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Stepping Out of the Line: Ukrainian Ballet in Search of a Contemporary Identity

Anna Seidl and Christian Noack

Abstract

This article explores the emancipation of contemporary Ukrainian ballet as an act of cultural resistance in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion and longer histories of imperial domination. Through close observations of two expatriate companies in the Netherlands – the United Ukrainian Ballet (UUB) and the Ukrainian International Ballet (UIB) – we document how contemporary Ukrainian ballet is 'stepping out of the line' of Imperial Russian and Soviet traditions in search of a new identity. We argue that this emancipation manifests through a dual process: first, disengagement from the deeply internalized conventions of the classic Vaganova ballet training school and its associated aesthetics and philosophies; second, the development of new aesthetic values in ballet music and choreographies, moving decisively away from dominant Russian traditions. Given the scarcity of substantial Ukrainian traditions in classical ballet, this suggests an opening up towards international dance practices.

Keywords: Contemporary Ukrainian ballet; cultural decolonization of ballet; cultural resistance; war, exile, and refugee artists; cultural ambassadorship; United Ukrainian Ballet / Ukrainian International Ballet

In February 2022, Russia unleashed its full-scale war against Ukraine, with the aims of eliminating the democratically elected government and of a demilitarization of the country. Even before that date, president Putin had denied the existence of an independent Ukrainian nation and culture in numerous speeches and articles.[1] With Putin negating its independence above all in cultural and historical terms, Ukraine had to engage not only in military and civic resistance to the invasion but also conduct a cultural war to defend its sovereignty. This essay examines Ukraine's cultural resilience and resistance through the lens of classical ballet, historically deeply influenced by imperial Russian and Soviet traditions, and only in the twenty-first century gradually being reclaimed as an expression of Ukrainian national identity.

Ballet's significance stems from its role as a political instrument of soft power in international relations, particularly during the Cold War.[2] Soviet-aligned ballet adhered to Russian standards in technique, style, and repertoire, centred on

1. See, for example, Vladimir Putin, 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians', *President of Russia – Events*, July 12, 2021, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181 (accessed April 24, 2025).
2. For further reading, see: Christina Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin: Ballet and Power in Soviet Russia*; (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012); Gerald Dowler, *The Golden Age: Ballet in Soviet Russia 1917–1991*; (Binsted, Hampshire: Dance Books, 2021).

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Moscow's Государственный академический Большой театр России, in short 'Bolshoi' and Leningrad's Kirov, the contemporary Балет Мариинского театра [Mariinsky]. These institutions functioned as ideological pillars, blending cultural prestige with political influence. Within the Soviet Union, they defined the standards to which classical ballet in the national peripheries had to adhere. Post-1991, their legacy endured through pedagogical norms (e.g., Vaganova method) and institutional dominance, perpetuating a form of cultural colonialism.

Since the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, Ukrainian ballet had to navigate the difficult balance between classical norms and national values, imperial-colonial forces and Ukraine's ongoing national revival – a process closely aligned with cultural decolonization.[3] While dance scholars may avoid explicit colonial terminology, their analyses reveal how the rejection of Soviet-Russian repertoire and the prioritization of Ukrainian composers, like Микола Лисенко [Mykola Lysenko, 1842–1912] or Мирослав Скорик [Miroslav Skoryk, 1938–2020] since 2014, constitute de facto a decolonialization process. Countering cultural assimilation and reasserting sovereignty involves both restaging Ukrainian classics – such as *Лісова пісня* [The Forest Song], based on the poetic play by *Леся Українка* [Lesia Ukrainka, 1871–1913][4] – and creating new works that reflect how Ukrainian ballet negotiates its place within national culture and the broader international ballet community.[5] Viewing ballet through the lens of decolonization calls for the 'Ukrainization' of ballet.

The start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has accelerated this process as Ukrainian dancers have taken on extraordinary dual roles – both by joining the military and by amplifying the spirit of resistance through storytelling and widely circulated images of themselves in uniform across international media, all while sustaining cultural resistance on the cultural front.[6]

However, ballet's transformation remains slow and fraught with challenges, exemplified by case of the United Ukrainian Ballet (UUB) – later reorganized as the Ukrainian International Ballet (UIB) – a company of refugee dancers established in the Netherlands in 2022. These expatriate dancers defend Ukrainian culture from afar, assuming their roles as cultural ambassadors while advancing the decolonization of their art form. Our analysis begins with a cultural-historical contextualization of Ukrainian ballet's position within imperial Russian and Soviet frameworks, delineating its struggle to assert autonomy. The second part examines UUB and UIB in the period between 2022 and 2025, looking at the challenges the dancers faced and the 'strategies' of defiance they have chosen. Our analysis draws on semi-structured interviews with the dancers, observation of their rehearsals and stagings, and their company's mission statements. As Ukrainian culture and Ukrainian ballet are currently in a state of transition, our study can only describe this process in an open-ended way.

