

## Transformations in the perception of Russian literature after February 24, 2022

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The following article, as its title suggests, will be neither strictly poetics-oriented nor will it exclusively discuss contemporary Russian prose. By the time it appears, more than a year will have already passed since the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, and some of the issues under consideration below could potentially change. However, I believe that it is crucial to consider the changes that have taken place in the representations of Russian literature beyond Russia's borders after February 24, 2022. Moreover, as these events are still unfolding, one also lacks the necessary perspective which is generally achieved with the passing of time. But the watershed character of the transformations that have already happened is evident and needs to be addressed and systematized (at least to the limited extent possible in such an article). I will attempt to outline the key transformations in the discourse that currently surrounds Russian literature (also as a part of the broader idea of Russian culture), predominantly by identifying the main topoi in the public and online media debate on Russia taking place in the Western and Central European (mostly Slovak) context, as well as by examining the opinions of some of the most prominent contemporary Russian authors, including Evgenii/Eugene Vodolazkin, Mikhail Shishkin, Ludmila Ulitskaya, and Maria Stepanova, as actors in this debate. The choice of texts and personalities (compared to the sheer number of texts and opinions available) can certainly be seen as subjective, but even this limited selection may serve as an effective illustration to the unfolding processes. I am also aware that the text has little from a directly Ukrainian perspective, but many of the aspects mentioned here are understood as the direct consequence of that perspective.

### LITERATURE OF “THE OTHER”

The way Russian literature is perceived beyond Russia's borders has always been marked by the period-relevant political situation in Russia itself and by its relations with other counterparts,<sup>1</sup> more so in the case of contemporary writings, since the po-

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sition of the classics (Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Bulgakov etc.) seemed to be well-established. That is why research on Russian literature, its image, and its perception in other cultures has been rather fruitful. Moreover, in many cases that research complements and broadens the studies of cultural, political, or even international relations scholars.<sup>2</sup> As a result, a large amount of this research shares common conceptual frameworks, one of which is relying on the Self/Other dichotomy to describe the mutual perception between cultures and the processes of identity formation and strengthening. Within this conceptual framework, individual national cultures have formed their own images of Russian literature (and culture in general),<sup>3</sup> determined by the degree of its exoticism in the host context and the magnitude of the role it played in the self-determination of that particular culture. That said, there are certainly some commonalities in these images, and the following observation by Ekaterina Shapinskaia, who discusses the Russian classics as perceived by the British, can be extended to other host cultural contexts:

In the field of representation of Russian culture, stereotypes based on traditional binary oppositions like Russia/West, on the one hand, coexist with new forms of representation carried out in the framework of intensive globalization and intercultural communication on the other. [...] Western culture is taking a serious interest in the deeper meanings of Russian classical works, in their universal character, in the emotional world of the characters. [...] The Other's view of Russian culture prompts reflection on the common and specific element in its texts, on the contextual conditioning of representation and the difference in the perception of the cultural phenomenon as belonging to the Self or to the Other. (2019, 319)<sup>4</sup>

However, there was a radical shift in this clichéd view of Russian literature as the literature of a vast, “mysterious” country of the Other, which, for all its borderline hostile exoticism, still shares some of the universal accepted cultural code that approximates it to an average Westerner. After February 2022, when a country with “great literature” at its cultural core launched a full-scale war in the geographical heart of Europe, this literature (for all its grandeur, mystique, and exoticism) began to be perceived, if not as the direct cause of this turn of events, then certainly as a key contributing factor, and the very place of Russian literature in the host literary contexts is now being questioned.

In their discussion on the *new poetics*, René Bílik and Peter Zajac reflect on the *poetics of the event*, arguing that the latter

explores the question of the formation and functioning of the literary field, ranging from the manifested power-involving shaping of the field to the shaping of the literary field as latent, hidden morphic resonances. In terms of the poetics of the event, it is a matter of figuring, configuring, and reconfiguring the literary field. (2018, 8)<sup>5</sup>

Within the scope of that poetics, they include the notions of *latency* and *foreclosure*, which can be instrumentalized to describe the various forms of suppression or expulsion from the literary field. Hence, foreclosure in this context is seen as a manifestation of censorship and self-censorship found directly in a work of literature, but I believe it is possible to broaden the use of the term also to the level of the collective perception of literary texts and collective literary practices. At the same

time, on the level of collective identity, latency and foreclosure form a “changing event-related measurement of acceptability and unacceptability of texts in a particular historical situation” (8).<sup>6</sup> Thus, the crisis of *acceptability* of Russian literature during wartime becomes the foundation for the discussions unfolding in the literary and broader cultural milieus, which will be addressed below. The most visible point of tension is seen in the clash of opinions over whether Russian literature deserves to be “cancelled”.

