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POLITICAL SCIENCES

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DECOLONIZATION OF CULTURAL SPACE: POLITICAL AND LINGUISTIC DIMENSIONS OF CONTEMPORARY UKRAINIAN THEATRE

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Abstract: The article examines the decolonization of Ukrainian cultural space through the relationship between public policy, language and contemporary theatre. It considers the legal framework governing the state language and imperial symbolism, the role of cultural funding, and the Ukrainian Shakespeare Festival as a case of artistic agency. The analysis argues that sustainable cultural autonomy requires both institutional support and freedom of artistic interpretation. Decolonization is understood as the expansion of Ukrainian cultural choices and international connections rather than the replacement of one compulsory aesthetic with another.

Keywords: Decolonization, cultural policy, national identity, Ukrainian theatre, cultural autonomy, language policy, artistic freedom, cultural resilience.

Russia's full-scale invasion has made the protection of cultural life a matter of public policy as well as artistic survival. Damage to cultural infrastructure, displacement and reduced opportunities for creative professionals affect the ability of

communities to produce and share cultural expression. UNESCO's 2024 Action Plan for Culture in Ukraine identifies support for cultural institutions and professionals as part of recovery [1, c. 14–15]. In this context, decolonization concerns not only the removal of particular symbols but also the conditions under which Ukrainian institutions can define their own priorities, preserve memory and communicate with the world.

The purpose of this article is to explain how cultural policy, language and theatrical practice contribute to national self-identification and cultural autonomy in contemporary Ukraine. The study uses a qualitative analysis of Ukrainian legislation, a cultural-support programme and the publicly available programme of the Ukrainian Shakespeare Festival. The festival is considered as an illustrative case; the study does not claim to measure the opinions of all artists or audiences.

For the purposes of this analysis, cultural decolonization means reviewing inherited relations of cultural authority: who selects the repertoire, whose language and historical experience are treated as central, and which institutions have the resources to tell stories. National identity is understood here as a shared and continuously negotiated sense of belonging, while cultural autonomy is the practical ability of cultural communities to make artistic choices, sustain institutions and maintain direct international relations. These concepts overlap, but autonomy cannot be reduced to a single language, aesthetic style or political slogan.

The political dimension is visible in the legal status of the Ukrainian language. Article 23 of the Law of Ukraine "On Ensuring the Functioning of Ukrainian as the State Language" establishes Ukrainian as the language of cultural and artistic events, while allowing other languages where justified by an artistic concept and in circumstances specified by law concerning Indigenous peoples and national minorities. It also requires Ukrainian translation of performances in another language at state and municipal theatres, using subtitles, audio translation or another method [2, art. 23]. The law therefore regulates public access and the role of the state language; it should not be described as an unconditional prohibition on every other language on stage.

The Law of Ukraine “On Condemning and Prohibiting the Propaganda of Russian Imperial Policy in Ukraine and Decolonizing Toponymy” addresses imperial propaganda, relevant symbols and place names [3]. Its focus differs from that of language legislation. Reconsidering a monument or an institutional name, for example, is not legally identical to choosing a translation for a theatrical production. Keeping these areas distinct makes the political analysis more precise and avoids equating an individual’s language with support for imperial policy.

Cultural policy also has a constructive dimension. Funding new plays, translations, archives, education, touring and digital access can widen the range of voices that audiences encounter. The Ukrainian Cultural Foundation’s Cultural Horizons programme identifies cultural heritage, Ukrainian language, diversity and the rethinking of collections among its areas of support [4]. Such programmes can create opportunities for local institutions, although the existence of a grant programme alone does not establish its effectiveness. To assess outcomes, researchers would need evidence about who receives support, which productions reach audiences and whether projects remain accessible after a grant ends.

A linguistic perspective adds another layer. Ukrainian-language terminology and contemporary translation affect how a performance names historical events, institutions and social relations. Translation is therefore a creative act as well as a change of words: it can make a work meaningful to a contemporary audience and give Ukrainian artists a direct voice in interpreting a shared international text. The question is not whether a play has a foreign author, but who selects it, translates it, stages it and provides the context in which it is discussed.

The first Ukrainian Shakespeare Festival in Ivano-Frankivsk in June 2024 illustrates this point. Its programme combined performances and public discussions with participants from Ukraine and other countries. The festival included the Ivano-Frankivsk theatre’s Hamlet in a Ukrainian translation by Yurii Andrukhovych and directed by Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi [5]. This example does not prove a general change across all Ukrainian theatres. It does show a specific institution presenting an international classic through Ukrainian translation and local artistic choices while

participating in international exchange.

The theatre researcher Ewa Bal interprets the festival through a decolonial lens and discusses Ukrainian translations and wartime reinterpretations of Shakespeare [6]. Her discussion also shows why artistic interpretation cannot be reduced to a single national message: productions may invite debate about gender, power, responsibility and the effects of war. A critical reading of such work is part of cultural autonomy, because the ability to disagree about a performance is itself a sign of a functioning cultural public sphere.

The state's responsibility for language and cultural security must therefore be balanced with artistic freedom. Article 54 of the Constitution of Ukraine guarantees freedom of literary, artistic, scientific and technical creativity [7]. In practice, this balance requires transparent grant criteria, protection of the rights of national minorities and Indigenous peoples, accessible performances, and room for independent artistic decisions. It also calls for attention to regional theatres and communities whose cultural resources or opportunities may differ from those of major cities.

Several criteria can guide a more substantive assessment of decolonization. First, repertoire and archives can be examined for the visibility of Ukrainian authors and previously marginalized histories. Second, language policy can be assessed through the availability and quality of translations and accessible information. Third, institutional autonomy can be considered through transparent funding, local decision-making and direct partnerships with foreign institutions. Finally, the diversity of participating artists and the ability to express disagreement should be treated as indicators of an open cultural environment rather than obstacles to national identity.

In conclusion, contemporary Ukrainian theatre can contribute to national self-identification by creating space for Ukrainian language, memory and interpretation. The Ivano-Frankivsk festival demonstrates one way in which local artistic agency and international dialogue can reinforce each other. Sustainable decolonization requires more than a symbolic change: it depends on cultural infrastructure, fair access to resources, linguistic rights and freedom of creativity.

These conditions allow Ukrainian culture to develop its own priorities while remaining open to critical discussion and cooperation.

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