THE IM/MEDIACY OF THE WAR

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Abstract: In the given article, the author addresses the issue of the perception of war in the information age through the prism of the concept of "im/mediacy", considered in several interconnected aspects. Of special interest are the following questions: How the effect of the im/mediacy of the war is being constructed and produced in the current political, media, cultural and technological context? What factors define the distancing of and/or proximity of the war, and what role do the languages of war and resistance (as tools of communication) play in this process? The author discusses these key issues on the example of two specific cases — the full-scale Russian war against Ukraine that started in 2022, and the undeclared war of the authoritarian regime in Belarus against civil society that began in 2020. The author places this discussion in a larger context of the debates on decolonization of knowledge and culture in the ex-Soviet spaces. The conceptual framework employed combines semiotics, decolonial approach and poststructuralist philosophy.

Keywords: Belarus, cancel discourse, deconstruction, encratic and acratic languages, im/mediacy, Russian war in Ukraine, semiocide.

Introduction

This article is a philosophical reflection on the phenomenon of war in terms of the effects and affects that it generates in the information age. The war in a sense of warfare is not the direct subject of my reflections. However, I consider it necessary to begin this paper with some clarifying remarks concerning the definition of the very term — "war".

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These explanations will help to better understand why and based on what conceptual ground I bring together in my analysis several seemingly unrelated topics — the war in Ukraine, political repressions in Belarus, culture as a battlefield, and issues concerning the languages of war and the war of languages.

I will start with the classical definition of "war" provided by Carl von Clausewitz back in the 19th century. He defined war as "an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will" (Clausewitz, 1989 [1832]: 75). This formulation seems to be applicable to any war and in any of its concrete forms. Still, in the context of the given article, the phenomenon of "war" will be considered mainly in two perspectives. Firstly, in the narrow sense, "war" means a full-scale armed conflict between different parties (states, as well as social groups within the same state territory, as in case of civil wars). Secondly, in its broader meaning, it implies the agonistic, irreconcilable struggle of two or more sides, which can manifest itself in different forms, be carried out on a different scale and with different methods, which are incongruent with the legal and moral norms of civil society. Under normal circumstances, legal instruments of mediation and conflict resolution are used to settle disputes between opposing parties. However, under the conditions of war the martial law is imposed, and thus, regular legal norms cease to function for an indefinite period of time. Disregard of moral norms that cease to operate in a state of emergency is only a consequence of already deployed hostilities. The annihilation of enemy involves and is accompanied by the seizure of someone else's "territory" with all its natural, human, material and immaterial resources, and implies assertion of superiority over the defeated "enemy" in the form of monopoly power over both its territory and resources. To sum up, the aim of warfare, in any of its guises, is to "to render the enemy powerless" (Clausewitz, 1989 [1832]: 75).

Both of the above-mentioned perspectives of the concept of war will be discussed further in this text in connection with two ongoing conflicts, namely, the full-scale Russian war against Ukraine, started in 2022, and the undeclared war of Lukashenka's regime against Belarusians since 2020 (however disproportionate they may seem on the scale of global politics and history).

This paper is structured according to the following logic. In the first part of the article, I elaborate on the term "im/mediacy" as a space-time concept and analyse it in three interconnected aspects, all of which are related to the perception of war. In the second part, I will consider the issue of the war of languages, drawing on the analysis of the political role and ideological (mis)uses of languages in the context of the continuing political crisis in Belarus exacerbated by the war in Ukraine. I place this discussion in a larger context of the debates on decolonization of knowledge and culture in the ex-Soviet spaces. The conceptual framework of my analysis combines the semiotic approach

(the concept of "semiocide") and poststructuralist philosophy (Roland Barthes, Paul Virilio and Jacques Derrida).

Immediacy: towards the definition of the concept

The historical moment in which we find ourselves at present is both unique and tragic. This "moment" has unfortunately been stretched out for an indefinite period of time (the full-scale war in Ukraine has been going on for more than a year, while the political crisis in Belarus has endured for almost three years). No one is able to forecast when this dire *now* will be over. It terms of the great historical time, this may seem to be only a brief moment, but in the context of an individual human life, it is quite long. It is not coincidental that the term "resilience" has recently become one of the most frequent words in the media and in academic discourse in connection with Ukraine. It denotes not only the resilience of the infrastructure, of the institutions of power under critical conditions, but also the endurance of ordinary people in these dramatic circumstances.

The term "immediacy (im/mediacy)" which I put into the title of this article implies several meanings and, in my view, deserves to be further elaborated as a particular space-time concept. Firstly, it defines a certain moment in time when a certain event occurs or is about to occur, and which is anticipated as forthcoming and even inevitable. In this sense, "immediacy" connotes instancy, urgency, emergency, imminence and so on.

