

## **Fending off a triple inferiority complex in academia: an autoethnography**

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I stopped keeping a diary at the age of 12, because my 9-year-old brother would not stop reading it. The last entry I recollect – which is still buzzing in my head 20 years later – was in winter 1998 when 15-year-old Tara Lipinski won Olympic gold in figure-skating. This event threw me into what I learned much later was an “acute awareness moment”. I went to our shared kids’ room, sat at our shared desk and wrote down in my pink diary: “She is 15 and has already won an Olympic gold. She is 15 and has already reached the goal of her life. You [that is: me] are 12, you don’t as much as have a goal, and you are nowhere near reaching it. A major waste of a life.”

This autoethnography is thus based on a non-journal – a very close to reality, at times exact, recollection of episodes from my professional life spanning 15 years (2003-2018) and various academic contexts, country-, discipline- and seniority-wise. While it is a story by an emigrant, it is not a story of emigration; that one would have had to be a book. Likewise, while it is my story, it is not a story about me. It is a story of subtle, nearly invisible, structures in academia and the heavy day-to-day burden of fending off a triad of assumed, imposed and self-imposed inferiority complexes: in relation to the “center” one arrives at, in relation to the “periphery” one (never really) leaves behind, and, specifically in my case, coming from Ukraine, in relation to this “periphery’s” very right to exist and be seen as a separate unit, a periphery of its own. This essay addresses the political through the personal and treats emotion as an inherent element of any human interaction – also in academia.

### **September 2003**

I am a first year law student at the National University “Kyiv-Mohyla Academy”, the oldest (it marked its 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2015), the most prestigious (according to various statistics and

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surveys) and the best (in my humble opinion) university in Ukraine. A month ago, I ranked 21<sup>st</sup> in a four-hour non-stop entry exam in seven subjects (in my case: Ukrainian, English, Mathematics, Chemistry, Literature, Law, and the History of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy) and, in a competition of 18-to-1, made it to a “budget place” in law school (which means my tuition fees will be paid from the state budget, so I can study for free). The day we saw the results – lists of names and scores on A4 sheets of paper glued on an improvised board outside one of the buildings on campus – was the first time I saw my father cry in a situation that did not involve death.

I come to my English class (I have 6 hours of those a week in the first two years of law school). The topic of today’s class is essay writing. We wrote short essays at home in preparation for the class, and now we will discuss them. The teacher walks in and says, “Listen everyone. Forget the way you’ve been writing until now. In English, they think, reason and write differently. Today I’ll tell you how.” In the next two hours, we learn that none of our “essays” are essays to begin with. Turns out, you shall start with the end and put your main point upfront, in your opening paragraph, rather than develop your thought gradually, building up the suspense until the very end and converting the reader line by line. Each paragraph shall have a point – and one point only; a paragraph with more than one point is messy and shall be split in two or more; a paragraph without an explicit point is redundant and shall be dropped. The exact same goes for sentences. You shall not express any unsupported opinions, for these don’t matter and, if anything, only undermine your “objectivity”. And “philosophizing”, as well as any other form of “free flow of thought”, is simply bad manners. I feel confused and dismembered. “But it can’t be that there is only *one* way of writing, can it?!” I protest. “And who said this is the better one, anyway?! What about the personalized style, the artistic, the aesthetic in one’s writing?...”, I continue, losing confidence along the way. Others in the class join in. A different *word* order is one thing (we have all long disciplined ourselves on the word order in English); a different *thought* order is something else. But – sooner or later – we all lose this battle.

## April 2006

I am a third-year law student and go to a public international law conference at Moscow State Law Academy, supposedly the best law school in Russia. I am thrilled! It is my first “international business trip”. My university even pays me per diems, so I feel like a real adult. It is also my first trip to Moscow since my family left Moscow and returned to Ukraine in the summer of 1992, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. I will be staying with my parents’ friends from back then, who will show me all the spots and places I don’t remember but know so well from my childhood photos. Again: I am thrilled!

The working languages of the conference are Russian and English – and, upon a quick deliberation with myself, I sign up to present in English. English is the language in which I have mastered the material: it is public international law after all! What is more, although I speak Russian with my parents, I struggle to discuss legal subjects in Russian for lack of professional vocabulary: I have been educated in Ukrainian my entire life. Finally (and this I find the worst!), I am self-conscious of an apparent Ukrainian accent in my Russian and dread sounding provincial. I decide to flash my advanced English rather than expose my imperfect Russian and be an object of ridicule. As I come to the tribune, the chair of the panel, a renowned Russian professor of law (I own one of his books, how exciting!), an older man, remarks (in Russian), “Olga here will be presenting in English today. Ukrainians are notorious for taking an issue with Russian and the Russians and do not miss a chance to make their point.” He makes an awkward chuckle, the room fills with suppressed laughter, and I pluck all

my courage and self-worth to bounce back and respond (in Russian...), “English *is* the working language of the conference – or is it not?” I proceed with my presentation in English.

It so happens that the following presentation, by Artur (a Russian-Armenian student from Velikiy Novgorod), addresses the exact same topic as mine did. He opens by saying, “And now I will translate Olga’s presentation into Russian for those who did not get it the first time around.” This time I have to laugh, too.

### **May 2006**

I am on my law school’s team for the Central and Eastern European Moot Competition. We have studied the case, submitted the written pleadings (our detailed solution of the case in writing), prepared the oral pleadings and booked (and paid for) our trip to Zagreb, where the competition takes place this year. All that is left to do is get us Croatian visas. This shall be easy, we reason, as Croatia is a friendly country and is not even in the Schengen zone. But the original letter of invitation just wouldn’t arrive. The lady in charge of the organization in Croatia swears she has posted it. She sends the visa service of the Croatian Embassy a scanned copy of the invitation, with all our names and passport details in it, and telephones them repeatedly to assure that our applications are “legit”, but to no avail. Time passes, too much time, and so we miss our departure date. We miss the competition. We are devastated and frustrated at having lost all this time, and effort, and money (and hope, and aspiration, and intellectual commitment) for what we believe is no good reason at all.

The letter of invitation does arrive in my postbox: on the day the competition ends. I toss it.

I hold a grudge against Croatia for a long time. It is almost ten years before I go there – this time on holiday and visa-free.

### **March 2007**

I am a fourth-year law student (the final year for a Bachelor in Law degree). I am on my law school’s team for the Philip Jessup International Law Moot Court Competition, the most prestigious competition for law students and law schools in the world. We’ve been working on our case days, nights and weekends for no study credits whatsoever for about six months – and just when my spontaneous nose bleedings become trivial, we win a tough national competition. As “Ukraine National Champion” we are headed to Washington DC for the International Rounds. It is the second year our team “does Jessup”, so we are ecstatic to have won this time.

Days before we depart for the USA, we have a major fight (let’s say money was involved and keep it at that). Disappointed in my team members and the coach, disgusted even, I consider not going to the International Rounds. But I plead the case for both sides, applicant and respondent, and there is no way on earth my teammates can take over my part in the few days left. I realize that my no-show will mean our team’s disqualification – in which case Ukraine and our law school will be unrepresented. I don’t want to, and frankly don’t dare, to do that. I also see it as *my* big moment, and I don’t want to let them take it away from me with my own hands. So, I decide to go, be what may.

Day 1 of the International Rounds. I am at a grand opening ceremony, where all participating countries and teams are introduced. When the team from Kazakhstan is called up, a hall with about 1000 people ... explodes with laughter. The movie “Borat” has been released earlier that year – need I say more? The laughter continues as the poor guys walk up the aisle with their heads down to receive their certificates and then back to their seats again. I am stunned. I bite

my lower lip and look pointlessly and powerlessly around the huge room, over laughing people's heads and into laughing people's faces. I can physically feel the anger and shame felt by the Kazakhstan team members. At some level, I cannot believe what I see is happening. I have never been a witness to such a mass ridicule. And that – I come to realize in a moment – by an audience composed almost entirely of top law students from around the world specializing in public international law, of all things! “Everyday geopolitics”, I tell myself. “The Kazakhs and the rest of us post-Soviets are being shown our place. We might be good enough to be invited to the party and even shine briefly, but we are most certainly exotic guests at this ‘feast of life’.”

