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To cite this article: Tatiana Zhurzhenko (2021) Fighting Empire, Weaponising Culture: The Conflict with Russia and the Restrictions on Russian Mass Culture in Post-Maidan Ukraine, Europe-Asia Studies, 73:8, 1441-1466, DOI: [10.1080/09668136.2021.1944990](https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2021.1944990)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2021.1944990>



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Published online: 18 Aug 2021.



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Fighting Empire, Weaponising Culture: The Conflict with Russia and the Restrictions on Russian Mass Culture in Post-Maidan Ukraine

TATIANA ZHURZHENKO

Abstract

This essay explores the controversial restrictions on Russian mass culture in post-Maidan Ukraine as an element of a complex palimpsest of post-Soviet culture wars. It addresses public debates and political controversies around the role of Russian culture in Ukraine in order to explain why and how they evolved into a *Kulturkampf* following the Euromaidan and the Russian aggression in 2014. The essay focuses on three central aspects of this *Kulturkampf*: limiting the import of Russian books and printed products; restrictions on Russian films and television products; and the ban on Russian artists touring in Ukraine.

RUSSIA'S ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA, ITS SUPPORT FOR PRO-Russian separatists and its military intervention in Donbas had a detrimental impact on all aspects of Ukrainian–Russian relations. Culture is one of the areas where this impact was especially dramatic even if less discussed. In response to the Russian aggression, the post-Maidan Ukrainian government banned Russian state television channels, raised the quota for Ukrainian language content on television and radio, barred many Russian actors and musicians from touring in Ukraine, and limited the import of Russian books and the broadcasting of Russian films and music. These measures, unthinkable before 2014, found significant support among Ukrainians. In fact, the initiative, and often strong pressure, came from civil society.

This essay addresses the restrictions on Russian mass culture in Ukraine in the aftermath of the 2014 events. Although an important aspect of post-Maidan politics, these measures have received much less attention in the academic literature compared, for example, to the decommunisation process that was formalised in 2015. I will argue that their meaning cannot be reduced to the issue of censorship and freedom of speech under the condition of a military conflict (Way 2019); neither can they be sufficiently explained by the rise of 'nationalist populism' in post-Maidan Ukraine (Molchanov 2018). Behind this policy was

the new conceptualisation of Russian culture as a weapon of hybrid aggression and a potential threat to national security. Its second pillar, however, was the cultural revolution inspired by the Euromaidan: the active role in the long-due reforms claimed by a new generation of artists, cultural managers and activists, the redefinition of the very notion of Ukrainian culture (such as reclaiming the Ukrainian contribution to what is usually labelled Russian avantgarde and Soviet modernism), the growing understanding of Ukraine as a multicultural polity and, finally, the new appreciation of Ukrainian culture as an instrument of soft power.

The Ukrainian reaction to the conflict was not unilateral: the only Ukrainian library in Moscow, for example, was closed and its director arrested on extremism charges, while books by the popular Ukrainian writers Serhii Zhadan and Andrei Kurkov, who had actively supported the Euromaidan, were no longer published in Russia. The restrictive measures of the Kyiv government, however, were not only more systematic but also anchored in legislation. This disparity not only reflects the asymmetric nature of the Ukrainian–Russian conflict, seen by Kyiv as Russian aggression and by Moscow as an internal ‘civil war’, but also mirrors the traditional hierarchy of Russian and Ukrainian cultures inherited from the Soviet era. The former has been widely perceived as universal, inclusive and transnational while the latter has often been stigmatised as ethnic, parochial or even ‘artificial’. The Ukrainian cultural self-assertion that resulted from the Euromaidan challenged this traditional hierarchy and thus was dubbed by the Russian historian Gerasimov (2014) ‘the first postcolonial revolution’. The approach suggested by this essay, therefore, goes beyond the notions of nationalisation and securitisation of culture and sees the abovementioned restrictions and the political fight around them as a ‘culture war’ or, rather, a *Kulturkampf*, in which the controversies around Russian mass culture in Ukraine signify a more encompassing ‘struggle to define Ukraine’, to paraphrase the title of James D. Hunter’s seminal 1991 book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*.

The essay starts with a discussion of the notions ‘culture war’ and *Kulturkampf*, which will be embedded in the Ukrainian context. The *Kulturkampf* against Russian mass culture in Ukraine will be discussed as an element of a complex palimpsest of local and globalised culture wars. I will then address intellectual debates and political controversies around the hierarchy of Russian and Ukrainian cultures in pre-Maidan Ukraine and try to explain how and why they evolved into a *Kulturkampf* following the Euromaidan and the Russian aggression in Ukraine. The essay focuses in detail on the three most important aspects of the *Kulturkampf*: limiting the import of Russian books and printed products; restrictions on Russian films and television programmes; and the ban on Russian artists touring in Ukraine. My focus is on culture; I will not discuss the ‘media wars’ in post-Maidan Ukraine, which included pressure on journalists and media outlets deemed ‘pro-Russian’, conflicts around the controversial *Mirotvorets* website and the ban on the popular Russian social networks VKontakte and Odnoklasniki.¹

¹For more detail, see Way (2019).

The essay is based on textual analysis of Ukrainian legislation and media reports. The main scope of the empirical research is limited to the period 2014–2019: from the annexation of Crimea to the end of Petro Poroshenko’s presidency.

Culture wars West and East

The concept of ‘culture wars’ was introduced into the US academic discourse by sociologist James D. Hunter (1991). It has become a meta-notion encompassing conflicts between social groups and coalitions of political actors that represent opposing sets of values, moral visions, and understandings of ‘good’ and ‘evil’. Since the 1980s, according to Hunter, conflicts of this kind—for example, over the role of religion in public schools, the right to abortion, gun control, LGBT rights or the limits of multiculturalism—have profoundly reshaped American public culture. Hunter labelled the two opposing camps in these culture wars ‘orthodox’ (or ‘traditionalists’) and ‘progressivists’, the former drawing on conservative Judeo-Christian values and the latter having an affinity for Enlightenment ideas, secularism and modernity.

Whilst being a global phenomenon, culture wars have their own specifics and history in other parts of the world. In Europe, they are as a rule more recent, less partisan and not as intense as in the United States. Issues traditionally polarising US society—abortion, gay rights, gun control—are essentially settled or non-existent in Western Europe. Most importantly, due to the level of secularisation in Europe, the religious/secular divide does not play the same role as in the US. Unlike the European culture wars of the nineteenth century, fought ‘between Catholics and anticlerical forces over the place of religion in a modern polity’ (Clark & Kaiser 2003, p. 1), those of the last two decades have been largely provoked by globalisation, mass migration and the politics of integrating minorities; for example, the headscarf ban in France.

In post-communist Eastern Europe, exposed to rapid political, economic and social transformations, the map of culture wars is different again. From a certain perspective, the new EU members are late starters: they have been much less affected by immigration and the refugee crisis; the LGBT issue has only recently become politicised; and far-right populism is a relatively new phenomenon. However, the culture wars in Eastern Europe are much more than a belated import from the West. The rise to power of such parties as *Fidesz* in Hungary and Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*—PiS) in Poland, both having roots in the 1989 revolutions, revealed the obvious fact that a conservative civil society and illiberal movements had been part of the opposition to the communist regime. The demographic, social and economic effects of globalisation and European integration prepared fertile ground for cultural warriors and moral alarmists while the EU came to be seen as an imperial power allegedly robbing the post-communist countries of their newly gained national sovereignty.

Two specific features of East European culture wars have to be mentioned in this context. First, unlike in Western Europe (with some notable exceptions, such as Spain), conflicts over history and historical memory have played an important role in the region as the re-interpretation of the past has been at the heart of post-1989 transformations (Bernhard & Kubik 2014). The second specific feature of Eastern European culture wars has to do with the processes of de-secularisation and the religious revival during the last three decades. The church has been often successful in capitalising on popular sentiments when

tradition, family and national identity appear to be threatened by rapid changes. The new urban middle class significantly differs from the rural population in terms of social attitudes and cultural values, and this gap creates the preconditions for political polarisation.

A ‘cultural turn’ can also be observed in Russian politics since Vladimir Putin’s re-election to a third term in 2012 (Robinson 2017). Far from being limited to political rhetoric claiming Russia’s spiritual and moral superiority to the West, the cultural turn was manifested in much disputed legislation initiatives, such as the law against ‘gay propaganda’ (2013), the ‘Dima Yakovlev law’, which banned the adoption of Russian children by US citizens (2012) and the law on ‘foreign agents’ (2012), which alienated the pro-Western part of Russian civil society. The Russian Orthodox Church has experienced a spectacular revival in the post-Soviet era and become an important ally of Putin’s regime, supporting his rhetoric of ‘traditional values’ and ‘spiritual bonds’. The first culture war in post-Soviet Russia, a conflict that has polarised Russian society, was triggered by the Pussy Riot affair in 2012, which helped to redefine state–church relations in Russia (Uzlaner & Stoeckl 2019). Russia’s cultural turn also has global implications; one of them is that Putin positions himself as the leader of global conservatism.