### TO CANCEL OR NOT TO CANCEL

Discussions on the necessity of “cancelling” Russian culture, Russian literature, and Russia as such (*ergo*, deeming it unacceptable) or on the contrary, on the excessiveness of this response, can be attributed to the key topoi that entered the public, cultural and media discourses with the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, accusations of Western attempts to “cancel Russia” became a self-victimizing leitmotif of Russian propaganda and one of the tools to legitimize its military aggression. Interestingly, in the latter application, the very notion of a “cancel culture” is also distorted and augmented with new interpretations that are not characteristic to its original Western context, where it is associated primarily with new ethics, the #MeToo movement, the struggle for class and racial equality, etc., or alternatively, is also perceived as a “progressive” phenomenon that “has silenced alternative perspectives, ostracized contrarians, and eviscerated robust intellectual debate” (Norris 2021). Already before the invasion, in the discourse of Russian officialdom, the understanding of “cancel culture” is expanded to include “attempts to rewrite history”, “rejection of familiar concepts like ‘mother’, ‘father’, ‘family’ or even ‘gender’” (Prezident Rossii 2021),<sup>7</sup> as well as sanctioning Russian athletes and representatives of Russian culture. In March 2022, in his speech on occasion of the “Day of the Cultural Worker”, Putin also specifically referred to the “banning of Russian writers and books” which, however, was not illustrated with any examples. But in the context of the widespread use of World War II images to portray Ukraine and the West as the hostile *Other*, he used references to Nazi Germany: “The last time such a massive campaign to destroy unwanted literature was carried out by the Nazis in Germany almost 90 years ago. We know it well, and the newsreels remind us of how books were publicly burned in squares” (Galaida 2022).<sup>8</sup>

As a result, a paradox-filled ideological struggle unfolds, in which real cases of exclusion of Russian culture and literature from public discourse (such as an attempt to cancel a course on Dostoevsky at the University of Milano-Bicocca) are magnified by the Russian side to phantasmagoric proportions, with the real reasons for this reaction (Russian military aggression) being replaced by ideological constructs that victimize Russia. At the same time, statements that speak of the need to preserve Russian culture in a European context are also used for propaganda purposes. A striking example is Italian president Sergio Mattarella’s speech at La Scala Theatre before the premiere of *Boris Godunov* in December 2022. In his speech, Mattarella expressed himself as follows: “There are views that I do not share both culturally

and politically. The great Russian culture is an integral part of European culture. It is something that cannot be erased [or cancelled, as it was ‘cancellare’ in Italian]. While the responsibility for the war should be attributed to the government of that country, it should certainly not be to the Russian people or their culture” (Sky.Tg24 2022).<sup>9</sup> Reacting to these words, one of the Russian patriotic news portals chose to cite only Mattarella’s words of support for Russian culture, completely omitting the Italian president’s blaming of the Russian government (Pobeda 2022).

Mattarella’s reasoning is an example of a *reconciling narrative* about Russian culture in wartime (which Ukrainian politicians, cultural figures, and journalists struggle against). But in general, even in the relatively small corpus of materials devoted to the “cancellation” of Russian culture, one can trace that the degree of radicality of the position expressed in a particular piece is often in direct correlation with the geographical remoteness of the media from Ukraine, as well as the origin of the author of a particular text.

*The New York Times*, for instance, published an article by Kevin M. F. Platt, which also conveys the aforementioned reconciling narrative. In the article, Platt discusses the boundaries of Russian culture, its dispersed and regional character, citing the non-Russian identity of the texts of contemporary Russian-speaking poets from Uzbekistan, Ukraine, and the Russian-speaking diaspora. Remarkably, the author does not focus on the fact that the very dispersion of Russian-speaking culture is often a consequence of the colonization practices outside Russia and the repressive practices within it. Platt summarizes his text with an observation that can be found in a number of texts with a similar topic.<sup>10</sup> He speaks of the irony contained in the attempts to cancel “everything Russian”, which in his view have the opposite effect, playing into the hands of Russian propaganda and Putin’s worldview:

That the world should be amplifying Ukrainian art and culture is clear. This is of the highest priority. Yet support for Ukrainian culture does not entail canceling Russian culture. To adopt such a stance is to support a world of pernicious national antagonisms and closed borders. That is precisely the world that Mr. Putin seeks to create with his war. We, along with right-minded Russians, should be working to resist the reactive canceling of Russian artists and performances, rather than playing along. (2022)

In addition, several Western and even English-language Japanese news outlets published an appeal by Nikita Khrushchev’s great-granddaughter, Nina L. Khrushcheva. Her text presents a more *defensive* approach to the issue and expresses her critique towards the “readiness with which the West turned on all things Russian” (2022) while using a rather effective and frequently used argumentative tool of drawing historical parallels. Khrushcheva supports her argumentation by alluding to the times after World War II when “people continued to read Goethe and Thomas Mann” (2022) comparing Russia’s actions in Ukraine to those of Nazi Germany.<sup>11</sup> She further elaborates her point of view with the idea of universal importance of Russian literature and it being “a potential source of information about [Putin’s] objectives and motivations” (2022). The latter point, albeit not recent, also transforms into one of the key topoi in the discourse surrounding Russian invasion and the role Russian literature did or did not play in it.<sup>12</sup>

## A CULPRIT?

Krushcheva's opinions echo those of Tim Brinkhof, who builds his argumentation in an article for *Big Think* around the concept that is generally known as Russian *literaturotsentrizm* (the central role of literature in Russian culture, as well as in social and even political thinking):

To say Russian literature had a profound effect on the structure of Russian society would be an understatement. Today, Russian school children are introduced to their country's literary canon as early as the fifth grade, where texts are studied for their universal wisdom as well as their contributions to the current understanding of Russia's national identity. [...] Just as Russian literature guides the daily lives of ordinary citizens, so too has it informed the worldview of Russian leaders. [...] Putin also has professed an appreciation for Russian literature. In various interviews, he has listed Tolstoy and Dostoevsky as some of his favorite authors. (2022)

