

## Literature and Politics in the Context of Democratic Transformations in Independent Ukraine

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### Abstract

*The quality of people's lives depends on politics institutions' authorities pursue at different levels. Notwithstanding the fact that Ukraine is an independent state, democratic processes taking place within the Ukrainian society can hardly be called smooth and transparent. Literature, particularly, sheds light on challenges of the times though not always explicitly. Connections can be traced between literature and human prosperity which is impossible either without people hearing each other because this leads to a genuine civic conversation. It is under these conditions that democracy is enabled. Values of civil society are promoted through empathy, considered the building-block of social justice, whose lack causes the aggravation of marginalization. Empathy is exercised through reading which amplifies liberal democracy. The paper endeavours to show that literature itself and the situation with literature are the indicators of the effectiveness of democratic processes. It is presupposed that society is still in trouble due to the current tendency concerning literature. However, there have already been positive trends in recent years in Ukraine and we will also be dealing with them here.*

**Keywords:** literature, politics, independence, freedom, democracy, marginalization, writers.

**Kľúčové slová:** literatúra, politika, nezávislosť, sloboda, demokracia, marginalizácia, spisovatelia.

### Introduction

Does politics influence literature and literature influence politics? It is a difficult question, but the one that clearly has a positive answer. It remains highly debatable which influence is bigger depending on a specific situation. After all, if we look at the history of various periods and countries, literary works often complement the vision of people's lives at different times. It has also to be admitted that if we resort to the division of literature

into fiction, non-fiction, publicistic, scientific, etc., we can find many direct and indirect answers in relation to understanding political processes that occurred at a certain time and place. Due to an author and topics, it can be figured out whether the country features a democratic, an authoritarian or a totalitarian regime, and characters' lives enable the interpretation of the socio-political and economic context. Representatives of culture, art, literature always clearly and subtly perceive reality being able to explicitly or implicitly point to problems in society through their creativity. Because of this there are authors who win the authorities' favour, while others, on the contrary, do not. Literary texts often convey political messages, respond to the broad political challenges of the epoch, create archetypal images which influence people's political worldview and their political actions. The issues of power, freedom, equality, hierarchy, emancipation, the horizontal and the vertical, the relationship of the citizen with the state, justice and injustice, violence and struggle are frequent literary themes.

Initially, it is important to delineate what literature and politics encompass in this paper. Making use of the word «literature» we refer to fiction, poetry, drama, i. e. works of creative imagination. The term «politics» presupposes not only big things like political leadership, confrontation, party politics, electoral politics but also personal politics, small decisions within a family which can impact the state's politics in general. In Ukraine, the issue of interaction between politics and literature has not been studied sufficiently, so this paper focuses attention on it.

## **Historical overview**

Studying the history of the twentieth century shows that it had many tragic pages. Yet with regard to Ukraine, in general, until the end of the twentieth century there was a permanent struggle for statehood, which in fact (due to the annexation of Crimea and Russia's attack of the eastern regions) continues in a hybrid format even today. Literary works played an important role because through them genuine Ukrainians sought to convey their thoughts and dreams to the public. The maturation of the national idea is inseparable from the formation of Ukrainian romanticism, which is a way of expressing the national outlook, ideology. The most important idea formulated by Ukrainian political thought is the idea of independence and autonomy of the Ukrainian state. Its development can be traced in the works of M. Gogol, P. Kulish, etcetera. T. Shevchenko, L. Ukraiinka and M. Mikhnovskii clearly reflected the national idea in their oeuvre. In particular, M. Mikhnovskii was one of the first among those in Ukraine to ponder on the connection

between literary writing and politics: «What is the role of a writer in organizing victory for the army to which he belongs; for the army that with its deeds, its movement is fighting for the victory of its common faith, and which, in order to win, must have many men of action, men of movement, and perhaps not so many men of letters? How can writing, that is, the rationalist methods of the printed word, solve purely irrational problems, which are the problems of will and power, of that will and of that power on which the exercising of every political belief, being irrational in its foundation and preconditions, depends?» (Lypynskii 1926). Later awakeners of the people's spirit saw nationalism as a force that could lift Ukraine out of ruins and lead it to a new life. Such a vision of the process of forming the Ukrainian national idea is found in the political thought and literary works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly, V. Lypynskii and D. Dontsov expressed their opinions on it.