But even before the culture wars raging in the West reached post-Soviet countries, most of them had been torn by culture wars of a different kind. Since the collapse of the USSR, conflicting conceptualisations of national identity, competing nation-building projects and alternative interpretations of the past have been at the core of these ‘native’ culture wars. In this sense the term ‘culture wars’ was introduced into the Ukrainian and Belarusian contexts (Riabchuk 2007; Ioffe 2007). The notion of ‘memory wars’, capturing one especially polarising aspect of this conflict, became most widespread.

Culture war or Kulturkampf?

This brief overview of the notion of ‘culture wars’ over the last 30 years shows that it is not easy to define or to operationalise, let alone to differentiate from more traditional political or ideological conflicts. In the following, I will discuss various definitions and features of culture wars, bearing in mind the case study that will be addressed in this essay: namely, the post-Maidan struggle to reduce the dominance of Russian mass culture in Ukraine.

According to one definition, the term ‘culture wars’ refers to ‘the impassioned confrontations between groups within the same society, polarized over so-called hot button issues falling broadly within the realms of race and ethnicity; the body, sexuality, and sexual orientation; identity politics; religion; and patriotism and national identity’ (Dubin 2006, p. 477). The polarisation of public opinion—a clash of two irreconcilable world views or systems of values—appears as one of the central features of culture wars, but it is also one of the most disputed. Hunter’s book raised a heated debate in US academia as some authors (Wolfe 1998; Fiorina 2004) doubted that the American nation was indeed as polarised as the notion of ‘culture wars’ suggests. Responding to critics who claimed that surveys do not confirm the existence of a deep normative conflict within society, Hunter acknowledged the primary role of cultural and political elites, institutions and especially mass media in instigating cultural conflicts as an explanation of

why and how ‘public discourse becomes more polarized than Americans as a people are’ (Hunter 2006, p. 21).

The question of, first, to what extent restrictions on Russian mass culture polarised Ukrainian society and second, to what extent this polarisation was generated by political and cultural elites will be discussed in this essay. The issue of polarisation brings us to the key role of ‘cultural warriors’. Analogous to the notion of ‘mnemonic warriors’ introduced by Bernhard and Kubik (2014) to explain memory wars in post-communist Eastern Europe, ‘cultural warriors’ can be defined as political and societal actors who believe that only their system of values is ethical and only their worldview is correct. In our case cultural warriors—activists advocating boycotts, politicians and journalists—have played an important role in launching public campaigns and initiating legislative changes.

Another common feature of culture wars is their ubiquity. By no means are they merely intellectual debates—culture wars are fought in the parliament, in courts, in the media, on social networks and on the streets. In his book, Hunter identified five ‘fronts’ on which the battle for the future of the US nation was being fought: family, education, the media, law and politics. For our case, the last three are especially relevant, encompassing social media campaigns, street protests, the fight for control over cultural institutions, legislative initiatives and counter-initiatives, and court decisions. I will add the consumption of mass culture as another important ‘front’: by making everyday choices to buy (or not to buy) a book, to watch a Ukrainian film instead of a Russian one or to boycott an artist who supported the annexation of Crimea, the Ukrainian public was broadly involved in the culture war forged by elites.

Some authors relate ‘culture wars’ to the notion of ‘hegemony’. Baruch Kimmerling (1998) looks at the decline of the hegemonic Zionist culture in Israel and the culture war resulting from this process. Balázs Trencsényi addresses the culture war against the pro-European liberal consensus waged by the populists in Central and Eastern Europe in the 2000s and defines it as an ‘encompassing struggle for the past and the future of a given community, aiming at creating an ideological hegemony by stressing the fundamental incompatibility of visions’ (Trencsényi 2014, p. 138). The notion of hegemony goes back to Antonio Gramsci, who conceived it as ideological domination of one group in society through the possession of a monopolistic cultural power position. The Marxist theory of cultural hegemony explains how the state and the bourgeoisie as the ruling class use cultural institutions to maintain power in capitalist societies. A hegemonic culture presents its values and norms as self-evident and has the power to exclude other cultures, thus maintaining general consent to the political order. The notions of cultural imperialism and cultural hegemony have been adopted by postcolonial studies (including in the post-Soviet space) and thus are especially relevant for Ukraine, where the dominance of the Russian language and Russian popular culture has been often seen as a legacy of the Soviet empire.

Hunter himself referred to the notion of hegemony; however, distancing himself from the Marxist tradition, he maintained that under conditions of institutionalised pluralism, one can only talk about ‘weak hegemony’: ‘a minimal and flexible framework of epistemic propensities, normative assumptions, dispositions, myths, and symbols that loosely order public life; that allows room for a certain range of acceptable diversity’ (Hunter 2009,

p. 1314). Seeking to establish a weak hegemony, the competing sides of the cultural divide ‘use the instrumentalities of the state in order to secure the patronage of the state, its resources and, finally, its coercive power’ (Hunter 2009, p. 1314). The Hunterian notion of culture war thus presents it as a bottom-up phenomenon, a clash of two factions of civil society using lobbying and electoral politics as weapons.

While the Ukrainian situation can be partly described in similar terms—especially in 2014–2015, when the Ukrainian state was extremely weak—it was the new post-Maidan political regime which took the lead in the fight against the dominance of Russian popular culture in Ukraine. In addition to ‘culture wars’ I will therefore introduce the notion of *Kulturkampf* as a top-down, regime-led phenomenon. Often used as a synonym for culture wars, it is not merely its German equivalent. In its initial meaning, *Kulturkampf* was used to describe Bismarck’s policy of limiting the influence of the Catholic Church on state institutions, such as public education. In the second half of the nineteenth century, not only Germany but most European nations experienced a period of anti-Catholic legislation initiated by the state (Clark & Kaiser 2003). Although followed by a societal polarisation and mass mobilisation, *Kulturkampf* in its original sense was a state-led policy.² Leaving aside the secular/religious dimension of *Kulturkampf*, I will use this concept as supplementary to the concept of ‘culture war’ in order to reflect on both the bottom-up and the top-down aspects of the campaign to reduce the dominance of Russian popular culture in Ukraine.

The struggle to define Ukraine

As already noted above, history and collective memory became an important source of legitimacy for the post-Soviet political elites, who saw the construction and consolidation of a new national identity as their primary goal. In Ukraine, similar to other post-Soviet republics, questioning the heavily ideologised Soviet historical narratives and demanding ‘truth’ and ‘historical justice’ became the motor of *Narodnyi Rukh* (People’s Movement), the popular movement for democratic reforms and later for national independence. Soon after 1991, however, the Communist Party of Ukraine (*Komunistychna Partiiia Ukrainy*—KPU) capitalised on the Soviet nostalgia widespread among the impoverished population. Multiple overlapping cleavages—the left/right political division, cultural/religious boundaries (often conceptualised as civilisational faultlines following the popular theory put forward in the 1990s by Samuel Huntington) and old ‘phantom borders’ from the imperial and interwar past—made Ukraine especially prone to conflicts over historical memory and identity.

At the same time, Ukraine became increasingly caught in its role as a ‘borderland’ between the enlarging European Union and Putin’s Russia with its ambitions to re-integrate the post-Soviet space. With the competition between the two integration projects intensifying, Ukraine found itself at the forefront of a ‘civilisational’ conflict between the West and the ‘Russian World’ (*Russkii Mir*). While the EU defines itself through liberal ‘European values’, Russia presents itself as a civilisational alternative to

²See, for example, Ross (1984).

the ‘decadent’ West and as a stronghold of ‘traditional values’. In Ukraine, this ‘clash of civilisations’ resonates with alternative images of Russia, which is seen both as an imperial power which has been suppressing the Ukrainian nation for centuries, according to the nationalist discourse, or a brotherly people united with Ukrainians by a common history, Orthodox faith and cultural affinity, according to the Soviet narrative.

In short, two major overlapping issues—dealing with the Soviet past and the ‘civilisational choice’ between Europe and Russia—have dominated the culture wars in Ukraine since 1991. Until the Euromaidan, these culture wars were fought between Soviet nostalgists sympathetic to Russia, led by the Communist Party and later the Party of Regions (*Partiia rehioniv*), and pro-Western national democrats and nationalists (Shevel 2016). At the core of these wars were competing nation-building projects, conflicting visions of Ukrainian identity and alternative interpretations of history. Was Soviet Ukraine a successful modernisation project or a country under foreign occupation? Does the Russian language and culture belong to Ukraine or is it an imperial legacy which perpetuates its colonial status? Does Ukraine belong to the Slavic/Orthodox Russian civilisation or is it an intrinsic part of Europe? What is the meaning of World War II for Ukraine—a ‘Great Patriotic War’ fought alongside the Russian people or the tragedy of a lost national cause in the greater Hitler–Stalin conflict?