Brinkhof then continues to conclude that "Putin had chosen Dostoevsky's faith in Russian exceptionalism over Tolstoy's belief in the universality of human experience", continuing that "[i]n light of the invasion of Ukraine and its perceived historical significance for Russians, one might argue Dostoevsky would have chosen Putin as well" (2022). Brinkhof's conclusions correspond to the specific narrative line where Dostoevsky and other Russian writers (and Russian literature in general) almost become an accomplice, a co-culprit to Russia's invasion of Ukraine by providing it with its ideological foundation: "So if you're looking for the roots of Russia's violence against its neighbors, its desire to erase their history, and its rejection of the ideas of liberal democracy, you will find some of the answers on the pages of Pushkin, Lermontov, and Dostoevsky" (Yermolenko 2020). The Slovak literary scholar Adam Bžoch also addresses connections between Russian literature and Russia's "geopolitical phantasmagories". According to him, these phantasmagories, that proved capable of leaving "a trail of blood behind them" and marginalizing the perspective of their victim, were best depicted by Dostoevsky, who approached them "with mild irony (but also with infernal insight)" (2022).<sup>13</sup>

However, not only classic works by 19th century writers are reinterpreted as the source of today's Russian imperialistic and colonial vision, since it is also the authors who are predominantly known as the representatives of the alternative, unofficial, state-opposing literature. In April 2022, *Time* magazine published an article by the Ukrainian professor Yaroslav Hrytsak entitled "Russia's Problems Go Far Beyond Putin" where he makes the following claim in attempting to interpret the current state of Russian culture and society:

There is something in Russian culture today making most Russians – even highly educated people – incapable of simple manifestations of human solidarity. [...] Russian oppositionists believe that the essence of Russia does not lie in its "brainless leaders" but in Bulgakov, Akhmatova, Mandelshtam, Brodsky and other geniuses of Russian culture. Their legacy is everlasting, and in a way, they are the real Russia. That might be so. It's just that it doesn't make much of a difference for Ukrainians, not then and especially not today. (2022)

The strong *othering* that is present in the passage falls in line with yet another revealing topos of the overall discussion around Russian culture and its literature

according to which even those, who are considered to be the “icons” of Russian liberalism and by definition should be antiimperialist, turn out to be deeply marked by the imperialistic essence of Russianness.<sup>14</sup> One of the most widely-discussed names in that respect is Joseph Brodsky and his infamous poem *Na nezavisimost' Ukrainy* (On the independence of Ukraine, 1991–1992). Sergei Medvedev's *Park krymskogo perioda* (Crimean Park, 2017), whose title alludes to *Jurassic Park*, addresses Brodsky's imperialistic resentment:

For all 23 years [by the time of Crimea's annexation] Ukrainian independence has been perceived as a misunderstanding, an anecdote; the word “nezalezhnost'” itself is usually pronounced with ironic connotations in Russia. Russians accepted Moldovan, Tajik, even Belarusian independence calmly, but they could not accept Ukrainian independence, and we are not talking about the imperialists and pochvenniks, but about the broadest strata of the educated class, who looked at Ukraine as a banana republic and simultaneously harbored a deep resentment against the unwise “younger brother” who had boldly denied blood kinship. This resentment turned into genuine hatred in Brodsky's famous poem “On the Independence of Ukraine” [...] a dissident and an idol of the liberal intelligentsia, Brodsky here displays the full extent of the bruised great Russian [*velikoderzhavnyi*] consciousness, which he had taken from Russia together with the memory of the imperial grandeur of St. Petersburg. (125)<sup>15</sup>

Brodsky's infamous poem was once again “uncovered” in the spring of 2022, causing further discussion, especially on its final lines: “When it's your turn to be dragged to graveyards, / You'll whisper and wheeze, your deathbed mattress a-pushing, / Not Shevchenko's bullshit but poetry from Pushkin”.<sup>16</sup> Stephen Marche has reflected on the poem's resonance with current events: “Brodsky's prophecy has come true, but not in the way he expected. The current war is about whose poetry will ultimately be whispered over all the pointless slaughter” (2022).

## DISCUSSIONS IN THE SLOVAK MEDIA

Moving away from the Western-oriented perspective towards the Slovak context (which to a certain extent represents the tendencies found in the broader Visegrad region), it should be pointed that the latter is marked by a higher level of emotional charge and, hence, stronger rhetoric and a higher degree of criticism (effective in both ways, as the support for Russian aggression against Ukraine is prominent in the country).<sup>17</sup> Consequently, although the topoi could be the same as the ones that have been already addressed, the “material envelope” can be very different. For instance, the Russian classics are discussed in an interview with the Ukrainian scholar Feliks Shteinbuk, published by the Slovak newspaper *Dennik N* under the provocative title “Russian Classical Literature as a Weapon of Mass Destruction”. To the question of whether he supports the boycott of Russian culture, the interviewee provides a rather radical answer according to which that culture is “unnecessary” as its direct influence is responsible for the shelling of Ukrainian cities, the killings in Bucha and other crimes (Vadas 2022). He then elaborates on that idea with an attempt to deconstruct the concepts of “one little tear from one single little tortured child” (as too big of a sacrifice even for a greater cause) and of “non-resistance to evil by force”,

that are stereotypically associated with Dostoevsky's and Tolstoy's writings respectively. In the following fragment, the understandable emotional charge of the rhetorical questions is amplified by the usage of a peculiar *othering* strategy, which results from the interviewee's special requirement to print the names of the Russian authors and words derived from "Russia" without capital letters.<sup>18</sup>

Do you think a russian in a military uniform who would rape a 10-year-old girl and then kill her was told about dostoevsky's "child's tear"? Or the russian in a military uniform who first ties the hands of a peaceful Ukrainian behind his back and then shoots his defenseless victim in the back of the head was told about tolstoy's "non-resistance to evil by force"? So, what is this all about anyway? If the russians weren't told about it, then why do we need dostoevsky and tolstoy – after all, the russians themselves don't need them either! (Vadas 2022)<sup>19</sup>