Day 3 of the International Rounds. We play against (“face in court”, he-he) a team from New Zealand. When they learn that we come from Ukraine, they look surprised and one of them asks, in all honesty: “How did you guys get here?!” I disallow myself to understand the question as “why is Ukraine competing?” and choose to understand it for what it meant *literally*, that is: “how did you travel here?” “What a strange question for someone from New Zealand, of all places, to ask!” I remember noting to myself. Having sensed the contempt in the question, my team mate jokes it away, nervously, saying that we first rode horses for a day, and then took a train, and then could finally take a plane. The expression on their faces suggests they believe this might be true. One of us adds, hastily, that it is a simple 9 hours with a direct flight from Kyiv.

Last day of the International Rounds. Game over. All participants attend the International Gala (or whatever it was called) where prizes and special awards are handed out. Our team ranks 9<sup>th</sup> out of a 100+ teams from around the world in the group rounds. This is the best result for Ukraine ever (I believe, it remains so to this day), and we are over-the-moon happy. We also make it to “octofinals” (1/8) in the knockout stage. Team Ukraine is the best-ranking team from continental Europe (in this competition, UK teams are considered separately because of their structural comparative advantage, the UK being a case law state unlike the common law states in continental Europe). Team Ukraine is also the only team from post-Soviet space to have made it this far in the competition. When we learn the results, my teammates and I cheer (despite not being on speaking terms otherwise!) about the fact that we “beat the Russians”, who had four or five teams in the international rounds that year while Ukraine only had one. As we are called up and walk to the stage to collect the congratulatory plaque, the general mild cheering of the crowd is interrupted by loud chanting in Russian by participants from other post-Soviet states: “Well done!” (“Molodtsy!”). I feel extremely proud and pleased: I know that *they* can appreciate the true value of our success, which is achieved “despite and not thanks to”, as a Ukrainian saying has it. I also feel a little embarrassed for being associated so flatly and publicly with the “post-soviet club”.

## July 2007

I obtained my Bachelor in Law degree at the end of June. Although for lawyers in Ukraine a Bachelor's degree qualifies as “incomplete higher education” and mandates another full year of study, the system does allow for an interruption at this stage, unlike during the first four years. My study mate and friend Tanya and I begin strategizing our “year abroad”. It cannot be a “year off” in the sense western students have it for various reasons, starting with the absence of the freedom of movement, so it has to be a formal study to justify a long-stay visa. We are looking at Master programs. As regular Ukrainians in financial terms, and non-EU citizens on top of that, we cannot afford to pay western/non-EU citizen tuition fees or even demonstrate sufficient subsistence funds, so it has to be on an all-inclusive scholarship. We are looking at countries and universities that grant those. Even though we both speak decent German and I

speak some Polish, English is by far our best-spoken foreign language (and we have already taken all tests necessary to prove that). We are looking at study programs in English. You might think the UK is on the top of our list, but no: we dismiss the UK altogether because its visa regime is different from the rest of Europe, and we do not wish to be “stuck in the UK” unable to travel anywhere else, do we?! We are looking at Schengen-zone countries only. Finally, we fear that the Nordic countries might be too dark, too cold and too expensive, so these are also scrapped off the list. All things considered, we opt for the Netherlands. During the summer, we apply to a number of Dutch universities.

## **September 2007**

I win a prestigious MATRA/MTEC scholarship of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and arrive in Maastricht to do a Master of Arts in European Studies (and Tanya heads to Rotterdam to do an LLM).

I land in what to me resembles Pleasantville (I have seen the movie just a few months earlier): seemingly perfect, too good to be true, in dire need of “colour”. Just like the two main characters of *Pleasantville*, I feel trapped in a TV-show. And yet I know it is for real. When someone refers to a “bad neighbourhood of Maastricht”, I laugh hysterically.

I also find myself immersed in a community of students who are on average 3-4-5 years older than me (now 21) and are only about to start thinking of who they “wish to become when they grow up”. Yet, I am told, Maastricht University is among the most competitive study environments in the Netherlands: because of all the Germans studying there. Having arrived from Ukraine, where life is daily struggle for most people, having studied in the most competitive faculty of the most competitive university in the country, having worked part-time on top of that in a Kyiv office of an American law firm to be able to afford anything at all, I do not find the environment competitive or the studies tough. From where I stand, it is rather a holiday from real life. The apparent discrepancy in default opportunities and an omnipresent sense of entitlement are very disturbing and confronting to me.

I also lose my name. First time, when most (if not all) people mispronounce “Olga” (“l” and “g” are both soft, not hard) and simply don’t get (and also mispronounce) the informal diminutive “Olya”. Second time, when I learn that the university accounts for me by my student number and not my name. Third time, when I comprehend that my patronymic (the part of one’s name that takes after one’s father’s name, e.g. I am Olga *Volodymyrivna* Burlyuk because my father is Volodymyr) is not taken up in any of the administration of me abroad because it does not feature in the transliterated bits of my passport, only in the Cyrillic bits. (Years later, without any second thoughts, I give my best childhood friend Kristina a personalized book “A girl who lost her name” as a birthday gift. It is a cute children’s book built around the letters of one’s name, where you find the letters on the pages of the book, one by one, so as to reconstruct the name. I am certain Kristina will have a good laugh. She calls me minutes after receiving it at her home in Stuttgart, sobbing, to say that just weeks before she has had to formally give up her patronymic in the process of naturalizing in Germany and she has been feeling like she has literally lost a part of her name ever since. I had no idea about that. I regret my gift dearly.)

I also catch myself converting prices into Ukrainian currency (a compulsion I quickly trained myself to block for my mental health’s sake) and trying to assess what kind of lifestyle my monthly allowance can provide. I soon figure out that I *can* afford to spend on coffees, lunches, drinks and partying with fellow students; but I never fully relax when I do. Upon reflection, I realize it is not about money as such, but about the gnawing awareness of structural inequality.

In self-preservation, I dive into studying. I know I have to go back to Ukraine and finish law school anyway, so my next step is set and simple. But I already entertain the idea of doing a PhD after that – and that will have to be fully-funded again, which means I will need to apply for a scholarship again, which means I need to be top of my class again. (I graduate *cum laude*, which is the highest distinction in the Dutch system and which does help me get a PhD scholarship later).

All in all, I experience a major shock to the system. By December, I descend into what might be my first ever depression. I have trouble falling asleep and occasionally wake up with sore muscles even though I don't do any exercising. I am homesick, too. My close friend that year is Anita, a fellow student from Romania. We are each other's in-house therapist and have long chats trying to give meaning to what we both are going through. Things do get better in due course.

## 2008

"Where are you from?", somebody asks me. – "Ukraine", I reply. – "Which part?" – "West." – "Ah, I see." I wonder what he/she "sees", but I am too insecure to ask.

I soon figure out that this query is inspired by an over-simplistic image of Ukraine split in two "parts" by a river, dating back to the Orange Revolution in 2004 and its coverage in western media: the east of Ukraine is supposedly the Russian-speaking pro-Russian part, and the west of Ukraine is supposedly the Ukrainian-speaking pro-European part. So, by asking me which *part* of Ukraine I am from, I guess what they are really asking is in what *box* they may put me.

## April 2008

I join on a student trip from Maastricht to Prague and Dresden. Somewhere on a German autobahn, it hits me that the general sentiment in the bus (packed mostly by Dutch and German students) is that we are going to "the wild east". I experience cognitive dissonance: in Ukraine, a trip to Prague is definitely, most certainly a trip to the civilised west. "If Prague is the wild east, where does that leave Ukraine and what does that make of me?" I wonder.

In Prague, we are brought to the Museum of Communism. "What a waste of time and opportunity!" I lament. "I don't need to be shown communist artefacts, most certainly not when I am in beautiful Prague!!!" But I presume it constitutes an important educational component of this study trip to the wild east, once communist. The museum displays "occupant" artefacts alongside their "dissident" counterparts: books, manifestos, posters, clothes, flags, banners – what-not. A story of occupation and resistance to occupation. The atmosphere is gruesome as well as entertaining. It is my first ever encounter with the official condemnation of communism. I try to imagine a museum like this in Ukraine, but I can't. Ukraine at the time is ambivalent on what to make of its communist past (it still is today, although less so); condemnation is already among the options, but not yet mainstream. After the museum, the group continues on the outdoor part of the "communism tour". I sneak out, together with Tanya and Oksana (a Ukrainian and a Russian girl), and go visit St. Vitus Cathedral instead.