Secondly, it denotes a situation when a certain event (or a series of successive and interrelated events) seems to be so real and so near that it urges/propels an individual to become emotionally and intellectually engaged in it. The mode of involvement, the sense of proximity, in their turn, determine the modality of interpretation, a certain way of cognition and evaluation of what is happening in the immediate present. It may be seen as a transformative moment, when distant observer turns out to be a participating observer who cannot distant her/himself from the scene of action, while being capable of establishing a reflexive attitude towards it.

Thirdly, the term also backlights the communicative aspect of the eventness that has to do with multimodal mediatization of the directly experienced reality. This process is enabled by contemporary technologies that produce an effect of utter immersion, thanks to which virtual reality is experienced as a physical one, while the distance is being constringed.

The issue of the im-mediatizaton of social life through visual representation and the simulative techniques had been discussed by social scholars and philosophers long before the arrival of digital technologies. As Paul Virilio noted back in the 1990s, "we are being confronted by a sort of pathology of immediate perception that owes everything, or very neatly everything, to the recent proliferation of photo-cinematographic and video-infographic seeing machines. Machines that

by mediatizing ordinary everyday representations end up by destroying their credibility" (Virilio, 1997:90). Jacques Derrida conceptualized the perception of reality that is artificially constructed with the help of contemporary media technologies in terms of "artifactuality" and "actuvirtuality" (Derrida, 2002). In his words, that what seems to be "apparently immediate" and the feelings it evokes, is actually "less spontaneous than it appears", being to a large extent "conditioned, constituted, if not actually constructed, circulated at any rate through the media by means of a prodigious techno-social-political machine" (Derrida, 2003: 86).

Media scholars, Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, relate immediacy to a transparent interface, the one that erases itself, so that the user/viewer is no longer aware of confronting a medium, but instead "would stand in an immediate relationship with the contents of the medium". According to them, "the logic of transparent immediacy does not necessarily commit the viewer to an utterly naive or magical conviction that the representation is the same thing as what it represents". However, the very term "immediacy" gives a name "for a family of beliefs and practices, the common feature of which is the belief in some necessary contact point between the medium and what it represents" (Botler, Grusin, 1999: 30). Therefore, due to contemporary media, we relate to screened reality as something that we are directly involved in, and someone else's life as partly our own: "This is life. It's a piece of somebody's life. [...] You're there. You're doing it, seeing it, hearing it ... feeling it" (Botler, Grusin, 1999: 3).

Since the very first days of the military invasion of Russia in Ukraine, many journalists, experts and scholars have noted that this may be the first war in the world history that can be monitored 24/7, virtually non-stop, thanks to modern communication technologies. An effect of the immediacy of the war is assured by the incessant media flow and is intensified by the diversity of media representations transmitted through different channels and platforms in a mode of (almost) real time[1].

This certainly does not mean that top-level political decisions or the exact geographical locations of the battlefront become *immediately* known to all those following media news practically around the clock. The information about the ongoing hostilities allowed for publicizing on either side remains partial, superficial and inaccurate. This implies that, on the one hand, we are dealing with the instantaneous delivery of news and media publications of many testimonies and facts almost in real time. On the other hand, all this takes place in the conditions of secretiveness about the actual situation on the fronts, arrangements on the supply and delivery of weapons, military

1 In this text I do not analyse the role of media representations and/or the formats of mediatization of the war; however, I am certain that media aspects of this war will become a subject for many research works in the future.

intelligence data, actual targets of missile strikes, the state of the armies' fighting ability, the actions of the guerrilla warfare, etc. In other words, the effect of the immediacy of the war is being produced by the informational simulacra that create an illusion of transparency and accessibility of the data, while concealing the actual state of affairs.

The categories of urgency, duration and speed (when discussed in relation to the temporal regimes of military actions, news delivery, evacuation, mobilization, aid and so on) are highly relevant for comprehending the effects of immediacy. Yet the issue of the im/mediated perception of the war relates not only to *time*, but to *distance* as well.

To begin with, "distance", while being a spatial and geographic notion, is also a speculative and subjective one[2]. It is well known that "distance" can be experienced and felt in a myriad of ways. Moreover, under certain circumstances, its physical parameters may not matter at all. The perception and commensurability of distance are determined by many social factors, such as family bonds, professional ties, cultural context, biographical circumstances and media consumption, with the latter often being decisive in our time. Media audiences consist of millions of people who follow the news on different media sources and, thus, perceive and interpret the information obtained from those sources in very different ways. In democratic societies, the decision-making of politicians on the aspects of warfare, the forms and strategies of support of either side of the conflict cannot be made without the electorate. The political views of ordinary people and their ethical attitudes to what is happening at the frontline and around the war are determined largely by the sense of proximity to or remoteness from the war. However, while the views of audiences (and, hence, of various electoral groups) are shaped by media representations, the perception of the war as an immediate or remote event is also constructed by media.

