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HOW DO WE PRODUCE KNOWLEDGE ON A COUNTRY DURING ARMED CONFLICT? THE CHALLENGES OF RESEARCHING UKRAINE IN THE CONTEXTS OF EUROMAIDAN AND RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

Abstract

This paper addresses some of the challenges that Euromaidan, Russia's annexation of Crimea, and the armed conflict in the East of Ukraine present to the work of researchers who study Ukraine-related issues. Firstly, I explore the considerations of "doing no harm" to the research subjects and avoiding the possible hazards to the researcher themselves. Secondly, I look at the conflict's limiting impact on scholarly writing. Thirdly, I look at potential tensions and splits within research communities that might affect the processes of collaborative production of knowledge. Based upon a series of interviews with scholars of Ukraine, this paper seeks to analyse some of the difficulties facing academics in politically sensitive situations.

Keywords: Ukraine, Euromaidan, production of knowledge, armed conflict, research ethics.

Introduction

Research in the context of large-scale social protests and armed conflicts is fraught with tensions and ethical quandaries which affect the processes of production of analytical knowledge as well as the socio-political processes beyond academia. In a tense and conflict-ridden environment within and across Ukrainian, Russian, and Western societies during the ongoing armed conflict in Donbas, researchers in Ukraine and in other countries have been faced with the need to make ethical decisions. Their complex experiences have so far received little attention, however, they represent a sensitive and potentially distressing issue that requires

a systematic analysis. My focus is on the influence that Euromaidan, Russia's annexation of Crimea, and the subsequent armed conflict in the East of Ukraine has had on the work of researchers into Ukraine-related topics, as the most dramatic and large-scale recent events in the post-Soviet space that have had a significant impact on politics and societies, international relations and social networks. This is a critical context for improving the understanding of research and knowledge production in politically sensitive situations.

A lot has been written about dangers and challenges in the field, particularly about those faced by anthropologists, as well as social and political scientists, and those (self-) identified as militant or activist researchers. The issues faced by scholars exploring conflict and political tensions are manifold and dependent upon the context of their work, but key questions resonate across disciplinary, geographical, and socio-political fields.

Safety and possible risks to the researcher as well as research participants are fundamental issues particularly relevant to studying politically oppressive or violent environments and during crises (Sluka 1990, Smeltzer 2012, Onuch 2014, Wood 2006). Concerns about access to and exit from the field, security risks, ethics and permissibility of data collection in crisis-affected zones are also accompanied by contemplations on researcher neutrality and applicability of the idea of "objective" research (Goodhand 2000, Helbardt *et al.* 2010). Emotional involvement, empathy and compassion are potentially destabilizing issues in such studies. The value of conflict zone research is stressed as an opportunity to not keep the knowledge about it "stuck at the pre-war level" (Goodhand 2000: 12), as well as giving voice to the affected populations and making the conflicts visible (Helbardt *et al.* 2010: 349). However, recognition of the impact of the messages the researchers are sending with their work as part of the "information economy", and their potentially empowering, but also possibly destabilising, consequences are to be approached with great care (Goodhand 2010). Self-censorship or inability to publish some of the findings, are the likely ethical issues for conflict researchers encountering controversial information (Cramer *et al.* 2011, Sluka 1990).

In addition to the challenges connected with following the imperative of "doing no harm", the risks involved in studying conflicts and protests may include ethical concerns about development of trust and rapport, "uncritical alignment", over-identification with movements, concerns of representation, and tensions of split identities (Juris and Khasnabish 2013,

Routledge 1996). Furthermore, there are particular challenges in studying movements and groups where reciprocity with the researcher is ambiguous or hardly possible (Gillan and Pickerill 2012). Overall, the idea that “in a revolutionary situation, no neutrals are allowed” (Nash 1976: 150) is a recurrent theme in studies of politically unstable situations (Cramer *et al.* 2010, Porter *et al.* 2005, Sluka 1990, Helbardt *et al.* 2010). The balance between being an insider and an outsider has been a topic of much debate in social sciences more generally (Merton 1972, Scheper-Hughes 1995), while in research on conflicts it gains a particular political relevance. But even though neutrality on the researcher’s part is generally perceived as practically unachievable, the careful reconsideration of the ideas of distance and detachment is an issue that needs to be explored in more detail in this context (Candea *et al.* 2015, Malyutina 2016).

Among the multitude of challenges connected with conducting research in (or on) conflict environments and producing knowledge, it makes sense to concentrate on a few that are most relevant to the current context. Due to length constraints, for the purpose of this paper, I outline three main themes that relate, loosely, to some of the main practices academics engage in (undertaking research, writing and publishing, discussing and presenting the results, interacting with colleagues and various audiences).¹ To be more precise, the key concerns of this study are as follows:

Firstly, it is the commonly discussed issue of harm and risk that concerns both the considerations of “doing no harm” to the research subjects and avoiding the possible hazards to the researcher themselves. This does not necessarily or only mean physical harm, as something that one might face while doing research in the actual zone of an ongoing armed conflict. It is understood here more broadly, including the potential threats that the researcher, their subjects, the social structures and institutions they are involved with or focusing on, or even the country’s political system and international relations might face in connection with their research.

Secondly, it is the idea of the potentially destabilising influence of the conflict on some of the routine elements of academic life. In this study, I concentrate on the impact on scholarly writing, both as a process and as a creation of tangible outputs which is a result of this practice.

Thirdly, I focus on the relationships among members of an academic community that may undergo certain changes and suffer from potential tensions and splits that, in turn, might affect the processes of collaborative production of knowledge.

