

The article analyzes how the idea of collective identity, mobilized by the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014 and Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, is contextualized in artistic projects by contemporary Ukrainian artists of different generations: Alina Yakubenko, Olia Fedorova, Illia Turyhin and Volodymyr Kaufman. Since identity is represented through national symbols, in particular, the flag, the article focuses on the works of Ukrainian artists in which the flag acquires connotations associated

with the nation-state and an emotional connection to a specific place. The choice of art projects is determined by the research framework – the flag as the nominal plot and the connection with national identity, the state and the homeland as its exhibitor. The analysis of the proposed cases reveals various aspects of identity construction, including identity as an imaginary community (Benedict Anderson), the discursive nature of identity as construction through difference (Stuart Hall), the connection of identity

with moral choice and responsibility for it (Zygmunt Bauman, Leonidas Donskis), and the crisis of identity as a crisis of indecision (Erik H. Erikson, Vincent Descombes). The analysis of the projects under consideration reveals the peculiarities of understanding the questions “who am I?” and “who are we?” by artistic means on the example of particular projects, as well as how art can interact with these questions at the intersection of different philosophical, anthropological and political perspectives.

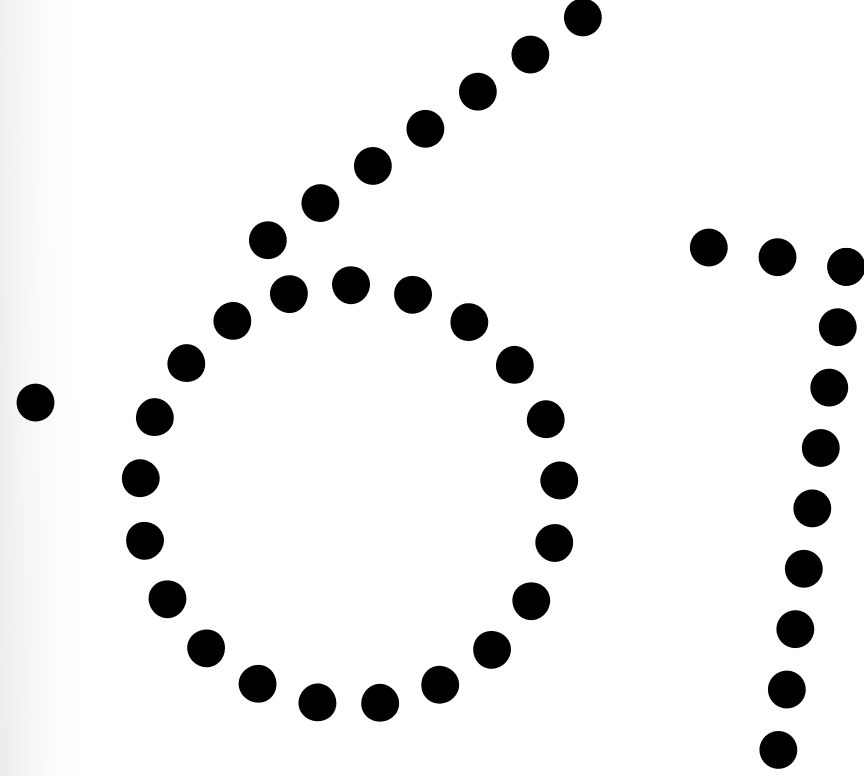
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Symbolism of the Flag: Ukrainian Art Projects in the Context of Collective Identity (2014–2024)

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The flag is a powerful cultural sign that can have a huge number of meanings and functions, depending on the context. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the concept of the flag as follows: "A piece of cloth or stuff (usually bunting), varying in size, color, and device, but most frequently oblong or square, attached by one edge to a staff or to a halyard, used as a standard, ensign or signal, and also for decoration or display."⁽¹⁾

Many contemporary artists from different parts of the world work with the image of the flag. In Ukrainian contemporary art, the flag also appears in the practice of artists of different generations and in diverse contexts. The flag in artistic works is often associated with the manifestation of certain ideas, with the study of power relations, with the expression of collective identity. The national identity in Ukraine, as well as for many post-Soviet countries after 1989, was a very sensitive issue. Throughout the period of Ukrainian independence, national identity and its attributes, especially language, has often become an instrument of manipulation by various political forces in the struggle for power, as well as by Russia in its ambition for dominance in the region. At the same time, under the surface of the supposed ethnic strife, there was often a conflict between a new Western-style civil society and a strong paternalistic state that represented the Soviet past and Russian reality.⁽²⁾

Since the 1980s, the tension between ethnic and civic models of Ukrainian identity has been a focus of Ukrainian artists and has become a subject of critical reflection. With the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014 and especially after the full-scale invasion in 2022 these concerns deepened. Moreover, in the situation of the Russian-Ukrainian war aimed at eliminating Ukrainian statehood

1 "Flag," in: The Oxford English Dictionary, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/flag_n4?tab=meaning_and_use#4302142 (accessed 10 February 2024).

2 Serhy YEKELCHYK, *The Conflict in Ukraine. What Everyone Needs to Know*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015, p. 18.

and restoring the Russian empire, the issue of identity has acquired an existential dimension. Many Ukrainian artists articulate collective belonging in their practice, either directly or more indirectly. The most immediate counterpart to the state and associative image of national identity are national symbols, in particular the flag. For this reason, this article is devoted to art projects by contemporary Ukrainian artists who address the theme of the flag in the context of collective identity and formulate different ways of understanding it.

National Identity in Ukrainian Art

For a deeper comprehension of the proposed topic in the context of the processes currently taking place in Ukrainian art, it is important to take a brief look at Ukrainian collective identity and its relationship to art in retrospect and outline several significant aspects. According to Ukrainian historian Yaroslav Hrytsak, before 1914, the Ukrainian nation existed in the minds of only a few tens of thousands of residents of the Ukrainian territory, as opposed to the nearly 30 million who made up approximately 90 percent of Ukraine's population at the time.⁽³⁾ The catalyst for the formation of national identity in Ukraine was World War I. The Russian Revolution of 1917 opened a new page in the history of the twentieth century. From the Bolsheviks' point of view, the Ukrainian lands were to become a bridge through which the Russian revolution would reach Western Europe. In 1918, Stalin wrote that in Ukraine the main knot of modernity was being tied.⁽⁴⁾ However, the Ukrainian lands experienced their own revolution, which most Ukrainian historians consider to be a national revolution.⁽⁵⁾

3 Yaroslav HRYTSAK, *Podolaty mynule: hlobalna istoriia Ukrainy*, Kyiv: Portal 2021, p. 223.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 231.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 232.

The purpose of the Ukrainian liberation struggle was to promote the national self-determination of Ukrainians and to build a state that did not yet exist.⁽⁶⁾

The emergence of national symbols and the formalization of other attributes of the nation-state is associated with the short existence (March 1917 – March 1918) of a Ukrainian national regime – *Ukrainska Narodna Respublika* [the Ukrainian People's Republic]. The key role in the creation of these symbols was played by prominent Ukrainian modernist artists such as painter, architect, and film production designer Vasyl Krychevskyi (1873–1952) and graphic artist and illustrator Heorhii Narbut (1886–1920).⁽⁷⁾ On behalf of the government of the *Ukrainska Narodna Respublika*, Krychevskyi designed the large and small state coats of arms, as well as the large and small seals of the UNR.⁽⁸⁾ The process of adopting full attributes of sovereignty in the then Ukrainian state – national symbols, awards, and uniforms of the armed forces – was completed by the introduction of its own currency.⁽⁹⁾ Narbut was the creator of the first Ukrainian money in 1917, which was later developed by Krychevskyi. The blue and yellow combination as the Ukrainian national colors was established during the European “Spring of Nations,” and the official approval of the blue and yellow cloth as the flag of the Ukrainian merchant marine took place in 1918. After the defeat of the Ukrainian Liberation Revolution and the creation of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, Ukrainian national symbols were banned. The blue and yellow flag, the small coat of arms of Krychevskyi and the anthem, which were symbols

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6 *Ibid.*, p. 233.

7 “Znak tvoiei svobody. Zatverdzhennia Tryzuba herbom UNR. Derzhavni symvoly y atributy Ukrainy,” *Ukrainskyi instytut natsionalnoi pamiaty*, February 2018, <https://uinp.gov.ua/informaciyni-materialy/vchytelyam/metodychni-rekomendaciyi/znak-tvoyeyi-svobody-zatverdzhennya-tryzuba-gerbom-unr-derzhavni-symvoly-y-atributy-ukrayiny> (accessed 14 March 2025).