If we consider the period of the Soviet Union's existence, it is difficult to find direct examples of Ukraine's national self-determination. However, we are likely to underestimate the value of the dissident movement and samizdat of the 1960s – early 1980s. The dissidents advocated the democratization of society, observance of human rights and freedoms in the Ukraine (USSR). This concerned, first of all, the free development of the Ukrainian language and culture, the realization of the rights of the Ukrainian people to their own statehood. This movement was based on the intellectual community comprised mainly of writers and poets. Through the «self-publishing» of publicistic, prose, poetic works, the shortcomings of Soviet society were exposed («Internationalism or Russification?» by I. Dziuba, «The Right to Live» by Yu. Badzio, «Ethnocide of Ukrainians in the USSR» by S. Khmara, publicistic writing by V. Chornovil, V. Moroz, V. Marchenko, E. Sverstiuk, etc.)

Initially, the center of Ukrainian dissidents was established by men of the sixties – a new fruitful generation of writers who were on their way of gaining recognition. Here belonged Lina Kostenko, Vasyl Symonenko, Ivan Drach, Ivan Svitlychnii, Yevhen Sverstiuk, Mykola Vinhranovskii, Alla Horska and Ivan Dziuba. Later they were joined by Vasyl Stus, Mykhailo Osadchii, Ihor and Iryna Kalynets, Ivan Gel and the Horyni brothers. The striking feature of this group was that its members were a model product of the Soviet education system and quickly made promising careers being at the same time dissidents. As in every group of intellectuals, there was a great diversity and a difference of opinion, but most agreed on the need to gain both civil liberties and national rights, and only few spoke openly about their opposition to the entire Soviet system. Some of them were detained and spent time in camps or were oppressed because of their views.

However, their right to write and express their views in artistic works could hardly be taken away. An important motive for their activities was that they wanted to speak and write in Ukrainian.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the texts of Mykola Khvylovii (1926) and Ivan Dziuba (1965) among others, formulated the defining anti-imperial postulates. They were addressing everyone who was not indifferent to topical issues of Ukraine's survival under the conditions of Bolshevik and communist cultural construction. These authors turned their works into legendary pamphlets, whose cross-cutting theme was the anti-colonial critique of provincialization and Russification deprived of the political subjectivity of the sub-Soviet Ukraine (Monolatii 2016).

### **Contemporary period**

With the proclamation of Ukraine's independence in 1991 and the change in the social system, Ukrainian literature and writers of that time strove to take a worthy position and their niche in society. And this process is still in progress. Some of them create literary circles, some go into politics at different levels, others choose new modern ways of communication and influence on the audience (via the Internet). It is clear that their role, especially in the 90s, was extremely important because they favoured the self-assertion of the Ukrainian state. However, these measures and actions taken by writers and poets did not give the desired result and the role of literature and artists' creative work did not gain the necessary prominence. Unfortunately, the authorities were chiefly indifferent to the problems of book publishing and the lack of programs promoting modern Ukrainian literature. Yet book publishing directly depends on the state policy. The point is that it is not financed so much from the free market as from the library market. In Ukraine the library sphere is barely alive and libraries themselves have remained the last bastion of Soviet power in Ukraine. More than 70% of the book collections of Ukrainian libraries are the ones inherited from the Soviet Union, although after 10-12 years books are to be discarded (Kushnir 2018).

Hence, Ukrainian literature existed due to the unification of the writers themselves and the support of sponsors. There appeared a tradition of holding literary festivals and exhibitions. For example, Lviv became one of the epicenters of the festival movement as in the case with the Ukrainian movement. In 1994 it was there that the annual Publishers' Forum began. Since 1995 the Literary Festival has been added to it (Slavinska 2011).