Ukrainian Ballet at the Crossroads

Since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014, Ukraine has striven to strengthen its national identity and societal cohesion through determined efforts at de-Russification and de-Sovietization, accelerating socio-cultural transformations and reinforcing national resilience.[7] These efforts culminated

3. Kate Vandy, 'Ukraine War: Ballerinas Fight Culture War Against Russia', *BBC News*, January 1, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64109021 (accessed August 20, 2024).
4. Hanna Perova and Liudmyla Khotsianoska, 'Lesia Ukrainka's Works on the Domestic Ballet Scene', *Notes on Art Criticism* 22, no. 2 (2022): 29–34.
5. Iuliia Bentia and Yuliia Shchukina, 'Stare I Nove V Suchasnomu Ukrains'komu Baleti: Vystavy, Tendentsii, Perspektyvy [The Old and the New in Contemporary Ukrainian Ballet: Performances, Trends, and Prospects]', *Suchasne Mystetstvo: Teoriia Ta Praktyka* 19 (October 2023): 9–14; Ania Nikulina, *Ballet in Ukraine: A Site of Tension Between Imperialism and Nationalism* (PhD diss., University of California, Riverside, 2020), 59–77; M. Pasternakova, 'Folk and Art Dance', in *Ukraine: A Concise Encyclopaedia*, ed. Volodymyr Kubijovyč (Toronto: University of Toronto Press for the Ukrainian National Association, 1969), 609–612.
6. Maddy Shaw Roberts, 'Ballet dancers from Kyiv National Opera join military to fight for Ukraine', *Classic FM News*, March 4, 2022, https://www.classicfm.com/music-news/ukrainian-ballerinas-join-military/ (accessed August 20, 2024); 'No More "Swan Lake": A Ukrainian Ballerina Goes to War', *The Economist*, June 30, 2022, https://www.economist.com/culture/2022/06/30/a-ukrainian-ballerina-goes-to-war (accessed August 20, 2024); 'Ukrainian soldier who lost legs performs ballet in US', *NV The New Voice of Ukraine*, 5 July 2023, https://english.nv.ua/life/ukrainian-soldier-who-lost-legs-performs-ballet-in-us-50336733.html (accessed August 20, 2024).
7. Olga Marukhovska-Kartunova, Vitalii Turenko, Olena Zarutska, Liubov Spivak, and Renata Vynnychuk, 'Exploring Contemporary Socio-Cultural Shifts in Ukraine and Their Effects on Strengthening National Identity and Resilience in Times of War', *International Journal of Religion* 5, no. 10 (2024): 1386–1394.

in the so-called de-communization laws, reshaping the country's symbolic and mental landscapes. The term 'decommunization' refers to a broad range of activities, public discourses, and interactions aimed at eliminating the symbols of the 'totalitarian communist regime' from the political and cultural space of contemporary Ukraine. It also encompasses practices intended to remove or marginalize social, cultural, and political groups perceived as carriers of Soviet cultural memory or suspected of harboring actual or alleged sympathies for it.[8] This process could not remain without influence on the canon of symphonic, choreographic, and vocal classics associated with a 'colonial heritage' (in this case, Russia).

In this context, ballet plays a significant role as Russian ballet has long been intertwined with political and ideological agendas. Having served as a cornerstone of Russian cultural identity since the eighteenth century and throughout the Soviet era, it continues to be regarded as a national treasure with deep cultural and historical significance. Ukrainian ballet, shaped and colonized for decades by the Russian legacy, finds itself confronted with the weight of its own 'classicism' in the twenty-first century. This includes the canonical repertoire, such as Лебединое озеро [Swan Lake] by *Чайко́вский* [Tchaikovsky], as well as expressive and aesthetic forms rooted in the Russian Vaganova schooling and system. These elements have become politically contentious.

