

Reflecting on the Limitations of Academic Freedom

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, JUL 17 2020

This is an excerpt from *Understanding Ukraine and Belarus: A Memoir* by David R. Marples. Download your free copy on E-International Relations.

The Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies (CIUS) commemorated its 40th anniversary in 2016. A large sign was placed outside Pembina Hall, on the main University of Alberta campus where it was housed on the fourth floor that said simply: “CIUS – 40 Years of Excellence.” There were a number of events over the year but the highlight was a conference on October 14 and 15 entitled: “Ukrainian Studies in Canada: Texts and Contexts.” The day before the conference, Taras Kuzio, whom Kravchenko had appointed a Research Associate on a three-year contract, offered a talk on “Is Donbas part of Ukraine?” Kuzio was unhappy because his contract had not been renewed, partly as a result of his YouTube broadcasts, several of which targeted CIUS among his usual victims of scholars who in his view were hostile to Ukraine, “Putinophiles,” or fellow travellers.

The Conference had a formidable array of scholars working on Ukraine throughout their scholarly careers. It included from Canada: Volodymyr Kravchenko, Paul Robert Magocsi, Serhii Yekelchuk, Bohdan Kordan, Manoly Lupul, Myroslav Shkandrij, Frank Sysyn, Zenon Kohut, Alla Nedashkivska, Heather Coleman, Natalia Khanenko-Friesen, Lubomyr Luciuk, and myself. In addition, there were Serhii Plokhyy, a former CIUS Research Associate, the Hrushevsky Chair of Ukrainian History from Harvard, Marta Bohachevsky-Chomiak from Washington, DC, Rory Finnin from Cambridge, and Andrei Portnov from Berlin. Among community attendees were Peter Savaryn, one of the CIUS co-founders, businessman Andrii Hladshchivsky, and Paul Grod, President of the UCC. Bishop Borys Gudziak, the prominent Ukrainian Catholic Church Archbishop from Philadelphia, gave the keynote address.

With heavy snow falling outside the windows, the 89-year old Lupul gave a passionate speech in which he lamented the lack of young scholars entering Ukrainian studies, and particularly non-existent at CIUS. Magocsi was particularly animated, expressing his anger at the concept of public history and scholars who took on the role of public intellectuals. Kuzio was very supportive of him, and informed me in some detail of the isolation of Magocsi during the time of his appointment as Chair of Ukrainian Studies in Toronto. In a later autobiographical pamphlet he circulated in 2019, Magocsi explained how at that time (1980) the campaign seemed designed to allot the position to Frank Sysyn, rather than the eventual choice, Orest Subtelny. All his anger, therefore, had been misdirected. The episode seems to have stood the test of time since it is evidently far from forgotten four decades later and Subtelny has passed away. On the other hand, Magocsi, an American of Transcarpathian origins, is still the holder of the Chair after 40 years in the post.

The conference turned out to be the final public appearance in my presence of two leading lights of CIUS. Peter Savaryn died in April 2017 at the age of 90, having remained very active and spry into his later years. And Lupul died in July 2019 at the age of 91. Typically, Lupul had set out the entire program of his own funeral, which took the form of his favorite music (Mozart and Leonard Cohen were included), interspersed with tributes, and he had left a message for his son and daughter that variance from the theme laid out would require a “very good reason.” I felt that his passing left a big hole, not only in the community but in my life too. This cantankerous but very likeable man had been my pathway to my life in Canada but perhaps his legacy had not been followed up fully by his successors who based on their own expertise took CIUS into the direction of historical topics rather than the broader fields Lupul had supported. I have no doubt that he remains a controversial figure in some parts of the community.

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In 2017, CIUS was seeking a new Director. After a five-year term, Volodymyr Kravchenko was seeking renewal but reaction to his public talk was quite fractious and there was some evident tension, particularly among members of the Ukrainian community. It seemed astonishing that whereas his predecessor had served for two decades, his ended so quickly, particularly since he had come from Ukraine. Ironically, his namesake Bohdan had also departed after five years, but at a time when many Canadian Ukrainians were anxious to take advantage of the opening of Ukraine. Volodymyr was somewhat old style in his approach, as he freely admitted, and he had fired the long-serving leader of the Ukrainian Language and Education Program, Marusia Petryshyn, very abruptly at the beginning of his term. The other academic staff were in their 60s and 70s, so the need for rejuvenation was clear, but Kravchenko had gathered an exciting group of young postgraduate students with the potential to chart new waters. Possibly the key factor was that upon appointment, CIUS turned out to be very different from what he had anticipated. As a Director within a faculty, he had considerably less power than earlier Directors.

