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**Viadrina Center of Polish and Ukrainian Studies. An Opening Talk
(November 30th, 2023, Frankfurt/Oder)**

Дорогі колеги! Drodzy koledzy! Meine Damen und Herren! Dear colleagues!

Thank you for joining us today at this very important event - the official opening of the Viadrina Center for Polish and Ukrainian Studies.

It is no coincidence that we meet today, on the eve of December 1. This is the day of the Ukrainian referendum on independence, which took place in 1991 and proved that the majority of the population of the whole Ukraine supports the independence of the state. The year 1991 is also the year when the European University Viadrina was founded. And this is not only a chronological coincidence. Both events – the Ukrainian state independence and the re-emergence of the University in Frankfurt/Oder – were part of the same great transformation process – the collapse of the ‘socialist block’ and the Soviet Union and the gradual integration of the Central European countries into the EU and NATO. The European University Viadrina had and hopefully still has a unique role in this process. Located on both sides of the Oder River, in Germany and in Poland, it could and should be seen as *the embodiment of European integration*, as a teaching and research institution facing the East of the continent.

In 1995, Serhii Plochy wrote in the “Slavic Review” (Vol. 54, No. 3) in a debate on Ukrainian studies after 1991: “it is doubtful that any new chairs of Ukrainian history will be established in the US, except those endowed by Ukrainians. It is much more probable that such chairs will be established in Germany or Austria”. This prediction came true in 2018, when the Chair of Entangled History of Ukraine was established at the Viadrina and the Collegium Polonicum. So far, it remains the only chair in Germany with “History of Ukraine” in its title.

Viadrina was founded and developed in the spirit of Jerzy Giedroyc and his “Kultura” tradition, a tradition based on the recognition of internationally defined borders, on historical reconciliation, on democracy, and on consistent opposition to imperialism of any kind... It is no coincidence that our research colloquium bears the name of Giedroyc, and it is the Giedroyc legacy that lies behind our deepest partnership cooperation with the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań.

Let's think about the title of Giedroyc's magazine, which has been published in Paris since 1947. It is "Kultura". Not politics, not ideology, not even Poland or Eastern Europe... The magazine "Kultura" existed until 2000 and was stopped after Giedroyc's death, according to his will. But it had and still has prominent and admirable successors. Among them we could mention our partners from the European Solidarity Center in Gdańsk and the "New Eastern Europe" magazine.

The decisive part of the appeal of "Kultura" was the concept of fundamentally new, respectful and equal relations of Poland with the ULB region – Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania. And it is no coincidence that in September this year in Vilnius was held an international congress "*Rethinking Ukraine and Europe. New Challenges for Historians*" – and we were one of the partners of this event, presenting the idea of our Center to the public for the first time.

Another programmatic initiative that has already begun with the participation of our Center is a research and mobility project *Festung Archiv Ukraine*, hosted by the Pilecki Institute Berlin and supported by the Bundesarchiv and the Polish Academy of Sciences – our friends and strategic partners. The very first presentation took place two days ago in Berlin, and we are honored that Sofja Kamenieva and Yuliia Bilodid from the State Archive of the Kyiv Region joined us tonight.

Let me go back to Ploky's quote. It comes from a response to Mark von Hagen's article "Does Ukraine Have a History?" In this influential text von Hagen explained the reasons for the weak legitimacy of Ukrainian, and more broadly East European, topics in the international academy, drew attention to the potential threats of the post-Soviet "nationalization" of Ukrainian history, and proposed to counter them with an approach in which "precisely the fluidity of frontiers, the permeability of cultures, the historic multi-ethnic society is what could make Ukrainian history a very 'modern' field of inquiry".