Methods

This study is empirically based upon 15 semi-structured expert interviews with researchers that were conducted via Skype between November 2016 and January 2017. Skype was chosen because the interviewees were geographically dispersed across six different countries, and the easiest way to access them was via this increasingly popular medium for qualitative research that combines a “‘face-to-face’ experience” with the “flexibility and ‘private space’ elements offered via telephone interviews” (Hanna 2012: 241). Respondents were recruited from personal acquaintances and colleagues with elements of snowballing technique: this strategy was considered most appropriate for this study which represents the first stage of a planned more large-scale research. The interviews were conducted in Russian and English languages lasting between 40 minutes and one and a half hour each. They were then transcribed verbatim and analysed using MAXQDA software. The analysis included development of a system of codes and bringing them together in more general categories, which helped identify a number of key themes.

Before describing the sample, a few words need to be said about the methodological particularities of interviewing researchers. Expert interviews are considered to be an efficient and concentrated method of data gathering, especially fruitful in case there is a shared understanding of scientific, social and political relevance of such research, and a high level of the expert’s motivation to participate in research (Bogner *et al.* 2009). The issue of negotiating power relations in a research situation can be characteristic of expert interviews where one might need to “bargain a study” in order to secure control over relationship with a powerful (and also more knowledgeable) research subject, but also to consider the interests and vulnerabilities of both parties (Obelene 2009). This is hardly a unique problem in qualitative research more generally; however, I observed that these issues were less relevant in a situation where both the interviewer and the interviewee, as scholars, share commonalities of expertise and exposure to the same field. Wiles *et al.* (2006: 284) suggest that “studies conducted by academic or professional researchers of their peers raise specific ethical issues that are not *distinct* from those inherent in all research but which arguably place researchers in a situation where they have increased sensitivity to some ethical issues such as confidentiality”. With regard to this study, this sensitivity proved to be beneficial since it promoted mutual understanding in terms of ethical aspects of this research.

My purpose was not only to gain understanding of the various difficulties that researchers may encounter while working in the context of armed conflict, but also to approach my respondents as active and knowledgeable individual subjects who might not want to be described as anonymised “informants”. Indeed, anonymisation in different research situations may be considered patronising, limiting the emancipatory and participatory research potential, decontextualising historical events, or even be impossible to maintain if a research group is unique and well-known (Vainio 2012, van den Hoonaard 2003). Therefore, I suggested to the researchers I interviewed that they decide themselves upon the level of anonymity. Interview transcripts were sent to the interviewees who then informed me if they wanted any parts of them anonymised or not published. Only one person decided to stay completely anonymous.

While approaching my respondents, I intended to keep the sample diverse in terms of disciplinary backgrounds, research interests, and origins of the subjects. The pilot nature of this research phase, time constraints, and concerns about generalisability required the imposition of some limitations, though. For example, the representation of Russian and US scholars is low; the majority of the respondents are based in Western European countries and Ukraine.

Next stages of this research will need to concentrate on these currently underrepresented categories: for example, Russian scholars focusing on Ukraine-related issues during the ongoing armed conflict between the countries are likely to face very specific issues connected with their identity and feelings about the ways in which their positionality² impacts the perception of their work. This was the case among Russian journalists in Ukraine whom I interviewed in late 2015: being a Russian journalist in Ukraine was sometimes connected with (self-)imposed limitations on speaking up about local issues or politically sensitive discussions. These were interpreted as a result of an individual moral choice. At the same time, such a positionality was also sometimes perceived as advantageous, enabling media professionals to employ their skills and characteristics tactically to achieve better professional results. The Maidan and the subsequent events have thus influenced their work ethics and made them particularly sensitive to the ideas of responsibility and journalistic subjectivity (Malyutina, 2017). The ways in which these events could have affected Russian researchers are yet to be researched.

Overall, at the time of the interviews three of my subjects were based in Austria, one in Israel, three in the UK, five in Ukraine, two in France,

and one in the US, working in universities, research centres and think tanks. Not all of them were involved exclusively in academic activity. More than half of them don't live in their countries of origin, which include Ukraine, Russia, the UK, Germany, and Belarus. Two of the Ukrainian respondents are from Crimea and Donbas, and had to either abandon the idea of going to the annexed territory again, or leave the home city when the war started. There were eight women and seven men in the sample. Their disciplinary fields of expertise include sociology, political science, history, literature and culture, philosophy, and policy analysis. Among their research interests are topics as diverse as the far right, memory politics, gender, social movements, migration, ideologies, and cultural memory (to name just the major ones).

Finally, something has to be said about the role of my own researcher positionality in this study. As a scholar who has been working on Ukraine-related themes since the beginning of the Euromaidan (namely, on the topics of Ukrainian migrants' protest activism in London, and the challenges faced by Russian migrant journalists living in Ukraine), and has been involved in some common academic activities (conferences, publications in journal special issues), has been engaged with the Ukrainian communities in London, and has lived in Ukraine for a few months, I felt that this experience provided me enough ground for developing rapport with most of my respondents (many of whom I already knew personally). However, this does not preclude from some issues potentially arising in the future, for example, when interviewing figures who are less known to me personally, or significantly more senior scholars in terms of academic career. Nevertheless, my experience of interviewing researchers as a researcher has proved to be a largely smooth and engaging process.

Framing the Case

The first thoughts on the topic of challenges faced by researchers studying large-scale social protests and armed conflicts arose during Euromaidan itself, the annexation of Crimea, and the first months of the armed conflict in Donbas.

The idea of this research takes its most significant inspiration from a 2014 interview with Vyacheslav Likhachev published in a 2014 issue of *Ab Imperio* in a section titled "Ukraine and the Crisis of 'Russian Studies': Participant Observation of History in the Making" (Likhachev 2014). In an

interview with the historian Andrii Portnov, Likhachev, a Russian historian and political scientist who has lived in Ukraine for over a decade and moved to Israel before the Euromaidan, outlines a number of challenges that he has faced since the beginning of the protests.