In the Department of History and Classics, the three professors involved in Russian and East European history – John-Paul Himka, Heather Coleman, and myself – had the largest contingent of graduate students. At one time the number was around 20, though they graduated in rapid succession between 2015 and 2019. Many studied and emanated from Ukraine, but we had others whose homelands were Moldova and Belarus. In addition to History and Classics, the only other department with a significant group of scholars working on Ukraine was Modern Languages and Cultural Studies (MLCS), which including the Folklore Center, had around eight faculty at its peak. As a result of a combination of program closures and retirements, the number depleted rapidly, however. Thus, History and Classics had the best potential to replenish the ageing staff of CIUS.

Though the 2012 directorship was advertised as an open position, that had not been the case when Kohut's various terms ended. He had been renewed without competition from outside or within. But by 2017, after CIUS was integrated into the Faculty of Arts and the university was suffering from provincial budget cuts resulting from the decline in world oil prices, it was evident that the search for a new director could only be an internal one. The Dean of Arts, Lesley Cormack, who was a member of my department, placed an advertisement accordingly, within the university for the position of CIUS Director.

A few weeks earlier, Kuzio and I began to have some online and public clashes, which began with a fairly polite YouTube debate, mediated by the affable UkeTube Director, William Szuch, on "Ukrainian Nationalism, Volhyn 1943, and Decommunization," which aired on July 26, 2017. Kuzio was sitting at his home in Amsterdam, a large whiskey on the table in front of him. It was apparent that we had some fundamental differences of opinion on all three issues, but once again the equation of Stalinism and Nazism, the subject of the Memory Laws, came to the fore. Kuzio's position on Bandera was that he was not a significant figure in the history of Ukrainian nationalism, "a nobody." But as one of my former PhD students commented afterward in an editorial: "You may hate or praise Bandera for what he did or did not do, but his standing as one of the most important figures in the history of OUN is undeniable."

As for the Holocaust, my comprehension of its horrors grew gradually over the years, no doubt enhanced by the visit I paid to Auschwitz and Birkenau with my former graduate student Victoria Plewak, then spending a year in Katowice, Poland; as well as peregrinations to former Jewish historical cities and places like Hrodna in Belarus, Bialystok in Poland, Babyn Yar in Ukraine and later the Trascianiec death camp just outside Minsk. I was also influenced by the writings of Jan Gross and Omer Bartov, two scholars who offered starkly honest and frank appraisals of the attitudes to and neglect of the Jewish past in contemporary Poland and parts of Ukraine. The point was not negotiable as far as I was concerned: the Holocaust was the epochal event of the 20th century. Kuzio appeared to dispute that fact. But he ended the debate jovially and incorrectly by declaring that the civility of the debate derived from the fact that we were both Yorkshiremen. Perhaps we were restrained, but I was not born in Yorkshire.

It seemed that for some time, there were no applications for a new CIUS Director. Dean Lesley Cormack sent me an email asking if I were interested. I was, since there would have been a certain poetic finale to my career to end where I started, and have the freedom and resources to build something new. But I was reluctant to abandon my position as Chair of History and Classics, which I thought equally important. In terms of a career move, it would have been a step sideways, even downward in administrative terms. In fairness I had not thought of myself as an administrator until I

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took on the Chair's position.

There were other possibilities, such as my colleague Heather Coleman or Alla Nedashkivska from MLCS. But when I submitted an application, it appeared I was the only applicant, a circumstance that led some in the community to suspect and declare that the Faculty wanted to railroad its preferred candidate into the position. After my application was completed, I booked a flight to Toronto on impulse and went to talk with the CIUS Toronto office staff: Frank Sysyn, Marko Stech, Andrii Makuch, and Tom Prymak. I thought the meeting over lunch at a Japanese restaurant was useful and amicable. I also received encouragement from my longtime friend Marta Dyczok when we met in the evening.