We continue to Dresden. As we tour the city, I am hit by a deep sense of having arrived ... home. I know it is a foreign city I have never been to, but it feels so familiar. As we walk around Dresden on our excursion, I feel euphoric and somehow lighter. I register the obvious resemblances with Ukrainian cities – socialist architecture along broad streets and boulevards (they can be broad because they are new as the old were destroyed during the war) – but I know that's not it. I try, again and again, to pinpoint what gives me a strong sense of home, scanning

every detail in the surroundings: people's faces and their clothes, street, road and commercial signs, urban planning, construction materials used and so on. Eventually, I come to realize that it is ... the grass! Not the all-same-colour-same-height-same-density (one may say *flawless*, I would say *sterile*) "lawn-grass" you find in the "west", but the "wild grass", with little flowers and weeds growing through it, you find in the "east". I am amused by this observation: how sweet that a warm feeling of homecoming can arise from a simple, meek thing like grass!

### **August 2008**

I get a scholarship from the Austrian government to attend a summer school at the European Forum Alpbach. The scholarship is open to Ukrainians and Kosovars only, is highly competitive and very generous: it covers participation fees, accommodation costs and a substantial daily allowance (so: everything but travel costs). The only caveat is that you get your per diems all at once on the very... *last* day of the summer school, upon presenting a complete attendance sheet. "So what, they fear that we collect the money on the first day and take off? How degrading is that?!" We deliberate collectively with other participants from Ukraine on our long, very long, train ride Kyiv-Vienna-Salzburg. Flying is unaffordable for us.

### **August 2009**

Now that I have been granted a PhD scholarship by the University of Kent at Brussels, I need to climb an even bigger mountain: a Belgian long-stay visa. For this, I have to undergo a general medical examination, which includes an HIV blood test and a chest X-ray, and turn up at the Belgian Consulate in Kyiv to write – by hand – an essay on "What I plan to do in Belgium and what I will do in case things go sour." (The assignment is announced to me there and then.) I am allowed three hours to write my essay. "This trumps even the Americans!" I have a flashback in amazement: two years earlier, an officer at the American Consulate asked our Jessup team to recite our case pleadings on the spot, right there at the visa application window, in order to prove that we were indeed going to the international rounds of an international law moot court competition. I am appalled at the visa application procedure. The lawyer in me wonders if it is legal (especially the part where my medical records are effectively passed on from one third party to another in a sealed envelope without me knowing what's inside – maybe nothing at all?!). I feel reduced to a human-like creature that poses a threat to a civilised, disease-free people. I am outraged and powerless at the same time – scared that I may be denied that visa, will arrive in Belgium late or not at all, will lose my scholarship and not be able to pursue a PhD. I do not feel in a position to challenge the system.

I do get a visa, after one month of agony of uncertainty and a tight two hours before my flight to Brussels, which is just enough for me to rush to the airport and catch my plane (yes, I show up at the Consulate on the day of my flight with a fully-packed suitcase, in case that visa does come through).

### **2010**

"Where are you from?" – "Ukraine." – "Which part?" – "I am from the east of the west of Ukraine."

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## June 2010

I discover a funding scheme by one of the Soros foundations: a supplement scholarship for doctoral students with minimal main funding. It is open to a list of nationalities; Ukraine is one of them. As I prepare my application, I repeatedly ask myself whether I shall inform Bojan, a Serbian fellow-PhD student, of this opportunity or not (I know that Serbia is among the eligible countries). I realize that the odds of two applicants from one institution getting funded are slim to none, so it would be the two of us being weighed off against each other if we stand out in the crowd to begin with. And “us” is “our stories” – so, before I know it, I find myself measuring our personal stories against the criteria “sad” and “touching”. I conclude, rational that I am, that his is a sadder one: the breakup of Yugoslavia was more dramatic than the breakup of the Soviet Union, and whatever deprivations I suffered in Ukraine in the 1990s and struggles I had in the 2000s pale in comparison. It is obvious that if I want to increase my chances, I shall not bring Bojan into this.

I don't tell anyone about my dilemma, not even my husband: deep down, I am ashamed of even thinking along these lines, let alone the possibility of acting upon them. After a few days of inner torment, I decide to tell Bojan: for the sake of fair play among us “the underprivileged” and because I too think that, as the one with a sadder story, he deserves to get it. It is a win-win for me, I conclude after all: if I get it, I get the money; if Bojan gets it, I get to ... feel good about myself! I tell Bojan about the funding opportunity and make it my business to keep him to submission deadlines (I know he is not good at keeping deadlines).

He gets it. I don't.

## November 2010

I am in Ukraine to do fieldwork for my PhD, running the winter streets of Kyiv from one interview to another. I meet the director of one of the leading Ukrainian think-tanks, a (then) highly reputable senior (and elder) female policy analyst. I walk into her office and present myself as a Ukrainian researcher currently doing a PhD on EU rule of law promotion in Ukraine at the University of Kent. She turns around and says, melodramatically: “All these scholarships! They tell us it is ‘for the good of Ukraine’, ‘for Ukraine’s development’, but that is simply nonsense. Where are *you* and where is *Ukraine*?! In my opinion, all these scholarships are a great waste!” She concludes her passage with an irritated sigh and a dismissive waving of her hand. I am caught totally off-guard by this remark and feel my body shrink. Shocked by her attitude and open resentment for what she thinks I might – and, ironically, I don't! – represent, I stand silent for a moment. “It is not a nationality-based scholarship that I've got, you know. It is a university fund thing, and it is granted on the basis of merit through an open competition. And I am doing research on Ukraine, you see, so it is for Ukraine's benefit, too”, I mumble quickly in my defence as I redeem my senses. I regret the defensive response I gave her that same instant (and I still do today). I stand (yes, I am still standing) disconcerted. I try to brush off the guilt feeling she has just shoved all over me and focus on what it is I came for: the interview.

We proceed with the conversation as if nothing happened.

## 2011

“Where are you from?” – “Ukraine.” – “Which part?” – “I am from a small town in the east of the west of Ukraine, but I studied, lived and worked in Kyiv for 5 years before coming here.”



By now, I have learned that there is a 99.99% chance my interlocutor does not know the city, province or region of Ukraine I come from, so I keep it simple and associate myself with the place of last residence: the capital. I might confuse my company by saying Kyiv (which is the city's official name, transliterated from Ukrainian) and not Kiev (which is its standard name in English, transliterated from Russian), but at least the capital they have heard of.

## **February 2011**

I attend an event on the constitutional reform in Ukraine at the Centre for European Policy Studies in Brussels. A top Ukrainian official (I find her a fascinating woman: integrity, intelligence, confidence and elegance combined) speaks in Ukrainian, and there is consecutive interpretation into English provided for the audience. The few Russian diplomats in the room pointedly abstain from taking earphones with the interpretation. "Of course, why would you?!", I note to myself sarcastically, "Ukrainian is but a dialect of Russian!" A short while later, I notice that earphones have magically made their way into the ears of the Russian diplomats, who appear to take notes *not* after the presenter-lady (who speaks in Ukrainian), but after the interpreter (who speaks in English moments later). "They couldn't understand what she was saying, ha-ha-ha!" I figure out. I feel exultant, and a happy smile floods over my face and stays there for the rest of the day.

## **April 2011**

The University of Kent at Brussels is hosting a guest lecture by a senior Ukrainian diplomat. I have heard him before at various policy events in Brussels and find him a charismatic public speaker. I am thrilled to meet him! I watch the doors anxiously, twisting my fingers, and run to greet him the moment he arrives. I address him in Ukrainian, to his great surprise (I realize then that, naturally, he did not expect to meet a Ukrainian at a UK university in Belgium), and explain that I am doing my PhD. "Where are you from?", he asks as I walk him through the corridor to the lecture hall. "From Kamyanets-Podilskyi", I reply proudly ("What a great promotion for my home town!" I think at that moment, all excited: despite it being a city of more than 100,000 people, a historical and cultural capital of the region with no less than 2 universities, Kamyanets is considered small and provincial by Ukrainian standards). "How did you get *here* from your *Kamyanets*?" he asks me, raising his eyebrows, with an air of condescension surrounding the word "Kamyanets". I am baffled. I did not expect something this audacious from a fellow-Ukrainian, least of all a diplomat! If anything, I assumed he would be glad to meet a Ukrainian in this context. "Well, I studied law at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy first, and then..." I mutter the milestones of my academic trajectory, my earlier joy and confidence evaporating with every word I say. "A-ha, that explains it," he concludes.