Likhachev reflects upon the relationship between “involvement and objective expertise”, and the dynamics of ethical approaches to the politics of writing and expression in the changing political circumstances. He mentions personal issues and the specifics of observing the unfolding events from abroad. The researcher also observes the increasing complexity of recognising one’s positionality as more than simply an “observer” or an “expert”, but also as a “public activist” and a “popular commentator”. Particular methodological concerns that he mentions include “intellectual honesty”, “intonation of texts”, and selection of themes. Furthermore, he describes the ambiguity of the task of presenting balanced accounts between academic and public commentary. Being “unwilling to engage in propaganda” and keen on “saying the truth and only the truth”, but at the same time feeling compelled to counteract the anti-Ukrainian discourse is another important issue. Finding oneself unable to engage in activities or take up jobs that imply promoting ideas running counter one’s political beliefs has become relevant in the context of Euromaidan. The researcher also reflects on the ways in which his research could have affected his research subjects and his concerns about the (potential) risks to some of them (but also to his future career) as related to publishing his work on Ukrainian far right in the context of the political crisis. Finally, he also speaks about the possibilities to influence public opinion by engaging in activities in the information space. Constantly employing reflexivity and critically questioning one’s public position are presented by Likhachev as key imperatives of his work.

My own concerns, as an ethnographer conducting engaged research on Ukrainian migrant street protests and some other activism in London in late 2013-2014, are also connected with the idea of the need to address the complexity of researchers’ experiences in more detail; for example, by examining the role their national/ethnic origin and gender may play in the course of fieldwork (Malyutina 2014, 2016). By analysing the challenges posed by negotiating my own Russian-ness and female-ness as an engaged researcher, I reflect upon the implications of “taking sides” while studying protests, and conclude that distance may be necessary in relationships with the research subjects in order to facilitate critical reflexivity.

Other reflections on the topic that have been published or otherwise articulated by researchers so far are few and not as detailed. It has been noted that fieldwork during protests, in war-affected areas, and with vulnerable populations, has its own problems. Onuch (2014) addresses a number of practical and methodological difficulties encountered while conducting a survey at the Maidan in winter 2013-2014. Galushko and Zorba (2013) mention political risks and concerns about anonymity of expert interviews during the period of political instability. A report on a 2013-2014 study of Maidan and Antimaidan activism in different regions of Ukraine which was conducted by a group of Russian researchers notes that the Russian origin of the interviewers affected their access to the field, and caused respondents from both sides to become suspicious of the interviewers' motives (PS.Lab 2015). Sereda and Mikheieva's 2016 study on displaced persons from Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts lists, among the methodological challenges, difficulties in reaching the affected groups, dealing with respondents' post-traumatic syndrome, and sensitivity of research topics.

The impact of the war on academic communities has been one of the topics addressed by some authors. Zhuk (2014) traces and questions his positionality as framed within (and as opposed to) the Russian-focused historiographical scholarly community in the US. Portnov (2014) mentions the impossibility of viewing the conflict in a detached way because of concerns about colleagues who had to leave the war-affected areas of Donbas. Elsewhere, he argues:

The attitude to these events [the Maidan, Russia's annexation of Crimea, and war on part of the territories of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts'] and the language of describing these, have turned into an identification mark of political affiliation, even beyond the boundaries of Eastern Europe. Emotional and ideological tension has manifested in academic publications as well: in these, facts are often selected to fit pre-determined conclusions; information sources are often not verified; certain statements in social media are neither contextualised nor called into question; descriptions of a dynamic socio-political situation are frequently static and subject to essentialised categories of "identity"; and serious transnational and transregional comparisons remain rare. (Portnov 2016: 103).

Turkova (2016) reviews the impact of the war on professional connections between Russian and Ukrainian linguists, arguing that "scholars find it impossible to rise above the fray and engage in pure,

disinterested analysis”, which has led to mutual isolation of research communities, and has limited the opportunities for research on linguistic processes during the armed conflict.

Media interviews are another option for researchers to reflect on the challenging aspects of their work. Shukan mentions the inspirational role of the Maidan for her as a sociologist, and speaks about a feeling of uncertainty while doing fieldwork in Donetsk at early stages of the war (“Mir nikogda ne priznaet...” 2015). Mikheieva talks about the limitations imposed by the war on the perspectives of archival research in Donbas, and while discussing the difficulties of life of a displaced person from the East in Western Ukraine from a personal perspective, also notes that analytical skills of a social scientist may be protective against particular disappointments (Kovalenko 2016a, 2016b).

Overall, these and similar observations suggest that a multitude of ethical challenges arose among the researchers since the very beginning of the Euromaidan; however, there has been no systematic attempt so far to disentangle and analyse these in detail. The next sections of this paper are, by no means, able to provide a complete picture; but they present an examination of some of the common issues faced by the scholars, which were outlined in the introductory part of this work.

Avoiding Risks and Harm

The discussion of ethical challenges accompanying the research process, from the start of fieldwork to writing up and disseminating the results, feeds into the idea of developing an ethical research practice as a way of dealing with, overcoming, or mitigating the potentially harmful effects for participants of the research interaction. In this section of the article, I will concentrate on two aspects of this idea: the respondents’ reflections on avoiding potential harm brought about by their research and dissemination of its results; and their thoughts on the various risks that they themselves might face in the process.

“Do no harm”

The idea that research should aim to do no harm to the research subjects is a classic ethical imperative. This applies to conducting research with human subjects, avoiding the risks to their health and safety as well as

emotional condition, and minimising the exploitative potential of research process. Concerns of anonymity and confidentiality can be of particular importance while studying populations that are affected by unstable political situations. However, even if research does not necessarily involve actual interactions with individual subjects and social groups (for example, as an interviewer), the issues of avoiding potential damage brought about by it can still be relevant for some of my respondents.