Nowadays, visual media play the most important role in producing the effect of presence and immersion in the events. The affective power of images demonstrates that they may serve "as catalysts to set off a chain reaction of mass emotion", functioning as "multipliers of meaning, power and emotion" (Mitchell, 2012: 95–96). Since the beginning of this war, due to the massive flow of visual images of violence and destruction, "the pain of others" (Sontag, 2003) has become part of everyday life for many. Seeing videos and photos of mutilated bodies, corpses of civilians, city bombings, ruined buildings and so on has become almost routine. One still has difficulty in accepting their realism: some of these pictures produce an effect of watching the cinematic scenes from the war movies, and at times even slashers. Unfortunately, this is not a cinematic staging, but the medialized reality of the war.

2 There is an extensive conceptual toolkit for the analysis of this phenomenon developed by philosophers, in particular, in the framework of the phenomenological tradition and of social epistemology.

Reflecting on the power of images (of war) to invade consciousness against our will, Judith Butler notes, “that images and accounts of war suffering are a particular form of ethical solicitation, one that compels us to negotiate questions of proximity and distance. They implicitly formulate ethical quandaries: Is what is happening so far away from me that I can bear no responsibility for it? Is what is happening so close to me that I cannot bear having to take responsibility for it? If I myself did not make this suffering, am I still in some other sense responsible for it?” (Butler, 2015: 101).

I find these questions highly relevant for the next chapter of my paper in which I reflect on the distance from the war that Belarusians find themselves at, and on the degree of distancing or direct involvement determined by the immediacy of the events that took place in Belarus and preceded the outbreak of the war.

On the proximity of the war: a view from/outside of Belarus

As I noted earlier, the immediacy of the war can be experienced in a particular context as its anticipation: as something that may be delayed for some reasons, but most likely is imminent and might occur at any moment[3]. The fact that the war against Ukraine began from the Belarusian territory and continues with the support of Lukashenka’s authoritarian regime is shocking, yet not surprising. In 2020, Vladimir Putin helped Lukashenka to remain in power. Over the last two years the regime’s dependence on Russia’s economic, media and political support has only increased. The military training in Belarus in January–February 2022 ended with an attack on Ukraine from its territory. Belarus as a state has lost sovereignty and turned out to be a *de facto* occupied country, with all the ensuing consequences.

It would not be a stretch to claim that for many Belarusians the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was the logical and in a certain sense anticipated continuation of the war that Lukashenka’s political regime had been waging against Belarusians since, at least, August of 2020. For almost three years, Belarusians have been living in a traumatic, never-ending, gloomy *present* caused by the political crisis in Belarus, mass migration abroad and

3 Many European intellectuals who faced the brutal reality of the Nazi regime (first in Germany and later in other countries) — as political migrants, as concentration camp prisoners, as people without citizenship, as war refugees or members of the resistance movement, reflected this anticipation of the impending tragedy and the approaching war in their letters, diaries and literary works written in the 1930s, even before the outbreak of World War II. The texts written by Adorno, Benjamin, Zweig, Sartre and other intellectuals in that decade seem to be so close to us today in terms of their perception of the Zeitgeist and their premonition of the imminent disaster.

the unprecedented level of violence and political repressions inside the country itself. Both the supporters of change who opposed the authoritarian regime in 2020 and the current authorities seem to be stuck in the eternal August[4]. Belarusians are facing legalized lawlessness on a daily basis. Since 2020, there have been registered thousands of cases of human rights violations, and already more than 1,500 individuals have been recognized as political prisoners[5] (their number is growing with every day). The machinery of repressions does not stop. More than 11,000 criminal proceedings related to political protests and media activity have been initiated by Belarusian authorities over the course of two and a half years. The recently adopted new Criminal Code allows for the deprivation of citizenship and the remote trials against those political activists who fled abroad. The inclusion of the article on death penalty for “attempted terrorism” and other new “norms” in the legislation are sheer evidence of the catastrophic situation with the constitutional and human rights of Belarusians these days. According to rough estimates, several hundred thousand Belarusians have emigrated since 2020, including many journalists, political activists, independent trade unions’ leaders, academics, cultural figures, athletes, IT professionals and so on.

Upon the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, political repressions took a new impetus. Within just one day, February 27th, 2022, more than 800 Belarusians who took part in the rallies against the war in Ukraine were arrested and later sentenced to jail (in 2022–2023 some of them were sentenced to 6 and more years of imprisonment)[6]. Detentions related to the support of Ukraine continue, embracing various cases — be it a singer who performed a popular Ukrainian song in a night club in the centre of Minsk, anti-war comments in social media, a wish to serve as a volunteer in the Ukrainian army, posting a sticker of the Ukrainian flag on the windshield of a personal car and other absurd cases — persecuted by the regime that claims to be a peacemaker in this conflict.