In Edmonton, I also approached some of my friends in the community: Roman Petryshyn, the former Director of the Ukrainian Canadian Center at Grant MacEwan University, and Olenka Bilash, the Professor of Education who had been at CIUS from its beginning, and whom I had also met in Tokyo the previous summer. Both wrote reference letters for me. Roman is the godfather of my younger son Keelan and had been my next-door neighbor between 1987 and 1994. We had celebrated Ukraine's Declaration of Independence on the lawn between our houses in August 1991, when local media were desperate for some input on events. The three of us had several meetings in which they expressed their ideas for the future of CIUS.

Prior to my talk and interview, Kuzio went on the attack, circulating messages on social media explaining why I should not get the position. Chief among them were my allegedly nebulous position on the Holodomor, my Open Letter about the Memory Laws, and my reluctance to acknowledge the analogies between Nazism and Stalinism. Notably, all these reasons were based on my research, suggesting that to adopt positions not in line with the prevailing narratives in the diaspora – or those of Kuzio himself – was tantamount to an offence. The concept of academic freedom of opinion, so precious to any university, was simply alien to him. He soon went further, circulating a private email I had sent to him in 2005, in which I stated that there was no need for a CIUS office in Toronto. I was astounded that anyone would keep personal emails for 12 years, ostensibly in the hope of using them as ammunition at a later date.

Kuzio's motives were unclear, especially given his earlier amicability. I could only assume that our debate had festered the anger within him. He had also been released by CIUS so surely could not expect that his opinions counted for much. Indeed, alone, they would have made as much difference as his tirades against Dominique Arel, Chair of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Ottawa had made to that scholar's reputation, i.e. none at all. But he had struck a chord on social media and there were others willing to join in and start a campaign against me.

I thought the job talk, held in the University Senate Chamber, went well. It was videotaped and could be seen not only in Alberta but all across Canada and abroad. Anyone could comment. One of my PhD students asked me about Kuzio's campaign, other questions were about the future of CIUS Press. As we were closing, there was still one hand in the air. The Dean announced that question time was over, but I asked her to allow a final one. It was from a man I had never seen before, from outside the university. "What would you do if you are boycotted by the community?" It was a manifestation of how far things had come. I thought back to the Bandera affair of 2010 and the discussions of the Memory Laws.

The interview with the Search Committee likewise seemed to go well. I knew most of the people on the committee. CIUS had representation from its Acting Director Jars Balan, with whom I had spoken at some length beforehand, while the community was represented by Andrii Hladyshkevsky, whom I had always respected.

Afterward, however, the social media campaign reached new heights. There were several leaks from the Search Committee, a complete violation of the privacy of the application. Thus, I found myself reading negative reviews from people I had known for years. Some were balanced. Others, such as a letter from a disbarred Edmonton lawyer prominent in the Ukrainian community to the University President David Turpin, were simply scurrilous.

I watched a program on YouTube on which I was attacked at an assembly of the World Congress of Ukrainians in Toronto by someone completely unknown to me. At the front of the room sat UCC president, Paul Grod, with whom I

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had breakfasted the previous week, and Marko Stech, whom I had known for years. I was aghast that neither offered any response in my defense. (Stech told me later he deeply regretted his silence. Many others offered their belated support.) Two who did defend me constantly were Natalia Pylypiuk and Oleh Ilnytzkyj from MLCS, as did also my faithful graduate students from Ukraine on the Facebook page “Ukrainians in Edmonton,” where most of the attacks circulated. I began to realize how Magocsi must have felt in 1980 or John-Paul Himka for the previous ten years.

I learned also that the threats to withdraw public endowments had some impact on the Dean, as did a meeting with Frank Sysyn and one with a major donor to CIUS. But that was not quite how the matter was addressed. The Dean’s view was that I was an important researcher – indeed a University Cup winner – and that she would not put me in a situation where such abuse could continue. That also meant she had no intention of making a stand on my behalf. I opted to withdraw from the campaign, still stunned by the hostility I had encountered. In retrospect, this was the right move though at the time it seemed like a cowed backdown. I would have been up for a fight. CIUS had become a troubled institution, however, and I had no wish for a career embroiled in conflict, of which there seemed to be plenty already.