A similar critical viewpoint can be traced in the *Aktuality.sk* interview with the Swiss-Slovak writer Irena Brežná (Hanák 2022), whose stance on Russian colonialism was already manifested in her *Die Wölfinnen von Sernovodsk* (She-Wolves from Sernovodsk, 1997; Slov. trans. *Vlčice zo Sernovodska: Zápisky z rusko-čečenskej vojny*, 2016). In the interview, Brežná approaches the Russian classics through criticism of Russian and Soviet colonial and imperialistic practices and pointing out the perseverance of their heritage in the consciousness of contemporary Russians, who have not gone through decolonization processes (as opposed to England, France, or Germany). She even engages in polemics with such antiregime and antiimperialist Russian writers as Vladimir Sorokin and Viktor Erofeev, who tend to blame the historical Asian ("Mongol") influence for the Russian pyramidally hierarchized state power: "I think one doesn't need to blame it on the Mongol Khan, but finally admit who we are and how we treat other peoples" (2022).<sup>20</sup> One could also follow the *culprit* narrative in Brežná's interpretations of Tolstoy's and Dostoevsky's writings, in which she mentions Oksana Zabuzhko's essay "No Guilty People in the World? Reading Russian Literature after the Bucha Massacre" for the British *TLS* (also published in Slovak by *Salon.eu*). Brežná agrees with Zabuzhko that, despite being accepted as "European", Russian literature can be essentially perverse and non-humanistic in its world modelling as it draws the reader's compassion from the victim to the culprit, whose actions then become forgivable, hence, making Russian literature co-responsible for the crimes of the Russian soldiers (Hanák 2022; Zabužko 2022).<sup>21</sup>

There are, however, the elements in the Slovak media debate that could be attributed to the aforementioned reconciling narrative (which is nonetheless still critical in its essence).<sup>22</sup> For instance, in his interview with *Denník N*, one of the most prolific translators from Russian to Slovak, Ján Štrasser (Tódová 2022), urges the need to distinguish between the Russian regime and the authors who are against that regime, including the ones with whom he is in direct contact: Vladimir Sorokin, Mikhail Shishkin, and Guzel Yakhina. That idea can also be traced in his reaction to Zelensky's words that Russian culture died along with the civilians of Bucha. Drawing parallels with World War II and German literature, Štrasser argues that Pushkin (as a collective representative of the Russian classics), unlike Putin, cannot be "liquidated", since that literature contains values which have nothing in common with

the war and some are, in fact, anti-war (2022). At the start of the Russian invasion, Štrasser even performed a symbolic act of protest against the appropriation of Russian culture by the Russian state by rejecting the Pushkin medal which had been awarded to him in 2004 with a certificate signed by Putin: “Unfortunately, Pushkin’s medal is also Putin’s medal” (SME 2022).

Their attitude to Russian literature was expressed not only by scholars and artists, whose work is directly connected to Russia and its culture, but also by the representatives of a broader cultural spectrum in Slovakia. The idea of the *uselessness* of Russian literature found its place in an article by the journalist and theologian Michal Havran in SME. Ironically entitled “Russia is not a trustworthy source on Russia” (“Rusko nie je dôveryhodný zdroj o Rusku”), the article develops the topos of the *unsound character* of Russian culture and literature, but rather than stressing what is typical of Russian literature, the author highlights the elements that Russian literature lacks. According to Havran, Russian literature “completely” lacks books that would address and reflect on its imperial and colonial past, “has no books on the murder of its own intelligentsia, on the systematic liquidation of the elite layers of its own society” (2022).<sup>23</sup> This leads to the absence of self-reflection mechanisms and the society’s inability to take responsibility for its own mistakes, the author concludes.

Of course, one could argue and provide a list of books and films that deal with the very issues Havran mentions, from Yuri Dombrovsky’s *Fakul’tet nenuzhnykh veshchei* (*The Faculty of Useless Knowledge*, 1975) through *Deti Arbat* (*Children of the Arbat*, 1987) by Anatoly Rybakov to the more recent *Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza* (*Zuleikha*, 2015) by Guzel Yakhina or *Aviator* (2016) by Evgenii Vodolazkin. At the time of its release in 1994, even *Utomlennye solntsem* (*Burnt by the Sun*) by Nikita Mikhalkov (who has since turned into one of the most aggressive pro-regime artists) was an important cinematographic statement towards acknowledging the trauma of repressions. In this situation, however, the very fact that this article was published by a major media outlet (rather than its author’s level of expertise on the topic) becomes a discursive event by itself, as it functions as a part of a broader transformative process that affects the representations of Russian literature not only in Slovak, but also in different host cultural contexts, since the prevailing narratives and topoi proved to be universal. This conclusion, admittedly, does not concern the “alternative” media scene in Slovakia (and Czechia), which, I believe, could be a separate topic of discussion.

## RUSSIAN WRITERS’ PERSPECTIVES

Finally, it should be noted that the previously addressed transformations happen not only in the representations of Russian literature channeled through media and critical commentary, but also logically, in the way the writers themselves perceive and narrate the ongoing processes. The reactions by the authors seem to correspond to the ideological and poetological divide that has gradually deepened and radicalized since the start of the 21st century. As Andrew Kahn and the other authors of *A History of Russian Literature* point out, for at least the last decade there have been two parallel literary processes, with one side inclining to the realist and socialist re-



alism traditions and the other gravitating toward modernist/postmodernist aesthetics, and that parallelism has been reproducing “the political split in society between a neo-conservative/nationalist majority and a liberal minority” (2018, 563). However, one could argue that this division certainly cannot be absolutized, since by no means does traditionalism in poetics (for instance, Guzel Yakhina’s historical fiction) always signal affiliation to the “antiliberal” camp, while experimentation does not serve as a marker of “liberality” (for example, Mikhail Elizarov’s provocative prose, which is almost Sorokinian but antiliberal in its essence). Nevertheless, Russian literature has returned to a politicized state with writers actively engaging in the political life (769).