As I listen to his lecture, I can't stop pondering on our brief interaction and how – apparently – someone's careless comment can push me towards insecurity and someone's sense of superiority can throw me into a position of inferiority. He is as engaging and bold as ever.

## **2012**

In a spirit of "if you have to carry it, you might as well wear it", by now I have become super-skilled at picking a "more favourable" identity each time I introduce myself: at times, I emphasize my Ukrainian-ness and Kyiv-Mohyla Academy as my alma mater, at other times – the University of Kent as the university where I am doing my PhD (stressing the UK-part or the Brussels-campus part, depending on the circumstances); at times, I am the only legal scholar in

a room full of political scientists, at other times, I am the only political scientist in a room full of legal scholars.

### September 2012

I attend the 42<sup>nd</sup> annual conference of the Academic Association for Contemporary European Studies (UACES) in Passau, Germany. A senior German professor of international relations, an older man I have never met, is a discussant on my panel. I attend welcome drinks on the opening night and – coincidentally – meet the professor. We chat, and he asks me to tell him a bit about my background. I tell him that I am from Ukraine, that I studied law at the National University “Kyiv-Mohyla Academy”, and that I went to do a Master in European Studies at Maastricht University after that. He interrupts me right there with a joyous exclamation, “I knew it! I knew it! You *must* have studied abroad! I saw from your name that you probably come from the east. But when I read your paper, so well-written and well-structured, I knew *immediately* that you must have studied abroad!” He is all smiling. I stand perplexed, confused on what to make of it. It is most certainly not in Maastricht that I learned to read and write. The jovial look on his face tells me that he means it as a sincere compliment, so I quickly thank him for his appreciation of my paper. And yet I feel like I have just been compared to a bear that can ride a bicycle: here I stand, nicely in the middle of a manège, all exotic, amusing and extraordinarily skilled!

I am so deeply thrown by this incident that the following day I re-tell the story to Suzanna (Armenian) and Cristian (Romanian), two junior researchers who I met at the conference, as we stroll along the Danube. They both laugh at it, say this is a trivial story, and pat me on the back. “But of course, Olya! This is a huge compliment! Don’t you understand?!” they say with irony. I figure they too must have been “complemented” before.

### 2013

“Where are you from?” – “Ukraine.” – “Which part?” – “I am from the south-east of the west of Ukraine, but I am bilingual Ukrainian-Russian, and at home we speak Russian, actually, but no, I am not ethnically Russian. In fact, I am partly Ukrainian and partly Polish.”

### December 2013

The Maidan protests have spread around Ukraine and are spreading throughout the world to places with a critical mass of Ukrainians. There is a rather dynamic Brussels-wing of the Maidan, too. My good Ukrainian friend and colleague Natalka (then a doctoral researcher at a UK university and an associate at one of the leading European think tanks) and I sip tea in a Brussels café. We discuss the events and our own contribution to the cause. Natalka is drawn to return to Ukraine and “make sandwiches on Maidan” (Maidan being the central square in Kyiv and the HQ of the protesters). I understand that she means this literally, not metaphorically: she wants to go and make sandwiches to feed the protesters, do something tangible and with immediate impact. I tell her this is nonsense, there are plenty of hands doing that already, and we are most useful, most impactful for doing academic research, policy consultancy and advocacy on Ukraine that we do here in the west. “Anyone can make sandwiches, Natalka. Few have the qualifications to do what we do – and this also needs doing. We are fighting the same battle on a different front, don’t you see?”, I reason with her. She says she hears what I say and agrees with it rationally, but she cannot embrace it emotionally, cannot stop feeling detached and useless.

Natalka does return to Ukraine one or two years later: to work for an international organization in the war zone in the east of Ukraine. To be where she believes she is most needed. To do what she believes is most helpful. And even though I don't follow her suit, I feel certain she does not judge.

Five years later, I invite her to read a draft of this essay, and she thanks me for remembering this episode, which she forgot, she says honestly.

### **March 2014**

I attend a policy event in Brussels organised by the European Policy Centre and featuring a line-up of experts from Ukraine. Amanda, senior policy analyst at the EPC, opens the event with a remark that, unfortunately, they did not manage to find an interpreter for Ukrainian in Brussels, so the distinguished guests from Ukraine have been kindly asked to present in Russian (a Russian-English interpreter is apparently easier to find). "Oh, come on! Again?!", I protest silently, visible irritation all over my face. I have witnessed this way too many times before in the five years of attending events in Brussels. "How are we supposed to persuade the world that Ukrainian *is* a language if Ukrainians are continuously requested to speak Russian?!" I lament. After the event, I approach Amanda and say, "What a shame that you could not find an interpreter for Ukrainian. It really does send the wrong political message, you know. If you are willing to give it a try, I am happy to offer my own services next time you need it. I am not a trained interpreter, but I have been interpreting back-and-forth for years now. Plus, I know all the jargon, since I do research on EU-Ukraine myself." She is surprised and politely replies that she's taken note of that.

A few weeks later I am contacted with a request to interpret at their next event on Ukraine. One thing leads to another – and I end up interpreting on occasion for various Brussels-based actors for a few years to come. I love the adrenaline of the job and quickly upgrade from consecutive to simultaneous interpreting: for once, my speaking too fast is an asset, not a liability! Interpreting the live debate between candidates for the European Commission President for the Ukrainian brunch of Euronews TV channel is probably the peak in my interpreter career.

Being unable to hear myself speak (in simultaneous interpretation, you listen to the original speech through earphones and so cannot hear yourself say the same in a different language with a moment's delay) is not the only odd thing about interpreting. It is odd to be formally and explicitly in-between the different sides and yet "interpret without interpreting", that is: translate without editing. After years of constant adapting, adjusting, withholding, supplementing, mediating, mitigating and otherwise repackaging information to, from and about Ukraine and Ukrainians, it is strange (and at times agonising!) for me to interpret spoken word literally, without any intervention or commentary from my side. I have to resist the impulse repeatedly. It is also odd to find myself in-between statuses: a researcher, an expert, an interpreter. As a researcher, I feel an urge to get information now that I have gained access – but as an interpreter, I may not ask questions and much of what I get to hear is off-the-record. As an expert, I want to voice my own opinion on the matter – but as an interpreter, I must remain as invisible a party as possible, a voice without a voice. Striving to be professional, I quickly embrace the mode of being in the middle of it without being a part of it (or being a part of it without being in the middle of it?). It is a good training in patience and modesty.

### **June 2014**

A fellow academic says to me joyfully at an event, “Oh, you must be so glad there is war in Ukraine! It makes your research more relevant and in demand!” I am shocked, and wonder whether this person is brainless, or heartless, or both.

### **July 2014**

I collect my PhD diploma at the graduation ceremony of the University of Kent in the majestic, grandiose Canterbury Cathedral. My husband films bits and pieces with his phone to turn into a video clip and show to my family later: there is no way any of them would have been granted a UK visa to attend the graduation in person (I barely got mine!), so we are there with just the two of us.

### **September 2014**

I miss the 44<sup>th</sup> annual UACES conference in Cork: I have no free pages left in my passport for an Irish visa because of all the previous visas and border-crossing stamps, and I find it too big of a deal – one hoop too many to jump – to obtain a new passport in order to obtain a new visa in order to attend a conference (even for my favourite annual EU-studies get-together).

### **October 2014**

The janitor comes to clean my office in Ghent University (I work there as a postdoctoral assistant since July). He notices a small Ukrainian flag hanging off my bookshelf and asks in his broken Dutch, pointing to the flag, “Are you from Ukraine?” – “Yes”, I reply in my broken Dutch. – “Oh, I am so sorry for what is going on in your country. I am from Kosovo. I can relate to your experience. I can feel your pain.” I am deeply touched by his words and become all emotional, smiling back politely and thanking him. As he walks out again, my eyes fill up with tears. Now that I hear these simple words of compassion from him, I realize that he is the first one in my workplace to utter them.