The political crisis in Belarus continues, while the political divide in the society is only deepening. Attitude to the war in Ukraine and the extent of emotional involvement among Belarusians (belonging to different social strata and representing various social groups) remains a complex issue in terms of sociological analysis[7]. However, if in Russia

4 It is not by accident that in each of his public speeches Lukashenka repeatedly refers to the events of 2020, trying thus to suture his personal traumatic wound and to exorcise the ghosts of revolution.

5 According to the data provided by the human rights centre *Viasna* 1996, as of the end of April 2023 [https://prisoners.spring96.org/en].

6 For more details on the protests in Belarus against the military aggression of Russia against Ukraine in February, 2022, see here: https://www.voiceofbelarus.org/belarus-news/large-anti-war-protests-took-place-in-belarus/.

7 Without going into details, I would only note that in the conditions of war and

the so-called "special military operation" against Ukraine is endorsed (or at least, not contested in public) by the large part of population, the situation in Belarus differs significantly. The adherents of Lukashenka inside the country may support Russia's invasion in their public utterances and employ highly militant rhetoric, but they hardly want Belarus to enter the war on a full scale. Numerous opponents of the regime, including those who have remained in Belarus but switched to the mute mode or gove underground, and those who were forced to emigrate, unanimously condemn the war against Ukraine and tend to help Ukrainians in various ways. There are volunteers working with refugees or providing humanitarian assistance both in Ukraine and abroad; as well as volunteers who joined the Ukrainian military forces and even formed special military units (such as Kastuś Kalinoŭski regiment). Independent Belarusian media provide information support to Ukraine and work both for the Belarusian and Russophone audiences. Besides, there are many ordinary people who donate to the needs of the Ukrainian armed forces or Belarusian regiments in Ukraine.

"We stand with Ukraine" in both the ethical and political sense. The prospective victory of Ukraine in the war against Russian imperialism gives grounds for hope that the defeat of Putin's Russia will foster the dismantling of the authoritarian regime in Belarus. It is on this background that Belarusians regard the struggle of Ukrainians against Russian invaders as the war that affects us in the most immediate way. This, however, might not at all be evident for the distant observers who until recently have not been familiar with the political situation in Belarus and may not have been aware of the dramatic developments within the country.

On the linguistic trauma and cancel discourse

The word "im/mediacy" that I put in the title of this text (split and yet conjoined by a slash) is certainly meant to be read as a deconstructivist gesture.

In view of the issues that I discuss in this paper (the war in Ukraine, the political conflict in Belarus, the problem of delinking from Russian imperialism and overcoming the path of dependency on the totalitarian

mass political repressions, the problem of the validity of sociological polls conducted from abroad, but aimed at studying public opinion within Belarus, is a very controversial issue regarding both the methodology and analytics based on the obtained data. However, surveys conducted by some research centres (such as Chatham House) provide certain insight into the general trends and dynamics of Belarusian attitudes towards the war in Ukraine and the change of attitude towards Russia since the beginning of this war (Chatham House, 2022; Ленкевич, 2023; Фридман, 2023].

regimes of the 20th–21st centuries), the slanting mark transforms into the self-sufficing sign, in all its polysemy. On the denotative level, the word "slash" means a cut made with a wide, sweeping stroke, typically by a knife or sword. The graphic signifier "/" retains this connection with an act of physical violence (Roland Barthes conceptualized this relation in his book S/Z (1970)).

However, the slash in "im/mediacy" reveals a cut and marks an open wound also in a metaphoric sense. This punctuation mark becomes a signifier of the traumatic division between *here* and *there*, *now* and *then*, *before* and *after* the series of the catastrophic events. Furthermore, the slash also implies a linguistic trauma caused by the war. "/" may be considered as a marker of a language disorder in a particular historical context. This issue will be analysed below in relation to the question of languages of war and resistance.

The question of the linguistic trauma will be considered here in three interconnected aspects. Firstly, it relates to the option (voluntary, forced or compulsory) between speaking out or keeping silent. The extreme case of silence is muteness, caused by the traumatic event(s) and the shock it produces. Secondly, it concerns the position of the Russian language in the context of the decolonizing process set off by the outbreak of the war. I imply here the revision of the attitude to the Russian language in the countries neighbouring Russia in the context of "cancel culture" (in Ukraine and in Belarus where a fairly large part of the population use Russian in everyday communication). Thirdly, I consider this question in the aspect of the *war of languages*, that is, of the clash between the language(s) of war and the language(s) of resistance, and reflect on the relationship between language and power, as well as language and violence.

There are, perhaps, three most recurrent questions that we hear and ask each other from the very beginning of this war. Where were you on February 24 (2022)[8]? Under what circumstances did you find out that the war had begun? What was your first re/action? Quite obviously, the first thoughts that came to my mind did not concern the language issue at all. But as the war continued, the question of language began to bother me more and more.