Admittedly, for their part, to become popular modern Ukrainian authors resort to various tools. One of them is the manifestation of an active life position through approaching political contexts, as well as the use of various ways of interacting with the reader. Just writing a book and waiting for readers' reviews, which are the practices of the past, do not work any longer, so the most popular authors today such as Yurii Andrukhovych, Oksana Zabuzhko, Lina Kostenko, Vasyl Shkliar, Serhii Zhadan run their websites, columns, have social media accounts and try to participate in public events, e. g. giving interviews. Writers' being present on the media and their influence on public opinion is simultaneously a positive and negative phenomenon (Slavinska 2011). Today, Ukrainian writers easily publish fragments of their new texts online. They are also daringly involved in discussing them or they just communicate with readers. According to Ukrainian scholar I. Monolatii, «politics and literature are at the starting line of the tracks, and these tracks are parallel, they do not intersect. And the speed of these runners, let's call them so, is quite different. Politics, certainly, outpaces literature. Literature cannot yet, in a symbolic sense, outstrip politics, therefore, it will always be a priori different. There can be no intersection between literary writing and the demands of any political regime, whether it is democracy or authoritarianism because this is no longer literature» (Kushnir 2018).

It should also be emphasized that literature is a soft external political force of the state. With the help of books the world can be conquered and the enemy – defeated. Each country is interested in promoting its culture and national product. Yet, these are high-quality translations that contribute to the popularization of literature ensuring its access to international markets. Indeed, there are altruists and various sponsors abroad, but no systematic work in this direction is not being carried out. The most well-known and translated are basically works of those writers who have already been mentioned: Yu. Andrukhovych, O. Zabuzhko, S. Zhadan, M. Matios, A. Kurkov, O. Lutsyshyna. With regard to the importance of translation, it was claimed by M. Stryjecki at TITA 2020 Translation Conference that thanks to translation people can help build the European Union and contribute to its openness and legitimacy.

### **Politics and literature.**

Our individual or social life is imbued with politics. «Politics is first of all a way of framing a specific sphere of experience» (Rancière 2004: 10). Based on politicians' decisions we have society where we live. Literary works introduce events happening in society interpreting them and, thus, familiar-

izing its members with the past, present or future. A firm connection between literature and society deals with the concept of freedom because complete freedom is impossible outside of the community. Being a part of society, writers contribute to its development by means of their creative works. Literature is political because we, the creators of literature, are political animals; it is part of accepting our responsibility of being human, of being citizens of the world (Senior 2013). A writer is shaped by the sociological and political environment of his time, so any work of literature is a product of sociological and political factors. Works of literature or whole literary movements have also affected society by setting up or destroying taboos, conventions, and social prejudices, thus leading to social and political change.

Literature is viewed mostly as a tool for instructing and entertaining but it is also believed to threaten the very foundation of society because of revealing the undesired. Despite the fact that some literary experts speak about conveying the importance of close connection between literature and politics through political novels or the so-called «engaged literature», not many writers are eager to write about politics. It is frequently linked to fear that a literary piece may be perceived by a reader as a propaganda tool or that an author may be marginalized and he together with his book will be cancelled. It cannot but be mentioned that the world of literature has been touched by cancellation culture. This culture creates the atmosphere of fear. Provided a book produces controversy, it may be banned and this is a negative phenomenon as it is related with restricting freedom of speech. Several authors, such as M. Atwood, S. Rushdie, M. Gladwell and J. K. Rowling There have signed an open letter protesting «ideological conformity» and the spread of «an intolerance of opposing views» and «vogue for public shaming and ostracism» (Cowdrey 2020). They do not want to choose between justice and freedom. All this shakes democracy. Telling authors what to imagine seems to be ridiculous and places literature in an unfavourable situation.

When new political forces come to power, they bring their own narratives which cannot but impact the state of democracy either positively or negatively. Democracy around the world is in decline. The human rights organization «Freedom House» from the United States analyzes the state of democratic governance in the countries of Central Europe, the Balkans and Eurasia, which are referred to as the post-Soviet countries. According to the data of the latest annual report «Nations in Transit» for 2020 provided by this organization, Ukraine's democratic rating has slightly risen but the country is still in the «transitional or hybrid regimes» section. Ukraine is undergoing democratic transformations but the situation with observance of