In the Political Limelight – Imperial Russian, Soviet, and Ukrainian Ballet

Characterized as a classicizing and 'idealized art',[9] the origins of ballet can be traced back to the courts of Renaissance Europe. The patronage and backing of European royalty and aristocracy left a deep imprint on this new form of dance, manifest in choreographic styles, physical practices, and organizational frameworks. It was during the reign of Louis XIV of France, fervently passionate for dance and the arts, that classical ballet attained general recognition and attained a high degree of formalization. As a highly codified and disciplined technique of dancing, ballet transcended the mere physical movements, with each step embodying a set of beliefs reflecting the self-perception of the aristocratic class: 'Ballet was an expression of a belief in hierarchy and in the truth of social distinction. The noble style was thus proof of an old social fact: kings and noblemen were, by grace of God, more elevated than the rest, and they danced in ways that proved it'.[10]

Not before the late nineteenth century, France ceded primacy as the focal point of ballet development to Imperial Russia. Notably in St. Petersburg, the Санкт-петербургский Императорский Российский Балет [Imperial Ballet], later renowned as the Балет Мариинского театра [Mariinsky Ballet], flourished under the patronage of the Tsars. Already more than a century earlier, the Танцо́вальная Ея Императорского Величества школа [Imperial Ballet School], at present the Академия русского балета имени А.Я. Вагановой [Vaganova Academy of Russian Ballet], had been established in 1738, and took on a crucial role in the development of a particular Russian ballet tradition. In close collaboration with Пётр Ильич Чайковский [Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky], renowned choreographers like Marius Petipa (1818–1910) crafted masterpieces such as *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Лебединое озеро* [*Swan Lake*], or *Щелкунчик* [The Nutcracker], which staged at the Imperial Ballet before conquering the stages of the world.[11] Ballet became one of the, if not *the* art form embodying Russian sensitivities and of the capital cities' elite culture.

Closely associated with the despised old regime, classical ballet initially struggled to align with the transformative ethos of the Soviet cultural project. Particularly during the 1920s, attempts to adapt the repertoire to the emerging doctrine of Socialist Realism failed to meet official expectations for propaganda ballets. It was Stalin's 'revolution from above' and the turn to 'middle class values' including the rehabilitation of Russian classics that ultimately preserved Soviet ballet – though it

8. See Georgiy Kasianov, 'In Search of Lost Time? Decommunization in Ukraine, 2014–2020', *Problems of Post-Communism* 70, no. 6 (2023): 326–340; Olena Betlii, 'The Identity Politics of Heritage: Decommunization, Decolonization, and Derussification of Kyiv Monuments after Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine', *Journal of Applied History* 4, no. 1–2 (2022): 149–169.
9. Jennifer Homans, *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet* ; (London: Granta, 2011), xxiii.
10. Ibid., 122.
11. Lynn Garafola, 'Russian Ballet in the Age of Petipa' in *The Cambridge Companion to Ballet*, ed. Marion Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 151–163.

continued to rest on the foundations of pre-revolutionary training and repertoire.[12]

Yet before ballet could become a jewel in the Soviet artistic crown, it first had to overcome numerous challenges – chief among them, finding a purpose beyond merely entertaining the Tsar and his court.[13] Even more remarkable, under Stalin and his successors, classical ballet became the *de facto* official art of the Soviet Union, endowed with new purposes. Instead of entertaining and mirroring court hierarchies and styles, ballet had to educate and express 'the people' to attain the degree of 'culturedness', describing the inculcation of proper manners and taste that was expected of the new Soviet Man and Woman, essential as it was to Stalin's cultural campaigns from in the second half of the 1930s.[14] This included the 'advance' of the non-Russian nations and nationalities, for whom the development of proper institutions and traditions of opera and ballet turned into an indicator of socialist cultural development.[15]

Meanwhile, the Балетная труппа Большого театра [Bolshoi Ballet] in Moscow had entered the cultural and political arena as a second major company next to the Mariinsky Ballet. Alongside the refined physical elegance that characterizes the former Imperial Ballet, a more spontaneous style, influenced by Russian folklore, was cultivated at the Bolshoi Ballet, giving rise to what later becomes known as 'the Moscow style'. According to dance historian Gerald Dowler, the state's decision to make ballet a motor for dissemination Soviet influence and power 'led to the establishment of many new centers of teaching and performance around the republics of the USSR'.[16]

Indeed, ballet's newfound significance extended beyond the borders of the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, art in general and ballet especially became embroiled into the ideological struggle between East and West. 'No matter its Imperial roots, [ballet] was a universal language accessible to everyone, from barely literate workers to sophisticated foreign ambassadors – and especially (during the Cold War) the Americans'.[17] The Cold War competition on the ballet stage served to highlight a stark contrast between the classical skills and the traditions of the Soviets, and a more abstract style of dancing, representing a distinctly American post WWII movement. As dance scholar Jennifer Homans notes, 'the line separating dance from propaganda was often perilously thin, and deliberately so'.[18]