On the conservative side of the spectrum, the first and most prominent name is undoubtedly the Russian nationalist Zakhar Prilepin, a vocal supporter of Russia’s military actions, who himself took part in fighting in the Donetsk region of Ukraine (Rasulov 2017) and signed a contract with the Russian army at the beginning of 2023 to actively participate in the invasion of Ukraine (TASS 2023).<sup>24</sup> Since his novel *San’kia* (Sankya, 2006), which brought him fame, Prilepin has proved to be a suggestive storyteller creating original characters committed to their ideology, who are filled with feelings of historical and social injustice (coincidentally, several chapters of the novel are devoted to a “special operation” in Latvia meant to protest the country’s policies towards Russian citizens and the Soviet heritage). With the onset of Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2022, Prilepin, now also a politician, has actively promoted the rhetoric that both victimizes Russian culture and demonizes the image of its external and internal enemies. For the sake of the latter, Prilepin even initiated the creation of GRAD, which stands for “Gruppa po rassledovaniuu antirossiiskoi deiatel’nosti” (The team to investigate anti-Russian activities), “a think tank in the Russian Parliament aimed at excluding from cultural life artists who do not support the war, or ‘the special military operation’” (Grynszpan 2018). Hence, for the official Russian culture, Prilepin has gradually become one of those who embodies the return of institutionalized cultural process, one of the “judges” who define the level of acceptability or unacceptability of artists’ public behavior and, consequently, their creative work. On the other hand, Prilepin was one of the first Russian public figures to get personally sanctioned less than a week after the start of the invasion, and that experience has been transformed into a rhetorical device in his public speeches. For instance, in his open lecture for secondary school students, he claims to be sanctioned for merely being “a representative of Russian culture”, which in his argumentation is presented as a proof of the “collective West’s” attempts to cancel Russian culture, which, according to Prilepin, are futile since they will only draw more attention and interest beyond Russia (2022).

In that respect, however, the possibilities of exporting state-approved Russian culture, specifically literature, has become quite limited. Within the sparse activities of such direction, one could mention the conferences organized by MAPRYAL (International Association of Teachers of Russian Language and Literature) in the countries that are more inclined to cooperation with Russia, such as Serbia, Turkey, or Cuba. One of the main faces of these conferences is Evgenii Vodolazkin, who has

been willing to represent Russia and its culture even during wartime. When confronted with questions considering the war or the cancel culture, Vodolazkin tends to communicate in a rather euphemistic way, quite in contrast with the general militant character of today's Russian public discourse:

[According to Vodolazkin] a writer should not “look around”, and bans should not affect their work. “They should mind their own business and what they write will still get through. Circumstances change and it is important to say your word, it is important that it is spoken, and I have the absolute conviction that it will not go unheard.” (Arnol'dova 2022)<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, even despite the “circumstances”, an English translation of Vodolazkin's novel *Brisbane* was published in April 2022. With it being strongly marked by contemplations on the relationship between Russia and Ukraine, it was natural for reviewers to point out the newly perceptive perspective: “From the vantage point of 2022, Vodolazkin's choice to portray the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine as a kind of personal annoyance to Gleb [the protagonist] feels like a missed opportunity in the novel. But it also underscores the puzzlement with which many people in Russia to this day view the subject of Ukrainian nationality and identity” (Young 2022). The change in perception is also marked by the translator of the novel, Marian Schwartz: “When I first read *Brisbane*, before this war, I could simply love it as a work of literature. That seems like a long time ago” (2022).<sup>26</sup> In the above-mentioned speech, Vodolazkin also touched upon the philosophy of Dostoevsky, which he used as a yardstick in the context of defining the place of Russian culture in pan-European culture: “There is no cancel culture, only a cancellation of culture. [...] In his time, Dostoevsky called for European consolidation, to which both Russia and the collective West belong” (Orlov 2022).<sup>27</sup> In his argumentation Vodolazkin oddly uses the same verbal formulas as Putin did in his already cited speech on occasion of the “Day of Cultural Worker” (Galaida, 2022).

Mikhail Shishkin also discusses Dostoevsky and the Russian classics in his article for *The Atlantic*, poignantly entitled “Don't Blame Dostoevsky” (2022). Shishkin, who lives in Switzerland, has been in opposition to the Russian regime for many years, but, as Natalia Ivanova notes, his “art-house” writing (oscillating between realism, modernism, and postmodernism) and his specific “historical pessimism” made him “a stranger – to patriots and liberals alike” (2017, 30).<sup>28</sup> The plots in Shishkin's key novels almost always allude to real historical events, although historicism does not dominate the narrative, as the writer, on the contrary, deconstructs the strict temporal boundaries by connecting the imperial Russian past with its refraction in the present. Mark Lipovetsky even believes that the overarching goal of Shishkin's metanovel is to “rewrite Russian classics, freeing them from the complex of a ‘Russian European’, the imperial mythology, the ‘Russian idea’” (2017, 46).<sup>29</sup> By the complex of a “Russian European” one could understand a paradoxical combination of antiimperialist views with the support for certain imperialist practices. That perspective becomes key for Shishkin's approach to the current context surrounding Russian literature. In terms of its content and the ideas expressed in it, his text on Dostoevsky could be classified as what was previously referred to as a defensive approach in the debate on the status

of Russian literature. Shishkin develops the idea that it is not the nature of Russian literature itself that determines the aggressive expansiveness of Russian culture, but rather the “internal imperialism” of Russia, which has entailed the oppression of its own people, especially its own writers. Therefore, according to Shishkin, “The road to the Bucha massacre leads not through Russian literature, but through its suppression [...]. The history of Russian culture is one of desperate resistance, despite crushing defeats, against a criminal state power”, and literature itself serves as an “antidote to the poison of the Russian imperialist way of thinking” (2022).<sup>30</sup>