8 *Ibid.*

9 Andrii BOJKO-HAHARIN, “Heorhii Narbut – tvorets hroshei z natsionalnym dukhom,” *Numizmatyka i falerystyka*, 2017, No. 2, p. 28.

of the Ukrainian state in 1917–1918, were again enshrined in the constitution as official state symbols after Ukraine declared independence in 1991.⁽¹⁰⁾

The Ukrainian avant-garde of the 1910s and 1920s discovered the imaginative potential of folklore and medieval icons, involving them in the artistic space of the modern era and forming a new language and aesthetics based on its experience. These sources became the basis of the imaginative system of Mykhailo Boichuk and his followers.⁽¹¹⁾ It was Boichuk, the founder of the school of Ukrainian monumental painting and one of the founders of the Ukrainian Academy of Arts in Kyiv, who was a representative of nationally oriented art.⁽¹²⁾ In 1932, after the resolution of the TsK VKP(b) (The Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of the Bolsheviks) on the liquidation of literary and artistic associations and the creation of centralized structures instead, socialist realism was proclaimed the only acceptable artistic method in the USSR, and thus in Ukraine.⁽¹³⁾ The main means of state governance in the USSR in the 1930s was mass terror directed against the Ukrainian peasantry (the Holodomor of 1932–1933) and the Ukrainian intelligentsia, which reached its highest point in 1937. Among the artists of the USSR killed in the 1930s and 1940s, the number of victims in Ukraine exceeded one third of the total number of those killed.⁽¹⁴⁾ In particular, Mykhailo Boichuk, who consistently developed the idea of national traditions in art, was accused of Ukrainian nationalism and shot dead in 1937.⁽¹⁵⁾ Under such conditions, it was impossible to address the

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10 “Znak tvoiei svobody.”

11 Halyna SKLIARENKO, “Folklor v ukrainskomu mystetstvi,” in: *Na berehakh. Notatky do ukrainskoho mystetstva XX stolittia. Zbirnyk statei*, Kyiv: Sofiia 2007, p. 27.

12 Alisa LOZHKINA, *Permanent Revolution. Art in Ukraine, the 20th Century to the Early 21st Century*, Kyiv: ArtHuss 2020, pp. 100–104.

13 Oleksii ROHOTCHENKO, *Sotsialistychnyi realizm i totalitaryzm*, Kyiv: Feniks 2007, pp. 119–120.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 125.

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 120–121.

topic of national identity in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.

Relative liberalization occurred with the coming to power of Nikita Khrushchev. This period, known as the Khrushchev Thaw (1956–1968), was marked by the emergence of a new generation of artists who significantly influenced the further history of Ukrainian art and created the phenomenon of the *Shistdesiatnyky* [the Sixtiers].⁽¹⁶⁾ The heightened interest of the Shistdesiatnyky in national issues was manifested in the appeal to the nationally biased avant-garde of the 1920s, the “recall” of its language, and the emergence of the neo-folklorism movement. Features of neo-folklorism were also present in the practices of some Ukrainian artists in the 1970s and 1980s.⁽¹⁷⁾ As Anthony Smith notes, during the last century, Eastern Europe has seen classic examples of ethnic self-determination. Artists were involved in mobilizing a sense of identity, and in particular, they carried out this mobilization through folk culture.⁽¹⁸⁾ In the conditions of Ukraine’s colonial existence as a peripheral component of the imperial whole, folk art, peasant culture, and the patriarchal worldview associated with them were perceived as perhaps the only purely national phenomenon that preserved traditional aesthetic, worldview, and ethical values.⁽¹⁹⁾

An alternative discourse in art that contributed to the formation of a civic model of national identity is associated with the emergence of the phenomenon of contemporary art in Ukraine in the 1980s. A critical study of the national myth was probably the first in Ukrainian art to be carried out by the group of artists *Volova hran natsionalnoho posteklektyzmu* [The strong-willed facet of national post-eclecticism], which included Oleksandr

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- 16 Halyna SKLIARENKO, “Mizh istoriieiu ta heohrafiieiu (do pytannia periodyzatsii ukrainskoho mystetstva XX stolittia),” in: *Na berehakh*, p. 15.
 17 SKLIARENKO, “Folklor v ukrainskomu mystetstvi,” p. 27.
 18 Anthony D. SMITH, *National Identity*, London: Penguin Books 1991, pp. 125–127.
 19 SKLIARENKO, “Folklor v ukrainskomu mystetstvi,” p. 28.



Nikita Kadan, *Hostomel sculpture*, 2022, metal, stone,
photo: Sandro Parrotta gallery, Cologne-Bonn, courtesy:
collection of Military History Museum, Dresden.

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↶
Olia Fedorova, from the series *I don't
know where I am, but it is my home* (2019–
2020), 2020, photo: Olia Fedorova.

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↪
 Illia Turyhin, *Flag*, 2023, video, 0:29 min,
 photo: Zlatslava Kryshchak.

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Kharchenko, Oleh Tistol, Maryna Skuhareva, Yana Bystrova, and Kostiantyn Reunov.⁽²⁰⁾ The works of this circle were dominated by the theme of national stereotypes, ironically deconstructed in the artists' practice. The path of "subjective research of the national space" turned out to be the main and most fruitful in the work of Oleh Tistol.⁽²¹⁾ In the mid-1980s, Tistol began a large project called *Ukrainski hroshi* [Ukrainian Money], which lasted until 2001. The project included drawings, etchings, paintings, and installations. Money appeared here as a symbolic and cultural category that recorded the history of national statehood and its attributes – among other postmodern citations the project referred to Narbut and Krychevsky as the creators of the first Ukrainian money.⁽²²⁾ The artist's critical view was aimed at the deformation of values expressed by money during the transition from the Soviet to the post-Soviet era.

Since 1991, Oleh Tistol has been working in tandem with Mykola Matsenko. The artists began collaborating and exploring national identity and related clichés and stereotypes within the framework of the joint program *Natsprom* [National Industry]. Together they created a number of artistic projects devoted to the study of identity, which became milestones for new Ukrainian art: *Ukrainski hroshi* [Ukrainian Money] – M. Matsenko joined this project in the early 1990s, *Muzei arkhitektury* (1996) [Museum of Architecture], and *Mat horodov* (2005) [Mother of Cities].⁽²³⁾ Since the early 2000s, Matsenko has been working on the *Heraldychnyi tsykl* [Heraldic Cycle], in which he visualizes idioms typical of the Ukrainian popular cultural space – for example, *Skhid i Zakhid razom* [East and West are together]

20 Halyna SKLIARENKO, "Nevianucha krasa stereotypu": Oleh Tistol," in: *Suchasne mystetstvo Ukrainy. Portrety khudozhnykiv*, Kyiv: Huss 2016, p. 103.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 104.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 107.

23 Halyna SKLIARENKO, "Kupui ukrainske!": Mykola Matsenko," in: *Suchasne mystetstvo Ukrainy*, p. 159.

– or invents logos of absurd institutions. Among the artist's important projects, in which he continues to develop a critical understanding of national and post-Soviet identity, are *Neofolk* and *Kupui ukrainske!* [Buy Ukrainian!], which started at 2000.⁽²⁴⁾ Through their joint practice and individual projects, Oleh Tistol and Mykola Matsenko have thus ironically deconstructed the myths associated with collective identities, both national and post-Soviet.

Among the important projects devoted to critical reflection on national identity and the influence of ideology, it is worth mentioning the R.E.P. (Revolutionary Experimental Space) group, a younger generation of artists who have played an outstanding role in Ukrainian art. In general, the work of the artists of the group, who entered the art scene in 2004, during the Orange Revolution, recorded the changes in social and political life in the 2000s and 2010s, identified important trends and critically responded to them. Since 2006, the group has included Nikita Kadan, Lada Nakonechna, Lesya Khomenko, Volodymyr Kuznetsov, Ksenia Hnylytska, and Zhanna Kadyrova. In the context of this article, it is important to mention the *Patriotyzm* [Patriotism] project which was shown in many institutions in Ukraine and abroad during 2006 and 2015. The artists created a dictionary of graphic signs – visual equivalents of words and concepts that can be used to construct a narrative that will be accessible at the level of symbols and associations. With the help of the dictionary, the viewer can read the messages made on the white walls of the exhibition spaces in the form of monumental thematic panels. The semantic framework of the project was the search for a universal language and the questions of whether patriotism is possible without nationalism and paternalism; can patriotism be based on other than the national idea and cultural specificity?⁽²⁵⁾

24 *Ibid.*

25 LOZHKINA, *Permanent Revolution*, p. 416.

The examples described above certainly do not exhaust the issue of collective identity in Ukrainian art – this topic deserves a separate broad and comprehensive analysis. Nevertheless, they indicate an important aspect – the attempts to critically comprehend and reflect on the idea of Ukrainian collective identity in contemporary Ukrainian art. This criticism has shown the emergence of a discussion about the transition from an ethnic to a civic concept of Ukrainian identity. The subject of this article is located within this discussion, which includes an analysis of the flag as a symbolic form, as well as projects by some Ukrainian artists who have addressed the flag from different perspectives. A more specific discussion focuses on how the idea of identity, mobilized by the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014 and the full-scale invasion in 2022, is contextualized in the projects of several Ukrainian artists of different generations – Alina Yakubenko, Olia Fedorova, Volodymyr Kaufman, and Illia Turyhin. The main focus is on works in which the flag acquires connotations related to the nation-state (and national) affiliation, emotional connection with a specific place. The selection of projects is determined by the research framework: the flag as a nominal plot; connection with national identity, state or homeland as its exponent; Ukraine as the territory of the works' development.