The vision of Ukraine as a country divided into a pro-European/Ukrainian west and a Sovietised/pro-Russian east and south was conceptualised by prominent intellectual Mykola Riabchuk (2000). Although he later updated his notion of ‘two Ukraines’, underlining the dynamic nature of this boundary as shifting further east as Ukrainian identity matured, his principal thesis about the antagonism of the ‘true’ Ukrainian identity and culture and *homo sovieticus* remains unchallenged, serving as the main explanation for Ukraine’s troubled transition. Ironically, the discourse of Ukraine as suffering from a cultural split rooted in different historical legacies, antagonistic attitudes to the Soviet past and alternative geopolitical orientations became instrumentalised in 2014 in the Russian media to justify the territorial disintegration of Ukraine as a ‘divided country’ and an ‘artificial state’ (Kuzio 2019).

The events of spring 2014 led to a cultural and political realignment resulting in a redrawing of the faultlines in Ukraine’s culture wars. For the first time since 1991, a broad pro-Western consensus emerged among the political elites and the politically active part of Ukrainian society, not the least due to Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its continuing support for the pro-Russian separatists in Donbas. The ‘memory wars’ that unfolded in Ukraine around the Soviet legacy and culminated in the so-called ‘decommunisation’ laws of 2015 ended with the victory of the national democrats and nationalists and the defeat of the Soviet nostalgists and defenders of the post-Soviet *status quo* (Shevel 2016). The new memory wars around the decommunisation legislation were fought mainly between nationalists and liberals, the proponents of national security and the defenders of freedom of speech. The liberals opposed the ‘nationalisation of history’ as an attempt to create a new state ideology and warned that renaming streets and removing monuments alone could not overcome Soviet political culture and substitute for true reforms. Members of Ukraine’s dynamic post-Maidan art scene joined this culture war, defending the freedom of the arts and resisting not only state censorship but also ideological pressure from nationalists and violent attacks by far-right activists. They were

confronted with the argument that artists should be aware of their responsibility in times of war and respect the patriotic feelings of society (cf. Sokurenko 2019; Filipchuk 2020). In addition, the public empowerment of the Church in the aftermath of the Maidan, on the one hand, and Ukraine's opening to the West and integration into European institutions, on the other, gave rise to new conflicts that had previously been rather marginal: conflicts over LGBT rights, gender roles and family values, and the role of the church in public life and in politics came to polarise society, often across old faultlines. All these multiple conflicts testified to new divisions inside the post-Maidan political consensus. The 'values of the Euromaidan'—dignity, freedom, human rights—came into conflict with the 'patriotic values' of a nation under hybrid aggression, a nation seeking to defend its historical memory and identity.

In short, a new and broader debate emerged that went beyond the traditional issues of national memory or the status of the Russian language in Ukraine. It was now about the securitisation of memory and culture under the condition of Russia's 'hybrid aggression' opposed to the liberal principles of cultural politics, for which many of the Euromaidan activists had fought. A new culture war emerged around issues such as quotas for Russian-language content in Ukrainian media, limitations on the import of Russian books, and bans on Russian social networks, Ukrainian artists' tours of Russia and Russian artists' performances in Ukraine. These will be analysed in more detail in the following sections, but first I will briefly address the pre-Maidan debates on the hierarchy of Ukrainian and Russian cultures in Ukraine.

The 'postcolonial syndrome'

The unequal status of Ukrainian and Russian cultures in post-Soviet Ukraine cannot be denied, but this undisputed reality has been framed and interpreted differently on both sides of the cultural divide. From the perspective of those Ukrainians who identify with the Russian language and culture, the *status quo* inherited from the Soviet era is an outcome of 'objective' historical developments and thus cannot be changed; Ukrainians were not suppressed or discriminated against by the Soviet system but voluntarily assimilated into Russian culture; they were never treated as 'others' but in fact actively participated in Russian and later Soviet empire-building. From this perspective, Russian language and culture have a legitimate place in post-Soviet Ukraine; they require protection in the same way as other minority cultures. The opponents question this interpretation of minority, since Russian culture has preserved its dominant position and they argue that both the Russian empire and the Soviet regime pursued a Russification policy and did in fact discriminate against and persecute Ukrainians when they dared to insist on their separate identity and culture. From this perspective, the post-Soviet *status quo* is not so much an outcome of historical developments in the Russian empire and the USSR but rather a result of Moscow's deliberate policy of social and political engineering, including mass repressions, resettlements and terror by hunger. The disposition of these two opposing camps has been described in detail by Riabchuk (2007) as pitting 'colonialism deniers' against those who identify with the Ukrainian 'Kulturation' (that is, a community defined by its shared language and culture). Riabchuk himself is a prominent representative of the second camp. Promoting the

discourse of Ukraine as a 'postcolonial' state in which Ukrainian culture still suffers from an inferior status, he criticised the 'colonial mindset' of Ukrainian elites and the 'creole nation building' project that perpetuates Russian cultural hegemony in post-Soviet Ukraine (Riabchuk 2011).³ As will be demonstrated below, the references to Ukraine's 'postcolonial syndrome' are important for understanding the arguments in favour of the restrictions on Russian mass culture.⁴

The hierarchy of Ukrainian and Russian cultures goes back to the Russian empire where Russian cultural and political hegemony, based on ideas of civilisational superiority and 'redemptive assimilation' (Shkandrij 2001, pp. 14–34), was established to legitimise territorial expansion. It re-emerged in the USSR in the 1930s when, despite the official policy of promoting 'national cultures', Russian regained its dominant position as the language of multinational communication and integration into modern urban society. The 'national cultures' of the Soviet republics were reduced to folklore, an ideologically correct socialist realism and the classical canon of the nineteenth century cleansed of all politically ambivalent elements. Embracing Russian language and culture was a precondition of higher education, a professional career and social mobility, while Ukrainian, the language of the rural population, was a marker of low social status. A genuine modernist Ukrainian culture was produced and consumed in the narrow circles of the Ukrainian intelligentsia from the 1960s to the 1980s, but it was often viewed with suspicion by the Soviet regime as an expression of political disloyalty and remained unavailable to the broader public (Riabchuk 2011, pp. 78–93).

This hierarchy of Ukrainian culture as parochial, archaic and rural relative to Russian culture as universal, modern and urban was inherited by the newly independent Ukraine. Moreover, the advance of market reforms and the retreat of the state had a detrimental impact on the cultural industry in Ukraine. As noted by Riabchuk, 'the enormous decline in state-sponsored cultural institutions has not been compensated for in any significant way by the development of a self-sufficient, market-oriented mass culture' (Riabchuk 2007, p. 165). The reason, he claims, is that *laissez faire* oligarchic capitalism in Ukraine speaks Russian. Russian as a global language and culture is backed by the economic, political and military resources of the Russian state. Moreover, Moscow deploys culture as an instrument of soft power in the post-Soviet space as well as in the West.

The market liberalisation of cultural production after the fall of the Soviet regime thus has not changed the hierarchy of Ukrainian and Russian cultures but instead cemented the

³See also Zabuzhko (1999, 2001).

⁴The reception of postcolonial theory in Eastern Europe and in Ukraine lies beyond the scope of this essay. Attempts to use it to denounce Russia's unreflected 'imperial mindset', such as Thompson (2000), were criticised as an example of orientalist discourse by Zarycki (2014). Meanwhile, the simple dichotomy of 'coloniser vs colonised' in the Russian case has been questioned by some authors; see Etkind's concept of 'internal colonization' (2011) and Morozov's notion of a 'subaltern empire' (2015). In Ukraine, postcolonial criticism has found its way into literary studies (see, for example, Chernetsky 2007; Hundorova 2013). In public debates, however, the discourse of the 'postcolonial' has been increasingly used to frame the asymmetry in Ukrainian–Russian relations and to explain Ukraine's troubled post-Soviet transition. It seems that the re-imperialisation of Russian politics has strengthened the tendency towards a nationalist instrumentalisation of postcolonial theory, what Uffelmann (2019) termed 'post-colonial nationalism'.

dominance of Russian books, films, television series and popular music on the Ukrainian market. Russian products profited from the weakness of Ukrainian mass culture, which was due, most of all, to the limited demand from the Ukrainian-speaking urban middle class. At the same time, many Ukrainian authors, popular singers and actors were switching to Russian to gain access to the much more lucrative Russian cultural market and to continue their careers in Russia.

