

Imagining Ukraine: Q&A with Olga Burlyuk

Created: 28 February 2019



Euromaidan **Political science** **Seminar in Ukrainian Studies**

What exactly is Ukraine? In the five plus years since the Maidan protests, or Revolution of Dignity, started in response to Ukraine's suspension of the process to sign an agreement with the European Union, this question has been mulled by journalists, scholars, citizens, and foreigners. While a uniform consensus seems elusive, the discussion itself is also worthy of attention.

That is the work of Olga Burlyuk, Research Foundation - Flanders (FWO) Postdoctoral Fellow at the Centre for EU Studies, Ghent

University (Belgium), who is currently a visiting scholar at HURI. On Monday, March 4, she will present, "[Imagining Ukraine: From History and Myths to Maidan Protests](#)," detailing the competing and interwoven narratives about what Ukraine is and should be.



Identifying four main narratives, she notes that they can be traced back to the slogans and interpretations of the Maidan protests (winter 2013-2014) and that they coexist in the public sphere, part in reaction to each other and part in conflict. "They can—and often are—used selectively (and speculatively) by (political) actors at home and abroad to advance their goals," Burlyuk added. "They are thus to blame for the mess in your head and mine."

So, what are the four narratives? Join us at the Seminar in Ukrainian Studies on March 4 (or [watch live—or later—on YouTube](#)) to find out. Burlyuk offered some additional insights in response to our questions below. She also promises an "animated presentation featuring political images and cartoons," so don't miss it!

HURI: *What is your current project as a postdoctoral fellow at Ghent?*

Burlyuk: My research interests are situated at the intersection of EU/European studies (with a focus on EU external policies towards countries further east) and Ukrainian/area studies (with a focus on social, political and cultural domestic transformation in Ukraine, also in the context of its "European integration"). The postdoc project I am currently working on examines culture in EU external policies towards Ukraine – that is, culture as a sector of international cooperation between the two. Having spent the last 10 years or so on analyzing political dialogue and top-down institutional reform (e.g. my PhD thesis explored EU rule of law promotion in Ukraine), I had reached a conclusion that no institutional reform (in Ukraine) will ever work without the social norms to back it up. No supply (and no point supplying) without the demand. That's why I turned to exploring culture, cultural diplomacy, cultural interaction in my postdoc project.

The piece on “Imagining Ukraine” that I will present at the Ukrainian Research Seminar paves the ground for my project on culture in EU-Ukraine relations to the extent that it formulates the four meta-narratives in and on Ukraine, what it is and what it should be, and identifies the various roles “Europe” plays therein.

HURI: *Why did you decide to spend a semester at HURI?*

Burlyuk: I am very happy to have a chance to spend a semester as a visiting scholar at HURI and to immerse myself fully in the Ukrainian studies community (as well as Russian/Eurasian studies at the Davis Center and European Studies at the Minda de Gunzburg studies – covering the entire continent, if you wish): back at Ghent University, I am based at the Centre for European Union Studies, with a specific focus on the EU, and I felt the need to change the perspective, if only temporarily. Coming to Harvard has also been a childhood dream of mine, so I can cross that one off the list now. :)



HURI: *Your data for this paper comes from speeches, protest slogans, and field work. Why did you select this material?*

Burlyuk: The easy answer would be: ask my dear friend and co-author, Dr. Vjosa Musliu; she is the one to blame for the choice of method ([read the published paper online here](#)).

Jokes aside, we found that these were important primary sources for what we were studying, and also excellent, tangible illustrations for the manifestations of otherwise abstract categories. They allow you to pin things down (when analyzing) and visualize ideas (when presenting).

HURI: *Do you think Ukraine has changed since the Maidan protests? Would you call the protests/ revolution a turning point or a step along a continuous path?*

Burlyuk: In the article, we talk about all the different narratives only to conclude – to the great disappointment of those who want clear, unambiguous answers – that “Ukraine is all and none of them at the same time”.

Going back to your question, I believe that, for some people in Ukraine, the Maidan protests have been a step (or a leap!) forward on a continuous path; for others – a turning point; yet for others, they went by unnoticed (in that they left the people unchanged). I do believe, however, that the Maidan protests, and the annexation of Crimea and the armed conflict in the east of Ukraine, have served a kind of point of no return for the Ukrainian society at large. This is the conclusion we reach in a [book on civil society in Ukraine post-Euromaidan](#), which I co-edited with Dr. Natalia Shapovalova (I will [present the book](#) at the Davis Center on March 15). This is also the conclusion Dr. Mykola Riabchuk put forward in his recent HURI seminar, [“Two Ukraines' Reconsidered.”](#)

HURI: *Did you come across anything that surprised you in your research?*

Burlyuk: I am a political science/IR scholar, not a historian, so an interesting element of researching for this paper for me was to see, once again and close up, that contemporary discourses, arguments, slogans etc. can be, in fact, totally un-novel (in that others have used the exact same ones decades and centuries ago). I remember Oksana Zabuzhko saying, “Read the classics. Everything has been said there.” Precisely.

Another thing I would like to mention here, not really a surprise in my research, but also a discovery of sorts, is that I came to realize that Maria Todorova's seminal book, *Imagining the Balkans*, which inspired our research and its title, has not yet been translated into Ukrainian. I find that a shame, honestly, – to the extent that I am currently corresponding with the different publishing houses in Ukraine proposing that they take this book up in their to-translate lists. Two publishers have said no so far, I am waiting to hear from the third one. If you happen to know an editor or a publishing house or a research center that would be interested in taking this up, do let me know!



Olga Burlyuk is a Visiting Scholar at HURI and an FWO Postdoctoral Fellow at the Centre for EU Studies, Ghent University (Belgium). Her research interests are situated at the intersection of EU/European studies (with a focus on external policies of the European Union) and Ukrainian studies (with a focus on Ukraine's socio-political transformation). She has recently published an edited book on *Civil Society in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine* (2018, Ibidem-Press/CUP, with Dr. Natalia Shapovalova) and a special issue on *Unintended Consequences of EU External Action* (2019, *The International Spectator*, with Dr. Gergana Noutcheva). Her publications have appeared, among others, in the *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *East European Politics and Societies*, *East European Politics*, *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law*, *Kyiv-Mohyla Law and Politics Journal* and edited volumes published with Routledge, Palgrave and Ibidem-Press. Burlyuk holds a PhD in International Relations from the University of Kent (UK), an MA in European Studies from Maastricht University (NL) and a Master in Law from the National University "Kyiv-Mohyla Academy" (UA)

Watch [Olga Burlyuk's presentation](#) on YouTube.