Any war is certainly a manifestation of the fiasco of the language of diplomacy (since politicians, unlike ordinary people, have the ability to act with words). In the conditions of war, vis-a-vis with brutal violence executed on a daily basis, the diplomatic speech acts such as "we are deeply concerned" seem to be completely out of place. In addition, there still remains an ethical dilemma related to the problem of not

8 February 24th, 2022, will certainly be remembered as such a dramatic date, the very impact of which was felt "in an apparently immediate way". Rephrasing Jacques Derrida's words, one can say that it was marked by the "ineffaceable event in the shared archive of a universal calendar" and will stay in history as the day "that truly makes its mark" (Derrida, 2003: 86).

only the uselessness, but also a certain tactlessness of speaking, as well as the inappropriateness of certain words in a particular situation. After all, in such circumstances it is necessary not just to speak, but act.

Then what instruments of resistance to the war, against violence and destruction are available to the "silent majorities" (to use the concept of Jean Baudrillard's), and which ones can be efficient under such circumstances? For instance, may cancel culture be considered as an efficient way of struggling and how does it relate to the question of language?

For a large number of people, the beginning of the war became such a profound shock that they could only respond to it with muteness. However, to remain muted and to keep silent is not the same thing[9]. After the beginning of the war, it turned out that for media persons, in particular those with high symbolic capital, even if they did not openly support Putin's military aggression, keeping up to the mode of muteness in media was fraught with immediate consequences. Those public figures (athletes, musicians, actors, writers, from Russia and elsewhere) who did not condemn the war and did not articulate clearly their anti-war position during the first weeks were faced with these consequences very soon. "Cancel culture" had become a means to remind them of the price of their silence in public.

The concept of "cancel culture" entered our lexicon only a few years ago, mostly in connection with the #MeToo (2017) and Black Lives Matter (2019) movements. In a digital, globalized society, "cancel culture" is primarily a network phenomenon that expands through various media platforms. Grassroots initiatives launched through social networks are a condition for both the possibility and the realization of an organized and consolidated cultural protest. At first, the boycott was aimed at concrete individuals (public figures, celebrities) who were publicly rebuked for inappropriate behaviour related to either sexual harassment or racism (offensive remarks or unacceptable actions, up to and including physical violence). But very soon the practices of cancel culture spread to various cultural institutions, brands, artworks and other social and cultural phenomena. Public debates around this phenomenon (regardless of the country or context) brought to the forefront a dilemma: is cancel culture only an instrument of social justice and expression of solidarity, or is it also a mechanism of political censorship from below, and therefore, possibly, it may represent a challenge to democracy, freedom of opinion and cultural diversity?

9 Under certain historical and political circumstances, performative silence in public may become a form of protest against power regimes, state oppression, violence, censorship, etc. To mention but a few examples, such as silent protests in Minsk in 2011–2012 or art performances with stitching up the mouth.

In the countries of Eastern and Central Europe, this form of ostracism in public discourse, even after 2017 (#MeToo movement), has rarely targeted issues of gender, sexuality, and racial discrimination (for a variety of reasons, stemming both from the patriarchalism in the public sphere and from the rise of neoconservative populist governments). However, public censorship has become a very important element of civic resistance in the context of military conflicts and political tensions. In Georgia (since 2008) and Ukraine (since 2014), it was directly linked to acts of Russian military aggression in the 2000s and 2010s.

Belarusians started to utilize the political potential of cancel culture in 2020. On the eve and after the rigged elections, many began to "cancel" supporters of Alexander Lukashenka's authoritarian regime in social networks, shun certain spaces of consumption and brands run by businessmen loyal to the regime, and to boycott the events organized by the state (concerts, sports events, festivals, music concerts, etc.). This form of civil disobedience has become especially important in the context of the increasing political repressions in 2020–2022. If one cannot voice her/his dissent in public, then silent contempt may become a personal strategy of resistance.

After February 24 of 2022, the phenomenon of "cancel culture" gained a new impetus and new forms. In some countries the condemnation of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine manifested itself in cancelling of Russian culture and/or putting it on the pause (be it the cancelling of art exhibitions, musical concerts, theatrical performances or dismantling of monuments, renaming of streets, and so on). "Great Russian literature" (which was long appraised as a unique contribution to the world culture and an etalon of morality) has also become the target of harsh criticism because of its implicit relation to the imperial narratives, ethnocentrism, xenophobia and patriarchy. These forms of protest against Russian aggression in Ukraine are among the few means available to ordinary people to make their outrage heard and supported through social media campaigning. It is both an expression of solidarity with the Ukrainian people and, at the same time, a means of distancing from Putin's imperial politics. Russian propaganda hastened to declare that the boycotting of Russian culture implies a revocation of culture as such. However, those Russian intellectuals who condemn the war note that Russian culture has for too long served as a protective screen for imperial ambitions of the regime, and that between "abolishing conscience" and cancelling of culture, they choose the latter.