Interestingly, the same metaphor was used by another prominent Russian writer, Ludmila Ulitskaya, in her interview with *Le Monde*: “I realize today how much Pushkin, Tolstoy and Chekhov protected me from the dreary Soviet propaganda. It is the only antidote to propaganda, that has become total in today’s world” (Jégo 2022). The writer has a long personal history of opposing the Soviet regime and later the Putin regime, as she has been one of the most active participants in the protest rallies since Putin’s presidential comeback in 2011–2012. Ulitskaya shares that dissident nature with her characters: “Her family sagas feature heroines and heroes who display attitudes of freedom in their lifestyle, rather than in their ideological statements or political positions. Their natural liberalism, manifested in free sexuality and dissident activities, pits them against political limits imposed from above” (Kahn et al. 2018, 763). Ulitskaya left Russia days after the start of the invasion and now lives in Berlin, where she has become one of the main voices of Russian intelligentsia abroad, the role she herself did not welcome: “I would much rather have continued to be an observer, which is how I actually define my role as a writer. But life just decided differently for me” (Kieselbach 2022). That role of an observer, which she connects to her Jewish origin, is also crucial to her argumentation perspective, as she stated in her interview for the Czech *Deník N* (also published in Slovak *Deník N*, which is cited here):

I am Jewish. That allows me to look at the Russian-Ukrainian war sort of from the side. I’m just an observer. And as an observer, I can see that relations between Russians and Ukrainians will not be broken forever. The common past plays too significant a role in the lives of both nations. But what is happening today is a steppingstone to the creation and ultimate self-determination of the Ukrainian nation. (Procházková 2022)<sup>31</sup>

Berlin has also become a place of refuge for the poet and a journalist, Maria Stepanova, whose 2017 novel *Pamiati pamiati (In the Memory of Memory, 2021)* became one of the biggest events in contemporary Russian literature and was translated into several languages, described by John Williams in the *New York Times* as a “daring combination of family history and roving cultural analysis” (2021). The synthetic, multimodal, documentary character of the novel and its thematic scope proved to be unique in the Russian context, known for its problematic relationships with its own generational memory – in Sergei Medvedev’s (2017, 96) words: “Russia is a country with an unpredictable past”.<sup>32</sup> Stepanova was one of the signatories (along with Ulitskaya, Shishkin, Sorokin, Akunin, Glukhovskiy and others) of the international anti-war letter (Meduza 2022; Sherwood 2022) focused on the Russian language, which had become hostage to Russian propaganda, and called to fight that propaganda

with that same language. A few weeks later, the *Financial Times* published a large and highly emotional article by Stepanova (2022), in which she argues about the war as a product of Putin's fantasy, driven by "a genuine fear of the existence of an Other, a desperate desire to crush this Other, to reform it, ingest it, draw it in, gulp it down, swallow it", by attempts to rewrite history, to become an author and a "screenwriter" for the new reality. She also ponders the internalized experiences of language change, comparing the wartime language to an "ancient minefield" in which words and phrases that have acquired new meanings or have lost their meaning (like the phrase "a soldier would never hurt a child") become symbolic "mines" (2022).

Finally, Berlin is now also home to Vladimir Sorokin, the writer who is widely believed to have predicted the reinstallation of a medieval authoritarian regime in Russia and its international isolation in his 2006 novel *Den' oprichnika* (*Day of the Oprichnik*, 2010). The very idea of the "new Middle Ages", which Sorokin continued to develop in his other works (*Telluria*, *Manaraga*), also provided him with the necessary interpretational framework to assess the Russian invasion and the hierarchy of the Russian establishment, from the "despotic Tsar" to the new "oprichniks" provided with iPhones (Borisova 2022). While drawing his comparisons, Sorokin goes centuries back, arguing that "in the guise of modern Ukraine, [Putin] is fighting Kievan Rus' as a pro-Western country that, in Putin's view, threatens modern-day Mongolian-Byzantine Russia by the very fact of its existence" (Borisova 2022).<sup>33</sup> At the same time, in his view, today's Russia is losing its civilizational battle, being a country fixated on the past, while Ukraine is looking to the future. In another interview, that was published by the *Financial Times*, the writer also addresses the boycott of Russian culture. Surprisingly, Sorokin takes a rather optimistic stance on the matter, also following the topos of historical parallels with Nazi Germany: "It's natural that culture will have to pay for this carnage. The Germans, too, paid a price after the second world war. [...] I think Russian culture will endure. [...] It's already part of the world's cultural heritage – hard to do without it" (Chazan 2022).