It became obvious that culture could not be left to the market alone; state support of Ukrainian culture in the sense of an affirmative cultural policy would be necessary to change the situation in its favour. This understanding seemed to reach the ruling elite after the Orange Revolution, but the Ukrainian state was still lacking resources, a consistent policy and, most importantly, a strategic vision of cultural modernisation (Hrytsenko 2019). In sum, isolation from the European context, decayed Soviet-style cultural institutions and the lack of professional management impeded any reform (Botanova 2015).

Radical changes came only after the Euromaidan, which revolutionised cultural politics in Ukraine. At the same time, as a result of Russian aggression, the role of Russian culture and the legitimisation of its presence in Ukraine became an object of a new *Kulturkampf*. The idea that the presence of Russian cultural products on the Ukrainian market should be reduced by restrictive administrative and legislative measures—which had never been seriously discussed before—was now legitimised by security concerns.

Between (unfinished) cultural revolution and securitisation of culture

The Euromaidan liberated the creative energy of the protesters and inspired the artistic community in Ukraine. A number of cultural initiatives and art projects emerged on the Maidan, which offered itself as a venue for rock concerts, performances and even art exhibitions (Musiienko 2015). In a society galvanised by the protests, arts and culture ceased to be seen mainly as ‘heritage’ and became an instrument of critical investigation, a platform for political debates and dialogue, and a way of building horizontal networks and expressing solidarity.

Moreover, the Europeanisation agenda and the empowerment of civil society provided a strong impulse for reinvigorating and modernising Ukrainian culture (Pesenti 2020). In the winter months of 2014, cultural activists symbolically occupied the Ministry of Culture and turned it into a space for debate and for developing alternative cultural politics based on new principles of open access, transparency and public–private partnership (Botanova 2019). As in other areas, activists and young professionals with Western academic degrees entered state cultural institutions with the aim of modernising them from within (Botanova 2019). The long overdue law ‘On Civil Service’ (2015), which introduced open competition procedures in cultural management, allowed people with international reputation, contacts and competence to take leading positions in state and municipal cultural institutions and radically modernise them.⁵

⁵Zakon ukrainy No. 889-VIII, ‘Pro derzhavnu sluzhbu’, 10 December 2015, available at: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/889-19#Text>, accessed 23 December 2020.

Another revolutionary step was the launching of several new state institutions, such as the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation, designed to support cultural projects and initiatives based on principles of transparency and competitiveness, and the Ukrainian Book Institute, entrusted with the mission of supporting Ukrainian publishing and promoting Ukrainian literature at home and abroad.⁶ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs established the Ukrainian Institute, an instrument of cultural diplomacy along the lines of the Goethe Institut or the Institut Français. This institutional revolution was triggered by another outcome of the Maidan—the worldwide interest in Ukraine and its culture, seen by the Ukrainian cultural community as a chance for re-branding the country as an intrinsic part of Europe. The post-Maidan political elites discovered culture as an instrument of soft power that could be used against Moscow’s policy of denying Ukrainians a separate identity. The opening to and integration into the European and global cultural context, the decentralisation and regionalisation of cultural life, and the new mode of cooperation between the state and the public were undisputable achievements of the cultural reforms after the Maidan. The combination of state support and a favourable market situation resulted in a significant production increase in such areas as publishing and film.

An upsurge in patriotic feelings raised the popular demand for Ukrainian books, music and films and widespread interest in various aspects of Ukrainian history and culture, understood in political rather than narrow ethnic terms. The rise of civic nationalism went hand-in-hand with the rediscovery of other cultures in Ukraine, most notably, Crimean Tatars (Charron 2019). Pointing to the role of Russian speakers and representatives of other ethnic groups during the Euromaidan, some authors underlined ‘the highly hybrid nature of the national community produced by the Euromaidan revolution’ (Gerasimov 2014, p. 43). Some cultural figures, such as the popular Ukrainian novelist Andrei Kurkov, who writes in Russian, came up with the idea that ‘Ukraine should take ownership of its Russian-language culture, which is distinct from the cultural world of the Russian Federation’, and even to create an institute to study ‘Ukrainian Russian’ (Montague 2018).

The cultural revolution inspired by the Euromaidan was, however, only one side of the coin. In response to Russian aggression in spring 2014 the government banned Russian television channels and social networks, limited the import of Russian books and the broadcasting of Russian films, raised the Ukrainian language quota on television and radio, and blacklisted many Russian actors and musicians for supporting Putin’s politics and visiting occupied Crimea. These measures were justified by a new understanding of Russian culture as a weapon of hybrid aggression and a threat to national security. This new perception of security resulted from the conviction that a strong identity was vital for a state to survive in the age of information warfare and presumed a tight connection between national identity and society’s resilience to external threats (Mälksoo 2015). Experts had warned of soft security threats from Russia long before the annexation of Crimea. For example, according to Bogomolov and Lytvynenko ‘an enormous focus on symbolic resources, a deep engagement in local identity politics, and promoting one

⁶For more information visit the websites of the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation (<https://ucf.in.ua>) and the Ukrainian Book Institute (<https://book-institute.org.ua>).

national discourse and combating another, have become endemic to Russian policy in Ukraine' (Bogomolov & Lytvynenko 2012, p. 15). The narrative of a 'single people', the hierarchy of Ukrainian culture as parochial and Russian as universal, and the obsessive association of Ukrainian nationalism with 'German fascism' were disseminated in Ukraine through multiple channels, including the Russian Orthodox Church, mass media, business networks and non-governmental organisations (Bogomolov & Lytvynenko 2012). A major channel was Russian mass culture, which dominated the Ukrainian market, even more so as most representatives of the cultural *milieu* in Russia shared stereotypes about Ukraine with the Russian political elites (Arkhangelsky 2016; Kuzio 2019). Moreover, Soviet mass culture (first of all films and pop music), with its system of cultural references recognisable in both countries, is still popular among the older generation of Ukrainians, nurturing nostalgia for a Soviet life 'without nationalisms'.

Since spring 2014 the securitisation of culture, historical memory and identity issues has become the new mainstream in Ukraine in response to Russia's 'hybrid aggression', which included support for radical anti-Ukrainian forces, the instigation of internal conflict, the use of fake news and conspiracy theories, and the instrumentalisation of historical narratives and symbols in a pro-Russian mobilisation. Mass media became an instrument of propaganda and Russian mass culture came to be seen as a weapon in a hybrid war.

Reacting to these new threats, the Ukrainian government took measures limiting pluralism in the public space and curtailing freedom of media and freedom of expression thus making itself vulnerable to Western criticism (Way 2019). The Kremlin joined and amplified this criticism, appealing to the Western liberal values that it was ostentatiously ignoring at home. This strategy, aimed at compromising Ukrainian democracy in the eyes of its partners, became another weapon in the hybrid war with Ukraine. At the same time, Moscow denied its role in what it considered Ukraine's internal civil conflict and presented itself as a peacekeeper (Kuzio 2019). Facing this non-conventional aggression, the Ukrainian government needed to legitimise its defensive actions in the field of culture, which were often criticised at home and abroad as censorship and attack on the freedom of speech. Thus, in January 2015, the Ukrainian parliament declared Russia an 'aggressor state', a formula used in the new legislation aimed at restricting the access of Russian cultural products to the Ukrainian market.⁷

However, the definition of Russia as an 'aggressor state' itself became a source and a manifestation of political polarisation in Ukraine. Opposed by the Opposition Bloc (*Opozytsiynyi blok*) and the Communist Party, it did not find sufficient support in the east and south. According to a sociological survey conducted in December 2018, 63% of Ukrainians agreed with the statement 'Russia is an aggressor' while 24% disagreed. In Kharkiv *Oblast*, only 35% supported this statement, while 48% disagreed. In the Odesa *Oblast* 28% of respondents supported the statement and 47% disagreed, while in the Ukraine-controlled territories of Donetsk and Luhansk *oblasti* the proportions were 32%/51% and 29%/55% respectively (Obukh 2018). Thus, the alternative interpretations of the

⁷VR vyznala Rosiiu derzhavoiu-agresorom', *Ukrainska Pravda*, 27 January 2015, available at: <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2015/01/27/7056514/>, accessed 23 December 2020.

role of Russia in the conflict polarised Ukraine and nurtured the *Kulturkampf* against Russian cultural dominance.