"Cancel culture" has much in common with the mechanisms of economic sanctions, but the difference is that the political reasons for economic sanctions are directly related to the achievement of goals. Their abolishment depends on the fulfilment of conditions — be it the ending of the war, releasing political prisoners or other. However, cultural sanctions differ in that they have neither a strictly defined

requirement nor a foreseeable duration. When the war in Ukraine is over (hopefully, on Ukraine's terms), the boycotting of Russian culture will not stop overnight, but most likely it will take new forms, because in this case we are talking not about merely neglecting a remote culture whose dissemination is put on a temporary hold (as in some European countries where the Russian language is not used in the public sphere), but about much more complex issues. By starting the war against Ukraine Putin's regime aimed to restore the frontiers of the Russian Empire, as well as its cultural and linguistic domination in the region, but this has resulted in the irreversible consequences. The process of decolonizing rapidly accelerated, and has become a pressing issue in the political and cultural agenda of ex-Soviet countries and beyond.

The growing negative attitude towards Russian culture in the conditions of the war has also affected the language issue. Many foreign writers and publishers who have been earlier making good profits on the Russian-language publishing market (given its capacity), have terminated their contracts for the provision of copyright for the translation and publication of books. However, for Russophone writers and scholars residing in different countries the situation appears more complicated. Publishing in Russian started to be seen as politically and ethically inappropriate: how can one write in the language of the aggressor country, publish in journals or take part in the conferences that are somehow connected with the country that unleashed the war? But ultimately, it is also a question of whether it is possible to distance oneself from the mother tongue and start to consider it merely a "first language"?

For writers and humanities scholars, the impeccable command of language(s) is a key prerequisite for intellectual work. Literary style, semantic nuances, word play, the use of puns, idiomatic ambivalences, intended ambiguity, intonation and rhyme, mastery of idiolects, ironic subtlety, the invention of neologisms — all of these features of the linguistic perfectionism (refined in one's own native language) certainly matter. However, under certain historical or biographical circumstances, the native/first language may become the most vulnerable spot, and in a certain sense a locus of pain. Giving it up can result in the temporary loss of the "gift of speech", as it takes time to start thinking and writing in (an)other language and to adjust the conceptual apparatus to it[10].

10 Those Russian intellectuals who are in opposition to Putin's regime seem to be likewise uncertain about which audience they address now (from exile), and in what language it would be appropriate to do, lest they be accused of the imperial view point. This situation is not unique and there are many historical correlations. A relatively recent example of the linguistic anxiety of intellectuals whose home country was in the position of a war aggressor and who were political migrants can be found in the correspondence between Walter Benjamin

For those Ukrainian intellectuals who until the beginning of the full-scale war had been writing mostly in Russian the question of the "first language" unequivocally ceased to be a neutral issue (for some, the turning point occurred back in 2014). A Ukrainian writer Vladimir Rafeenko (Volodymyr Rafeyenko) noted: "After February 24, I made a firm decision never again to publish a single text in Russian. [...] And I have no desire to contribute any longer, even if indirectly, to Ukrainian literature in the Russian language. [...] I'm simply unable to write in Russian any longer. The very thought that someone would consider me a Russian writer because I write in Russian is intolerable" (Rafeenko, Shore, 2022).

For a significant number of Russophone Belarusians, the Russian language lost its seeming neutrality back in 2020. In an effort to keep power in their hands, Lukashenka's regime headed for total Russification. Persecution of the Belarusian language and culture became one of the key strategies of the politically motivated trials (the examples are so numerous, that it is hardly possible to list them all). Russian invasion of Ukraine made the political-linguistic divide inside the country even more acute. The fact that many Belarusians, including some opinion leaders, in the context of these events switched to the Belarusian language is explained by both the desire to separate themselves from the system of power built by Lukashenka's regime, and to strengthen the ground for political independence of the new Belarus. In a decolonial prospective, it is important to underline, that the Belarusian language has not sullied itself either in the past or in the present by its proximity neither to dictatorial regimes, nor to the imperial/colonial regimes of power.

In order to explain why the cancelling of Russian culture after the beginning of the war against Ukraine could not abide the language issue, it would be useful to recall the relation between cultural representations and linguistic categories. The notion of "culture" implies a certain set of values and meanings, codes of communications, historical narratives, behavioural conventions, rituals, ethical norms, religious beliefs, and sexual norms. According to Stuart Hall, "meaning depends on the relationship between things in the world — people, objects and events, real or fictional — and the conceptual system, which can operate as mental representations of them". Hence, individuals

and Theodor Adorno after having left Germany. Benjamin started to write in French, Adorno switched to English, and both of them discussed the condition of the German language in their emigrant milieu. Thus, in May 1937, Benjamin writes to Adorno: "I dislike the frequent offences against German itself. [...] I have the rather evil suspicion that the ressentiment of the emigré [...] is simply finding an opportunity to express itself at the expense of the German language, and that is no longer an amusing matter" (Benjamin, 1994: 186). In response, Adorno notes: "It is interesting that you too suspected a certain revenge against the language here. I have often had the same feeling myself" (Wiesengrund-Adorno, 1994: 190–1991).

who speak the same language share a basic set of meanings. At the same time, "the conceptual map which I carry around in my head is totally different from yours, in which case you and I would interpret or make sense of the world in totally different ways" (Hall, 1997: 17–18).