democracy remains challenging. The report raises an important issue of making democracy stable through policymakers' actions such as prioritizing anti-corruption programs, as well as closely monitoring restrictions on freedom of expression so that these are justified (Drachuk 2020). O. Matviichuk claims that the difficulty of strengthening democracy may be connected with the fact that the rebooting of the political elite did not occur after the Euromaidan Revolution (the Revolution of Dignity). K. Sydorchuk stresses the importance of the so-called «elite rotation» too (ProstirTalks 2018). In Ukraine a lot of challenges and changes are based on a proactive civil society. It was the Revolution on Granite when civil society came to light and these were students. The Revolution of Dignity, in fact, became an indicator of the development of civil society, social responsibility and true values. However, Ukraine is still not considered a democratic country (ProstirTalks 2018). In fact, one can say that Ukraine features democracy by default which is connected to freedom of expression.

For the Ukrainian identity inherited political institutions are important. However, Ya. Hrytsyk is also of the opinion that it is the appearance of independent institutions that created the foundation for democracy, not political ideas (Shchur 2021). D. Acemoglu and J. A. Robinson view political and economic institutions as the main reason for discrepancies in the economic and social development of different states (Acemoglu, Robinson 2012). These institutions, though, are formed by people and if they are exploitative-oriented and not aware of empathy, society is evidently doomed.

### **From literature crisis to real-life crisis**

Interpersonal relations, such processes as thinking, communicating, writing, creating feature the humanitarian aspect. Literature helps us exercise our humanity. Yet it can scarcely be denied that we live in the age of absurdity (Foley 2010) since the humanities, literature belonging to them, have been accused recently of the lack of civilizational potential. It is believed by many that the humanities are far from reality in view of the idea that compared to hard sciences they demonstrate no practical results (Epshtein 2004). The destruction of humanitarian orientation of education, perception unification do not do any good to world societies. In Ukraine crisis in learning literatures is observed at the level of secondary and tertiary education. It is manifested through aversion to literature, the choice of literary works, teaching methods, the content of literature education, criteria of assessing learners' competences, external independent testing requirements with regard to literatures, suggestions concerning integrating literatures with other

subjects, the reduction of hours for teaching the Ukrainian and World literatures.

In M. Nussbaum's book «Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities», which has not reached the Ukrainian readership yet because of the absence of its Ukrainian translation, reveals that education is currently focused on training profitable skills which leads to creating a cynical rather than a decent world and producing citizens whose participation in a democratic society will be poor. M. Nussbaum emphasizes that healthy democracy needs the humanities, literature, in particular (Nussbaum 2010). Reading is a means of developing empathy and empathy is an essential ingredient of humanity. With diminishing the role of reading in public consciousness the humane potential of politics decreases too. The consequences of politics, in particular, concerning literature, affect democratic processes. The maintenance of democracy is possible through reading literature but only if readers judge an idea as universal human experience.

M. Nussbaum also ponders upon disgust, shame and dignity insisting on the necessity of empathy for social justice and sheds light on how constructs of disgust are utilized to throw away marginalized people and on who is considered worthy of humane and dignified treatment. Those others not being in our circle whom we do not empathize with are outside society (McRobie 2014). It cannot but be agreed with her that emotions play an important role in building and understanding of justice and they have been recently undervalued. Writers encourage readers to engage their own moral compass because they enable the awakening of empathy for complex characters with their imperfect, human inner world because this makes readers meet with their own humanity, extend their moral imagination. Literary works make it possible to live through characters' experience, hear the multiplicity of voices with the help of reading. Due to this living people are not viewed as alien or disgusting, which cannot be said about governments that are inclined to do so. Indeed, these are chiefly politicians who regard the humanities to be redundant but «the upbringing» of a complete citizen who is able to see the wrong or outdated in the authorities' actions requires not only technical skills but also soft skills.