To start with, some of the obvious challenges of conducting field research are connected with the territories of Russia-annexed Crimea, and the occupied areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. These concern physical safety of respondents, interviewers, and other members of local populations, but also difficulties of access, and, on a more abstract level, the ideas of whether it is morally permissible to do research there. Oksana Mikheieva, an historian and sociologist working at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv (herself originally from Donetsk), reflects upon the differences in perceptions of these territories:

There's this general ethical idea in Ukraine, [Ukrainian researchers] don't go to the territory of Crimea [...] because from the point of view of the Ukrainian sociological community, we came to a conclusion that we cannot provide safety to the interviewers and to the respondents. It is considered immoral to conduct research in the Crimean peninsula now. In terms of doing research in the East [of Ukraine], it is more ambiguous. [...] As far as I know, a number of big sociological agencies are conducting qualitative and quantitative studies in the occupied areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts yet. But I don't know how it will be in future [...]

I heard about problems of research at the Crimean peninsula in 2014, when among those who suffered as a result were not only interviewers and respondents, but also, for example, the owner of the cafe where the interview was conducted. [...] Definitely, we shouldn't get people into trouble, however important such research may seem now.

It is not only studies actually conducted in Crimea and East of Ukraine which can be connected to potential harm. A number of researchers I interviewed have been engaged in projects based upon interviews with social groups that can be considered vulnerable; such as displaced persons who had to leave Crimea and Donbas, (former) combatants, and female participants of the ATO (Anti-Terrorist Operation). Some people have also conducted participant observation and brief interviews at the

Maidan during the protests of 2013-2014, and immediately after that. The traditional concerns of anonymity within social sciences and protection of research subjects' identities apply to the studies conducted by my respondents; according to them: "I promise anonymity to people, and I never had any screw-ups in my whole professional career. This is like the seal of confession to me"; "These are the elementary norms of scientific research, these ethical norms must be followed."³

At the same time, standard procedures of anonymisation do not necessarily ensure that potential risks are eliminated. In other words, research results may bring public attention to social groups and practices, and be used or interpreted in a manipulative way by media, political authorities, and other organisations. According to a scholar who is at an early stage of a study on displaced persons:

As researchers, we are trying to be ethically neutral, or even support the point of view of the vulnerable people. However, from the authorities' point of view, this information about vulnerable people can often be used against them, even if it is presented in very general terms. So I think we might face some difficulties here.

Nevertheless, depending upon the researcher's chosen method and approach to their participants, anonymisation is not used universally. This particularly applies to instances when the scholar is concerned with giving voice to the research subjects and increasing their participatory potential. Thus, Ioulia Shukan, a political scientist from the University Paris-Ouest Nanterre who has been conducting ethnographic research of ordinary citizenship practices at the Maidan and after it, specifically stresses that she did not anonymise her respondents:

I had a different aim. I wanted to [give] anonymous people [...] more publicity as participants in [the Maidan]. [...] At the Maidan, I think I had a different logic. I was communicating with anonymous people, and I wanted to make them non-anonymous.

Empowerment of research participants can be an important concern for researchers whose work correlates with feminist and emancipatory approaches. Another respondent, Tamara Martsenyuk, a sociologist from Kyiv-Mohyla Academy who has been involved in a project on women's participation in ATO military operations in Ukraine (which was also partly

a lobbying project to improve women's situation in Ukrainian armed forces; see Martsenyuk *et al.* 2016), speaks about some of the challenges of maintaining research participants' anonymity, in the case of studying a particular social group:

In our study, *Invisible Battalion*, we interviewed 42 women, and we tried not to include their names [...] just the general socio-demographic information; principally because sometimes they tell us things that might cause them some problems. [...] We understand that some may be identified, for example, because there are not so many female snipers. But some of them have become more public persons, because we also had a photography project, and it's hard to fight when everything is anonymous. [...] It was a nice surprise for me when the women themselves wanted to stand for their rights as ATO participants. There was a huge resonance in the media. The [female respondents] came to the project presentation and spoke there openly.

Apart from protecting the identities of research subjects, more specific issues that researchers frequently come across in their work include dealing with potential emotional damage. In this sense, after the Maidan, many of the researchers seem to have encountered new challenges at this stage of their careers. For example, Anna Colin Lebedev, a political scientist from the University Paris-Ouest Nanterre, recalls:

When I interviewed veterans of the Afghan war, I understood that there was a trauma in their narratives. But this was an old trauma, from 20 years ago, and I didn't have a feeling that I'm evoking something that might harm them. I didn't even think about this aspect at that time, to be honest.

But now I understand, when I'm interviewing the combatants [of the Russia-Ukraine war] who have just returned [from the war], many of them are in a very difficult psychological condition. And I realise that I'm not ready, I'm not ready methodologically, I don't know what to do with them. I was never trained by a psychiatrist who could have told me how to realise when I need to stop. [...] Especially in one interview, I felt very strongly that I might be doing something that can make the person feel radically bad. Although I don't ask hard questions myself, but people sometimes just start talking about these issues.

Although researchers have already been involved in their studies for some time, it seems that still for many of them there is no clear solution on how to deal with difficult situations of talking or otherwise engaging with people who have recently experienced trauma because of the ongoing conflict. Olesya Khromeychuk, an historian from the University of East Anglia, contemplates:

I'm in the position of someone who's asking difficult questions, talking about difficult subjects, like sexual violence, and if my respondents start telling me these painful memories, how do I react to this? I keep thinking about it, and I don't have any clear solutions yet.

In terms of the wider implications of research and its connection with harm, my respondents are not only thinking of it as related to interactions with individual respondents and social groups. It is often described as part of the responsibility of the researcher, particularly in sensitive political situations like the one in Ukraine, to help minimise risks for the society. As argued by Mikhail Minakov, a political philosopher from Kyiv-Mohyla Academy:

Philosophy is an applied discipline, not a theoretical one. [...] its mission is to be therapeutic via critique of ideology. That's what I've been trying to do since 2014 [...] The responsibility of social and political philosophers, sociologists, political scientists increases, in order to produce new ideas for solving conflicts, and to reduce harm.