That is why decolonial thinkers question the presumable innocence of language, considering the latter rather as a system of concepts and as a way of seeing of the world through the prism of linguistic categories than as a neutral tool of communication. Hence, in the given context, it would be more correct, instead of "cancel culture", to use the term *abrogation*, which implies a "refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or "correct" usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning "inscribed" in the words" (Ashcroft, Griffiths. Tiffin, 1989: 38)..

Deconstructing the semiocide

The opinion that the Russian language is not Putin's or Lukashenko's regimes' "private property" and should not be blamed for violence is rather wide spread these days. However, the political status of Russian as a language of those who unleashed and support wars (Russia's military aggression against Ukraine and Lukashenka's warfare against Belarusians and against the Belarusian language) induces the reconsideration of the relationship between the language(s) of power and the language(s) of resistance.

Teresa de Lauretis, in her article "The Violence of Rhetoric: Considerations on Representation and Gender" (the title of which reverberates with Michel Foucault's term "rhetoric of violence") argues that "the (semiotic) relation of the social to the discursive is posed from the start", as there is a close connection between "the order of language, some kind of discursive representation and the social practices of violence" (Lauretis, 1989: 32). In other words, language was and remains the main instrument of ideological indoctrination, which may be exploited according to the needs of power regime(s).

The prominent German philologist Victor Klemperer, soon after the end of WWII, published a book named *LTI. The Language of the Third Reich* (1946). It was written on the basis of his wartime notes and observations that he kept writing down throughout the years of the Nazi regime. Describing the linguistic catastrophe that had overtaken the German language under the Nazi regime, Klemperer noted that words can be like tiny doses of arsenicals: they are swallowed unnoticed, they do not seem to have any effect, but after a while the poisoning is evident. Noticing everywhere the same clichés, the same intonation, the spread of the style of "bazaar agitator-shouting", he concludes: "Nazism permeated the flesh and blood of the German people through single words, idioms, and sentence structures which were imposed upon them in a million repetitions and taken on board

mechanically and unconsciously" (Klemperer, 2000). Not realizing this danger, the Germans soon found themselves in another reality: books and newspapers, official correspondence and bureaucratic forms were all swimming in the same brown sauce. But the worst thing was that the symbolic violence was total — so much so that even the Jews spoke the language of the Nazi (Klemperer, 2000).

These days, in both Putin's Russia and Lukashenka's "Belorussia", the language of hatred plays a key role in the implementation of violence. Its offensive and obscene rhetoric permeates all levels of the power vertical and is transmitted through the state media channels. Moreover, its efficiency as a tool of symbolic violence significantly increases when the state repressive apparatuses are also involved, as in the case of Belarus. During all the years of Lukashenka's rule, Belarusians have also witnessed how the meanings of even the most familiar, everyday words (both colloquial and official language) have been gradually destroyed or inversed. This has affected the judicial and political vocabulary in the first place. Through diverse media channels of propaganda, the "newspeak" intruded and took over the public sphere. It is not accidental that the same language (i.e. Russian) is used for the propagation of war, hatred and genocide, and for the imperial expansion and occupation.

For more nuanced conceptualization of the destructive actions of power regimes with respect to language, the concept of "semiocide" may be relevant here. This term, coined by the Estonian scholar Ivar Puura (Puura, 2013), describes a "situation where signs and stories that are significant for someone are destroyed because of someone else's malevolence or carelessness, thereby stealing a part of the former's identity" (Puura 2013: 152). In a broad sense it signifies "the destruction of signs and stories", it implies "the erasure, total or partial, sudden or gradual, of meaning making processes pertaining to individuals as well as communities", but what is equally deleterious, is the damage to or even "destruction of sign relation, not only of the sign bearers themselves" (Usluu, 2020: 224, 234). In this context, my own semiotic anxiety stems from what I would call the contamination of "letter", or to put it differently, the defilement of language with all the ideological impurities that have saturated the official rhetoric in both Russia and Belarus.

However incredible it may sound for the adherents of the "Russophone world", but Lukashenka and Putin, aiming to disrupt Ukrainian and Belarusian cultures, languages and national identities, harmed Russian language the most. Conducting semiocide via annihilation of language as both the system of signs and the picture of the world is certainly quite symptomatic. On the one hand, it represents an attempt to evocate the ghosts of the "radiant" past (be it the Russian empire or the USSR) and the desire to bring the dead back onto the political scene and into the discourse. And on the other, it is also an intended revenge on the immediate present in which there is no place

for dictatorships in any impersonation, likewise there is no room for the language of violence, hatred and destruction.

