

# The Care of the Meanings

*My speech at the University of Paris 8 (Saint-Denis), with which the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy has close partnership relations, is indicative not only in terms of the dissemination of information about Ukraine and Ukrainian higher education during the full-scale war for independence from Russia, but also in terms of achieving cultural and political understanding between Ukrainian and French intellectuals. It was delivered at a conference “Informer, raconter, résister. Régimes de vérité dans l’Ukraine en guerre, 2022-2023” on November 15, 2023.*

*The University of Paris 8 was founded in 1969 as a result of the student protests of the 1968 in France, which in many ways echoed the social processes that took place in the United States against the backdrop of protests against the Vietnam War. The issues of social justice, the democratization of public and academic life, proposed by the representatives of the Frankfurt School and leading “leftist” French intellectuals, had a huge impact throughout the world.*

*Today we are witnesses of the gradual overcoming by the West of the greatest Russian imperial delusion, connected with the perception of the Soviet Union, and also, to a large extent, of modern Russia, as an alternative to the “unjust” Western capitalist society. The “left” University Paris 8, like almost the entire French academic environment, already treats the Putin regime as fascist, understands the criminal essence of Russian imperialism and the Russian political identity associated with it. Instead, against the background of current global shifts, a rethinking of the meaning of European and generally Western values comes to the fore.*

*After all, the concepts of freedom and justice, magical for Ukrainian society, have a truly attractive force, regardless of the completely “right” context of the national liberation struggle of the Ukrainian people. We see that the Russo-Ukrainian war, Ukrainian resilience, and Ukrainian dignity caused this “value shift” in the West. That is, in a certain sense, Ukraine is becoming a kind of a source of new meanings. And this, in turn, will certainly lead to the creation of new foundations needed for rebuilding the global security system, completely destroyed in 2022, as well as human mutual understanding and a common attitude to justice.*

*The title “The Care of the Meanings” is an allusion to the philosophical*

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*concept of one of the founders and a professor at the University of Paris 8, post-modernist Michel Foucault, “the care of the self,” which roots go back to antiquity. Greek philosophers not only had the ability to understand the essence of things and determine the truth. Also, vice versa, they had to be demanding of themselves from the point of view that this special ability of theirs meant that they had to correspond to the truth. That is, in a certain sense, the truth determined the philosophers themselves.*

*This publication is dedicated to the 410th anniversary of the founding of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, the most national and global Ukrainian university.*

**T**he phenomenon of “post-truth,” identified in 2016, includes three main components: an allusion to the unlimited multiplicity of judgments, the technology of common deception, and the desire of the mass audience, instead of true news, to have fake news which is convenient and comfortable in some way. The post-truth era describes our world as uncertain and fragmented, where people live in parallel, non-overlapping realities, produce mutually exclusive rhetoric, and rely on different understandings of truth and justice.

That is why, we should think about an approach that would give people not only the requisite intellectual space to differ from each other in their preferences, while simultaneously laying the ground for mutual understanding, hope, and respect. The current opportunity to “be different and not overlap” has not overcome intolerance, nor has it reduced aggression toward those we do not know and do not understand.

Therefore, it requires significant efforts by responsible intellectuals, starting with demands from oneself. Michel Foucault describes this phenomenon in his concept of ‘the care of the self.’ Perhaps, it is the care of important meanings and of common values that make us human that would be the special activity to prepare the necessary ground for mutual understanding. We should focus on articulating the truth, but the truth would also influence us and align us.

The Russian-Ukrainian war, which began in 2014, has shown the ineffectiveness of international institutions, the vulnerability of the international security system that was created after World War II, the international spread of political corruption, the relativity of moral principles for international leaders, the lack of critical thinking, and the insufficient marker of education and awareness.

The attention to the current war for survival and independence, as well as for European values and Western civilizational choice, has created a unique opportunity for Ukrainians to tell the world the truth about themselves, since almost everything previously known about Ukraine came to Europeans from Russian sources. Being informed about some achievements of Russian culture, residents of “Old Europe” usually do not take into consideration the pathological imperialism and chauvinism of the figures of that culture. Starting with such icons as Aleksander Pushkin and Fedor Dostoyevsky.

By killing, torturing, raping, deporting, and russifying Ukrainians, Russia is trying to apply its traditional technology, which can be called the “erasure of meanings:” of cultures, languages, and nations. Erasure has also been one of the most effective instruments of creating a false history and false meanings about itself. Having first burned Ukrainian books in 1627 simply because they were

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printed in Ukrainian, banning the Ukrainian language about 130 times between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, Russians, in the twenty-first century, continued the same policy of destroying the Ukrainian language and culture.

Thus, in June 2022, Russians burned the books of Petro Mohyla Ukrainian Orthodox Church library in Mariupol city. This church was named after a prominent seventeenth-century intellectual and one of the founders of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. As of August 2023, Russia has destroyed more than 300 libraries and 1,500 secondary schools in Ukraine.