In this respect, the researcher's task is described as not just exploration and abstract theorizing, but also as something that has a practical value. Vyacheslav Likhachev, an historian and a political scientist, an expert on the far right who worked at the National Minority Rights Monitoring Group and lived in Jerusalem at the time of the interview, stresses:

Of course, there is an ethos of "doing no harm". [...] However, this work has always had a practical meaning. It has never been abstract and speculative, it was for informing society, so that society could make conclusions about movements, political leaders. It was for working with the state authorities in order to monitor xenophobia and hate crimes. [...] I'm exploring something because I'm interested in it for some reason, but I'm also producing something for external purposes, following a particular

purpose – to do something for society, to change something for the better, and of course, to do no harm to anyone.

The topic of the far right in Ukraine has become extremely politicised after the Maidan and frequently exploited by the Russian propagandistic media as well as some Western commentators; this has been underlined by the specialists on this topic whom I interviewed. This has led, on the one hand, to the rapid increase in demand for their expertise as researchers and often as political commentators. On the other hand, the recognition of the importance of careful and qualified expertise on the topic has contributed to some decisions that may be interpreted as attempts to use this expertise in order to counteract manipulation of information, oppose misinterpretations of the role of the far right in the Ukrainian revolution, and thus help minimise the damage to the image of Ukraine (including both the potential future image of it as a democratic country, and the image of the revolution as liberal and pro-European). Anton Shekhovtsov, a political scientist from the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, notes:

Just as I feared, the far right participation in the Maidan has been used by propaganda from different sides to discredit these protests. [...] It didn't make me stop researching the far right. But I started to approach this topic more carefully, meaning that if this theme becomes a weapon of some political forces that are using it just to harm Ukraine, for instance, I would refuse to give interviews to Russian TV channels, or channels that I knew would manipulate my words.

The idea that information, if used unprofessionally or in a manipulative way, may inflict harm upon respondents, colleagues, vulnerable social groups, and even wider society, underscores the concerns of researchers, especially those who regularly engage in public commentary. Andreas Umland, a German political scientist and historian who works at the Institute for Euro-Atlantic Cooperation in Kyiv, argues:

Generally, truth liberates, it has to come out. I see it as a key task of an academic researcher, a journalist, and a good citizen in general, that if you have some truthful information, it should be disseminated, if it is valuable. [...] But there are exceptions to this, not all information should always be shared with everyone. Because it might end up in the hands of those who are less constrained in terms of morality and ethics.

Umland also mentions another topic that is related to concerns about harm and risks, and that, according to him, has emerged as important after the Maidan – namely, particular attention paid to potential risks to colleagues:

For example, if someone goes to the war zone, then you need to keep this information to yourself, to prevent it from getting to the media. Because if someone comes to Ukraine, or goes to Russia, not to mention Donbas, there is a concern: if I announce on Facebook that my colleague went somewhere, some unsavoury people may meet them there.

Thus, the idea of research as potentially connected with (reducing) harm also includes a focus on another social group that may be affected by studying socially and politically relevant issues in the context of the armed conflict: the researchers themselves.

Risks to the researcher

There has been no direct threat of imminent physical violence to most of the researchers of the recent situation in Ukraine, although some of them have been faced with actual threats and speak about some fear for themselves and their families. However, on a broader scale, certain aspects of the ongoing conflict have affected most of the scholars not only in terms of concerns about wellbeing, but also in terms of emotional impact, and risks to professional image and career. My respondents speak about the intensification of some potential risks that have already been present in their work before the Maidan, but they also admit that the situation has brought about some new difficulties.

To start with, risks certainly depend upon the researcher's field of expertise and methods. For example, researchers specialising in the far right speak about their work as traditionally connected with some threats coming from the object of their studies. Likhachev says:

In this sense, nothing has really changed in the context of the Maidan and the war, apart from the intensity of polemics and the volume of public attention drawn to this topic and to the people who study it. Briefly, probably, there is a certain danger, and probably everyone recognises it, at least I do. [...] This is not something that influences what you say or write. [...] These risks have not changed, in essence. They have intensified, yes.

On the other hand, for example, Uilleam Blacker who specialises on literature and culture and works at University College London, notes that his research is much less likely to be connected with risks apart from emotional ones:

I don't know how relevant it is to me, to be honest, because I'm not [...] interviewing people, I'm not doing that kind of stuff. I don't feel any particular risks to myself. [...] I think I'm not controversial enough. [...] Maybe if I was researching fascists or whatever, it would be more risky, but I'm not. Stick to literature, it's a lot safer.

When threats are coming from particular groups, researchers take into consideration the audiences that are reacting to their publications, blog and social media posts, media appearances and talks. Khromeychuk notes:

This is not a safety issue, but when I started writing about gender and war, gender and memory politics I began to receive not only academic critique, but also attacks of personal nature [on social media].

As well, when considering risks, the location of the researcher is taken into account. Three of the researchers who are based in Ukraine explicitly talk about potentially threatening reactions from the public, authorities, and/or activist groups to their work, suggesting that (temporarily) leaving the country, or working in the West is a safer option to produce critical analysis.

A specific and essentially novel set of risks that many have encountered in their professional activity after the Maidan and the annexation of Crimea are connected with Russia. These range from the perceptions of risks related to travel to the country and conducting research there, to "concerns about spoiling relationships with Russia and Russian colleagues". The majority of my respondents (but not all of them) speak about making decisions not to go to Russia for conferences, fieldwork, archival research, or media interviews. These decisions are less frequently explained by physical safety concerns. Often, the motives are described in more psychological terms of feelings of uncertainty and discomfort, increasing difficulties in communicating with research institutions and local scholars, community gatekeepers and potential research subjects.