In the discussion at the time, not everyone shared von Hagen's attitude. In particular, Andreas Kappeler rhetorically asked: "But is this the time for a post-national approach to Ukrainian history?" and continued: "I have my doubts – especially for Germany and western Europe where Ukraine and its history are largely ignored in politics, the press and research. As usual, traditional Russocentric approaches to Ukrainian history dominate the field. The first task of Ukrainian historiography therefore is to make information available in order to show Ukrainian historical perspectives and to counterbalance the Russian and Polish views already entrenched in the field".

From the perspective of almost 30 years, one can (and should) ask what path Ukrainian studies has chosen. According to my observations, in general, the perspectives proposed by von Hagen have played an increasingly important role in Ukrainian studies. This does not mean that the national narrative has completely disappeared, but it certainly has not remained unquestioned and purely dominant. After all, the issue of the fundamental inclusiveness of Ukrainian history and the inadmissibility of limiting it to the history of ethnic Ukrainians was raised long before von Hagen by Omeljan Pritsak, a prominent Turkologist and founder of the Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University. However, neither Pritsak's appeals nor the publications of his students were able to significantly undermine the Russocentric basis of American and Western European Slavic studies. It is important that this fundamental recognition was made in the first days of full-scale Russian aggression. And it came from Marina Mogilner from the University of Illinois at Chicago, who wrote: "Putin's national-imperial fantasies may look crazy in the proposed arrangement and as a pretext for the war, but at a structural level they correlate perfectly with the most fundamental narratives in our field, both here and in Russia" (<http://www.slavicreview.illinois.edu/discussion/>).

The call for the "decolonization" of our research field, whose very name has become problematic as words such as "post-Soviet" have been increasingly criticized, has been made from various quarters. In the contemporary Ukrainian debate, decolonization seems to be the leading, almost universally accepted approach. However, its precise definition, as well as its positioning in relation to postcolonial studies in Western historiography, remains a matter of debate. Whether the postcolonial research perspective is a return to the national narrative, particularly given the tendency of both to assert "realism of the group" by perceiving society as composed of pure forms – homogeneous social groups?

Can the (post)-colonial theme actually become one of the keys to analytically overcoming (or at least balancing) certain trends that Sebastian Conrad noted in 2016: "In some recent writing, empires appear as self-evident forms of political rule over heterogeneous populations and no longer as based on infringements upon individual and group rights" (*What is Global History?* Princeton, 2016, p. 229). I believe nowadays responsible history writing should be aware of epistemological dangers of both methodological nationalism and methodological imperialism.

Transnational, comparative, or global history cannot be properly done without in-depth knowledge of the local material. Area studies seem to be a natural precondition for transregional and global research. A complex Ukrainian history can only be entangled. Just like any other! In the same vein, the development of Ukrainian studies, knowledge of the Ukrainian language,

and the wider use of local sources do not imply a negation of Polish or Russian studies. On the contrary! As Andreas Kappeler noted in his response to von Hagen`s article, quoted above, “new directions in research on Ukraine will bring new insights for those who study Russia”. We can add: for those who study Jewish history, the history of the Crimean Tatars, the Crimean Khanate and the Ottoman Empire, the history of the Habsburgs, the history of Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and – last but not least – German history. And we have more and more publications that convincingly prove this.

We believe that modern Ukrainian studies cannot be conducted without knowledge of the Ukrainian language, wide use of local sources, and treating Ukrainian colleagues as equal partners in intellectual exchange.

The teaching of the Ukrainian language is of special importance. Viadrina has every reason to be proud of being the first university in Brandenburg and Berlin to establish a permanent Ukrainian language lectureship. The Viadrina Language Center is a strategic partner of our Center when it comes to plans for the certification of Ukrainian studies, the accreditation of Ukrainian language courses at UNiCert, and the introduction of Ukrainian academic communication courses. The same goal of establishing Ukrainian as a language of academic discussion – also outside Ukraine – will be furthered by the Open Lectures on Ukrainian Studies (*Відкриті лекції з українознавства*) that we have launched. The first such lecture in Ukrainian is scheduled for January 22 next year. And I am very pleased to announce that we are launching this project together with two non-governmental organizations, the Association of Young Ukrainians in Germany Viche (<https://vitsche.org/en/>) and Helping Hands Blaue Brücke Frankfurt/Oder (<https://www.blauebruecke.org>).

