

Cancelling Russia? That's just the start

Vasyl Cherepanyn

11 May 2022



Kyiv Maidan, February 20, 2014. Bulent Kilic/
AFP via Getty Images.

Real political change comes at a price

Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine has provoked a wide range of cancellations by various cultural organizations, companies, festivals, and international art events, who have rejected institutional cooperation with their collective and individual Russian counterparts. That was followed by a fierce debate in which many argue that a great Russian culture has nothing to do with the war ("it's Putin, not Pushkin"¹), that all this may play into Putin's hands,² and that the West has to find ways to protect "good Russian"³ dissidents who have found themselves in exile.

But this controversy has worked as a comfortable way out for the West to avoid much harder and far-reaching challenges that we face in the current predicament. Cancel culture in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, accompanied with sanctions and embargoes on the economic front, is just a soft starter for the heavyweight work that lies ahead.

Firstly, culture doesn't rest on metaphysical heavens of past grandeur but is part of an ideological state apparatus together with propaganda machines, construction of historical myths and educational battle over the past, present and future. Therefore, it cannot pretend to be innocent as it is used and misused for the sake of political tasks in the present. As American political theorist Nancy Fraser precisely put it,⁴ one cannot claim justice until injustice is overcome. That is not only applicable to politics but also to culture.

1. [pen-deutschland.de](https://www.penn.de/pen-deutschland.de).
2. [washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com).
3. [npr.org](https://www.npr.org).
4. [cccb.org](https://www.cccb.org).

International cancelling of cooperation with Russia is part of Ukraine's decolonial liberation struggle. In recent centuries, Ukrainian culture has not been just put in the Russian imperial shadow, but has simply been robbed of its heritage and modern actuality and forcefully provincialized. All of this has been done with the full acceptance and support of the West, which nowadays is very willing to follow a decolonial trend but is totally blind to matters outside its bubble, as it was towards its own past not long ago. Now Ukrainian museums and cultural sites are being looted and deliberately destroyed by the Russian military, the vanguard force of Russian cultural colonialism.

After Russia's invasion on February 24, no Russian institution whatsoever opposed the war, let alone named the aggressor: a few declared, in typical newspeak, suspension of their work because of "the human and political tragedy unfolding in Ukraine."⁵ Many Western institutions that have been claiming "radical political engagement" for years, have simply resorted to a white cube radicalism and self-satisfying humanitarianism, too afraid of acting politically beyond their comfort zone and unsettling their publics and authorities by attempting to affect the decision-making process regarding the Ukrainian cause.

5. garagemca.org.

Culture as an institutional field is part of social relations which include political protest too. In the 21st century, Ukraine has had two successful Maidan revolutions, the last of which eight years ago was a local manifestation of the global wave of square-occupations and uprisings, and managed to topple a bloody authoritarian president. On the last day of Maidan in 2014, Kyiv's central square was almost totally burnt down after the face off with heavily-armed police and looked literally like Malevich's "Black Square." That was a display of the revolutionary victory in Ukraine.

Counter-revolution came from the Russian side a few days later in the form of the military occupation of Crimea and the waging of war in Donbas. The alpha and omega (or rather Z⁶) of Putin's regime has always been to prevent any precedent of overthrowing the dictator by the people. That's exactly why the Kremlin leader has smashed any opposition at home and rushed to eliminate "Maidans" in Syria or Kazakhstan. Now he seeks to eliminate the country of Maidan by physically exterminating its people.

6. project-syndicate.org.

As the famous statement by German philosopher Walter Benjamin goes, behind every fascism, there is a failed revolution. After the 2020 rigged presidential election in Belarus, its people managed to protest on a massive scale but their resistance effectively fell short. Regime change can't be achieved by simply marching on the streets and taking off shoes when standing on benches.⁷ Russia then annexed Belarus and the puppet government in Minsk joined Kremlin's war of aggression providing its territory and facilities for artillery strikes and bombing of the Ukrainian land.

7. twitter.com.

Modern Russia is a country of a suppressed revolution; its society has never seized the opportunity to revolt en masse. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there have been around 14,000⁸ individual protests across a country with over 140 million people. Those were undoubtedly courageous acts of dissent, though made out of despair as it was obviously too late to change the status quo. But much more

8. [aljazeera.com](https://www.aljazeera.com).

numerous than the protests were endless queues at Uniqlo, IKEA and McDonald's, that were about to withdraw from Russia.

The Kremlin's fascist ⁹ military dictatorship didn't appear out of the blue just yesterday, it took years to be established and to reach the point of no return. The only person in Russia openly denouncing Putin's regime in real political practice is Alexei Navalny, imprisoned for surviving an assassination attempt being poisoned with a Novichok nerve agent, ¹⁰ whose name the Russian president cannot even pronounce. ¹¹ His distant Ukrainian relative Ilya Navalny was recently killed by the Russian soldiers ¹² in Bucha near Kyiv just for his surname. If you want to know Russia, that's Kremlin politics in short.

9. [politico.com](https://www.politico.com).

10. edition.cnn.com.

11. theguardian.com.

12. [bild.de](https://www.bild.de).

When the West plays its game of declaring support equally to Ukrainians resisting the Russian military as well as to Russian dissidents opposing Putin's rule, it doesn't just make an insulting equation between the massacre of Ukrainians by the Russian army and the hardship of Russian civilians: the West also evades questioning its own fatal inaction.

It's symptomatic indeed how quickly the Ukrainian appeal to introduce a no-fly zone became virtually utopian. Today, we are not even allowed to think that the West with all its capabilities could show enough courage to step in to prevent further atrocities. We, of course, know very well the "no NATO intervention" argument, but how does this inertness, hiding behind the European Wall and observing the unbearable, affect the state of democracy as such? What kind of democratic society do we have if the infamous "red line" doesn't actually exist as the continuous cycle of war disasters always appears to be insufficiently unbearable to directly stop them?

Russian dissidents in exile may go on with their radical chic revolt against Putin, waiting for the "wonderful Russia of the future" to come. But it won't come by itself, and Russia's regime change isn't going to happen in Berlin or in Amsterdam but in Moscow. Radical political language should be tested by radical political action. Now of course they all oppose Putin's war and feel guilty and ashamed of their country. Unfortunately, at this point, it's too late and not enough.

Russia's full-on assault on Ukraine was absurdly justified with the lexicon of "denazification" and "demilitarization" not accidentally. It was later accompanied by the Russian fascist manifesto, published by the official press agency "RIA Novosti," openly stating ¹³ its genocidal purpose to completely eliminate Ukrainians as such. Attempting to hide its own core, ideology always lays it bare in plain sight.

13. snyder.substack.com.

We have indeed reached the point of no return. But if we are courageous enough to think of the future amidst the current catastrophe, the only chance for it to come is to make Russia as a state and as a country go through full and profound denazification and demilitarization. Europe once carried out such ground-shaking commitment before, and only this now can lay the new foundations of our common world.

But first Russia must suffer a crushing military defeat.

If we don't achieve this, then the victory over Hitler was for nothing.

The views and opinions published in this section mirror the principles of academic freedom and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of the L'Internationale confederation and its members.