In general, respondents note that risks that are more related to safety issues and are in this sense more tangible, or quantifiable, can often be

circumvented or minimised. On the other hand, emotional risks are much more difficult to predict and avoid. For example, Khromeychuk wonders:

How do I support myself, having heard all of these things [about women's experiences in the army]? Sometimes they are sharing very difficult experiences with me, and I need to process all this information somehow.

Personal relationships also trigger emotional engagement. There are situations when a researcher's respondents become their friends; or when the armed conflict is also seen through the experiences of someone who has been personally affected by it, or is fighting in the East. But emotional involvement is not just connected with discomforting consequences of feelings of stress, disappointment, compassion, or anger. It is also described as inevitably influencing the process and the results of the researcher's work. Respondents speak about inability to act as impartial observers and produce a Weberian version of "value-free" research (Christians 2005). Tatiana Zhurzhenko, a political scientist from the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, claims:

[The Maidan and the subsequent events] have tied me to [Ukraine] in a completely new way, and deprived me of the opportunity to stay detached. I've been wallowing in these feelings for a long time, and still am. Because I understand that I will never be able to return to a position of a neutral observer which used to be so comfortable.

Emotional impact of traumatic events in Ukraine and attempts to reconsider the ideas of researcher's distance and involvement can affect the scholar's attitude to their own role as a producer of knowledge in a format of tangible outputs such as publications. Particularly interesting in this respect are the often self-imposed limitations on writing.

(Not) writing

To begin with, the increased political relevance of Ukraine-related topics during and after the Maidan has, according to most of my respondents, contributed to the growth in demand for their expertise; in particular, in terms of increasing their visibility to the non-academic audiences. Topics that previously were of interest to narrow groups of

scholars have gained public attention; issues that used to be discussed to a large extent locally, started to attract wider audiences in the West. Researchers from a number of countries speak about a gap in specialised expert knowledge on Ukraine that was most prominent at the start of the events, and that could not be filled by older generations of sovietologists, Russia experts, or those focusing on geopolitical issues.

However, another trend that seems to have corresponded to the dramatic developments in Ukraine since the Maidan, is reflected in certain challenges to producing outputs in the form of academic writing, policy or other expert commentary. The implications of a particular increased reflexivity regarding one's writing vary in the narratives of my respondents: from a writer's block induced by emotional impact of the traumatic events, to doubts in one's ability and preparedness to write about certain themes, and to ethical dilemmas about the representation of particular groups.

Among my respondents, there are people who at some point consciously decided not to write on particular topics, or take extra care so that their words would not get manipulated by propagandistic media. Such was the situation amongst the researchers of the far right, as I mentioned earlier in this paper. For example, Likhachev recalls:

I had a moment in January-February 2014, approximately after the first death on Hrushevskoho Street, and for about a month afterwards until the victory of the revolution, when I made a decision not to write or say anything about the far right. [...] I was thinking with some trepidation that if the Maidan lost, my characters [the far right] would become political prisoners, or become wanted by the authorities, or just die, and then I would impose on myself a self-declared ban from profession. [...] I understood that I wouldn't be able to do that, that I'm closing this theme for myself. That was a month of a certain self-censorship. Although I was very actively asked to write, and was offered money as well.

However, a number of researchers also speak about feeling unable to write because of the emotional impact of the dramatic events in Ukraine that were rapidly unfolding, often created uncertainty, and on the one hand generated a lot of relevant material for potential research and writing, but on the other hand, made the process of writing difficult. Again, Likhachev says that since the start of the Maidan, he was thinking of writing a book; the war has fuelled this idea. At the same time:

During the period of the most intense combat actions, until spring 2015, I simply couldn't write. I couldn't, and I was unable to write about war, because you're worrying about those held captive, you're following it very closely [...] it concerns people you know personally, and it just shuts you down. [...] I started writing in summer 2015, but I've never ever written any text so painfully and for such a long time. I've been in a kind of stupor [...] This emotional involvement really prevents you from writing. It's not that it creates obstacles, like it's difficult to say something; you're just unable to say anything.

It seems that this kind of destabilising influence of the conflict has not only affected the processes of writing about the war; for instance, Portnov says that the Maidan has significantly postponed his plan to write a book about Dnipro(petrovsk):

I wasn't writing the book [that I previously planned to publish in 2013], I was going to some events, giving some talks. From the point of view of academic writing, it was a lost time. [...] I only made myself write something [after summer-autumn 2014], but the news from Ukraine was still terribly distracting.

Increased reflexivity about the impact and limitations of one's writing often means thinking about the implications of positioning of the self in relation to the conflict, and, consequently, of producing some knowledge as a result of a view from a particular position. In this respect, a researcher is never just a researcher: they are of particular national origin, located in, and observing the developments from a particular country, involved in particular social groups. Distance – either temporal, or geographical, or in terms of personal and emotional engagement – matters significantly for many of my respondents when they reflect on their ability to write. For example, Colin Lebedev notes:

I understand that I'm unable to write a high-quality piece of sociological work, because there's very little distance. Not only temporal distance, but also distance from my respondents. I realise that I need to collect data, be attentive to the interview context, for example, methodology and its side effects, and that the time of a substantial work has not come yet. This is a matter of involvement and distance.

A number of researchers based in Western institutions question their ability to write about, as well as to represent, the events taking place in Ukraine. Khromeychuk speaks about this feeling as a new challenge that has not been felt in her work before the Maidan as strongly as now:

How can I speak about the Maidan if I wasn't there? I only came after it finished, in April. [...] I sometimes feel uncomfortable criticising what's going on in relation to the war, because I don't even live in the country. Previously I was not worried that not living in Ukraine and only coming for research purposes would have an impact on my academic work. [...] Now, I'm concerned that I'm producing some analysis but I don't know it from inside, I don't live there, I've never been to the war zone.