Flags, as national symbols, play an important role in the formation and preservation of national identity.⁽²⁶⁾ The crucial role of symbols in the formation of national unity was also emphasized by Anthony Smith and Michael Billig. According to Smith, in order to develop social ties between individuals and classes, a nation creates a set of common values, symbols and traditions. Through the use of symbols

26 Pål KOLSTØ, "National Symbols as Signs of Unity and Division," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 29, 2006, No. 4, p. 1.

– flags, coins, anthems, uniforms, monuments, and ceremonies – members are reminded of their common cultural heritage and cultural kinship; a sense of shared identity and belonging strengthens and inspires them. The nation is transformed into a group of “faith-inspired” people who are able to overcome difficulties and obstacles.⁽²⁷⁾

Thus, the flag is one of the most important direct attributes of a nation. Michael Billig analyzes what he sees as a creeping “banal” nationalism in the so-called “established nations” – states that are “confident in their own continuity.”⁽²⁸⁾ The basic difference between these nations and unestablished nations on the symbolic level, Billig argues, is that in the former case “the flag [is] hanging unnoticed on the public building,” while in the latter it is “a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion.”⁽²⁹⁾ Michael Billig explains the connection between identity and flag by belonging to life forms:

An “identity” is not a thing; it is a short-hand description for ways of talking about the self and community [...]. Ways of talking, or ideological discourses, do not develop in social vacuums, but they are related to forms of life. In this respect, “identity,” if it is to be understood as a form of talking, is also to be understood as a form of life. The saluted and unsaluted flags are not stimuli that evoke “identity-reactions;” they belong to the forms of life which constitute what could be called national identities.⁽³⁰⁾

27 SMITH, *National Identity*, p. 16–17.

28 Michael BILLIG, *Banal Nationalism (Theory, Culture and Society)*, London: SAGE 1995, p. 8.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 60.

Living in developed democratic nations, as Billig explains, “we” do not forget “our” national identity because “we” are constantly reminded of it – our identity is continually being “flagged.” However, this designation cannot be limited to a flag hanging over a state building or a national emblem. “National identity” is shorthand for a whole range of familiar assumptions about the nationhood, the world, and “our” place in it. “These assumptions have to be flagged discursively. And for that, banal words, jingling in the ears of citizens, or passing before their eyes, are required.”⁽³¹⁾

A flag can have both unifying and divisive potential.⁽³²⁾ In his study of national symbols, flags in particular, Pål Kolstø disagrees with Billig, arguing that in new, insecure nations, flags and other national symbols often bring to the fore strong divisions within the putative nation.⁽³³⁾ In the beginning, a national symbol for a new state will, inevitably, always be regarded as novel and unfamiliar. However, the flags of today’s consolidated nation-states were also at one point new and “artificial.” Since there are no inherent qualities in any symbol that link it emotionally or cognitively to the entity which it symbolizes, this linkage has to be learned.⁽³⁴⁾

Focusing on one’s own identity is the experience of any war, especially in a country under attack. As Anthony Smith notes: “[...] war mobilizes ethnic feelings and national consciousness, becomes a unifying force in the life of a community, and provides myths and memories for generations to come.”⁽³⁵⁾ Since the beginning of the Ukrainian-Russian war in 2014, and then the full-scale invasion, significant dynamic changes in attitudes toward national identity and its symbols can be traced in Ukrainian society. According to the Razumkov Center for Economic and Political Studies,

31 *Ibid.*, p. 93.

32 KOLSTØ, “National Symbols,” p. 1.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

35 SMITH, *National Identity*, p. 32.

when asked the question “How proud are you of being a citizen of Ukraine?” in June 2024, 91 % of respondents said they were “very proud” or “rather proud” of having Ukrainian citizenship. In 2015, the number was 68%, in 2010 it was 62%, and in 2000 only 62%.⁽³⁶⁾ These changes are also reflected in the intensity of the emotional and cognitive connection between national symbols, including the national flag, and identity they are supposed to represent. To the question “How do you feel about the flag of Ukraine as an attribute of an independent Ukrainian state?” 37.9% of respondents answered “I am proud of it” in 2012, 47.9% in 2015, 74.9% in 2023, and 64.1% in 2024. In general, Razumkov Center researchers note that the percentage of respondents who are proud of Ukraine’s state symbols is significantly higher than before the start of full-scale Russian aggression.⁽³⁷⁾

*The flag before and
after the invasion*

In Ukrainian art, the flag appears in the artistic expressions of many artists of different generations. In his individual practice, outside of the R.E.P. group, Nikita Kadan has been working with the flag as a symbolic form for a long time. The artist has turned to this image many times in different contexts, starting with his early work *Prapor* [Flag] in 2009.⁽³⁸⁾ In this work, the flag was presented on the wall as a flat object made of a mirror. It was placed above the viewer’s eye level, so one had to make an effort to look at themselves. In 2015, Kadan began a series of sculptures – “flags” – made of shrapnel-damaged metal

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36 “Identychnist hromadian Ukrainy: tendentsii zmin,” June 2024, <https://razumkov.org.ua/napriamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/identychnist-hromadian-ukrainy-tendentsii-zmin-cherven-2024r> (accessed 10 February 2025).

37 *Ibid.*

38 Nikita KADAN, *Flag*, 2009, mirror, drawing on the wall, <http://nikitakadan.com/works/flag/> (accessed 6 February 2025).

found at the sites of shelling and military operations of the Russian-Ukrainian war. For example, the work *Gazelka* was made from an iron sheet of a GAZ-3302 car, broken by shrapnel, which Kadan found in 2015 in eastern Ukraine in Severodonetsk. By using this material for the flag, Kadan works with

the experience of shattered everyday life, the experience that has been denied subjectivity and voice. Is it possible to imagine a flag of the victims who express their thoughts without being backed by force? Can destroyed buildings and broken things, animals and plants affected by the fighting, be a similar flag? [...] [T]he flag embodies a phantasm of revolt of things, where no one has expected it.⁽³⁹⁾

Nikita Kadan continued this series also after the full-scale invasion of 2022. His work *Hostomelska skulptura* [Hostomel Sculpture] (2022) is a fragment of metal from the roof of a building in Hostomel – a town near Kyiv, destroyed by artillery missiles, which was transformed into a flag-shaped sculpture. Another element of the work is a stone found in the countryside near Cologne (Germany). The encounter of material evidences from the places of catastrophe and of “European normality” creates the tension, showing the shrinking distance between war and peace.⁽⁴⁰⁾ One of the latest works in his series is *Khram Syvilly v Tivoli* [Temple of Sibylla in Tivoli] from 2023.⁽⁴¹⁾

39 Nikita KADAN, *Gazelka*, 2015, metal, <http://nikitakadan.com/works/gazelka/> (accessed 9 March 2025).

40 Nikita KADAN, *Hostomel sculpture*, 2022, metal, stone, <http://nikitakadan.com/the-chronicle/hostomel-cologne-sculpture/> (accessed 9 March 2025).

41 The sculpture was created with the support of the Lviv Municipal Art Center and was shown in the Center’s gallery at the collective exhibition of Ukrainian artists *Regarding Loss* (29 September – 15 November 2023), curated by Nikita Kadan.