### **Beyond the black-and-white schemes**

Common people are accustomed to saying that they are not concerned with politics, however, O. Lutsyshyna's novel «Ivan and Phoebe» (Lutsyshyna 2020) is a perfect example of a literary text which reveals our constant engagement in politics. This is the first novel about the Granite Revolution. It



won two prestigious awards in 2020: UNESCO City of Literature Award and Taras Shevchenko National Prize. The events of the novel take place in the last years of Soviet rule and the first years of Ukrainian Independence in Uzhhorod, Lviv and Kyiv. One finds the whole Ukraine on the pages of the book which is full of real dynamic life. Ivan studied in Lviv and participated in the Granite Revolution. His student years coincide with the beginning of independence. He is still a very young man who discovers the unknown history of Ukraine, admires the revolutionary movement and feels the sublime. In his life there are artistic parties, open conversations, alcohol, youthful passion and the strength to turn the world upside down. Moreover, all this continues until Ivan is persecuted threatened and his life turns into a nightmare. He is forced to return to his native Uzhhorod, where he married the poetess Maria, who called herself Phoebe. She soon becomes the one guilty of everything that went wrong in his life. Lviv and Kyiv are cities with a turbulent political life, while Uzhhorod is characterized by a somewhat grotesque atmosphere of patriarchal family structure and Ukrainian-style early capitalism.

This is a story about small revolutions within each woman and man because the characters are historically traumatised. Instead of dealing with traumas, the characters attack each other, turning their loved ones into enemies. Obviously, both they and the whole country need psychotherapy at some national level, otherwise, they will slowly destroy themselves as a nation and the people who are dear to them. Empires do not die so easily without a trace. And the terrible ghost of the USSR is still crawling in the web of modern history since the change of consciousness as well as the change of political forces takes time (Petrenko).

Ivan is always choosing an escape and is inclined to make fast decisions. The spirit of alcoholism in each home produces the no-way-out atmosphere of reality. The parallel with these can be drawn in relation to democracy by default. The central metaphor of the book is the family at the table. They are either silent or shout at each other, they cannot communicate. People are marginalized through silence or abstraction. Terms and figures typical of political language do not convey the human reality that they try to describe because they do not reach the depth of mind. Spending time at the table is associated with the ritual of emotional unity which is possible based on love. There are no signs of love around the table. There has never been love between Ivan and Phoebe. Phoebe is in toxic relations and her child is born as a result of rape. The absence of love burdens. Is nation preservation possible even if it is of priority? There can be no democracy without unity.

In his article Y. Jie mentions I. Calvino who underlines that literature is necessary to politics above all because it gives a voice to the one who

doesn't have a voice, because it gives a name to the one who doesn't have a name, and especially to all that political language excludes or tends to exclude (Jie). O. Lutsyshyna's novel «Ivan and Phoebe» represents several women in the novel but they are secondary, some of them have no voice at all, for example, Milena, which is an interesting tendency not only in Transcarpathia. Phoebe is manifested through her two dialogues. Female characters are concentrated, though. Women are strong but remain dependent. They are not seen as human beings but an appendix to men, servicing personnel who should know their place. Literature focuses on the individual whereas politics – on the collective, which also means that literature, manifests a more profound perception than politics. The individual voice is lost among the crowd. Literature is uninterested in distorting the language or content while describing reality and is committed to freedom of investigating any topic. Politically, a family or a woman, events are viewed and presented in one way whereas the novel e.g. shows unpleasant and complicated sides.

## **Conclusion.**

Summing up, we can unequivocally say that the interaction of politics and literature is present in the theory and practice of public life. With regard to it in transitional societies, such as Ukraine, this interaction is extremely important. Life testifies to the existence of the necessary connection between politics as a specific form of collective activity and literature as the art of the word defined by practice. Literary creativity as a certain resource of culture voluntarily / forcibly fits it into the theory and mythology of political science.

Society is not something abstract, it consists of its members who create politics and literature, admittedly, using the same language. Literature and politics can be viewed as allies due to which democracies are kept alive. It is clearly shown that the exclusion of literature jeopardizes the health of democracies. Democracy is about having a choice and making it. Moreover, it is literature that induces people to become politically accountable and thus makes them feel like participants in a joint project. The key phrase in O. Lutsyshyna's novel «Ivan and Phoebe» «to maintain the perimeter» obtains a special meaning because «maintaining the perimeter» just like preserving democracy being alone is impossible. The perimeter of the camp in the text is approached only by women, the crazy and senior dissident political prisoners. Hence, to be able to secure the perimeter, i. e., to protect

Ukrainian civil society from enemies the interaction of literature and politics is necessary.

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