### **2015**

“Where are you from?” – “Ukraine.” – “Which part?” – “What do you mean ‘which part’?! My feet, my legs, my nose – these all come from Ukraine. And the rest of me, too!”

### **February 2016**

My two good friends and colleagues from Ukraine, Natalka and Katya, and I decide to co-edit a special issue on civil society in Ukraine post-Euromaidan. It will be a side-project for all three of us: Natalka works full-time for an international organization; Katya works full-time for a Ukrainian think tank; and while I do work full-time at a university, civil society in Ukraine is not my primary research area. It will also be practically challenging, as we are based in three different cities (Kramatorsk, Kyiv and Brussels) and have no budget whatsoever for this. But we are so drawn by the idea and so committed to the “no one but us” slogan of the Maidan that we decide to do it.

We have selected contributions through an open call for papers and are in one of our multi-sited Skype conferences discussing the potential outlet. We agree right away that we do not want a

journal with “soviet”, “communist”, “Eurasia” or anything with a third world flavour to it in the title. As a result, we have to cross off of our list many of the area-studies journals that could have been interested in the topic. We then agree that it would be best – indeed necessary – for our special issue to be published open access: that way, also scholars in Ukraine and other countries in the region (who have little to no access to international academic journals) can read it. We cross off a few more potential outlets of our list. We also want it to be published as soon as it is ready, not wait in a publication queue for years, so we drop a few more journals with long waiting times. I don’t remember which one of us proposed *Kyiv-Mohyla Law and Politics Journal* first, but we all love the idea right away. This journal ticks all of our boxes and, as a welcome bonus, it is a Ukrainian journal hosted by our alma mater (all three of us have at some point studied or worked at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy). We get all excited at the idea of investing in Ukrainian academia and promoting a new journal of our dear university at the same time! We are well aware that publishing in this journal will not score us any “hard points” in western academic metrics, which disregard pretty much everything that is not an article in an impact-factor journal. But we don’t care: we have a bigger cause and longer-term goal in sight.

We fear we may lose some of the authors because the journal does not rank; and we do.

### December 2016

I am preparing my application for a postdoc grant of the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO), as my postdoctoral assistant contract at Ghent University is ending in 8 months. The application form is long and standard, but the section I get stuck at is typically easy to complete: “international mobility and research stays abroad”. Listing international conferences and guest lectures is straightforward, and I get that done quickly. What I am confused about is whether I shall be putting down my work in Belgium as “international mobility” from Ukraine (and the Netherlands, and the UK), an unusually long “research stay abroad” of sorts, or whether I shall be putting my frequent field trips to Ukraine as repeated “research stays abroad” but then in my home country. My emotional response swings from concern to amusement and back to concern, for I do need to fill in this section in order to demonstrate that I *am* internationally mobile (mobility being an important selection criterion). I resolve to address the situation head-on and end up including both dimensions accompanied by a brief explanatory note.

### 2017

“Where are you from?” – “Ukraine.” – “Which part?” – “Do you mean *where* in Ukraine I am from?”

### July 2017

I go to China to teach a two-week course in the University Immersion Program (a gigantic summer school with 100+ foreign lecturers, 150+ courses and thousands of Chinese students) at Sichuan University in Chengdu. This is my first trip “to the east of Moscow”, so I am very curious and excited. To prepare for what is coming, I have long talks with three of my colleagues who taught at this summer school in the past and attend a training session “Dealing with China” (or something along those lines) offered at Ghent University. I am ready. Bring it on!

As I arrive in Chengdu and begin interacting with the Chinese hosts, it strikes me that – from their point of view – I have arrived *from the west*. To them, I am a “western professor”. “Now,

this is something new!”, I think to myself. I am so used to being the one *from the east* that I feel slightly misplaced and uncomfortable in this new status. I don’t know *what* I was thinking before coming here, but I was not thinking of *that*.

On the second day, I meet Bonnie, my assistant for the coming two weeks. I learn that she is a second year Master student at Sichuan University, from an ethnic minority, from a town high up in the mountains some 5-6 hours away from Chengdu. This is the first time she is “assisting a foreign professor” (which, I sense from her intonation, is an honourable task). She is truly fantastic. Without Bonnie, I would have been totally and utterly socially paralyzed, so I am very glad to have her on stand-by. And yet, I cannot help feeling some emotional discomfort about the whole set-up: how can I be *having* a Bonnie when I *am* a Bonnie?.. I look at Bonnie and I see myself ten years prior: a student in Kyiv, grateful for every and any opportunity to speak English to a rare guest-from-the-west (a native-speaker as a bonus), curious, eager and enthusiastic, proud to show off the good sides of my country and struggling to conceal, justify or at least explain the not-so-good ones. I see someone who feels lesser and inferior by default, regardless of whether she is treated as such, before she is treated in any way at all. I have flashbacks to when I skipped classes to volunteer at the European Championship in Rhythmic Gymnastics in 2004 (to assist the UK team) or the Eurovision Song Contest in 2005 (to assist the Danish delegation) hosted in Kyiv. I feel thrown into the air by this whole situation – and I hope I get to keep my cool.

On the day of the final class, students invite me to a fancy restaurant for hot-pot dinner (Sichuan’s specialty). They order a non-spicy version (which is still way too spicy for me, but probably utterly bland and tasteless for them), and one of the students kindly fishes food out of the boiling pot and puts it on my plate: I am not skilled enough at using chopsticks. They tell me, a little proud and a little shy, that they all can use a fork and a knife and enjoy an occasional steak. At the end of the dinner, they insist that they pay. I tell them that I am the professor here, so for reasons of seniority it should be me paying, and that moreover it would give me great pleasure for this to be my treat to them. They insist that they are the hosts and I am the guest, so there can be no further argument about this – and, before I know it, they have scanned some QR-codes with their mobile phones and the deal is done. I am touched by their genuine hospitality and thank them for it sincerely. At the same time, I cannot help feeling upset. Because I did the math. I inquired indirectly here and there – and I know that the remuneration we “western professors” receive for a 16-hour, two-week course is equivalent to 30 (thirty!) monthly student allowances. The total cost of a room in a 5-star hotel (with a heated toilet seat, no less!) at which we are staying for two weeks equals another 20 monthly student allowances. Plus a return flight across the globe (in my case, equivalent to 25 monthly student allowances). Basically, the cost of my brief “service” is higher than the total allowance any one of them receives during their *entire* studies, Master level included. And they paid for my dinner. I find the system behind this appalling. More so: I recognise some of it from Ukraine, if not in the scale of disparity, then in the assumptions and structures behind it. This realization – and the thought of me now being on the other side – makes me nauseous; also, now as I write this up. (I learn a year later that the Chinese have reduced the remuneration to guest professors, and the Bonnie in me is joyous!)

Ironically, as if to amplify and mock the absurdity of the financial arrangement, my remuneration and reimbursements are paid out *in cash!* A day after the farewell dinner with my students, at a local bank brunch, in the common hall with dozens of observers and zero privacy, after hours of waiting, using Bonnie’s bank account to wire the transfer, in stacks (literally: bank-sealed stacks) of 100 yuan bills. This is the biggest pile of cash I’ve seen in my life: a bank officer has to lend me a plastic bag as the money simply won’t fit in my handbag. I am afraid it is also the biggest pile of money Bonnie has seen in her life. I find the situation

extremely embarrassing. I am visibly annoyed, and Bonnie notices it. She attempts to comfort me. “Don’t worry”, she says, “you see, you got the money, everything is OK!” I worry that I cannot tell her why I am really annoyed without hurting or offending her, so I say it is just that I don’t feel safe walking in the street now that 50 or so strangers have seen us leave the bank with a bag full of money (which is not untrue!).