## CONCLUSION

In this text, which is just a preliminary exploration of this unfolding issue, I have tried to present the key transformations affecting the representations of Russian literature and the level of its *acceptability* in the new social and medial context formed after the Russian invasion of Ukraine began. Having addressed several key topoi (the guilt and innocence of Russian classical literature, the imperialism of Russian liberals, the "uselessness" of Russian literature in the context of war), several narrative lines (cancelling, reconciling, defending), and the perspectives of some of the most prominent contemporary writers, it can be argued that Russian literature as a collective entity has proved to be a tool with enormous argumentative and manipulative power. This tool is used by all parties to the conflict to confirm their ideological position. At the same time, the active use of Russian literature by Russian propaganda seems likely to cause greater marginalization and even more pronounced *othering* in its representations. Such morbidly absurd episodes as covering the bombed ruins of the Mariupol Drama Theatre, after the city was seized by the Russians, with scaffold-

ding featuring portraits of Pushkin, Tolstoy, Gogol, and surprisingly, Taras Shevchenko (Insider 2022; Kamanin 2022) will only increase this marginalization.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> As this article is mainly about the shifts in the “Western” reception of Russian literature and culture, the contemplations on historical, political, and social aspects will also revolve around Russia’s relationships with the countries of today’s EU and the USA.
- <sup>2</sup> See for instance one of the key Russia-related international relations publications by Iver B. Neumann 1996.
- <sup>3</sup> For instance, on Slovakia see Kusá 2017 or on the UK, see Cross 2012.
- <sup>4</sup> “В области репрезентации русской культуры соседствуют стереотипы, основанные на традиционных бинарных оппозициях типа Россия/Запад, с одной стороны, и новые формы репрезентации, осуществляемые в рамках интенсивной глобализации и межкультурной коммуникации. [...] западная культура проявляет серьезный интерес к глубинным смыслам русских классических произведений, к их общечеловеческому звучанию, к эмоциональному миру героев. [...] Взгляд Другого на русскую культуру заставляет задуматься об общем и специфичном элементе в ее текстах, о контекстуальной обусловленности репрезентации и разнице в восприятии культурного феномена как Своего и как Другого.” Unless otherwise stated, the translations into English are by present author.
- <sup>5</sup> “skúma otázku utvárania a fungovania literárneho pola v rozpätí od manifestovaného mocenského utvárania pola po utváranie literárneho pola ako latentných, skrytých morfických rezonancií. Z hľadiska poetiky udalosti ide o figurovanie, konfigurovanie a rekonfigurovanie literárneho pola.”
- <sup>6</sup> “meniacu sa udalostnú mieru prijateľnosti a neprijateľnosti textov v konkrétnej historickej situácii.”
- <sup>7</sup> “отвергание привычных понятий вроде ‘мама’, ‘папа’, ‘семья’ или даже ‘пол’”
- <sup>8</sup> “В последний раз такую массовую кампанию по уничтожению неугодной литературы почти 90 лет назад проводили нацисты в Германии. Мы хорошо знаем и помним из кадров кинохроники, как сжигаются книги прямо на площадях.”
- <sup>9</sup> “Sono posizioni che non condivido sua sul piano culturale sia su quello politico. La grande cultura russa è parte integrante della cultura europea. È un elemento che non si può cancellare. Mentre la responsabilità della guerra va attribuita al governo di quel Paese non certo al popolo russo o alla sua cultura.”
- <sup>10</sup> See for instance Friedersdorf 2022; Lindsay 2022; Lee 2022.
- <sup>11</sup> Another common time period used as a common point of history is the Cold War. Sholto Byrnes states that “not even during the Cold War, when the Soviet Union and its nuclear arsenal posed an existential threat to the West (admittedly, the feeling may have been mutual), did anyone try to ‘cancel’ Russian culture” (2022), while Gary Saul Morson notes, “Even at the height of the Cold War, no one thought of banning Russian literature, art, or music. Quite the contrary; that is when Russian studies first flourished in America” (2022).
- <sup>12</sup> For the most recent illustration see Yermolenko 2022 or Morson and Schapiro 2022. For the general idea of the way imperial heritage functions in contemporary Russian literature see also Ulbrechtová 2015.
- <sup>13</sup> “geopolitické fantazmagórie”, “s miernou iróniú (ale aj s inferálnym porozumením)”
- <sup>14</sup> Of course, as most of the mentioned topoi, this one has also been in circulation long before the current invasion started. For one of the earlier media contexts, see *Obozrevatel’s* longread which discusses, among other topics, Oksana Zabuzhko’s commentary on Ludmila Ulitskaya and her “imperialistic” stories about Crimea (Altunian 2017).
- <sup>15</sup> “На протяжении всех 23 лет украинская независимость воспринималась как недоразумение, анекдот – само слово ‘незалежність’ в России обычно произносится с ироничным подтекстом. Молдавскую, таджикскую, даже белорусскую независимость русские воспри-

няли спокойно, а украинскую не смогли, причем речь идет не об имперцах и почвенниках, а о самых широких слоях образованного класса, смотревших на Украину как на банановую республику и одновременно затаивших глубокую обиду на неразумного ‘младшего брата’, который дерзко отринул кровное родство. Эта обида в известном стихотворении Бродского ‘На независимость Украины’ превратилась в неподдельную ненависть [...] диссидент и кумир либеральной интеллигенции Бродский здесь являет всю полноту уязвленного великодержавного сознания, которое он вывез из России вместе с памятью об имперском величии Петербурга.”