The work consisted of two objects mounted on a flagpole: a piece of metal found by the artist in the destroyed village of Dolyna in the Donetsk region, and a reproduction of Claude Laurent's work *Temple of Sibylla in Tivoli* (1635). Kadan's work points to the inequality of the concepts of ruin and rubble. Ruin is romanticized, placed in culture and history, and is reflected in many other descriptions of ruins, while rubble is extra-historical, promising neither grief nor memory, it is identical only to itself.⁽⁴²⁾

Since 2014, Maria Kulikovska has used the flag as a symbol of the state in performances dedicated to Russia's annexation of Crimea, her homeland, and the Russian full-scale invasion. The first performance in a series of similar events took place in 2014, in Saint Petersburg, Russia. Kulikovska held an unauthorized performance during the opening of Manifesta 10, the biennale of contemporary art held at the Hermitage. On the stairs to the museum, the artist took a prone position, resembling a wounded soldier, and covered her body with a Ukrainian flag. The performance provoked a mixed reaction and was stopped by force, after which Kulikovska was briefly arrested. As a result of this action, she was included in the list of banned artists in Russia. The name of the performance *254. Aktsiia* [254. Action] comes from Maria Kulikovska's number 254 as a registered refugee from the occupied Crimea.⁽⁴³⁾ Still in 2014, the performance was reenacted. This time, the action was held in solidarity with Maria and displaced people around the world by several participants, including artists Sofia Akimova, Christine Bouvier, Alexey Markin, Ornic'Art, Anna Des, and Natalia

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Tseliuba. Like the artist on the steps of the Hermitage, the protesters lay under a yellow and blue flag on the Boulevard de la Charonne.⁽⁴⁴⁾

In 2015, Kulikovska realized the unauthorized action *Bilyi* [White] in Moscow near the Crimean Bridge. There, on the Moskva River, the artist washed a handmade flag of the Crimean Peninsula.⁽⁴⁵⁾ The flag of Crimea, adopted in 1992, closely resembles the Russian tricolor – a thin blue stripe, a wide white stripe in the middle, and a thin red stripe at the top. On the flag, the red stripe signified the past, the white stripe – the present, and the blue stripe – the future of Crimea.⁽⁴⁶⁾ After Ukraine gained its independence in 1991, Crimea remained in Russia's zone of political influence. Russia has maintained a military presence on the peninsula (the Russian Black Sea Fleet), exercised significant influence on political processes, and stimulated pro-Russian sentiment in Crimea. Local elites, supported by the Russian authoritarian system, sympathized with the Russian authorities.⁽⁴⁷⁾ These reasons, as well as the unpreparedness of the Ukrainian authorities in Kyiv to defend the territorial integrity of the state, including the then decline of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which was prepared by pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich, made it possible for Russia to easily seize Crimea. It is noteworthy that after the annexation in 2014, the new pro-Russian government decided to leave the state symbols of Crimea, including the flag, unchanged, as it was essentially a variation of the Russian tricolor.⁽⁴⁸⁾

42 From the description of the work on the exhibition in Lviv Municipal Art Center.

43 Maria KULIKOVSKA, "Actions and Performances," <https://www.mariakulikovska.net/artwork/actions-performances> (accessed 8 February 2024). A thorough analysis of these performances and actions by Maria Kulikovska was carried out by art historian Nazar Kozak. See Nazar KOZAK, "Art Resistance against Russia's 'Non-Invasion' of Ukraine," *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies*, Vol. 9, 2022, No. 1, <https://ewjus.com/index.php/ewjus/article/view/585> (accessed 10 February 2025).

44 *254. Collective action*, 2015, performance, <https://www.mariakulikovska.net/project-page/254-collective-performance> (accessed 13 April 2025).

45 Maria KULIKOVSKA, *White*, 2015, performance, <https://www.mariakulikovska.net/project-page/white> (accessed 9 March 2025).

46 Andrii HRECHYLO, *Ukrainska terytorialna heraldyka*, Lviv: Instytut ukrainskoi arkhohrafiy imeni M. S. Hrushevskoho NAN Ukrainy – Ukrainske heraldychnye tovarystvo 2010, p. 161.

47 YEKELCHYK, *The Conflict in Ukraine*, p. 4.

48 "O hosudarstvennykh symbolakh Respublyky Krym," *Zakon Respubliki Krym*, June 2016, <http://crimea.gov.ru/textdoc/ru/6/act/13z.pdf> (accessed 13 April 2025).

However, when commenting on her 2015 performance, Maria Kulikovska adds her own emphasis. In particular, she highlights the symbolism of the white stripe of the flag, from which the red and blue colors disappeared after washing. According to the artist, the white color on the flag symbolizes the equality of all cultures and peoples of the peninsula, which turned out to be declarative. With her gesture, Maria was trying to draw attention to the change in the status of Crimea as a result of the violence: “I wash these colors because the borders of Crimea are mentally blurred. [...] It is a white spot on the world map [...]”.⁽⁴⁹⁾

After the outbreak of the full-scale invasion in 2022, Maria Kulikowska held or incited a series of reenactments of the *254. Aktsiia*. In particular, it took place in Azerbaijan in the public space of Baku as part of the group exhibition *The Fog of War*, Goethe Center Baku.⁽⁵⁰⁾ The exhibition was also shown in Tiflis (Georgia) and Almaty (Azerbaijan), where activists recreated Maria’s performance. The performance was also reproduced in Germany in a public space in Bremen as part of the group exhibition *How to Displace the Flag* at the Weserburg Museum.⁽⁵¹⁾ The *254. Aktsiia* lasted for a week at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin. Commenting on the performance, the artist noted that in this case it was not a protest, but rather a manifestation of solidarity with all Ukrainians from different Ukrainian cities and on the front line who are suffering but continue to live.⁽⁵²⁾

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49 “Ukrainska khudozhnytsia vyprala krymskyi prapor u Moskvi-richtsi,” *Ukrainska pravda. Zhyttia*, May 2015, <https://life.pravda.com.ua/person/2015/05/3/193416/> (accessed 11 April 2025).

50 Maria KULIKOVSKA, *254. Act of Solidarity. Baku*, 2022, performance, <https://www.mariakulikowska.net/project-page/254-act-of-solidarity-baku> (accessed 11 April 2025).

51 Maria KULIKOVSKA, *254. Act of Solidarity. Bremen*, 2022, performance <https://www.mariakulikowska.net/project-page/254-act-of-solidarity-bremen#> (accessed 11 April 2025).

52 Maria KULIKOVSKA, *254. Act of Solidarity*, 2022, performance, <https://www.mariakulikowska.net/project-page/254-act-of-solidarity> (accessed 11 April 2025).

Another example of artwork dealing with the flag is Maksym Khodak’s 2018 animation *Prapory propahandy* [Flags of Propaganda]. It was inspired by the black-and-white film *Bronenosets Potomkin* [Battleship Potemkin] (1925) by Sergei Eisenstein and its sequence in which the film culminates with the raising of the red flag over the deck of a battleship. Due to the specifics of black-and-white cinema, the flag that Eisenstein shot for this scene was white, but for the premiere, he colored it red in every frame of the film. In his animation, Khodak colored the flags from the Potemkin battleship footage in the colors of the flags of the most influential ideologies that, according to the artist, competed in Ukrainian society at the time – yellow and blue and red and black, which are associated with right-wing discourse, the red communist flag and the Russian tricolor.⁽⁵³⁾ The artist chose this film because of its propagandistic nature, as he commented: “Even the worst ideas can be propagated through artistic means.”⁽⁵⁴⁾ It is difficult to agree that the political struggle for power in Ukraine after independence can be called simply ideological – most often the line of tension was identitarian: between pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian forces, regardless of (other) ideological preferences. However, by simplifying these complex and ambiguous processes, Maksym’s artistic gesture reduces them to an ideological struggle, treating flags as its emblems, equating them through criticism of the propaganda that instrumentalizes art.

Identity and belonging are also important themes for Yulia Krivich, a Ukrainian artist based in Poland. In her artistic practice, based on her personal experience of migration and integration into a new community, she interprets national identity as a fluid element – she identifies herself as a migrant, but treats it as one of her

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53 Maksym KHODAK, *Flags of Propaganda*, 2018, animation, <https://www.maksymkhodak.com/flags-of-propaganda> (accessed 6 February 2025).