On the final night in Chengdu I go to dinner with other “western professors” and some of their Chinese assistants. I flow with the group to find myself in a Cultural Revolution-styled restaurant: there are replicas of propaganda posters from that time on the walls and weapons are scattered around (I hope these are fake, but prefer not to check), waiters are dressed in period military uniforms, and while I cannot understand any of the lyrics, the music sounds like revolutionary agitation to me. Everyone in the restaurant is amused; the place (enormous, by the way!) is packed. I tense up. “Why are we here again?”, I ask myself in bewilderment. “And how is this setting entertaining, exactly?!” I struggle to silence the associations spinning in my head of millions of victims of the Cultural Revolution, which – in one quick jump of the mind – turn into thoughts of millions of victims of Communism and Stalinism and – in another quick jump of the mind – turn to the thoughts of the present-day armed conflict in Ukraine. I imagine myself in a similar Soviet-styled glorifying and nostalgic place, and it makes me shudder. A daughter of a colonel, I used to love military parades as a kid; but I have since lost the ability to enjoy anything “military”, however recreational. For the rest of the evening, I try to keep my eyes on what’s on the table and who’s at the table and block out of my sight the décor and the waiters in military uniforms.

As the plane lands in Amsterdam, the tension that accumulated in my body for the past two weeks releases, and I burst into tears. I am so happy to be back. (Just like a story of my emigration would merit a book, a story of a person-from-a-former-communist-country’s trip to China, a country where the communist party is safe and sound and equipped with top-notch ICT to control its people, would merit a separate essay). Coincidentally, I return to Brussels on the night before my daughter’s second birthday – and wake up to a day of celebration with my mother, who flew in from Ukraine, and my numerous Dutch in-laws. The house is buzzing: there are seven happy kids under the age of ten running around and some twelve happy adults chatting. I am being the happy hostess. And then someone asks during tea and cake, “How was it in China?” – and I burst into tears again. Unprepared to verbalize why I am sobbing, afraid it would ruin the atmosphere if I did and wary of the likely lack of understanding (given our different backgrounds and the fact that none of them has been to China), I pin my reaction on jetlag, tiredness and having missed my family. I cry on-and-off for the next few days.

I am black-listed, I discover later, for having touched upon politically sensitive issues in my classes, although we have been *explicitly* advised against doing so in the welcome session. How could I not touch upon politically sensitive issues in an international relations course? How could I not discuss regime change and human rights in a course on European Union’s policy towards Eastern Europe and Northern Africa? How could I not ask my students “What’s up with Hong Kong (and Taiwan, now that we are at it...)?” if that same week China – and international media – was pompously celebrating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Hong Kong’s handover? How could I not ask them “What’s up with Tibet?” if my bags were scanned each time I entered one of Chengdu’s many metro stations and, when I asked them why that was the case, my students answered, “it is because Sichuan province borders Tibet”? “So they *do* record ‘western professors’ in the end!” I say to myself with irony as I read the email in astonishment. Officially, my “please don’t send her again” verdict was due to “poor student evaluations”, which, my students told me via email, they had never been asked to fill in. The news makes me feel a little insulted (How dare you! I am an excellent teacher! My student evaluations here at Ghent University are fantastic!), a little concerned for Bonnie and my students (Gosh, I hope I

didn't get anyone in trouble...), a little suspicious (Was one of the students an informant?!) and a little relieved (At least I will not be re-living this experience any time soon, if ever!). As I take my eyes off the computer screen and look through the window behind it, I bet you, I see the “invisible hand of the Communist Party”, which I could sense with my every cell every minute of my stay in China, show me a middle finger.

More than a year later, I come to realize that – to my genuine surprise – I have never added the China experience to my CV. I wonder if that was my subconscious erasing it.

## September 2017

I am awarded a postdoc grant by the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO). These grants are extremely competitive, so the news that I am awarded one of a total of eight postdocs in Social Sciences that academic year comes as a miracle of sorts. I stay at the same department, the same office and the same desk, but my new contract gives me more research time and facilitates international mobility (in that it allows me to go on a long research stay abroad as a visiting scholar). I immediately see this as a chance to realize my long-standing aspiration to go to a North-American university, which somehow did not happen during my MA and PhD studies. The precarity of my future in academia serves as an extra motivator: since there may not be a professorship or another postdoc after this, given the situation on the job market, why wait?!

After “consultations” on the “parameters of the possible” with my employer, as well as my husband (and his employer), I get on with drafting a list of potential host institutions. Harvard University is at the top of my list. My granny would sometimes say, “People travel to Paris. People travel to open space. From where I stand, these are categories of the same order.” (We eventually launched granny to Paris when she was in her 70s). By a similar token, from where I grew up, going to Harvard and going to open space were categories of the same order (Paris has become slightly more attainable with the fall of the Iron Curtain). Silly as it may be, the sheer realization that Harvard is now in the realm of my options and not fantasies gives me huge satisfaction. Luckily, I am now at the point where I realize this clearly and where I see that my longing for Harvard has less to do with what Harvard actually is and what it represents (I am perfectly aware of the long list of “reservations”) and more with Harvard's symbolic value in my own, personal trajectory. I am not fooling myself too much, or at least so I hope. While there may be an *objectively* better place for me and my research, there isn't a *subjectively* better one. At the very least, I will have bought the metaphoric “lottery ticket”.

My list includes several other universities in the USA and Canada that I would love to go to: those which may be objectively a better fit and which I set to apply to as soon as I get a rejection from Harvard (despite my strong desire and motivation, I entertain rejection as a more likely outcome given that I know literally no one at Harvard and thus am “applying from the street”, as we say in Ukraine).

A short while later, I get on with preparing my applications for a visiting scholar position at Harvard University (I apply to three relevant departments to maximize my chances of getting in: Ukrainian Studies, Russian and Eurasian Studies, and European Studies). Barry, my former law professor from Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, offers to help with cover letters. He urges me to use strong confident language so that nobody doubts that I am “a true alpha male” (his words, not mine!). As part of my application to the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, I need to provide two letters of recommendation. I strategize and opt for a constellation “one western professor + one westernised Ukrainian professor”: I am afraid that naming two “western professors” would give an impression of me having lost touch with Ukraine and Ukrainian



academia, while naming a Ukrainian professor who is “unbeknownst to the west” might lower my chances.

### **October 2017**

I am contacted by Luc from the Belgian-Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce and invited to speak about the European Union and its relations with Ukraine to a group of CEOs of top Ukrainian companies, who are coming on a study trip to Brussels as part of their programme at Kyiv-Mohyla Business School. I jump off my chair with enthusiasm and accept the invitation: for one, this business school is from my alma mater; for another, I am always eager to interact with practitioners and repackaging my knowledge. The thought of delivering a lecture in Ukrainian and to a group of high-level businessmen is a little intimidating, but I decide to embrace the challenge. I start preparing right away. Luc calls me again a few days later and says, “Sorry, Olga, I have to cancel: the guys from KMBS preferred to have a foreign speaker, so we have invited a local Belgian professor who will speak about the idea of Europe in general. I think it’s a shame, because you are really an expert on EU-Ukraine relations. And you could have spoken in Ukrainian, so no interpretation would have been necessary. But well, they were not thrilled about having a Ukrainian scholar as a speaker. I am very sorry.” I am frustrated with the news – but not at all surprised. Ukrainians are notorious for their inferiority complex (I am going a long way to squeeze mine out!), and it is no wonder they prefer *any* foreign professor to *any* Ukrainian one, no matter how “westernised”, how specialised and how well-suited for the job. This “gentle reminder” of the situation at large makes me angry and sad all at once.

### **November 2017**

The special issue on civil society in Ukraine post-Euromaidan, which Nataalka, Katya and I co-edit, is as good as done, and we are working on a series of columns for one of Ukraine’s most popular online media outlets. Our idea is to communicate the findings to a wider Ukrainian-speaking audience and, at the same time, promote the special issue to local experts. As we work on our short column, a realization strikes me: this is the first time I write something professional in Ukrainian in the past... 10 years!

### **November 2017**

I arrive in Kyiv for “work purposes only”, first time “child-free in Ukraine” since my daughter was born 2.5 years ago. I am anxious to make the most of my three-four days here.

I have co-organised a conference at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy to launch the special issue on civil society in Ukraine, and I am swayed by sentiment, having returned to my alma mater as an academic, not a student. I remember everyone, and everyone remembers me, and it is one big homecoming with greeting, and hugging, and giggling. I am formally an external though, and I *have* been away for many years, so I quickly find myself in an observer role: watching carefully who has changed, and what has changed, and how it has changed. Symbolically, our conference takes place in an old seminary building that has been acquired by the University and carefully restored after I graduated, so while I am on a campus I know so well, I am actually in a room I’ve never set foot in before.