Weaponising culture

The *Kulturkampf* against Russian mass culture in Ukraine was legitimised by a discourse on informational and cultural security promoted by the elites. It would not be successful, however, if it did not resonate with the new culture war in Ukrainian society. This culture war emerged from the dramatic tension between the close affiliation to Russian culture (for most Ukrainians, Russian culture could hardly be considered ‘alien’) and the mass patriotic mobilisation caused by Russian aggression. Moreover, because Ukraine, as discussed above, has been part of Russia’s own identity, public intellectuals and cultural icons in Russia could not stay neutral in this conflict. Some of them—such as rock singers Andrey Makarevich and Yuriy Shevchuk, writers Boris Akunin and Lyudmila Ulitskaya, and film actress Leah Akhedzhakova—supported Ukraine and openly criticised Putin’s politics; in return, they were stigmatised in Russia as a ‘fifth column’.⁸ At the same time, a large number of prominent Russian cultural figures signed an open letter approving the annexation of Crimea and Putin’s politics in Ukraine in general.⁹ Soviet/Russian pop singer Josif Kobzon, who was especially celebrated in his hometown Donetsk, and the Russian writer Zakhar Prilepin, who joined the pro-Russian paramilitary in Donbas, became known for their pro-Putin loyalism and anti-Ukrainian position.¹⁰ The ‘rally round the flag’ effect of the annexation of Crimea on the Russian cultural elite came as an unpleasant surprise in Ukraine, an important market for the Russian cultural industry. Many Russian actors, filmmakers, musicians have been no less popular in Ukraine than in their home country; many of them were icons of Soviet mass culture common to the older generation of both countries. Unsurprisingly, there was an emotional reaction in Ukrainian society to the pro-Putin stand taken by certain Russian cultural figures. This deep conflict between affiliation with Russian culture and political loyalty to the Ukrainian state, reinforced by Russia’s aggression, goes some way to explain the intensity of the culture war around the presence of Russian mass culture in Ukraine. This war polarised society and, as will be discussed below, took various forms, from legislative initiatives to open letters, grassroots actions, boycotts, protests, public shaming campaigns on social media and attempts to exercise censorship by using moral pressure as well as physical force: organisers of cultural events were sometimes threatened or even attacked by radical nationalists and far-right groups. Beyond the perennial issue of censorship in times of war, the conflict revealed not only different understandings of culture and its political role and public responsibility, but also alternative sets of values: patriotism, cultural sovereignty, the right to defend oneself

⁸‘V Moskve na Dome Knigi vyvesili plakat o “pyatoi kolonne”’, *Radio Svoboda*, 6 May 2014, available at: <https://www.svoboda.org/a/25374646.html>, accessed 23 December 2020.

⁹‘Deyateli kul’tury podderzhali pozitsiyu prezidenta po Ukraine i Krymu’, *Izvestiya*, 11 March 2014, available at: <https://iz.ru/news/567299>, accessed 23 December 2020.

¹⁰‘Russian Nationalist Writer Creates Battalion To “Liberate” Ukraine’, *The Moscow Times*, 13 February 2017, available at: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/02/13/russian-nationalist-writer-creates-white-horse-battalion-to-liberate-ukraine-a57129>, accessed 23 December 2020.

as opposed to freedom of expression, *laissez faire* liberalism and an often deeply rooted belief in the universality of Russian culture. Moreover, this divide resonated with two different visions of Ukraine—a ‘Ukrainian world’ in the making set against Ukraine as an integral part of the *Russkii Mir* and, as mentioned above, with perceptions of the current conflict (Russian aggression or civil war).

As will be shown below, the adherents of measures aimed at reducing the Russian cultural presence in Ukraine ranged from ethnic nationalists and radicals, who saw the chance to establish a Ukrainian cultural monopoly, to moderate statist concerned with informational security, and even some liberals who advocated a selective approach, rational criteria and only temporary restrictions. Attitudes to the Russian language and Russian-speaking culture in Ukraine also differed from negative (‘language of the enemy’) to neutral and even affirmative; as mentioned above, the writer Andrei Kurkov suggested appropriating Russian as one of Ukraine’s domestic languages in order to undermine Russia’s monopolist claim on it.

Arguments in favour of reducing the Russian cultural presence in Ukraine can be categorised into three groups. The first argument was rather moral and emotional and often came from grassroots activists: consuming Russian cultural products in times of Russian aggression against Ukraine was unpatriotic and immoral. It resonated with a number of local initiatives to boycott Russian goods and buy Ukrainian products instead. For example, activists from the civic movement *Vidsich* (Repulse) launched an information campaign on social media and staged flash mobs calling for the boycott of goods produced in Russia (Hryshko 2014). The moral argument—the call for solidarity and support for the Ukrainian state—was also rationalised from an economic perspective: activists argued that buying Russian products was to help Russia finance the war in Ukraine. For example, according to Riabchuk, it is ‘quite disputable whether we should really define the ban as censorship or merely a trade embargo against an enemy state’ (Riabchuk 2017, p. 120). Since Ukrainians could still access Russian cultural products *via* the internet, censorship, he argues, was not at issue here, only a matter of ‘preventing the profits from going back to Russia’.

Another set of arguments referred to the securitisation of culture as justification for restrictions. As noted above, some narratives produced by the Russian cultural industry came to be seen as an instrument of ‘hybrid aggression’ undermining Ukraine’s national identity, questioning the legitimacy of its independence and state borders and weakening the resilience of Ukrainian society. Explicit in this respect was Volodymyr Horbulin, the Head of the National Institute of Strategic Studies from 2014 to 2018: ‘Russian cultural politics towards Ukraine was an integral part of the general strategy aimed at the termination of Ukrainian statehood. Not only mass media but culture and the entertainment industry have been used in Russian propaganda, namely cinema, show business, seemingly apolitical “cultural” TV, radio programs and the internet’ (Horbulin 2016).

Finally, one more argument in favour of restrictions on the import of Russian cultural products referred to the potentially positive effects on the Ukrainian film and television industry, entertainment business and publishing. In a *de facto* bilingual country, cheaper Russian books with much larger print runs would never give Ukrainian books a chance, unless the situation in the market became fairer. As for television shows, restrictive measures would help to break Russia’s monopoly, diversify the content and introduce Ukrainian

consumers to cultural products of other countries—preferably European, as Ukraine is striving for EU membership.¹¹

The arguments of opponents and critics of the restrictions varied from ideological and emotional—accusing the Ukrainian government of primitive nationalism—to normative and pragmatic, referencing freedom of speech and the unrestricted movement of ideas and cultural goods as the norm in a globalised world, the inefficiency of administrative restrictions in the era of the internet, and the legitimate interests of Russian-speaking consumers.¹² The opponents of restrictions were not a homogeneous group: they ranged from traditional Russophiles (the Opposition Bloc and the Communist Party, some pro-Russian media and journalists) to liberals and leftists who argued that Ukraine’s actions in this respect seemed queasily similar to the Kremlin’s repressive politics, and who protested against attempts by the far-right and nationalist activists to impose censorship by violent means. The latter, however, found themselves in a difficult position; they were often labelled traitors and agents of the Kremlin for not complying with the new patriotic consensus (Sokurenko 2019).

Limiting the import of Russian books

Russian books in Ukraine became a hot political issue in summer 2014, when the organisers of Ukraine’s oldest and most prestigious bookfair, Book Forum Lviv, together with the civic initiative Economic Boycott Movement, announced that Russian publishers were not welcome in Lviv because of continuing Russian aggression against Ukraine. In July 2014, as the situation at the frontline in Donbas deteriorated, the Lviv city council—citing the right of Ukrainian consumers to information—introduced the obligatory labelling of all products imported from Russia.¹³ Referring to this resolution, Otar Dovzhenko, a well-known Ukrainian blogger and journalist, called for the same rule to be applied to books printed in Russia and, moreover, for a boycott of Russian publishers as long as the war against Ukraine continued. Dovzhenko insisted that this was a rational and economic measure: a book is a commodity like any other and buying commodities produced in Russia meant, in his words, funding the murder of Ukrainians and the occupation of the Ukrainian lands (Kipiani 2014). Some well-known Ukrainian writers supported the boycott of Russian books: Oksana Zabuzhko maintained that ‘publishing houses in today’s Russia are institutions of propaganda and thus a “hidden army” of the information war, the same way it was under the USSR’.¹⁴ Others, such as the organiser of Kyiv’s

¹¹‘Rosiiski serialy, gudbai?’, *DW*, 23 May 2016, available at: <https://p.dw.com/p/1IsrK>, accessed 23 December 2020.

¹²See, for example, the discussion ‘Cultural Prohibitions: Protection of the State or Basis for Future Abuses?’, organised by PEN Ukraine, 31 December 2019, available at: <https://pen.org.ua/publications/kulturni-zaborony-zahyst-derzhavy-chy-fundament-dlya-majbutnih-zlovzhyvan/>, accessed 23 December 2020. See also Rechytskyi (2019) and Yakubenko (2019).

¹³‘Lvivska miska rada pryiniiala rishennia pro dodatkove markuvannia rosiiskikh tovariv’, *UNIAN*, 10 July 2014, available at: <https://www.unian.ua/society/938172-lvivska-miska-rada-priyniiala-rishennya-pro-dodatkove-markuvannya-rosiiskikh-tovariv.html>, accessed 23 December 2020.