54 *Ibid.*

multiple identities. In 2019, Yulia Krivich held a happening *W Ukrainie* [In Ukraine] at the Western Railway Station in Warsaw, the place of arrival of migrants from Ukraine.⁽⁵⁵⁾ During the action, the artist stood in the square in front of the Railway Station holding a white flag with the words *W Ukrainie* written in Polish. The starting point of the event was the artist's intention to begin a discussion about the use of the prepositions "na" ["on"] and "w" ["in"] in Polish in relation to Ukraine.⁽⁵⁶⁾ In Ukrainian, the preposition "in" is used with the names of states, and the preposition "on" is used only for names that indicate a geographical part of a state.⁽⁵⁷⁾ In 2011, then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, during a meeting with Russian historians, emphasized the need to use the preposition "on" rather than "in," meaning that Ukraine is a territory, not a state.⁽⁵⁸⁾ Vladimir Putin used to say "in Ukraine" until the summer of 2013, and then began to use the expression "on Ukraine," declaring his strategic goal to unite Russians and Ukrainians into one state.⁽⁵⁹⁾

Since Russian propaganda outlets mostly use the expression "on Ukraine" when commenting on the Russian-Ukrainian war, this term became a symbolic manifestation of imperial claims and aggression.⁽⁶⁰⁾ Symmetrically, after the full-scale invasion, many Ukrainian media outlets began to use the expression "on Russia." In outlining this theme in the context of the Polish language, Yulia Krivich posed the questions: "Why do we speak of 'in France' but

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- 55 Yulia KRIVICH – Kateryna RUSETSKA, "Yulia Krivich/Юлія Кривич," *Secondary Archive*, <https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/yulia-krivich/> (accessed 6 February 2025).
- 56 "Yulia Krivich. W Ukrainie," *Szkola Patrzenia*, <https://www.szkolapatrzenia.pl/publikacja/9-transparent/9-11-w-ukrainie-yulia-krivich.html?source=2> (accessed 7 April 2025).
- 57 Liudmyla KOVAL, "Yak pravlyno hovoryty i pysaty v Ukraini chy na Ukraini?," *Universytetski visti*, 28 March 2022, <https://news.donnu.edu.ua/2022/03/28/yak-pravlyno-govoryty-i-pysaty-v-ukrayini-chy-na-ukrayini/> (accessed 26 April 2025).
- 58 Yaroslav HRYTSAK, *Podolaty mynule: hlobalna istoriia Ukrainy*, Kyiv: Portal 2021, p. 25.
- 59 *Ibid.*
- 60 Yvan TOLSTOI, "Ukrayna pod predlohom," *Radio Svoboda*, 27 February 2017, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/28332799.html> (accessed 26 April 2025).

not 'in Ukraine,' 'in Belarus,' or 'in Lithuania'? What language tradition does this come from? Is it an expression of colonialism?"⁽⁶¹⁾

A part of the action was its photographic documentation, which Yulia posted on Instagram and Facebook. The publication of the photos on social media provoked a strong reaction. A description of the action was published in Polish newspapers – *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Gazeta Stołeczna*. It sparked a discussion and a wave of criticism, as there were no sufficient grounds for accusations of linguistic colonialism. The use of these prepositions in modern Polish has no political connotations, but rather is an inherited archaic tradition, the origin of which is also debatable.⁽⁶²⁾ Nevertheless, the discussion resulted in several portals and magazines (*Wysokie Obcasy*, *Newsweek*, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *OKO.press*, *gazeta.pl*) starting to use the phrase "in Ukraine" in early 2020. *KyivPost* and the French newspaper *Le Courrier d'Europe Centrale* joined the campaign. In 2020, the action was repeated by activist Anna Dąbrowska from Homo Faber Foundation at the bus station in Lublin.⁽⁶³⁾ After the full-scale invasion, the project received an unexpected continuation. In July 2022, Julia's proposal was officially authorized and approved by the Polish Language Council. It was recognized that the form "on" as well as "in" is correct, but at the same time, the use of the form "in Ukraine" was recommended as more acceptable.⁽⁶⁴⁾ In the end, Yulia's artistic gesture created a resonance that revealed the symbolic connection between language and geopolitical consciousness.

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- 61 "Yulia Krivich. W Ukrainie."
- 62 "Opinia Rady Języka Polskiego w sprawie wyrażenia 'w Ukrainie' / 'do Ukrainy' i 'na Ukrainie' / 'na Ukrainę,'" *Rada Języka Polskiego*, July 2022, <https://rjp.pan.pl/?view=article&id=2099:opinia-rady-jezyka-polskiego-w-sprawie-wyrazen-w-ukrainie-do-ukrainy-i-na-ukrainie-na-ukraine&catid=98> (accessed 26 April 2025).
- 63 *Ibid.*
- 64 "W Ukrainie – Yulia Krivich – Wykłady, 5 minut o sztuce współczesnej, odcinek 7," *NNO – Po stronie odpowiedzialności*, 6 August 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=slceuK7UXf8> (accessed 7 April 2025).

In this way, the ambiguous nature of the image of the flag makes it present in the practice of Ukrainian artists as a tool for the critical reflection of politically charged topics, including ideology, violence, and collective identity. Bearing in mind that projects dealing with Ukrainian identity and the flag have long been used and worked on in contemporary Ukrainian art, I will now focus only on those projects created in Ukraine in response to the military aggression, which manifest various aspects of collective identity. My aim is to explore how the Russian-Ukrainian war has influenced thinking about collective identity in the contemporary artistic practice of Ukrainian artists and what are the main tropes and approaches used by them.

Two sides of the flag

Born in 1983 in Kyiv, the artist Alina Yakubenko has been a member of the art groups R.E.P. and Ubik since 2005 and was also a member of the DE NE DE initiative, where she curated projects dealing with social issues. In addition, she is part of the Ukrainian underground music scene, often performing as a DJ, and her artistic practices include painting, video, installation, and photography. An important component of her practice is interaction with public space, interventions through video projections in the urban environment.⁽⁶⁵⁾

Alina Yakubenko's video work *Flag/Prapor* [Flag] is a reaction to the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war in March 2014 and is aimed at finding a new identity for a person who finds themselves in new geopolitical circumstances.⁽⁶⁶⁾ This video was shot during a residency on the

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65 Ksenia HNYLYTSKA – Alina YAKUBENKO – Oksana BRIUKHOVETSKA, “Ksenia Hnylytska and Alina Yakubenko/Ксенія Гнилицька, Аліна Якубенко,” *Secondary Archive*, <https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/ksenia-hnylytska-and-alina-yakubenko/> (accessed 7 March 2025).

66 The title of the work consists of two words – the translation of the word “flag” into Ukrainian and Russian.

Biryuchiy Peninsula, located in the northwestern part of the Sea of Azov not far from the Ukrainian territory that has become contested by Russia. The residency took place in a tense atmosphere, because in 2014 Biryuchiy was close to the front line, “between peace and war,” and an attack on Ukrainian territory at this point could have started anywhere from land or sea.⁽⁶⁷⁾

Yakubenko's video is a diptych: it is a two-part documentation of the traditional, familiar use of the flag – on a flagpole and waving. The peculiarity of the flag in both videos is that its cloth is Ukrainian yellow and blue on one side and the Russian tricolor on the other. In the first part, the flag on the flagpole is being fluttered by the wind on the seashore. In the second part, Alina's friend, a Russian who changed his citizenship to Ukrainian, waves the same double-sided flag. The artist shows two dimensions of using the flag – as an object and as an action.⁽⁶⁸⁾ The flag as an object

is a symbol of appropriation, when a flag is used to mark a newly opened, liberated or captured territory. The flag, under the influence of external circumstances (“where the wind blows”), changes sides so quickly that it is impossible to determine the exact symbolism on it, it is a metaphor for military operations, when the territory changes its borders in a matter of hours.⁽⁶⁹⁾

The flag being waved is an element of the action. Here, the flag symbolizes the personal dimension – the search for self-identification of a person caught in the middle of geopolitical transformations.

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67 “Proekt [un]moved u Mystetskomu Arsenali,” *Vidkrytyi arkhiv ukrainskoho media-artu*, 17 November 2014, <http://mediaartarchive.org.ua/news/ukrainsku-strichku-vizna-no-nayviznachnishim-dokumentalnim-filmom-vsikh-chasiv1/> (accessed 10 March 2023).

68 My personal interview with Alina Yakubenko, 20 September 2024.

69 “Proekt [un]moved u Mystetskomu Arsenali.”