The next day I interview Yulia, a top cultural manager, for my research project on EU cultural diplomacy in Ukraine. She cannot stay long, she says, because she has been called up last minute to join a high-level roundtable on EU-Ukraine cooperation at the Diplomatic Academy, and invites me to join her. As we walk into the fancy conference room, we are both visibly

confused: 7-10 high-level speakers (including senior officials from Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs) have been invited to speak to an audience of 15-20 ... American college kids. Undergraduate students on a study trip. "Well, well, well! Look at this! I have studied law at the top Ukrainian university for five years – and we have never had a study meeting with a senior diplomat or a government official, let alone so many of them at once. But then again, I am not American, so that's that," I revolt inside. "Everything has changed, nothing has changed." Some speakers are exaggeratedly cheerful, others are apparently bored. The whole thing is truly bizarre.

### **November 2017**

I give a guest lecture on the conflict in Ukraine to a group of Master students at the Free University of Brussels. This is not my first lecture on the subject. Equipped with my previous experiences, I open the lecture with the following statement: "I am a young Ukrainian woman talking about root causes of the war in Ukraine. I know you will dismiss everything I say in the next two hours on accounts of age, nationality and gender. Who am I as a young person to talk about tectonic shifts in international relations? Who am I as a Ukrainian to know and say anything 'objective' and 'authoritative' about Ukraine? Who am I as a woman to talk about war?" This opening has a stunning effect on my audience.

### **December 2017**

It is the day of a big march in Brussels in support of Catalan independence (it is later communicated that nearly 50,000 people participated). It is early morning, and I embark on my regular Brussels-Ghent commute (I live in Brussels and work in Ghent). As I enter the metro packed with people dressed in yellow and red and carrying Catalan flags, my body tenses up. I get out of the metro and continue into the hall of the Brussels Central train station – only to see many, many more protesters. The memories and images of the Maidan protests followed by war in the east of Ukraine overflow in me, and I spontaneously burst into tears. I am baffled and a little frightened by how strong my reaction is. I try to keep my cool and navigate through the crowd to the platform I need. But I cannot stop crying. I text a good friend and colleague of mine, who is from Kosovo, "Vjosa, I walked into a crowd of Catalans, and I started crying, and I can't stop." Moments later she responds, "Olya dear, I am so glad that you did."

### **2018**

"Where are you from?" – "Ukraine." – "Which part?" – "I am from a town 100 km north of Ukraine's border with Romania and Moldova," I reply and enjoy the sight of my counterpart's face slowly descending into geographic confusion and spatial disorientation.

### **January 2018**

It is a late evening at our research group's annual midweek research seminar. The day sessions are over, the dinner is finished, and I am chatting about this and that with two colleagues of mine. Out of nowhere, the conversation turns to the question of Ukrainian language, and one of them authoritatively says, "Ukrainian is to Russian what West Flemish is to Dutch". I freeze for a moment with a glass of red wine centimeters away from my mouth (I was about to take a sip), dumbfounded by the sudden statement. I have been asked the question "Is Ukrainian different from Russian?" about a million times, in all possible and impossible settings, and I have learned to take that one with a poker face; but this is a new low. I consider asking her what

makes her think so. I consider countering her answer with one of my standard responses formulated over the years. For example, that Ukrainian and Russian technically (if you consider vocabulary, phonology, morphology, syntax and other elements of grammar) have less in common than do Italian and French or Italian and Spanish. Or that Ukrainian and Russian have less in common with each other than they have with Polish (and that Ukrainian is actually closest to Belarusian). Or that, ironically, although Russian is the most widely known Slavic language, it is actually the least Slavic of the Slavic languages due to strong historic influences of the Finno-Ugric and the Tatar-Mongolian peoples and languages (and later Western European ones, too). Or that Ukrainian has 12 official dialects (and many unofficial ones), and we all know from linguistics that dialects do not have dialects. Or that, paradoxically, even though Ukrainian is often perceived as a “minority language”, there are about twice as many people speaking Ukrainian today than there are people speaking Dutch (even combined with Flemish and West Flemish, yes). I have many more sets of arguments up my sleeve. No, Ukrainian is not to Russian what West Flemish is to Dutch. Ukrainian is to Russian what Dutch is to German. But I don’t wish to engage in this conversation. I have had it so many times. Too many times. It is always the same, always predictable. I am bored and secretly wish for better conversations. I could not be bothered, not tonight.

I un-freeze, take that sip of red wine, gaze away and say absolutely n-o-t-h-i-n-g. Ironically, we *are* in West Flanders at that moment – and the realization of it makes me chuckle, so I almost choke on the wine.

### **January 2018**

I am invited to speak at the conference on civil society in Ukraine post-Euromaidan at the College of Europe in Bruges. A senior diplomat from Ukraine is also on the panel, concluding the session. In no ambiguous terms, he blames Ukrainian students who study abroad in general – and specifically those in the audience here at the College of Europe – for not returning back to Ukraine upon graduation. I writhe in my chair in irritation and feel like shouting out, “Oh, come on!!! How dare *you*, a middle-aged man, put the blame for the condition of the country on the *young*?! It is *your* generation that let *ours* down, not the other way around. And how embarrassing it is, how humiliating for everyone involved, that you, a Ukrainian diplomat, are shaming your own countrymen publicly in front of their peers!” But I behave myself.

I hear him say the exact same thing in a different context months later. I behave myself again, shamefully bowing to authority and seniority. I wonder if one time I will snap back for real, not only in my mind.

### **February 2018**

Together with Gergana, we are working on a project on unintended consequences of EU external action. Gergana was my teacher and thesis supervisor at Maastricht University; she has become my dear friend and mentor in the years since, and I am very happy she agreed to work with me on this. We have assembled a great team of scholars to investigate unintended consequences of EU external policies in their respective areas of expertise and are now preparing for the author workshop and two panels at an international conference after that to discuss the results. Tom, one of my two PhD supervisors and also a dear friend and mentor, contributes to the project too, so my vanity is fully contented.

Every time I tell someone about the project, I get to hear, “Oh, so you must be writing about the EU and the Euromaidan?!” I have to explain then that I am not, in fact: the

theoretical/conceptual part, which Gergana and I are in charge of, concerns EU external action in general, not EU policy towards the European Neighbourhood or Ukraine in particular. At first, I link this common perception to my research profile, which, indeed, has a prominent Ukraine-component. As the question pops up again and again, however, I begin to wonder to what extent it reflects an assumption, seemingly held by so many fellow researchers, that I am somehow *confined* to the study of Ukraine, can and shall only generate country-specific knowledge, relevant (only) for those involved. I recollect stories told by my Ukrainian scholar-friends scattered around Europe of how they'd been asked "Why do you work on Israel-Palestine if you are from Ukraine?", or "Why would you study LGBT in Turkey if you are from Ukraine?", or "How come you work on the Balkans if you are from Ukraine?". Hm. I have always worked on Ukraine by choice, out of genuine curiosity and a strange sense of mission, and I was largely blind to the extent to which I was playing into a stereotype. It was not until I clearly stepped out of the box – also by choice, out of curiosity and a sense of mission (frustrated with the way we study EU engagement in third states, I decided to try and improve that at least a tad) – that I realized I was in one.

I grow so conscious of this implicit assumption that each time I hear the question anew, I fire back "Oh, it has nothing to do with Ukraine!" (in a friendly, not angry tone).

### April 2018

I am accepted as a visiting scholar at the Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University. I learn the news late on a Friday night: it is 6 hours difference with the East Coast of the US after all (and lately I have gotten into a habit of mechanically checking my email late at night "one last time" just in case *the* email comes from "the Americans, who are still working at this hour, you know"). I am very tired, so I don't trust my own reading of the email and ask my husband to check if there is maybe a "no" or "not" or "un-" somewhere that I overlooked. He confirms that this is indeed a positive response. I am ecstatic. It is a dream come true. As we celebrate, my husband tells me that I spoke of going to Harvard at our first date 12 years ago. Apparently, I said, "I don't know when and in what capacity but I am going to Harvard." I have no recollection of saying this whatsoever, but I readily believe him I did.