¹⁴‘Lvivskiy Forum: “nebazhani” rosiiski vydavtsi’, *BBC*, 23 July 2014, available at: https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/entertainment/2014/07/140722_book_forum_zsh, accessed 23 December 2020.

international book fair, the Kyiv Book Arsenal, Olha Zhuk, criticised the boycott and argued for a more selective approach such as banning only books with anti-Ukrainian content. As a result of the campaign, Russian publishers did not take part in the book fair. While some Russian authors boycotted it, others, such as pro-Ukrainian writer Lyudmila Ulitskaya, came to Lviv and were warmly welcomed by the local public (Kipiani 2014).

One year later, in July 2015, the Ukrainian state joined the ‘book war’: the State Committee on TV and Radio Broadcasting asked the State Fiscal Service to include 38 Russian books with anti-Ukrainian content in the official ‘List of goods banned from import into the customs territory of Ukraine’. The decision was justified by ‘the necessity to prevent the Russian Federation’s use of information warfare and disinformation methods against Ukrainian citizens, dissemination of the ideology of hatred, fascism, xenophobia and separatism’.¹⁵ On the banned list, among others, were books by Russian nationalists Alexander Dugin, Eduard Limonov and Sergei Glazyev. While the decision was welcomed in Ukraine as a long overdue measure, some human rights activists warned that this might be the first step towards censorship. To quote the representative of Amnesty International’s Kyiv office, Bohdan Ovcharuk, ‘it’s one thing to restrict access to texts advocating violence, but in general banning books because their authors have views deemed unacceptable to politicians in either Kiev or Moscow is deeply dangerous. Both sides need to de-escalate this “culture war” as soon as possible’.¹⁶

In December 2016, the Ukrainian parliament adopted the law ‘On amendments to some legal acts of Ukraine concerning the restriction of access of foreign printed products with anti-Ukrainian content to the Ukrainian market’.¹⁷ The law, which came into force on 1 January 2017, introduced an official procedure for obtaining permission to import books from Russia and the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine. Permits were to be granted by the State Committee on TV and Radio Broadcasting after evaluation of the content by an ‘Expert Council’ created especially for this purpose. The distribution of Russian books without appropriate permission thus became an offence under civil law punishable by fines. Ordinary citizens, however, had the right to bring up to ten Russian books each to Ukraine without special permission. Additionally, the law banned the ‘popularisation and propaganda of an aggressor state’ (namely, Russia) in print media.

It took some months before the Expert Council was created and a list of criteria developed. Permission was denied to books and printed materials justifying ‘the occupation of the Ukrainian territory’, ‘acts of aggression and war’, ‘promoting Russian imperial geopolitical doctrines’ and ‘propagating communist and Nazi totalitarian regimes’, as well as books whose authors were on the list of persons posing a threat to the national security of Ukraine.¹⁸ It was only in summer

¹⁵‘Pershyi zastupnyk holovy Derzhkomtelradio Bohdan Chervak: Antyukrainskym vydanniam ne mistse v Ukraini’, State Committee on TV and Radio Broadcasting, 9 July 2015, available at: http://comin.kmu.gov.ua/control/uk/publish/article?art_id=121879&cat_id=117238, accessed 23 December 2020.

¹⁶‘Ukraine Bans 38 Russian “Hate” Books amid Culture War’, *BBC*, 11 August 2015, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33863697>, accessed 23 December 2020.

¹⁷Zakon ukrainy No. 1780-VIII, ‘Pro vnesennia zmin do deiakykh zakoniv Ukrainy shchodo obmezhenia dostupu na ukrainskyi rynok inozemnoi drukovanoi produktsii antyukrainskoho zmistu’, 8 December 2016, available at: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1780-19#Text>, accessed 23 December 2020.

¹⁸State Committee on TV and Radio Broadcasting, Order no. 47, 3 March 2017, available at: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/z0586-17#Text>, accessed 23 December 2020.

2017 that the first Russian books which were granted permission under the new law arrived in Ukrainian bookstores. Due to the new procedure, the number of Russian books imported to Ukraine dropped dramatically from 2017 (Botanova 2019). Further law drafts submitted to the parliament suggested additional taxes and custom duties on Russian books and even a total ban on import, but they were not adopted (Zakusylo 2017).

Among the consequences of the new law was a rise in pirate publishing and contraband, described by Ukrainian curator and cultural critic Botanova (2019) as a ‘black market’ for Russian books in Ukraine, as well as a shortage of specialised literature, such as medicine and business administration, which was traditionally imported from Russia. Overall, the drop in the number of Russian books benefited Ukrainian publishers. According to Botanova (2019), the restrictions provided ‘a powerful impetus for the development of the Ukrainian-language book market, in particular regarding translations and humanities literature, and allowed new small publishers to emerge’. By 2018, the proactive state policy in support of Ukrainian publishers, translators and writers was having a visible effect: surveys demonstrated a shift towards Ukrainian books in reading preferences, especially among the younger generation.¹⁹

Restrictions on Russian films and television products

The preponderance of Russian products on Ukrainian television, the dominance of ‘Russian production standards in the Ukrainian entertainment industry’, and the economic dependence of Ukrainian pop singers and musicians on the Russian market has long been discussed in Ukraine, albeit in the narrow circles of experts and cultural critics.²⁰ The Russian aggression and the growing awareness of the role of Russian media and media products in fuelling the conflict helped to legitimise the first restrictive measures directed at films, entertainment programmes and television series. The first boycott actions started in spring 2014 as part of broader political consumerism protests. They were fuelled by the abovementioned open letter in support of Putin’s Ukraine politics signed by many prominent Russian actors and filmmakers. In April 2014, some cinemas in Kyiv, Lviv and Odesa announced that they would temporarily refrain from showing Russian films.²¹ In autumn 2014, after the defeat of the Ukrainian army near Ilovaisk as a result of Russia’s direct military intervention, the civic campaign ‘Boycott Russian Films’, initiated by *Vidsich* activists, was launched. They staged flash mobs, street theatre performances and protest actions in front of governmental offices and cinemas screening Russian films. The activists also started monitoring the content of Ukrainian television channels and claimed that some of them did not comply with the Ukrainian legislation on quotas for national content.²² The campaign triggered a public

¹⁹Ukrainian Reading and Publishing Data 2018, available at: <http://data.chytomo.com/chytannya-v-ukrayini/>, accessed 23 December 2020.

²⁰See, for example, the interview of Hutyk (2014) with the Ukrainian producer Volodymyr Bebeszko.

²¹‘Nekotorye kinoteatry Kiieva, L’vova i Odessy ob“yavili boikot rossiiskoi kinoproduksii’, *Censor.NET*, 11 April 2014, available at: https://censor.net.ua/news/280504/nekotorye_kinoteatry_kieva_lvova_i_odessy_obyavili_boykot_rossiyskoyi_kinoproduksii, accessed 23 December 2020.

²²‘Rosiiske kino vse shche dominuie na ukrainskomu teleprostori’, *Espresso*, 11 September 2014, available at: http://espreso.tv/news/2014/09/09/rosiyske_kino_vse_sche_dominuye_na_ukrayinskomu_teleprostori, accessed 23 December 2020.

debate on the appropriateness of broadcasting Russian films and television series—especially those glorifying the Russian military—during a war waged by the Kremlin against Ukraine. In October 2014, several commanders of volunteer battalions—at that time popular media figures—appealed to President Petro Poroshenko in an open letter and demanded a stop to the broadcasting of Russian propaganda under the cover of media products such as television series, films or entertainment programmes.²³ The same month, the Ukrainian State Film Agency (*Derzhkino*), under the new leadership of filmmaker and *Svoboda* member Pylyp Illienko, banned a number of Russian films on the grounds that they glorified the Russian security services and special forces. Later *Derzhkino* added more films and series to the banned list, notably those starring Russian actors, such as Mikhail Porechenkov and Ivan Okhlobystin, who publicly supported the pro-Russian separatist republics in Donbas. In the remaining months of 2014, *Derzhkino* banned 55 Russian films and television series.²⁴

At the same time, as in the case of Russian books, attempts were made to introduce the respective change in Ukrainian legislation. In October 2014, the first draft law seeking to legalise restrictions on Russian films and television products was submitted to the parliament. The draft envisaged a ban on audio-visual products which depicted the armed forces and special services of the Russian Federation and/or USSR and/or the Russian empire in a positive way, except for Soviet audio-visual products created before August 1991.²⁵ The draft, however, did not receive sufficient support in parliament. The next, more successful attempt was made by the new parliament, formed as a result of snap parliamentary elections in October 2014. The new draft was submitted in December 2014 and followed by a number of alternative drafts, proposals and heated debates. Finally, the law ‘On amendments to some legal acts of Ukraine concerning the protection of the information television and radio space of Ukraine’²⁶ was adopted on 5 February 2015. The new law prohibited the distribution and screening of audio-visual products that contained propaganda of an ‘aggressor state’, created a positive image of Soviet and Russian security services, and justified the occupation of Ukrainian territory. This concerned Russian films and television series produced after 1 August 1991, as well as non-Russian films.²⁷ The

²³ ‘*Kombaty prosiat presydenyta zaboronyty na ukrainskomy TB rosiiski serialy, shcho idealizuiut voroha*’, *Radio Svoboda*, 18 October 2014, available at: <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/26643566.html>, accessed 23 December 2020.