Since I have already spoken about German friends and partners, I cannot but mention a number of initiatives. These are: Center for East European and International Studies (ZOIS), Virtual Ukrainian Institute for Advanced Study and the Institute for Advanced Study Berlin, German-Ukrainian Historical Commission, Forum Transregionale Studien, where the Research Network PRISMA UKRAÏNA is located since 2015. It is the Deutsches Kultuforum östliches Europa in Potsdam – an institution with which we are currently preparing the publication of a unique German-Ukrainian manuscript by Oswald Burghardt/Jurij Klen, a forgotten prominent translator and literary scholar of German origin, one of the most fascinating Ukrainian poets of the 20th century, and proof that German-language Ukrainian studies have a long – and still unexplored – history of more than one hundred years.

Another important pillar of our attention is school education. In mid-November this year our Center was a co-organizer of an international workshop “*How to Teach Ukrainian History in Germany, Poland and other European Union countries?*” – together with the Leibniz Institute for Educational Media (Georg Eckert Institute) and the Center for Historical Research in Berlin, Polish Academy of Sciences. The institution that hosted this event was the Ukrainian Free University in Munich, whose history dates back to 1921, and whose rector, Dr. Maria Pryshlak, is with us this evening.

I mentioned our Ukrainian partners and the principle of equal partnership. First of all, we have in mind our partner universities in Ukraine. And we sincerely thank the representatives of these universities who were able to come to us today. I would also like to emphasize the agreements on academic cooperation we have already reached with the Ukrainian Center for Holocaust Studies Kyiv, and to mention the launch of a book series in Ukraine, together with the Dukh i Litera publishing house. It is an honor and a pleasure to pass on to you the best greetings from our colleagues in Kyiv, Anatoly Podolsky from the Ukrainian Center for Holocaust Studies and Leonid Finberg from Dukh i Litera.

Another new series of publications, this time in Polish, entitled “*Ukraine-Poland-Germany. The Triangle of Dialogue*”, which we launched together with the Center for Historical Research in Berlin, Polish Academy of Sciences.

We realize that our Center is emerging in the context of a full-scale war unleashed by Russia, and we understand that our colleagues who gave their lives (or are still doing so) on the battlefield, who died (or survived) under occupation, who remain in Russian prisons (like our friend, human rights activist Maksym Butkevych) paid with their lives for the ever-increasing willingness of Western authors and publishers to start writing “Kyiv” instead of “Kiev”. We understand the emotional tension and personal dimension of the war experience. At the same time, we are convinced that even in such extremely difficult conditions, the primary mission of the university and our Center is academic quality, open discussion, and the pursuit of understanding...

We believe in the possibility and productivity of creative combination of high-quality local competence with transregional/transnational approach, full acceptance of Ukraine`s agency with careful study of its global interconnections, critical search for the new paths of explaining societies of Central Europe with best traditions of German Slavistics, special focus on Polish-Ukrainian entanglements with principal inclusive approach to other groups, identifications and experiences.

America`s oldest dictionary – Merriam-Webster – recently announced the top word of 2023. It is “authentic”. I think “authentic” is the right word to describe my own Viadrina experience, since my very first teaching assignment here – made possible thanks to Prof. Annette Werberger – and up to today, the moment of opening our Center. I am very grateful to the leadership of the University, personally to the President, Prof. Eduard Mühle, to my exceptionally dedicated Co-Director, Prof. Dagmara Jajesniak-Quast, to my wonderful colleague Bozhena Kozakevych, to all the researchers of the VCPU, and to all of you who have joined our event tonight. This Center will work for all of you, for all of us...

Thank you very much! Дуже дякую!