- <sup>16</sup> “Только когда придет и вам помирать, бугаи, / будете вы хрипеть, царапая край матраса, / строчки из Александра, а не брехню Тараса.” Translated by Artem Serebrennikov.
- <sup>17</sup> In Slovakia, according to a survey conducted by Globsec, 19% of the responders would welcome Russia’s victory, while for 24% it does not matter who wins the war (Hajdu and Slosiarik 2022).
- <sup>18</sup> That strategy is, understandably, not exclusive for the interview. In the spring of 2022 it has become widespread in both formal and informal Ukrainian discourses and found its way even into the United Nations’ documents written by the Ukrainian representatives, see for instance “Statement by the Delegation of Ukraine at the Open Debate of the UN Security Council on ‘New Orientation for Reformed Multilateralism’” (2022).
- <sup>19</sup> “myslíte si, že rusovi vo vojenskej uniforme, ktorý znásilní 10-ročné dievča a potom ju zabije, povedali o dostojevského ‘slze dieťaťa’? Alebo rusovi vo vojenskej uniforme, ktorý najprv zviaže ruky mierumilovnému Ukrajinčovi za jeho chrbtom a potom strelí svojej bezbrannej obeti do zátylku, hovorili o tolsthého ‘neodporovaní zlu násilím’? Tak o čom to vlastne celé je? Ak sa o tom nehovorilo rusom, tak načo potrebujeme dostojevského a tolsthého – veď ich nepotrebujú ani samotní rusi!”
- <sup>20</sup> “myslím si, že to netreba zhadzovať na mongolského chána, ale konečne si priznať, kto sme a ako sa správame k iným národom.”
- <sup>21</sup> Logically, it is a topic for a much broader discussion, however, before completely endorsing such an opinion one should also bear in mind the “practical” side of the matter, as nowadays it is highly questionable to what extent any literature can influence a “common man” (according to a 2021 survey, one third of the Russian population have not a read a single book in the previous year (Tadtaev 2021)).
- <sup>22</sup> See also the interview with the prominent Czech scholar Tomáš Glanc for *Denník N*, who, on the one hand, sees reasons for excluding Russian culture from international context, but advocates against a total boycott of everything Russian on the other. He is also careful when blaming every Russian classical literature for the war crimes: “To accuse representatives of classical literature of crimes against humanity is simply not possible. Or rather, it is, but only from the point of view of personal trauma, not from the point of view of rational reasoning” (Sudor 2022).
- <sup>23</sup> “nemá žiadne knihy o vyvražďovaní vlastnej inteligencie, o systematickej likvidácii elitných vrstiev vlastnej spoločnosti”
- <sup>24</sup> It is peculiar to note that many of Prilepin’s mentions in the news even fail to present him as an active writer, but rather a “military blogger” (Lister and Tarasova 2022), “Russian TV analyst” (Stanton 2022), “the pro-Kremlin novelist turned politician” (Grynszpan 2022) etc.
- <sup>25</sup> “писатель не должен ‘смотреть по сторонам’ – запреты не должны влиять на его работу. ‘Он должен заниматься своим делом и то, что он напишет, все равно прозвучит. Обстоятельства меняются, и важно сказать свое слово, важно, чтобы оно было произнесено, и у меня есть абсолютное убеждение в том, что оно не останется неуслышанным.’”
- <sup>26</sup> Schwartz also provides a valuable insight to the future of translation from Russian: “Publishing Russian literature in translation has suddenly become extremely problematic, and for the next generation, possibly, impossible” (2022).
- <sup>27</sup> “Нет никакой культуры отмены, есть только отмена культуры. [...] Достоевский в свое время призывал к европейской консолидации, к которой принадлежит и Россия, и совокупный Запад.”
- <sup>28</sup> “Шишкин остается чужим – и для патриотов, и для либералов.”
- <sup>29</sup> “переписать русскую классику, освобождая ее от комплекса русского европейца, имперской мифологии, ‘русской идеи’.”

- <sup>30</sup> Certainly, the author strategically narrows the scope and omits the whole level of Russian culture, which managed to achieve recognition without existing in open confrontation with Russia's various regimes (with such obvious examples as Tchaikovsky and other famous Russian composers of the 19th century or less obvious examples such as the "village prose" of the second half of the 20th century).
- <sup>31</sup> "Som Židovka. To mi umožňuje pozerat' sa na rusko-ukrajinskú vojnu tak nejak zo strany. Som iba pozorovateľ. A ako pozorovateľ vidím, že vzťahy Rusov a Ukrajincov nebudú navždy pretrhané. Spoločná minulosť hrá v živote oboch národov príliš významnú rolu. Ale to, čo sa dnes deje, je odrazovým mostíkom na vytvorenie a konečné sebaurčenie ukrajinského národa."
- <sup>32</sup> "Россия – страна с непредсказуемым прошлым."
- <sup>33</sup> "Путин ведет войну против Украины, в современном образе которой он видит Киевскую Русь. По его понятиям, уже только своим существованием Украина как ориентированное на Запад государство представляет угрозу для России – с ее татаро-монгольским и византийским наследием."

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## **Transformations in the perception of Russian literature after February 24, 2022**

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Contemporary Russian literature. Discourse. Russian propaganda. Perception of Russian literature. Cancel culture. War in Ukraine.

This article explores the ongoing transformations in the way Russian literature has been represented and perceived outside Russia since the start of the war in Ukraine in 2022, based on texts from Western and Central European media. It addresses several key topoi (the guilt and innocence of Russian classical literature, the imperialism of Russian liberals, the “uselessness” of Russian literature in the context of war) and several narrative lines (cancelling, reconciling, defending). It then examines the perspectives of some of the most prominent contemporary Russian writers, including Evgenii Vodolazkin, Mikhail Shishkin, Ludmila Ulitskaya, and Maria Stepanova.

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