After my withdrawal, some of the postdoctoral fellows there offered me sympathy, as did many others from the community. Olenka told me she was ashamed of her community’s reaction. I resigned from all my CIUS positions, such as the Advisory Board and Editorial Board of the *Journal of Ukrainian Studies*. I declined to attend any CIUS functions thereafter, other than a talk by my PhD student Ernest Gyidel, which I had promised beforehand to chair. As with Dobczansky earlier in Washington, I was no longer certain whom I could call a friend, it was a different world and I had moved from the inside to the outside. The Department Council meeting of History and Classics applauded when I told them I would be continuing in my position, an endorsement I sorely needed.

For the first time in my experience, public opinion from outside the university had counted for more than scholarly achievement and peer evaluation within it. I was well qualified for the position, and had even served as Acting Director of CIUS in 1999-2000 when Zenon Kohut was on sabbatical leave. I had edited the *Journal* and the Newsletter’s English version, and had the main responsibility for CIUS Press for many years. And in terms of scholarly output, I probably had more publications than any potential external candidate – incidentally the same lament that Magocsi had offered in his own memoirs.

None of this mattered, since my research publications caused offence in certain quarters, including among donors. UkeTube ran a program with the headline “David Marples writes bad things about Ukrainian history,” apparently oblivious of the contradictions in that phrase. Also, perhaps, though I am not certain, there may have been concerns that I was not of Ukrainian background though in the past that factor had made little difference to my reception at community events. In fact, it could be regarded as an asset. I had come full circle: the warm embrace by the community had become a cold rebuff. The door seemed firmly shut.

Balan was asked to stay on as Acting Director, an unusual decision given his apparent lack of qualifications – a completed PhD was one of the job requirements – and before long the “Acting” disappeared from his job title. I had no issues with Jars whom I had known for years and who is a very likeable and good-natured man, but I was perturbed after my experience that the position was handed over to someone without any job talk or interview, and extended until the summer of 2020. It made a mockery of the hiring process.

Still, there had been obvious signs after the events in 2014-2015 that the community demanded positive appraisals of all aspects of Ukraine, including its past. Often this translated into permanent assertions of victimhood, often in a very simplified form. I had to be careful not to overstress my own feelings of victimhood and deal with the reality: that CIUS, the institution that in many ways began my career, was no longer part of my working environment.

I did ask myself whether these events were a result of the consequences of Maidan, and concluded that in some respects that was the case. Whereas my editorial on Bandera had offended many in the community, the subsequent polarization of views as a result of Maidan and Russia’s conquest of Crimea divided not only academics, but also the general public, and particularly those of Ukrainian background. Militant Russophobes who earlier were on the fringes of discussions now had ample freedom to espouse their views on social media. In more elitist circles, some of the

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articles published by *The Atlantic Council* seemed to me narrow-minded and politically indoctrinated. I saw my erstwhile colleague Bohdan Nahaylo berated for criticizing some of the policies of Poroshenko. Perhaps by authorizing the annexation of Crimea, Putin appeared to have justified many long-held views in Ukrainian circles that Russia was, and had always been, an imperialist power, like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It was time to move on. In November 2018, I organized, with funding from the Department of National Defense, a major conference on the war in the Donbas that tried to see all sides of the question. The conference was officially organized by the Kule Institute of Advanced Studies, and I was the sole coordinator in the field of Ukrainian studies. I invited many scholars whose names appeared on a list provided to me by Mikhail Minakov. My main criteria were expertise, open-mindedness, and the ability to present a paper in English. The speakers included Sergiy Kudelia, Kimitaka Matsuzato, Alina Cherviatsova, Tetyana Malyarenko, Oksana Mikheieva, Natalia Stepaniuk, Serhii Yekelchuk, and Bill Risch, all of whom we flew into Edmonton for the event from Ukraine, Japan, the United States, and Victoria, and Ottawa in Canada; along with a stalwart group of more local people such as Sergey Sukhankin, Alla Hurska, Oleksandr Melnyk, and Ernest Gyidel. Our mandate was to come up with solutions to the war in the east, but the views varied more than any I had heard hitherto on the Ukraine-Russia conflict. Matsuzato, for example, had spent weeks at a time in the occupied parts of Donbas and interviewed the main players. Kudelia's solutions seemed to some present to be offering too many concessions to the Russians, the same sort of sentiment expressed with regard to Zelensky's peace proposals following his election as Ukrainian president in the summer of 2019.

For me, however, the gathering was a reassuring sign that it was possible to hold an academic debate on political issues in Ukraine without the intrusion of petty politics. At the time of writing, I was preparing collected articles from the conference for publication.

About the author:

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