The idea that the Maidan and the war in the East have served as an impediment to writing has been mentioned by a number of respondents as a substantially new, previously inexperienced challenge in their research careers. Indeed, the developments in Ukraine seem to have caught many of the scholars off guard, at least for a while. Moreover, they also made some of them question their role as experts, and reconsider the value of the discourses they may produce. Zhurzhenko reflects:

There was this feeling of a limitation to this role of an expert or an intellectual [...] who is engaged in research and seems to possess some information based on this research, or some particular vision that differs from a vision of an ordinary person. This turned out to be an illusion, because experts, like ordinary people, were not ready for the reality that went totally beyond any expectations or scenarios. [...] That Crimea would be annexed in such a quick and impudent fashion, no one could imagine. When for the first time in 20 years there is a demand on you as an expert [...] you realise that you're not an expert and cannot be such. [...] On the day of the shooting on Institutaska Street, I understood that we're also responsible for this blood, not only politicians are, but also people who were creating some discourses, those who wrote that there are two Ukraines and they will never make a whole one. [...] I had a feeling that we all need to fall silent, and ask where our responsibility lies in the horror that is going on. [...] I've been thinking for a long time after that whether I would be able to continue academic research and write anything, because the real value of our words has been revealed.

This narrative also connects the thoughts on the role of the scholar during an armed conflict with another feature of an academic context:

knowledge production is never an individual endeavour, but the effect of the political crisis on a scholarly community may be particularly traumatising and unpredictable.

Research Community

The conflict has, indeed, had a strong impact on the relationships within the field of Ukrainian Studies (and with those beyond it). Both localised and transnational connections have been affected. Politics has seeped into research communities, universities, and conferences. Increasingly militant language has been used to describe the impact of the conflict on academic relationships. On the other hand, ideas of reconciliation and reformatting of problematic relationships amongst researchers seem to be discussed by an increasing number of researchers.

Zhurzhenko argues that the protests, the revolution and the conflict have led to a noticeable fragmentation of the field, where previous contacts and groupings have disappeared, but new coalitions based upon research interests as well as political views have emerged at the same time: “this is not just one frontline”, she stresses. Conflicts and disagreements with those who were previously considered as colleagues or fellow researchers are mentioned by the majority of my respondents. Strikingly often, these are described using a particularly militant language that utilises metaphors like Zhurzhenko’s “frontline”. Shekhovtsov, for one, says:

Many people have quarrelled. When the Yanukovich regime really started to suppress the protesters, it was a watershed moment. I thought that after that people who focus on Ukraine in their research and have lived in Ukraine cannot stay neutral. It does not matter if they were a researcher or an observer. This is a moment when you need to state clearly, if you are for or against something. There’s a need to establish a kind of barricade and to understand who is on which side.

Similarly, Likhachev speaks about the disappearance of a research community where “colleagues stop being colleagues”:

[...] because they are either on one side of the frontline, or on the other.
[...] When colleagues become either companions in arms, or the enemy’s associates, it is the end of a research community.

The “enemy” metaphor is also used by a number of other respondents; “participation in the information war”, “information battlefield”, “battles”, “traitor” are among the others. Even those who do not speak about actually severing ties with other scholars, describe the polarisation within the academic space, where ideological divisions become increasingly prominent, and discourse turns more radical. Ukrainian Studies as a field is criticised by many of my respondents for the increase of such polarised discourse, and intensification of “patriotic” tone: it has “become pro-Ukrainian”, argues Colin Lebedev. Khromeychuk speaks about reluctance to participate in some discussions:

Sometimes I just don’t want to participate in discussions, because it’s impossible, everything is so heated. [...] There’s this dichotomous perception, *zrada-peremoha* [“betrayal-victory”, a Ukrainian meme reflecting the polarisation of public discourse]. If you’re not promoting *peremoha*, you must be part of *zrada*. My research has never fitted into this dichotomy.

In terms of practical implications of splits in the research communities, people talk about “inability” to share common physical space with some (former) colleagues, such as attending the same events together, saying something like: “we could stand next to each other and diligently try not to notice each other”. Colin Lebedev talks about appearance of “non-handshakeable colleagues”: “these are the people who would not get invited to a research seminar, while everyone else would. [...] They have become marginalised”. While conference discussions seem to have become increasingly tense and the space for calm, constructive discussion on politically sensitive topics has narrowed, according to the researchers, quarrels and arguments usually take place in the online social space rather than during personal encounters. Unfriending or banning someone on Facebook is a practice that most of the respondents recall having resorted to.

Relationships of Ukraine- and Western Europe-based scholars with Russian researchers deserve a particular mention: when asked about the impact of the conflict on research relationships, respondents frequently start talking about Russian (ex-)colleagues without being specifically prompted. Stories about actual break-ups and impossibility of further collaboration feature most prominently in the narratives of those whose research concerns contemporary politics. Some seem to question the very

possibility of discussion between Ukrainians and Russians, arguing that the language for dialogue is yet to be elaborated. Concerns have been expressed about the potentially destructive impact of the war on links with Russian academia as such, and the consequent decline in the level of expertise on Russia.

Notably, this does not in all cases mean that the relationships with Russia-based scholars have been affected more or less than those with others (a number of people have not even had serious developed contacts with Russian researchers). Rather, it is telling that for at least half of my respondents, the topic of tensions and divisions in academia that are associated with the Maidan, the annexation of Crimea, and the war, immediately invokes reflections on relationships with Russian colleagues.