This is a video about Ukrainian citizens or people who are in border states, in border areas. Unlike the first video, here the person is actively involved, spending his or her energy, as he or she is driven by conflicting feelings and the inability to make a final choice,⁽⁷⁰⁾

comments Alina Yakubenko. The video deals with the problematic nature of personal choice, which is essentially a critique of the idea of the nation-state. "This work is about the variability, relativity, and artificiality of any state borders and one's own citizenship, and the need for such a choice in general,"⁽⁷¹⁾ says Yakubenko. In this work, the flag waving reveals the artificiality of identity acquisition, in fact, manifests it. By artificiality, I mean the fact that, like any other identity, national identity has to be learned.⁽⁷²⁾ The usual use of the flag in the context of "learning" an identity, which is not an innate property of a person but is the result of "training," involves interaction with the flag. People who are "training" to recognize their belonging to a particular nation-state are encouraged not only to observe the flag from afar, but also to interact with it as a physical object, including carrying it in their hands.⁽⁷³⁾ Pål Kolstø cites sporting events as an example of how citizens can form an emotional and psychological connection with national symbols.⁽⁷⁴⁾ Indeed, pride, joy, and enthusiasm can be reflected in the flag, especially when athletes wrap themselves in it in the most solemn moment of victory. In the Ukrainian context, we have another very emotional example: when Ukrainian prisoners of war are finally returned from Russian

70 *Ibid.*
 71 *Ibid.*
 72 KOLSTØ, "National Symbols," p. 1.
 73 *Ibid.*, p. 1.
 74 KOLSTØ, "National Symbols," p. 36.

captivity to Ukraine, they are wrapped in the national flag.⁽⁷⁵⁾

The anthropologist Raymond Firth distinguished between the symbolic and signaling functions of flags. In particular, he noted that the forerunners of modern national flags were often used as signals, reducing entropy in a situation of uncertainty.⁽⁷⁶⁾ In this case, flags acted as pragmatically convenient means of communicating messages. Instead, the national flag performs a symbolic function, being a "condensation symbol" and "a focus for sentiment about society."⁽⁷⁷⁾ Most of the national flags that citizens are likely to see in their lifetime will not signal a specific message.⁽⁷⁸⁾

The signal, if it is to be effective, must pass into the conscious awareness of its recipients. However, the symbol need not have a direct emotional impact [...]. That being so, one can distinguish between the ways in which national flags are treated. Some are consciously waved and saluted symbols [...]. Others – probably the most numerous in the contemporary environment – remain unsaluted and unwaved.⁽⁷⁹⁾

So, people normally don't pay attention to flags hanging in the city space, they perceive them just as part of the environment. In line with this scheme, Billig distinguishes between flags that are deliberately waved and saluted and flags that remain unwaved and are not saluted. These latter

75 Nadiia PRYSHLIAK, "Ukraina povernula z rosiiskoho polonu 197 zachysnykiv (foto, video)," *Unian*, 19 March 2025, <https://www.unian.ua/society/ukrajina-povernula-z-rosiyskogo-polonu-175-zahisnykiv-12950667.html> (accessed 13 April 2025).
 76 RAYMOND FIRTH, *Symbols. Public and Private*, London: George Allen and Unwin 1973, p. 356.
 77 *Ibid.*, p. 356.
 78 BILLIG, *Banal Nationalism*, p. 39.
 79 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

routine flags provide a banal reminder of nationality and are different from those that draw attention to themselves and their symbolic message.⁽⁸⁰⁾

In the case of Alina Yakubenko's work, the flag that is not waved seems to correspond to Billig's scheme. However, the artist's gesture, which transforms the national symbol into an indefinite one – either yellow and blue or a tricolor – in the situation of military confrontation between these states mobilizes the viewer's imagination. From being a routine flag that reminds of nationality and is normally an "unconscious" symbolic message, it shifts to the status of a signal and relays a message that is realized through its ambiguity. The message becomes conscious if there is an imaginary community in the recipient's mind with which he/she identifies. And this imagination, mobilized by an artistic gesture, provokes a real internal conflict. Thus, the artist's critical gesture reveals the aspect of identity construction that Benedict Anderson explains through the idea of an imagined community.⁽⁸¹⁾

The artist's commentary gives grounds to consider this work in the context of the borderland trope.⁽⁸²⁾ In this case, the border, the boundary that marks an essentially existential choice, is marked by a flag, the two sides of which are exhibitors of two states. The flashing of the flag represents the binary oppositions that construct each other and at the same time exclude each other. This gesture by the artist, who in 2014 maintained a critical distance from the war, focuses on the way identities are constructed, which echoes Stuart Hall's discursive approach. In particular, he notes that identities are constructed through differences, not outside of them. Only through a relation to the Other, to what has been called its constitutive appearance, can the

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80 *Ibid.*, pp. 40, 41.

81 Benedict ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso 1991, p. 6.

82 Myroslav SHKANDRII, *V obimakh imperii. Rosiiska i ukrainska literatury novitnoi doby*, Kyiv: Fakt 2004, p. 28.

"positive" meaning of any term – and hence its "identity" – be constructed.⁽⁸³⁾ Alina Yakubenko's video thus reveals the mechanisms of constructing identity as an imagined community and constructing on the principle of difference.

Identity as moral choice

Olia Fedorova is also a multidisciplinary artist. Born in 1994 in Kharkiv, she works with performance, photography, video and text, exploring and interacting with the environment as a semantic space – she is interested in writing as a physical, meditative and (self-)therapeutic practice.⁽⁸⁴⁾ Since the summer of 2022, she has been temporarily living and working in Graz, Austria. In her practice, Fedorova has addressed the image of the flag several times.

In the context of the question of belonging, the ongoing photo project *Ya ne znaiu de ya, ale tse mii dim* [I don't know where I am, but this is my home], which began in 2019, is worth mentioning. The artist took a flag made of transparent cloth on a journey, expanding her personal concept of "home." She photographed the transparent flag in various environments: in the middle of a snowy field; in a field among sunburned vegetation; among brown plowed land; under the clouds in the middle of ripe golden wheat; in the sea among water, thus assigning the status of home to an indefinite place. Although the photos show Ukrainian landscapes, it is difficult to recognize a specific place in them. The flag had to abandon its function to define the person who carries it, but in an atypical way. As a result of the artistic gesture, the flag was to stop expressing a stable identity through colors and graphic forms and become a less specific, variable, and

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83 Stuart HALL, "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?", in: Stuart HALL – Paul du GAY (eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity*, London: Sage Publications 1997, pp. 4–5.

84 Olia FEDOROVA, *Statement*, <https://www.oliafedorova.com/statement> (accessed 7 March 2025).

inclusive manifesto of a person's broad belonging to the world around them.⁽⁸⁵⁾

"A linguistic unit is an empty form that is filled with connotations depending on who is looking," says Olya Fedorova.⁽⁸⁶⁾ In the end, the flag became such an empty form. The flag plays a fundamentally different role here than in Yakubenko's work. The artistic gesture plays on the functions of the flag as both a symbol and a signal. On the one hand, the flag in this work has connotations of a national symbol, but its transparency undermines this function – the flag "reflects" the colors of the environment. Thus, it denotes not a fixed identity and stable affiliation with a particular country, but the "identity" of each place where it is installed. Planting a flag in a particular place distinguishes it, indicates it as "home" and sets a certain point of reference. This function echoes the signaling function of the flag as described by Raymond Firth – the flag as a signal, for example, marked a clear place for soldiers to rally on the battlefield or the presence of commander to other ships of the fleet.⁽⁸⁷⁾ In this series, the flag marks an abstract place and signifies the presence of the artist. The places depicted in Fedorova's works are abstract. In fact, this deterritorialization is the essence of the work, as the title *I don't know where I am, but this is my home* manifests. In this case, the place does not matter, because it can be anywhere. It all depends on where the artist plants her flag, which marks her physical presence, and it is the artist without a fixed identity who becomes the point of reference.

However, after the full-scale invasion, the emphasis in Fedorova's work fundamentally shifts. Until 24 February 2022, the artist focused on the landscape as a kind of abstract form that is filled with meaning depending on the viewer. Therefore, at the exhibitions, she showed exactly

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85 Borys FILONENKO, "Olya FEDOROVA," in: *Zdaietsia, ya zakhodzhu v nash sad* (exh. catalog), Kharkiv: A4 Plus 2019, pp. 122–123.

86 *Ibid.*, p. 125.

87 FIRTH, *Symbols*, p. 356.

those photos that did not have fragments that would help identify the landscape with a clearly defined place.⁽⁸⁸⁾ One part of this series of photographs of the flag at sea was taken in 2019 in Mariupol, the city that was later almost completely destroyed by the Russian Armed Forces. The battle for Mariupol lasted 86 days. At the end of April 2022, the ring of defense shrank to the territory of the Azovstal metallurgical plant, and the resistance lasted until the end of May. Since 20 May 2022, the city has been under occupation and for Ukrainians, the Azovstal plant in Mariupol has become a symbol of the steadfastness of the Ukrainian defenders.⁽⁸⁹⁾

Since then, as part of the above-mentioned project, Fedorova showed in her exhibitions a photo where the silhouette of the Azovstal plant is visible on the horizon, in the basements of which thousands of civilians and hundreds of the last defenders of Mariupol were hiding from Russian missile strikes from the sky, from the ground and from the sea.⁽⁹⁰⁾ By showing the photo of Azovstal, the artist identifies this place as a very specific location, framed by the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Fedorova is from Kharkiv, not Mariupol. However, in this project, the transparent flag no longer manifests the broad affiliation of the nomadic person to the outside world, but marks an important place for the artist as a member of the community against which terror is being perpetrated. Thus, the transparent flag that marks the place that has become a symbol of resistance is itself transformed into a symbol, changing its original meaning.