²⁴ ‘*Za chotyry roky Derzhkino zaboronylo do pokazu 620 filmiv ta serialiv*’, *Dostup do pravdy*, 7 September 2018, available at: <https://dostup.pravda.com.ua/news/publications/za-chotyry-roky-derzhkino-zaboronylo-do-pokazu-620-filmiv-ta-serialiv>, accessed 23 December 2020.

²⁵ Law draft No. 5036, ‘On the amendments to the Law of Ukraine “On TV and Radio Broadcasting” Regarding Protection of State Interests’, 5 September 2014, available at: http://w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb2/webproc4_1?pf3511=52126, accessed 23 December 2020.

²⁶ Zakon ukrainy No. 159-VIII, ‘Pro vnesennia zmin do deiakykh zakoniv Ukrainy shchdo zakhystu informatsiinoho teleradioprostoru Ukrainy’, 5 February 2015, available at: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/159-19#Text>, accessed 23 December 2020.

²⁷ In November 2016 *Derzhkino* banned the broadcasting of the German television series *Tschiller: Off Duty* in which one of the main protagonists, an FSB agent, is presented in a positive way. See, ‘Ukraina zaboronyla nimetskyi film z dobrozhylyvym ahentom FSB’, *5.ua*, 12 November 2016, available at: <https://www.5.ua/kultura/ukraina-zaboronyla-nimetskyi-film-z-dobrozhylyvym-ahentom-fsb-130913.html>, accessed 23 December 2020.

prohibition also applied to films and television shows made with the participation of persons listed by the Ministry of Culture ‘as presenting a threat to national security’ (see the next section). Finally, the law prohibited television broadcasting of all films, regardless of their content, produced by an ‘aggressor state’—*de facto* all films produced in Russia after 1 January 2014. This last restriction was evidently meant not as a security measure but rather as an economic sanction against Russia.

The day after the law was adopted by parliament, two MPs from the Opposition Bloc submitted a draft resolution to cancel it, in this way seeking to prevent or at least postpone its enactment. Despite these efforts, and under pressure from activists, the law came into force. Between August 2014 and October 2018, around 780 Russian films and series were banned, according to information provided by *Derzhkino*.²⁸ Public opinion on the new legislation was divided: according to a poll conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in March 2019, 59.6% agreed that the prohibition of performances by particular Russian artists and Russian films in Ukraine was wrong and led to a restriction of citizens’ rights, while 27.7% supported this measure.²⁹

The new legislation did not end the culture war: the *Vidsich* activists behind the boycott campaign monitored Ukrainian television channels, often pressuring state bodies to ban further programmes and films. The opponents of the new legislation did not give up either. In July 2018, 47 MPs from the Opposition Bloc and independents appealed to the Constitutional Court, requesting confirmation of the new legislation’s constitutionality. This provoked a debate among legal and media experts on the justification of restrictions and their compatibility with liberal values. Some experts argued that the prohibition of films based on a list of persons who posed a threat to national security contradicted the principle of individual responsibility and had a good chance of being ruled unconstitutional (Rechytyskyi 2019; Yakubenko 2019).

At the same time, the revival of the Ukrainian film industry and the growing interest of the Ukrainian public in domestically produced films seemed to justify the restrictions on Russian products in the eyes of the supporters of the new legislation.³⁰ Responding to critical voices from the Ukrainian cultural industry that restrictions on Russian films alone could not solve the problems of the Ukrainian film industry and make Ukrainian products competitive, in March 2017 the parliament adopted the law ‘On the state support of cinematography in Ukraine’.³¹ According to this law, state funding was increased to support the production, distribution and promotion of Ukrainian films. For the first time since independence, the film industry experienced an upsurge. Ukrainian films were not

²⁸ ‘Zaiava Derzhavnoho ahentstva Ukrainy z pytan kino shchodo sytuatsii, iaka sklalasia navkolo serialu “Koloobih”’, Ukrainian State Film Agency, 5 October 2018, available at: http://dergkino.gov.ua/ua/news/show/1690/zayava_derzhavnogo_ahentstva_ukrayini_z_pitan_kino_shchodo_situatsiyi_yaka_sklalasya_navkolo_serialu_koloob.html, accessed 23 December 2020.

²⁹ ‘Attitude of the Ukrainians to the Policy of Regulation of Informational Sphere: March 2019’, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 5 March 2019, available at: <http://kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=833&page=1>, accessed 23 December 2020.

³⁰ For the official statistics on the Ukrainian film industry from 2014 to 2018 see: ‘Zvit za rezultatamy diialnosti Derzhavnoho ahentstva Ukrainy z pytan kino u 2018 rotsi’, Ukrainian State Film Agency, available at: http://dergkino.gov.ua/media/text/zvit_presentation_2018.pdf, accessed 23 December 2020.

³¹ Zakon ukrainy No. 1977-VIII, ‘Pro derzhavnu pidtrymku kinematohrafii v Ukraini’, 23 March 2017, available at: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1977-19#Text>, accessed 23 December 2020.

only increasingly popular at home but also winning awards at international film festivals.³² The revival of the film industry came at a certain price, as state funding was conditioned by a number of criteria that required films to be sufficiently ‘patriotic’ to receive state support. For example, one of the *Derzhkino*’s requirements was that Ukrainian or Crimean Tatar language accounted for 90% of the total dialogue thus disqualifying prospective Russian-language films (Miller 2018). In this way, the tension between ‘patriotic values’ and freedom of art in the discussions about the new Ukrainian cinema became another feature of the culture war.

Restrictions on Russian artists touring in Ukraine

The last example of *Kulturkampf* in Ukraine in response to the Russian aggression concerns the restrictions on Russian artists touring in Ukraine. These measures affected actors, filmmakers, pop singers and musicians who supported the annexation of Crimea or made anti-Ukrainian statements. Similar to the prohibition of Russian films and television series discussed above, the restrictions on Russian artists were introduced under pressure from Ukrainian civic activists during the patriotic mobilisation of 2014–2015. Both activists and public officials supporting these measures referred to the need to debunk Russian propaganda and protect the national information space, to ensure ‘cultural security’ and to impose economic sanctions on Russian cultural figures who did not respect Ukraine’s territorial integrity but still wanted to make money in Ukraine.

In spring 2014, the Ukrainian authorities sought to prevent the infiltration of Russian special forces and volunteers in the east and south and introduced temporary restrictions on entrance to Ukraine for all male Russian citizens aged between 16 and 60. The law ‘On sanctions’,³³ adopted in August 2014, introduced various forms of economic and administrative sanctions as a new instrument against foreign states and their citizens who threatened the national security, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, and who supported terrorism and the occupation of Ukrainian territory. The list of sanctions included the ‘suspension of cultural exchange, academic cooperation, educational and sport contacts, entertainment programmes’ as well as a ban on individuals entering the territory of Ukraine. Finally, the law ‘On amendments to some legal acts of Ukraine concerning the protection of the information television and radio space of Ukraine’, adopted on 5 February 2015, as mentioned above, envisaged the creation of an official list of persons posing a threat to national security. According to the law, the list was to be composed by the Ministry of Culture based on information from the Council of National Security and Defence, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) and the National Council on TV and Radio Broadcasting. Persons listed as ‘posing a threat to national security’ were not only denied certificates for screening and broadcasting their works but also banned from entry into Ukraine.

³²For example, *My Thoughts are Silent* by Antonio Lukich, *Homeward* by Nariman Aliev and *Atlantis* by Valentyn Vasanovych received numerous international nominations and awards. See Geoffrey Macnab, ‘Why Film Production is Thriving in Ukraine’, *screendaily.com*, 1 October 2020, available at: <https://www.screendaily.com/features/why-film-production-is-thriving-in-ukraine/5153677.article>, accessed 1 June 2021.

³³Zakon ukraïny No. 1644-VII, ‘Pro sanktsii’, 14 August 2014, available at: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1644-18#Text>, accessed 23 December 2020.