Kyiv-Mohyla Academy was founded in 1615 by a woman whose name was Halshka (Elizabeth) Hulevychivna. Throughout its history, until it was closed by Russian Bolsheviks in the mid-1920s, this institution of higher education was nurturing Ukrainian political and military leaders, philosophers, musicians, scientists, and public intellectuals. As Ukrainian independence was restored so to the present-day National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy was reopened in 1991. It became an agent of educational and social change and an active participant in the Orange Revolution (2004) and the Revolution of Dignity (2013-2014). All - without exception - innovations that came to higher education in Ukraine after 1991 were first introduced and tested at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy.

Ukrainian and French cultural contexts need better common understanding. To this end, intrusive Russian imperialist “mediation” must be completely removed. Contextuality is as important for intercultural understanding.

It will tell us that the same concepts, such as the meaning behind the strategy of decolonization resonate in different ways depending on if you are from the United States, which is a global superpower, the former metropolises of “Old Europe,” or the post-totalitarian countries of “New Europe” from the former so-called “Socialist Camp” and the USSR, including Ukraine, which has been fighting for centuries for its dignity and independence.

Unfortunately, the countries of the Global South, in general, do not want to understand the motivation of Ukrainians to struggle for independence because Ukrainians are white, like all the former European colonizers.

The example of Russia serves as a “special case.” It should be noted that Russians do not have a national history, identity, or territory separate from their imperial belonging. At its essence, there is no country, but only an empire. Therefore, the problem is not only in the criminal nature of Putin’s regime, but

also in the focus of the entire Russian society on preserving this empire, and so, accordingly, on oppressing all those who do not consider themselves Russian by origin.

After the full-scale Russian invasion started in February 2022, our university, with the main campus located in central Kyiv, became part of the defense line of the government district. Thus, in February and March, together with the military, we were prepared for a landing of Russian parachute troopers on Kontraktova Square in front of our buildings. It was in the first days of the invasion that Russian armored vehicles were trying to break through to the city streets, where two tanks and several armored vehicles were destroyed.

Many students, alumni, faculty, and staff members of Kyiv Mohyla Academy are fighting at the front, and 27 of them have heroically died in the fight against Russian aggressors. The NaUKMA alumni who returned from studies in the United States during the first week of the full-scale war organized an effective logistics center to help the Ukrainian army. Other alumni have been coordinating the largest public drone projects since 2014. We have the best in Ukraine national security programs at Kyiv-Mohyla Business School, also Law and IT units created last year on the basis of the corresponding faculties.

After the Russian army chaotically withdrew from the areas near Kyiv, Kyiv-Mohyla Academy opened a Center for psychological support in the town of Bucha, which is not far from Kyiv and known worldwide for Russian war crimes. Our dormitory in the town of Vorzel, located very close to Bucha, also suffered damage from the occupiers. The Russian army advanced so quickly in February 2022 that 25 students and staff members of our university were caught by occupation. By mid-March, we managed to get them out after many efforts.

It is not for the first time in history that war put Ukrainians and Ukraine before an existential choice of national and physical life and death. NaUKMA is responding with even more help to the frontline and even more intensive intellectual work and internationalization. Oleksandra Matviychuk, a student of Kyiv Mohyla Business School, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022.

Our honorary professors for the two full scale war years (2022-2023) are Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Council and professor at Leuven University, who received the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of the European Union in 2012, and Serhii Plokhyy, one of the most famous Ukrainian intellectuals and director of the Ukrainian Institute at Harvard University, whose books, in addition to French, have been published in Chinese, Polish, Estonian, Spanish, Romanian, Portuguese, German, Belarusian, Ukrainian, and English.

We have global media projects that are directly engaged in caring for important meanings. The fact-checking project StopFake was founded and is operated by instructors, students, and graduates of the Mohyla School of Journalism, which operates in 12 languages, including French. It is led by Yevhen Fedchenko, director of the Mohyla School of Journalism.

Another such project is Kult: Podcast, which offers programs for intellectuals about Ukrainian culture and contemporary Ukraine. Its working language is Ukrainian, with related projects in English and French. The founders are Volodymyr Yermolenko and Tetiana Ogarkova, graduates and professors of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, who defended their dissertations in philosophy and literary

studies, respectively, in Paris. Another NaUKMA graduate and lecturer and a well-known activist in Ukrainian language protection, Oksana Nezhyvenko, also defended her dissertation in finance there.

Kyiv-Mohyla Academy pays great attention to European continental projects, focusing on the European integration of the Ukrainian higher education system, cooperation with European partner universities, translations of classical philosophical, literary, and political texts into Ukrainian, and, in general, on the future of Europe.

I would especially like to note the activities of our “Dukh I Litera” (“Spirit and Letter”) Research and Publishing Association, which has been very active in translations, particularly from French. Among the authors who have been translated into Ukrainian are Michel Montaigne, Blaise Pascal, also Georges Nivat and Barbara Cassin, who have spoken not once at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, our honorable Doctor Paul Ricoeur, and others. The Ukrainian language was the first to pick up such an important continental French project as the “Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon.”

I would also like to express my hope that, in pursuit of true meanings, the Ukrainian and French contexts will continue to come closer to one another, to learn and understand each other more and more, and the renewed and united Europe will enrich itself with the wisdom and courage of all Europeans. Accordingly, our universities, Kyiv-Mohyla Academy and Paris 8, will make a significant contribution to this intercultural contextual understanding through their fruitful cooperation. ¶