The shift in emphasis in Fedorova's practice towards the need to clearly define her identity can be seen in other works that appeared after the full-scale invasion. The

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88 My personal interview with Olya Fedorova, 14 September 2023.

89 Anton SIMANCHUK – Anna MURLYKINA – Denys HUBASHOV – Nadia KELM – Inna HADZYNSKA, "Viina. Pochatok. Mariupol," *Texty.org.ua*, April 2023, https://texty.org.ua/d/2023/mariupol_chronicles/ (accessed 4 September 2024).

90 Interview with Fedorova.

project *Skryzhali liuti* [Tablets of Rage] has the form of inscriptions on bedding, which was the only material available to Olia in the first days of the invasion: “Living in Kharkiv, one of the most bombed cities in Ukraine, between apartments and an underground bomb shelter, I write my ‘tablets of rage’ in which I express all my rage and anger at the Russians...”⁽⁹¹⁾ Olia didn’t have a paper of proper size at home and couldn’t buy it, because all the shops were closed due to the introduction of martial law and intense shelling. So she used old bed linen and other textiles as canvases. Later, these works were exhibited hanging on the walls. This method of display resembled laundry hung up to dry. The artist created inscriptions on them with a dark marker. In these poems, Olia expressed her reaction to the events around her: “These poems I wrote – are my prayers, my magic spells, my incantations to curse the enemy.” Here are some of these texts:

I don’t know where the history of my family started –
 These houses, apparently, have long been gone.
 But wherever I am, I feel
 As in this black soil my roots keep supporting me.
 For a long time, I spoke the language which wasn’t mine –
 I used to think it was my native one.
 But I always kept in my heart
 That language in which I was sang lullabies.
 My Lord Please give me strength to always remember who I am,
 And to resist those who want to force me to become who I am not.

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91 Olia FEDOROVA, *Tablets of Rage*, handwriting on the textile, 2022–2023, <https://www.oliafedorova.com/works/tablets-of-rage> (accessed 10 February 2025).

Don’t let me ever forget my roots,
 But also don’t let the past engulf me.⁽⁹²⁾

Another example is her project *Kraievyyd, yakyi boiusia zabuty* [The landscape I am scared to forget] (2023), a series of textile works made from fabrics found during the Kunstnarhuset Messen residency program in Ålvik, Norway – the remains of old Norwegian blankets, curtains, and furniture upholstery. Glued together, they refer to Ukrainian national flag colors. The artist admitted that while creating them, she thought about the landscapes of Ukraine: “The landscapes that I miss so much and that show up in my artworks again and again, even when I’m surrounded with stunning landscapes of other countries, whether they are Norwegian fjords, Austrian Alps or the skyscrapers of Tokyo...”⁽⁹³⁾

The change in the initial meaning of the artistic gesture, the shift from nomadicity to belonging as a manifestation of solidarity and the emotional connection of the artist with the represented place, can be read through Anderson’s idea of the nation as an imagined community.⁽⁹⁴⁾ At the same time, it is appropriate to recall Billig’s statement that the idea of a country as a place, as a certain territorial unity is similar to the idea of a national community. That is, according to the same principle that a nation is an imagined community, a territory with clearly defined borders as a condition of awareness for a certain group in relation to itself is also an imagined territory with which the community identifies itself.⁽⁹⁵⁾ Coming back to the project *Ya ne znaiu de ya, ale tse mii dim*, the place

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92 *Ibid.* Originally written in Ukrainian, this is the artist’s own English translation of her texts.

93 Olia FEDOROVA, *The landscape I am scared to forget*, reused textiles, 2023, <https://www.oliafedorova.com/works/landscape-i-am-scared-to-forget> (accessed 10 February 2025).

94 ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities*, p. 6.

95 BILLIG, *Banal Nationalism*, p. 74.

represented in the photo ceases to be an abstraction, instead it is concretized in the context of the country under attack. This concretization is connected with the mobilization of the artist's sense of belonging.

Another important aspect that Olia Fedorova's work reveals is the connection between identity and moral choice and the responsibility it entails. Referring to Zygmunt Bauman, Leonidas Donskis reflects on this issue, noting that in today's multicultural society it is understood as moral responsibility. Identity answers the question of who will celebrate our military and political victories, our history, or mourn the victims of war crimes.⁽⁹⁶⁾ Reflecting on the possibility of rethinking the principles of coexistence of differences, Bauman concludes that the modern project promised to free people from inherited identity. However, it did not oppose identity as such, against having a stable, and unchanging identity. It only transformed identity from a matter of ascription to a matter of achievement, thus making it an individual task and the responsibility of the individual.⁽⁹⁷⁾

Olia Fedorova's decision to exhibit a photograph from the project *Ya ne znaiu de ya, ale tse mii dim*, which radically shifts the emphasis of the original idea, as well as her other works made after the full-scale invasion, highlights the aspect of identity as a moral choice and personal responsibility for it described by Bauman and Donskis. In her artist's statement, she notes in particular that after 24 February 2022 she was forced to reorient her artistic practice to resist "modern Russian colonialism, imperialism and dictatorship, against oppression of all kinds, to make Ukrainian voices loud and heard."⁽⁹⁸⁾

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96 Leonidas DONSKIS, *Zbentezhena identychnist i suchasnyi svit*, Kyiv: Fakt 2010, p. 30.

97 Zygmunt BAUMAN, "Making and Unmaking of Strangers in Stranger or Guest?," in: Sandro FRIDLIZIUS – Abby PETERSON (eds.), *Racism and Nationalism in Contemporary Europe*, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International 1996, p. 62.

98 Olia FEDOROVA, *Statement*, <https://www.oliafedorova.com/statement> (accessed 7 March 2025).

The work of an emerging artist from Lviv, Illia Turyhin, born in 2001, explores how external factors – political, military, or personal – influence the processes of formation and transformation of national identity. The starting point for his video *Stiah* [Flag] (2023) was a personal story – the Russian origin of Illia's family has always been emphasized by his family members as a defining identity. The artist recalls that he had begun experiencing an internal conflict since school age, which was initially felt at the level of language: he essentially grew up in a bilingual Russian-Ukrainian environment: "The more my integration into different social environments deepened (clubs, children's camps, friends outside of school, etc.), the stronger the identity crisis became," Illia explains. The context in which Turyhin uses the term "identity crisis" allows us to consider it in the interpretation of Vincent Descombes:

The identity crisis has to play out in two registers: the first is the individual in the face of others (who recognize his objective identity in the sense of the Who's Who), and the second is the individual in the face of himself (hence the subjective identity that comes to the stage). The conflict it produces is not a purely internal contradiction [...]. It is caused by the fact that the individual cannot integrate into the community on which he depends until he has been able to reconcile the two sides of his "identity" in Erikson's sense.⁽⁹⁹⁾

The artist adds: "My position periodically changed from opposing myself to society and confidently saying 'I am not

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99 Vensan DEKOMB, *Klopoty z identychnistiu*, Kyiv: Stylos 2015, p. 106.

a Ukrainian; I am a Russian' to silence or cosmopolitanism. The crisis reached its peak with Russia's launch of a full-scale war.⁹⁹⁽¹⁰⁰⁾

While Russian missiles were destroying the country Turyhin grew up in and loves, his loved ones asked him to "remember his roots and identify with them," he recalls.⁽¹⁰¹⁾ This experience prompted him to research the transformations of Ukrainian identity in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war (including as part of his master thesis).⁽¹⁰²⁾ The work *Stiah* appeared as a result of his interest. The video shows a vertical pole against a blue sky. The camera gradually moves upward, but the end of the pole is never seen. The video is looped, so the viewer sees the camera moving continuously upward toward the invisible top of the pole, which remains off-screen. The video is accompanied by the sound of a flag flapping in the wind. It is only thanks to this sound that it is possible to identify the image in the frame as a flagpole at the level of sensory perception. The artist deliberately avoids representing the flag itself, leaving the viewer to imagine which flag flies on top of the flagpole. Despite the laconicism of the work, this understatement leaves a wide scope for interpretation by the viewer.