According to Roland Barthes, the domain of language(s) under certain conditions may become a true "battlefield" (Barthes, 1989: 106)[11]. The war of languages is not "natural": "it occurs when society transforms difference into conflict" (Barthes, 1989: 107). The dividing line runs in the relation of languages to Power. It is on this ground that he proposed to distinguish between the *encratic* and *acratic* languages:

> "There are languages which are articulated, which develop, and which are marked in the light (or the shadow) of Power, of its many state, institutional, ideological machineries; I shall call these encratic languages or discourses. And facing them, there are languages which are elaborated, which feel their way, and which are themselves outside of Power and/or against Power; I shall call these acratic languages or discourses" (Barthes, 1989: 107).

In my view, the notion of the *encratic* language is applicable to the analysis of the discursive regimes of imperialism, colonialism, totalitarianism, but also may be instrumental for the analysis of more specific languages of propaganda, oppression and violence (characteristic for racism, misogyny, homophobia, prison, gang and military subcultures and so on). The particular cases of the acratic languages, as well as the strategies of resistance to the discourses of power are likewise diverse and multiple, and are being shaped by the concrete political circumstances[12].

The events of 2020 in Belarus that made a clear-cut the divide between the adherents of the current power regime and its opponents revealed the yawning discursive gap between the *encratic and acratic languages* in the divided Belarus. In the current circumstances, it is necessary *to keep up a correct distance* from the language that has been poisoned by propaganda cliches of "denazification" and "demilitarization", i.e. from the discourse that serves as an ideological curtain of the war against Ukraine. In the analysis of what happened, how the war became possible at all, what role hate speech and propaganda messages play in this conflict, we certainly will need a different conceptual vocabulary. The emancipation of language, the discursive *delinking*

11 It is worth mentioning that this wording from Barthes's text has been translated into Russian as "поле брани", but in Russian "брань" also means obscene, rude, inappropriate language.

12 In this paper I choose English as both a metalanguage in relation to Russian as a language-object and as an acratic language in the given political and cultural circumstances. English is certainly not a neutral or innocent language either, especially in light of the history of colonization, yet I recourse to English in order to create a critical, reflective distance towards the war and the discourses that are servicing it (be it in Russia or Belarus).

from the current power regimes and the deconstruction of meanings that the authoritarian regimes of Lukashenka and Putin have assigned even to common language phraseology will require time and effort.

Will we be able to restore the meanings of the terms that were appropriated, abused and corrupted by the languages of hatred and violence? How will we deal with the etymology of devalued words? Will we be able to get rid of some words and phraseological constructions that have established themselves in this "newspeak", so that they do not continue to poison our languages after the collapse of these regimes? These are all open questions, but one has to be reminded of the work on deconstruction of the language(s) of war and violence that awaits us ahead.

Concluding remarks

As Jacques Derrida once noted, "being 'in touch with actuality' and 'thinking one's time' are not the same thing. Both of them imply doing something, over and above establishing facts or offering descriptions: taking part, participating, taking sides. That is when you 'make contact', and perhaps change things, if only slightly. But one 'intervenes, as they say, in a time which is not present to one, or given in advance" (Derrida, 1994: 28). In continuation of Derrida's thought, I would note that in terms of individual agency, none of us has the power to stop, cancel or "cross out" the war, and yet we have no choice but to critically revise our own distance and proximity from/to the war. I mean not only the empathy and solidarity with those who are struggling against war, violence, destruction and dehumanization, but also the political distancing from those who started the war, moral distancing from those who support it, and building a critical, epistemological distance towards the very situation of the war.

I would like to conclude my reflections on the im/mediacy of the war with two relevant quotes. Both of them sound if not optimistic, then at least encouraging. The first quote, which invites us to think of the present dialectically, in all its complexity, is from the text by the decolonial thinker Achille Mbembe: "we have now fully entered what looks like a negative moment. [...] It is a moment when contradictory forces — inchoate, fractured, fragmented — are at work but what might come out of their interaction is anything but certain. It is also a moment when multiple old and recent unresolved crises seem to be on the path towards a collision. Such a collision might happen — or maybe not. It might take the form of outbursts that end up petering out. Whether the collision actually happens or not, the age of innocence and complacency is over" (Mbembe, 2015).

The second quote is taken from the above-mentioned book by Viktor Klemperer. He advises us, instead of getting desperate, to do what we can do as scholars even in the conditions which may not at all be

favourable for the intellectual work. He suggests noting every detail of the immediate present, in order to make it comprehensible later, and to value the experience of living in the troubled times: "observe, study and memorize what is going on — by tomorrow everything will already look different, by tomorrow everything will already feel different; keep hold of how things reveal themselves at this very moment and what the effects are" (Klemperer, 2000: 10).

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