomads, republic versus empire, hedonism versus sadism: these are the controversies, which in many ways define Ukrainian history and identity.**

They have deep roots in the past, and they still persist today, setting the framework of the ways in which Ukrainians think, feel and act.

Ukraine is a nation born on lands, which could become both an earthly paradise and an earthly hell. It was a paradise thanks to its fertile lands, biodiversity and cultural encounters. And it was hell because for centuries they were borderlands, on which different cultures, political projects and massive ambitions clashed, turning them into "bloodlands" where nomads and empires marched pitilessly.

The Big Steppe was bringing the imminent danger of the nomadic Stranger or a nomadic Empire, who came, who saw, who conquered, but who also destroyed, and left no traces of the past. Amnesia and myopia, big Ukrainian cultural diseases, might have come from this Steppe identity, in which history does not leave traces, and which does not let you plan your future. Space always had influence over time, and geography always put important frames over history, and both had their influence on mentality.

In a way, Ukraine's self-definition traces its roots back to the 16th and 17th centuries. Facing a Big Nomad, it needed to accept part of the nomadic identity, but to also challenge it, defending its *locus* and its roots. The semi-nomadism of Ukrainian Cossacks was defending a settled culture of local places against a nomadic culture of big spaces. Today, by defending itself against Russia, Ukrainians are re-inventing their Cossack myth, perceiving Putin's Russia as another Big Nomad, an imperial power fighting on the lands of others, and challenging cultures that are proud of their local identities. This might explain why so many current Ukrainian soldiers in the East even copy the

hairstyles and moustaches of Cossacks, and why since the Maidan protests Ukrainians have re-appropriated the concepts of Cossacks (like *sotnia*, hundred, or *pobratym*, adopted brother). Moscow, which was an ally for Kyiv in the 17th century in the defense of the Orthodox locality against Turkish and Tatar nomadism and Polish Catholic imperial expansionism, now turns into the symbol of the new nomadic and imperial expansionism of the 21st century. History twists – and Crimean Tatars, once a nomadic opponent, are today siding with Ukrainians in defending their local identities. Similarly, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (the *Uniates*), seen by Orthodoxy of the 16th – 17th centuries as symbols of Catholic Counter-Reformation expansionism, is now one of the truest expressions of Ukraine's local uniqueness.

Another historical dilemma, between Empire and Republic, is also at the core of Ukraine's current history.

> **With its essentially pluralist political culture, Ukraine opposes Russia's new expansionism, which is an attempt to revive the empire in the mask of a nation state.**

The success or failure of Ukraine's republican project will determine whether Russia's new imperialism will expand or fail in Europe as a whole.

Finally, Ukrainian intellectual history had its peaks during those eras in which asceticism prevailed in European culture, which made the presence of hedonism in Ukrainian culture so little and modest, and so overwhelmed by the cults of suffering, self-restriction and violence. This also leaves behind its trail today.

Ukraine is a nation born in violence and traumas. It is probably a world champion at survival. Ukrainians are now learning to live, not only to survive, and to plan their long-term future, not only to hide their small belongings from nomadic or imperial strangers.

It is important that Ukrainians survive this time too, though it is also important that they do far more than this.