Obviously, the nature of the interpretation will depend on the place/country and with what cultural identity the viewer is looking at the work. However, for the artist, the context in which this work appeared is fundamental – he speaks from the place where he was born, from Ukraine and about Ukraine less than two years after the full-scale invasion, in the winter of 2023. This work is both an artistic statement and a question, which emerged as a reaction to a personal crisis of identity – the need to choose. At the same time, the work is addressed to compatriots, their

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sensuality and imagination. The image created by Turyhin involuntarily evokes associations, provoking an emotional response from the viewer. Bypassing discursive thinking, this emotional response claims to be the viewer's frank answer to himself. Whose flag flies at the top? What do you see there? What motivates your imagination to make a choice?

No matter what the viewer sees, the answer remains in his or her imagination, invisible to others, confidential – in fact, in the space of fantasy. However, this imaginary is of utmost importance for the real, directly affecting it. The desperate resistance of ordinary Ukrainians, rooted in an "irrational" belief in the value of freedom, slowed down the Russian offensive in the first days of the full-scale invasion and allowed the Ukrainian Armed Forces to deploy troops and launch an effective defense. Like Alina Yakubenko's work, Illia Turyhin's video exposes the mechanism of constructing identity as an imagined community. An important aspect of this work is the need to make a choice as such, and the responsibility that this choice entails. The pressure of (moral) responsibility creates an additional tension in this artistic expression. It emerged out of a sense of inner conflict over responsibility for one's choice. In this way, the work actualizes the understanding of identity described by Leonidas Donskis. The artist puts the viewer in a position where the imagination works without regard to his or her will. Faced with one's own imagination, the viewer can comprehend and choose a reality open to the future, or rather to the futures, realizing their own responsibility.

However, such a choice cannot take place without a strong-willed decision. Vincent Descombes interprets the identity crisis primarily as a crisis of indecision. He raises the question of whether it is possible to understand the "identity crisis" as a stage of life when an individual must face himself, making a radical choice of his values and his

100 My personal interview with Illia Turyhin, 20 September 2023.

101 *Ibid.*

102 Illia TURYHIN, *Natsionalna identychnist v umovakh rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny* [master's thesis], Lviv: Lvivska natsionalna akademiia mystetstv 2023.

life's purpose.⁽¹⁰³⁾ For Turyhin, the intention of his artistic expression is not so much to criticize the nation-state as to make a radical choice of values as a choice of self, and to realize that the various value systems he considered his own are in conflict.

This contradiction was articulated in 2022 in his installation *Vikna* [Windows]. In order to protect themselves from potential glass shards during shelling, the windows in the shelter of the artist's house were filled with books from Turyhin's library, which consisted mainly of Russian literature. "Every time I was in the shelter, I thought about how ironic it was that Russian books should protect me from Russian missiles."⁽¹⁰⁴⁾ This idea became the starting point for his *Vikna* installation consisted of several elements – window frames with glass placed in the gallery space, as well as a video. The glass of the window frames, located on the floor, was taped in a specific way to keep the glass inside the window frames during the blast wave. The window frame was lying on a carpet – since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, civilians have started using carpets to protect themselves from glass shards in the event of explosions. Another window frame was suspended in the gallery space and filled with books from Illia's library. The installation was complemented by a video on a tablet – thanks to the multi-screen effect, the video simultaneously showed footage of windows from the streets of Lviv that were protected from missile attacks in different ways. These devices created a kind of bizarre aesthetics of the streets in Ukrainian cities at the beginning of the invasion.

A similar formal technique of mobilizing the viewer's imagination through the play of the visual and aural is used in the video work *Tin prapora* [Shadow of the Flag] (2024) by Vlodko (Volodymyr) Kaufman. He was born in 1957 in Karaganda (Kazakhstan) and has lived and worked in Lviv

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since 1974. Kaufman is a graphic artist, painter, performer, curator and also a co-founder of important art institutions in Lviv – in 1989–1993, he was a member of the Shliakh [The Way] art society; in 1993, he co-founded the Dzyga Art Association – one of the first institutions in Ukraine to exhibit experimental contemporary art. In 2007, Kaufman co-founded the Institute of Contemporary Art that ran the Week of Contemporary Art and the Days of Performance Art in Lviv. These institutions and events have had a significant impact on the development of the Ukrainian art scene and artistic education. Through experimentation in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Kaufman found his medium by exploring and experimenting with different formats and techniques. He called his genuine art genre "vydyvo" [spectacle + video], which combines graphic art, painting, installations, performance, and happenings. In its material form, this format is a cross between spectacle and video.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾

The work *Tin prapora* is rather atypical for his practice, as he has not turned to video for many years. It is also the first time Kaufman has worked with the image of the flag, linking its creation to the reaction to the full-scale invasion.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ The work shows a piece of land covered with grass. Gradually, the lighting changes in the frame and the shadow of the flag on a pole and an indefinite structure on which it is mounted appears. Several factors create the dynamics of the video. The movement of the sun causes the lighting to change and the shadow to gradually shift in the frame. The silhouette of the flag appears and disappears, and the contrast of the shadows changes depending on whether the sun is shining or going behind the clouds. The flag is fluttering in the wind, which blows and then stops. The video is accompanied by sound – insects chirping in the grass, birds singing, the sound of the wind and the flag

103 Vensan DEKOMB, *Kłopoty z identychnistiu*, Kyiv: Stylos 2015, pp. 132–133.

104 Interview with Turyhin.

105 "Vlodko (Volodymyr) Kaufman," *Center for Urban History*, <https://lia.lvivcenter.org/en/persons/kaufman-volodymyr/> (accessed 7 March 2025).

106 My personal interview with Volodymyr Kaufman, 12 February 2025.

as it blows. The video begins and ends with a shot in which there is no shadow of the flag.

An important element of the artistic expression is the way the plot is relayed. The video is edited from fragments shot with an unprofessional camera. The presence of the cameraman is “included” in the work: the image captures the trembling of the filming hand; the image is occasionally distorted – pixelated into an abstraction – and visual “noise” appears. The sound accompanying the video is also distorted – in addition to the sounds of nature, wind, and a tractor engine, the noise of the speaker of the camera is clearly audible. This presence of the camera and cameraman is part of the artistic gesture. The artist consciously included the context of the broadcast in the work: “When this glitch appears, it gives a warning, you start to doubt something – what is it? Maybe it’s not true? Why did it appear? It creates tension.”⁽¹⁰⁷⁾ In this way, Kaufman articulates his distrust of the image as a representation that can manipulate the viewer, as an instrument of ideology and propaganda.

Although the technique used by Vlodko Kaufman has a lot in common with the work of Illia Turyhin, for the former this video is not related to psycho-social identity and internal conflict. Realizing the constructed nature of identity, he accepts it as something that cannot be avoided: “There are some significant things that you cannot overcome in yourself one way or another, because otherwise you feel uncomfortable. Because you were brought up with it.”⁽¹⁰⁸⁾ Therefore, in this work, the artist focuses not on criticizing the need to choose, but on the realization of his own choice. This work is a reflection, addressed to others, on what the flag means to everyone, as it appears in the imagination. The idea of an imagined community is also emphasized by Kaufman’s observation: “I caught myself thinking that when the shadow disappeared, nothing

107 *Ibid.*

108 *Ibid.*

changed... this noise remained out of frame.”⁽¹⁰⁹⁾ Kaufman draws attention to the fact that even when the flag is not visible, the sound from it continues to act on the imagination and evoke its image, which is different for everyone.

Conclusion

The focus on collective identity and radicalization of world-views for societies that find themselves the target of military aggression is not a unique phenomenon. Nevertheless, in the context of the dynamic transformations that Ukrainian society is experiencing, art retains the ability to remain a critical tool of reflection or to act as a “magnifying glass” that reveals the mechanisms of perception of reality, its ordering and comprehension even in these difficult circumstances. Art responds sensitively to threats and changes in a society both at the level of themes and at the level of “plastic” language and imagery, in particular when it refers to recognizable symbols of general significance such as the image of the flag.

Considered works of art reveal the ways of constructing national identity; constructing belonging to a place; understanding the national community and national territory as mental representations; realizing one’s own collective identity as a personal choice. These characteristics of the semantic levels of the analyzed projects give grounds to consider them as part of a discourse that concerns not an ethnic but a civic concept of identity based on a conscious personal choice. The analysis of the projects under consideration revealed the peculiarities of understanding the questions “who am I?” and “who are we?” through artistic means, as well as how art can interact with these problems at the intersection of different philosophical, anthropological, and political perspectives.

109 *Ibid.*