The impact of ideological divisions amongst academics can be quite distressing and hampers the processes of collaborative knowledge production and maintenance of cross-border academic connections. However, while respondents speak more about tensions than cooperation, the situation is not described only in negative terms. There are frequent mentions of being “lucky” or “in a fortunate situation” not to lose some of the contacts, or of being pleasantly surprised at Russian colleagues “who have not supported *Krymnash* [‘Crimea is ours’, Russian meme]”. People talk about new and ongoing collaborative research. Where ideological divisions have not emerged amongst scholars, but instead solidarity, this has provided ground for working together. Furthermore, there are also the narratives of the scholars with feminist or left-wing views who present these as a basis for transnational anti-war and anti-oppression solidarity. Finally, there is some rational/moderately optimistic reflection on the future of academic collaboration. Mikheieva says:

All wars end. We are two neighbouring countries, and we will have to develop a dialogue. Completely severed ties would not work to our benefit in the future. We will have to communicate at some point. Obviously, it will be on a different level, from a different point of view, but we have to communicate.

Conclusion

Academic activity encompasses a large variety of practices. In this paper, I sought to explore how large-scale protests and an ongoing armed

conflict have influenced some of these practices of researchers whose work is connected with the affected region. I particularly concentrated on some aspects of conducting research, writing, and communications within a research community (however loosely defined).

Overall, this paper is an attempt to understand and possibly distinguish between the variety of challenges of knowledge production. By no means does it provide a complete account of all the challenges that the researchers of Ukraine-related issues have encountered in the wake of the Euromaidan, Russia's annexation of Crimea, and military intervention in the Donbas. However, in this brief overview I look at some of the common concerns connected with the usual activities of the scholars in these unusual circumstances.

Has this conflict brought new challenges to the scholars? It certainly has, even though the people I interviewed are already mature researchers, some of them quite established and recognised in their respective fields of expertise, and have had experience studying controversial topics and dealing with vulnerable populations.

Often, it made them particularly sensitive to the issues of "doing no harm" by their work, or think about the possible ways in which their activities can benefit the democratic development and international relations of Ukraine. Previous research experience has reportedly equipped some of them with relevant skills for dealing with vulnerable populations. The increased political relevance of Ukraine-related topics and attention of wider non-academic audiences drawn to their work has made the players more acutely aware of the political significance attached to their words, and, therefore, the sensitivity about the potential impact of academics going beyond academia on public opinion and international diplomacy.

The more a researcher tries to go beyond the "ivory tower" of academic work and engage with wider audiences, the more likely they are to get exposed to various risks. Increased public exposure meant that scholars started to take extra care that the ways in which their comments may be perceived do not put them at risk, from online attacks to actual threats. While risks also depend on the discipline and the political sensitivity of researched topics, emotional engagement, for one, has become particularly important. Another novel kind of impact of the conflict on researchers' lives and work has been reflected in the emergence of self-imposed limitations on writing, questioning one's ability to represent social groups, feeling unprepared to write about the situation which is still developing, and struggling with emotions triggered by the political situation.

The tensions have seriously impacted the relationships among fellow researchers. Polarisation of the academic discourse and research communities is the key novelty here. Increased politicisation of topics like memory politics, the far right, or Russian language in Ukraine has occasionally limited some of the scholars' participation in discussions on the topics. Relationships with Russian scholars and Russian academic institutions seem to have been affected to a large extent, predominantly negatively.

Overall, it seems that the developments in Ukraine since 2014 have had a somewhat paradoxical impact on the production of knowledge on Ukraine-related topics, in Ukraine and Western Europe. On occasions, they have facilitated or stimulated the production of knowledge by the researchers. For example, there has been an increase in public attention to the previously marginal issues that were formerly only interesting to a narrow group of specialists but have rapidly gained political relevance. New research topics meant appearance of new publications, new academic connections, and sometimes new research funding.

At the same time, the events in Ukraine also frequently limited the researchers in their professional activities. Various factors have contributed to some issues not being raised, not discussed in detail, or not criticised by my respondents in their non-academic publications and talks, and, albeit perhaps less frequently, also in academic ones. These range from concerns about safety and wellbeing of those potentially affected by the research to worries about the scholar themselves; from conscious self-censorship and disappointment with the media's manipulative approach to the words of academic commentators to inability to write because of emotional impact of the conflict; and from increasingly complicated relationships with some colleagues to complete severing of some academic contacts.

The work of researchers in the context of an armed conflict, as the current situation in Ukraine suggests, is an increasingly multifaceted endeavour that involves interaction with various audiences and certainly goes beyond the old adage described by one of the respondents as "writing these articles, who reads them anyway? Five people, an editor, a couple of readers, and the author?" This paper has suggested that one of the possible directions for further research is the role of academics beyond academia during the war. Another topic for further exploration is connected with researcher positionality which implies that concerns are manifested in different ways for different researchers. Indeed, would a Ukrainian scholar not be affected by the protests and the conflict in a different way

to a British one, or to a Russian one? How are the challenges different for female researchers as compared to their male colleagues? Can experiences of a literature scholar be compared to those of a political scientist? How would scholars with different political positions perceive events and react to them, and what kinds of splits in the research community may be caused by this? What can be the common issues faced by a feminist advocate of public sociology, and an expert on the far right who has more conservative leanings? It is crucial to consider the various positionalities that are implicated in the processes of studying contentious issues, and to tease out the more specific and more general concerns. These and other themes indicate potential directions for further research that stem from this overview of the challenges faced by academics working against the backdrop of an armed conflict.

NOTES

- ¹ I chose to avoid discussing the practices of teaching and interacting with students in this paper, since not all of my respondents are involved in these. However, these issues were mentioned by some of them, and will be considered in further research.
- ² I approach positionality as a realization of one's particular social location as a relational position and its implications for the resulting knowledge: 'standing on shifting ground makes it clear that every view is a view from somewhere and every act of speaking a speaking from somewhere' (Abu-Lughod 1991: 141).
- ³ The scope of this paper does not allow for more detailed discussion of the institutional approach to research ethics. Some of the respondents were faced with the need to obtain ethical approval from their universities (the UK ones, for example), but not all of them are required to do so. These procedures have been usually described as routine paperwork, rather than connected with actual ethical concerns.

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