In the weeks that follow, I am careful not to look too happy around my colleagues at Ghent for fear they may think I am celebrating the going away part, which is not the case. I struggle to explain to them what Harvard's symbolic value is *to me*. I consider saying it as it is: that the path to Harvard from where I come from, which is considered periphery by Ukrainians themselves, is much longer than from wherever it is that they come from (and I don't mean this in geographic terms). But I don't. Who am I to judge the length of their path? I only know the length of mine.

### May 2018

I attend the 5<sup>th</sup> bi-annual European Union in International Affairs conference in Brussels. In one of the panels on unusual approaches to teaching politics, IR and the EU (I am a great fan of those!), a female professor from a UK university (herself Irish, as she states right away) shares with the audience how Brexit has placed her and her teaching in a whole new universe: suddenly, there is emotion in class. As I listen to her talk, it strikes me that – but of course! – it can be that there is *no* emotion in class. Actually, there *should* be none, it is a situation to strive to: a professional conversation ought to be unemotional; an opinion of importance is expressed unemotionally too. (Oh, the number of times I have been dismissed in an argument for "being so emotional"! "How about I am passionate about the subject, not emotional? And what is

wrong with being emotional to begin with?" I would retort back as I grow more mature and confident.)

It so happens that I have always been teaching courses that concerned me personally as well: for example, the European Union's Neighbourhood Policy (my home country being one of the countries in question), or EU migration policy (me having held various migrant statuses over the years and my passport putting me firmly and deeply in the "migration risk" category of any "first-world" country), or the EU and the Ukraine crisis (no comment). I wonder if some lecturers never have to deal with this kind of "problem". Wow. "How nice, how easy it must be to teach when you are not emotionally invested in the subject!", I think to myself. I am using (read: losing) much of my energy and, in fact, intellectual resource to "take distance" and "hold it up". Be professional. Unemotional. My personal threshold for classes on Ukraine I teach (in that moment, I have classes on the conflict in Ukraine in mind) is that I don't break into tears at some point in the lecture – for instance, when presenting human losses and other damages the conflict had brought about. If I manage to do that, I feel content with my performance.

It is not on that day but in later reflections on this episode that I ponder the other dimension of her story and mine: emotion (and the lack of emotion) among students. As I recollect, it is students' emotions, not only her own, that disconcerted that Irish-UK professor. "No wonder the teacher-side of her story resonated with me first!", I reckon. As I mull over it some more, I come to realize that my students are also socialized in a culture of rational, emotion-free-reason-only debates and discussions in class. It is on rare occasions that emotion on the students' part "breaks into the classroom". A lot of the time, they remain professionally untouched.

### **June 2018**

The 2018 FIFA World Cup is hosted by Russia. Like many Ukrainians, I boycott the event in solidarity with the dozens of Ukrainians held as political prisoners in Russian jails and in condemnation of Russia's conduct in Ukraine and pretty much everywhere else in the world. In contrast, my all-Belgian colleagues are following the World Cup closely: Belgium has qualified for the tournament (which is a rare thing!) and has a good chance of doing remarkably well (which is equally rare!). I find this an alienating situation for me, exhausting emotionally and intellectually. I am torn. A part of me contemplates sending out an email shaming my colleagues and calling upon them to "come to senses" and boycott the event that gives Russia's horrible regime international legitimization. "We are a bunch of international relations and development scholars! Shouldn't we be taking a stand on something like this?", I wonder. (I do blow off some steam by replying, "Thank you, but I will not be participating in our research group's World Cup office pool as I am boycotting the event" when the email about it is circulated.) Another part of me begs *me* to "come to senses", calm down and accept the fact that my battle is not their battle and my pain is not their pain. "Who am I to poison their truly unique moment of Belgian national unity and pride?", I challenge myself.

Football is all our exceptionally euphoric group talks about during lunches and coffee breaks. I chew my food and sip my drink quietly, holding it up once again, so as not to spoil everyone's fun.

### **September 2018**

I meet a colleague of mine on the way to work. We start chatting, one thing leads to another, and I tell him that I am trying to get Maria Todorova's book *Imagining the Balkans* translated

into Ukrainian. “What a shame that this book is not available to the Ukrainian reader!” I lament. “There are so many striking similarities between the two stories! Ukrainians ought to be able to read it!” To which he responds, casually, “Oh, are there similarities? I wasn’t aware. I never really studied the history of Eastern Europe, you know.” I do my best to keep my eyebrows where they belong, resorting to all the tricks I learned in a face yoga class once – because I know for a fact that he holds BA and MA degrees in history from a Belgian university. “You never studied the history of Eastern Europe?” I ask him casually, with a toned-down disbelief. “Nope. Eastern Europe and Southeast Europe were electives with us, and I chose Southeast Europe, by far the less popular module. Probably, to be eccentric!”, he concludes with a laugh.

“Now, the fact that our countries are optional even for history students would explain why people here generally know nothing about Ukraine”, I note to myself. I had no idea. I try in vain to imagine the reverse: a history program in an Eastern or Southern European country that would not include (or let’s face it: that could afford to exclude) the history of Western and Central Europe.

### September 2018

I am in a research seminar on critical ethnography at Ghent University. We are asked to formulate a dilemma related to our research and positioning. I formulate mine: “What am I: a Ukrainian scholar working in the west, or a western scholar coming from Ukraine, or a westernized Ukrainian scholar, or what?” The group tells me I am “all and none of these at once” and ought to embrace it. “Easier said than done”, I say to myself as I nod back to the group. By the end of the seminar, I decide to write an autoethnography on this.

A non-ethnographer that I am, I do not have a diary to turn to. And yet, once I sit down and create a Word document, once “the gates are lifted”, crystal-clear memories flood my mind, and I write, write, write. Somewhat to my own surprise, I remember episodes, dates, places, names, quotes exactly, like it all happened yesterday. Ideas of memories and episodes to include pop up in my mind one after another, also when I am busy with something mundane – so I regularly have to stop whatever it is I am doing and rush to my desk to note it down. The few people who know I am working on this warn me that it will be a painful and traumatic process; so I observe myself attentively. I make a pact with myself: if it is too hurtful or makes me feel bitter, if I notice that I write in frustration, in anger, to spite – I immediately stop. But no, it is not painful, and I do not feel heavy, or empty, or bitter. Quite to the contrary: I feel lighter with every word I write. It is actually great fun, perhaps the most fun I have ever had writing (at least, professionally). What a load I have been carrying and what a timely idea to off-load it!

I finish the first draft of this article in less than two weeks, working on it on the margins of my regular workload. It takes many months of reflection and soul-searching after that to really finish it.

### October 2018

I am reading Haruki Murakami’s *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and his years of pilgrimage*. “A clear goal makes life much easier”, one of the book’s characters reflects. I pause for a moment and fold the edge of the page, so I can easily find this back later. “Precisely, Olya, eyes on the ball,” I tell myself. “Eyes on the ball.” For if you stop moving forward, stop fending off the

many inferiority complexes floating above you, you might collapse.

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In January 2019, I submit the draft of this essay to the *Journal of Narrative Politics* and soon hear back from Elizabeth and Naeem. “It is an honest essay with a false ending”, they say (but then in many more words than this). The coda does not capture fully what the essay is about, they say.

I need time to process. It looks like they saw through me better than I did myself, which is at the same time comforting and discomfoting. My first impulse is to disagree and reassert that the ending is not false – even if that effectively means admitting that I am simply “not there yet” in my levels of understanding and awareness. There is nothing wrong with that, is there? We each have our own path. So, I want to keep fighting, battling, competing, pursuing my goals – let me. So, I want to fool myself – leave me to it. I am not trying to appear better than I am. (Moreover, referring to goals in the final paragraph elegantly brings us back to the opening paragraph. Isn’t that a lovely literary move?)

But I cannot give in to this impulse to disagree. Because, deep down, I know they are absolutely right: *that* ending is false. Because I am not defined by the goals I set, even if I am driven by them. Because writing this essay – and being ready to share it with the world – is not by any means about achieving my goals (let’s face it: if anything, such “radical transparency” might jeopardize them!). Because this essay is an exercise in acceptance. An exercise in emotional exposure. An exercise in vulnerability. And vulnerability is not about strength or weakness: vulnerability is about courage. So, bring it on!