The first step, again, was made under pressure from grassroots activists. In July 2015, representatives of the *Vidsich* boycott movement submitted to the Ministry of Culture a list of more than 500 Russian artists who, in their eyes, deserved to be banned from entry. The Ministry of Culture sent a significantly shortened list to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the SBU; finally, the first official list with 14 names was published in August 2015. The list grew over time as new names were added.³⁴ Apart from this Ministry of Culture ‘blacklist’, the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine has the authority to deny entry to foreign citizens who fail to justify the aim of their visit to Ukraine. If there is evidence that a person has visited occupied Crimea without the permission of the Ukrainian authorities, they can be banned from entering Ukraine for three years.³⁵ Therefore, the number of Russian artists banned is *de facto* higher than the official ‘blacklist’, which at the time of writing in December 2020 included around 150 persons. Around two-thirds of them are actors, filmmakers, musicians and singers; the remainder includes writers, stand-up comedians, bloggers, journalists and academics.³⁶

In addition to these restrictive measures, in October 2017 the Ukrainian parliament adopted amendments to the legislation regulating the organisation of concerts and touring events in Ukraine when citizens of an ‘aggressor state’ were involved.³⁷ According to the amendments, any propaganda of separatism, communist or Nazi regimes and their symbols, the justification of an aggressor state’s actions and the occupation of Ukrainian territory was deemed unlawful. Any tour that included an individual from the Ministry of Culture’s ‘blacklist’ was prohibited; every organiser of a tour involving Russian citizens had to obtain permission from the SBU.

As mentioned above, Ukraine used to be a lucrative market and a favourite touring destination for Russian artists. With the restrictions on entering Ukrainian territory, they faced a choice between loyalty to the Kremlin (performing in Crimea had become an important demonstration of this loyalty) and losing their income in Ukraine. But apart from being an economic sanction, the ban on the entry into Ukrainian territory was an act of symbolic punishment; denying entry at the border (such as at Boryspil airport upon arrival) could be seen as an act of personal humiliation. In many cases, such bans had a significant public resonance both in Russia and Ukraine, thus adding fuel to the ongoing culture war. For example, in March 2017, the Ukrainian authorities barred the Russian representative Julia Samoilova, who has reduced mobility, from participating in the

³⁴In June 2020, the list published on the website of the Ministry of Culture consisted of 155 names, most of them Russian citizens; available at: <https://mkip.gov.ua/content/perelik-osib-yaki-stvoryuyut-zagrozu-nacbezpeci.html>, accessed 23 December 2020.

³⁵Nakaz Ministerstva Vnutrishnikh Sprav Ukrainy N 520 ‘Pro zatverdzhennia Zmin do Instruksii pro poriadok pryniattia orhanamy okhorony derzhavnoho kordonu Derzhavnoi Prykordonnii Sluzhby Ukrainy rishen pro zaborony vizdu v Ukrainu inozemtsiam ta osobam bez hromodianstva’, 6 May 2015, available at: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/z0558-15#n15>, accessed 23 December 2020.

³⁶The list also includes some third-country nationals who support Putin’s politics towards Ukraine such as Gérard Depardieu and Emir Kusturica.

³⁷Zakon Ukrainy No. 2165-VIII, ‘Pro vnesennia zmin do Zakonu Ukrainy “Pro hasrolni zakhody v Ukraini” shchodo osoblyvostei orhanizatsii ta provedennia hasrolnykh zakhodiv za uchastiu hromadian derzhavy-ahresora’, 5 October 2017, available at: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2165-19#Text>, accessed 23 December 2020.

Eurovision Song Contest in Kyiv due to her earlier visit to occupied Crimea. This decision caused outrage in the Russian media.³⁸

At the same time, as the conflict with Russia was unfolding, public opinion in Ukraine turned against Ukrainian singers and musicians touring in Russia, who were often subject to public shaming in the media and social networks for prioritising their financial interests over patriotic values. Here, as in the case of the Ukrainian film industry discussed above, patriotism became an important criterion of artistic success.³⁹ Several proposals for a direct ban or economic sanctions for touring in Russia were submitted to parliament in 2017–2018. None of them was adopted, but they initiated a heated discussion as to whether the ‘unpatriotic behaviour’ of Ukrainian artists was a question of criminal and civil law, or just of moral responsibility (Torop 2018).

Conclusion

Restrictions on Russian mass culture in post-Maidan Ukraine cannot be reduced to either wartime censorship politics or to the nationalist populism of the new political elites. Rather, these measures should be understood as a form of *Kulturkampf*, a policy aimed at limiting the hegemony of the Russian culture, and a ‘culture war’, polarising Ukrainian society into supporters and critics of this policy. From the perspective of the mainstream understanding of ‘culture wars’, which goes back to James Hunter and is focused on the religious/secular divide, our case might appear rather marginal. However, it is relevant in the post-Soviet context, where, since the disintegration of the USSR, ‘native’ culture wars have been fought around alternative visions of nation and national identity, conflicting narratives and symbols of the past, and different approaches to language and culture policy. In Ukraine, where politics has been dominated by business interests and traditional political ideologies have remained embryonic, post-Soviet political history can be viewed as a palimpsest of such culture wars. They have been dominated by two major overlapping issues—dealing with the Soviet past and the ‘civilisational choice’ between Europe and Russia. My argument here is that the definition of the ‘culture that Ukraine needs’ has been at the core of these wars.

The idea that every nation should have a full-fledged and clearly bounded ‘national culture’ might seem obsolete in the era of globalisation. In the post-Soviet context, however, this vision of culture, which in fact goes back to Soviet nationality politics, inspired the cultural intelligentsia and the ‘national democrats’ in their fight with the ‘postcolonial syndrome’ resulting from the hegemonic status of Russian culture in Ukraine. Initially not a priority for the neoliberal state, culture was indeed left to the free market and ‘private patronage’ (and thus the taste) of the new rich, while some Soviet-era cultural institutions were minimally funded to keep them afloat. The Orange Revolution in 2004 brought the ‘national democrats’ to power and opened a window of opportunity

³⁸‘Eurovision 2017: Ukraine Bars Russian Singer Samoilova from Contest’, *BBC*, 22 March 2017, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39354775>, accessed 23 December 2020.


³⁹One example was the official selection of the Ukrainian singer Maruv to represent Ukraine at the 2019 Eurovision song contest in Tel Aviv. As she refused to cancel her concerts in Russia, the contract was not signed, and Ukraine was left without a representative.

for a new cultural policy. However, the reduction of Ukrainian culture to folklore, its understanding as traditional and monoethnic, hardly changed.

It was the Euromaidan, ten years later, that revolutionised culture and brought it out from the museums to the streets; a new generation of cultural activists entered state institutions to modernise and Europeanise Ukraine's cultural policy. The reform gave a powerful impetus to publishing, film production and other branches of the cultural industry. At the same time, the unfolding military conflict in the east and Russia's role in it provided the Ukrainian state with arguments in favour of restrictions on Russian mass culture in Ukraine. They were legitimised by informational security concerns, by the necessity of economic sanctions on Russia as an aggressor state, and by the need to give Ukrainian cultural production a fair chance. As the consumption of Russian mass culture became politicised, the restrictions imposed on it polarised Ukrainian society. Self-appointed watchdogs—activists of the boycott movement—sounded the alarm every time they perceived another attempt from the Russian side to circumvent restrictions and, even more so, when they saw a sign of an alleged 'betrayal' on the part of the Ukrainian state. At the same time, while reflecting the black-and-white vision of the world reinforced by the war, the restrictions raised a number of important issues about the limits of securitisation and weaponisation of culture, the appropriateness of cultural contacts with Russia in a time of military conflict, the freedom of art and its limits, violence as an instrument of censorship from below, and the moral responsibility and public role of an artist in politically turbulent times.

One could have expected that the victory of Volodymyr Zelenskyi and his party Servant of the People (*Sluha Narodu*) in both the presidential and the parliamentary elections would bring about change in Ukraine's cultural policy regarding the restrictions on Russian culture. Zelenskyi, after all, was a successful showman and actor popular in Russian-speaking countries and his entertainment company Kvartal 95 Studio was making money in Russia.⁴⁰ Moreover, Zelenskyi's strategy in gaining popular support was to oppose Poroshenko and his allies, denouncing them as the 'party of war' and promising a reconciliation with Russia. However, after his first year in office, restrictions on Russian mass culture remained in place, not least due to the highly mobilised and vigilant patriotic minority afraid of a pro-Russian backlash. What threatens the positive effects of these restrictions is the government's attempts—under the pretext of the COVID pandemic—to cut funding drastically and to abandon the reform of cultural policy (Botanova 2021).

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⁴⁰While Zelenskyi denied doing business in Russia after 2014, an investigation by Ukrainian journalists proves otherwise. See, 'Prospective Ukrainian Presidential Candidate Linked to Russian Film, TV Companies', *RFE/RL*, 18 January 2019, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/journalists-find-businesses-in-russia-linked-to-ukrainian-comic-who-wants-to-be-president/29718084.html>, accessed 23 December 2020.

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