Over time, the Soviet Union developed a vast, centrally controlled network of schools, ballet companies, and choreographic academies spanning the continent. Alongside the classical repertoire, particular technique and body aesthetics defined Soviet-Russian ballet legacy. The influential teacher and ballet mistress Агриппина Яковлевна Ваганова [Agrippina Vaganova, 1879–1951] was instrumental in preserving the imperial traditions by developing a distinct training program – known as the Vaganova system – which, until the present day, sets the rigid principles of Russian ballet's physical and aesthetic codex.[19] Vaganova's philosophy has much in common with the cultural worldview of the Bolshevik revolutionaries. Aiming at a clear and straightforward approach to the mechanics of the human body, all unnecessary and ornamental movements from ballet technique were eliminated, thereby producing dancers who were efficient, effective, and highly skilled technicians.[20] By emphasizing classical technique, Vaganova redefined the classical canon and developed the first established Russian system of ballet

12. Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin*, 1–10. Dunham pointed to the return of 'middle class values' already in 1976: Vera S. Dunham, *In Stalin's Time: Middle Class Values in Soviet Fiction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976).
13. Dowler, *The Golden Age*, 1.
14. Homans, *Apollo's Angels*, 343. On the concept 'culturedness', see David L. Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity (1917–1941)* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 57–87.
15. On 'opera as development' see Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *Laboratory of Socialist Development: Cold War Politics and Decolonization in Soviet Tajikistan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018). For a nuanced discussion of negotiations between 'centre' and 'periphery', see Serhy Yekelchyk, 'Diktat and Dialogue in Stalinist Culture: Staging Patriotic Historical Opera in Soviet Ukraine, 1936–1954', *Slavic Review* 59, no. 3 (2008): 597–624.
16. Dowler, *The Golden Age*, 2.
17. Homans, *Apollo's Angels*, 342. See also Cadra Peterson McDaniel, *American-Soviet Cultural Diplomacy: The Bolshoi Ballet's American Premiere* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015).
18. Homans, *Apollo's Angels*, 343.
19. Cf. Agrippina Vaganova, *Basic Principles of Classical Ballet: Russian Ballet Technique*, trans. Anatole Chujoy (New York: Dover Publications, 1969 [1948]).
20. Laura Katz Rizzo, 'Vaganova's Vision and the Development of Neoclassical Russian Ballet Technique', *Dance Chronicle* 35, no. 3 (2012): 408–13.

training that concentrated on simplification and efficiency.

As a highly transferable skill, Russian dance instructors spread the Vaganova system across the globe, where it remains one of the most respected and influential systems of ballet training in the twenty-first century. Embracing Vaganova's style stands for a commitment to excellence, elegance, and virtuosity which gives ballet academies and ballet dancers throughout the former Soviet space their particular value and criteria of 'true distinction'.[21] Dancers trained in this method embody a blend of technical mastery and artistic refinement that is highly valued within the global dance community. Until today, classical ballet is a mainstay of Russia's cultural identity.

Ukraine has been no exception to this. On contemporary Ukrainian territory, classical ballet developed basically as a variation of Imperial Russia's dance culture.[22] Besides some amateur groups consisting of enserfed peasants staging plays and dancing on the estates of the magnates, nineteenth century Київ [Kyiv], then a town dominated by Russian culture and language, became the pivotal place. When in the 1860s the first permanent theatres opened – long after the establishment of such venues in the imperial metropolises – they occasionally offered ballet productions by Russian companies and dancers. Unlike the theatre scene in Kyiv, which witnessed a thorough Ukrainization in the first half of the twentieth century, classical ballet changed very little. Even as Ukrainian-themed works entered the repertory–from early twentieth-century choreographers like Василь Миколаайович Верховиинець [Vasyl Verkhovynets, 1880–1938] to later innovators, they often struggled against the institutional dominance of Russian ballet traditions in Kyiv.[23] Soviet cultural policies prioritized Russian repertoire and aesthetics, marginalizing indigenous narratives in favour of Moscow-centric standards.

Socialist realism allowed for the combination of the form of classical dancing, as long as the plot or libretto carried a politically acceptable message. Modern forms of stage dancing from Europe were perceived in Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic during the interwar but stood no chance to reassert themselves under the dogmas of social 'realism' as well as due to dominance of classical ballet. Noteworthy, also in interwar Poland, political circumstance amounting to an increasing suppression of Ukrainian culture prevented the development of a specific Ukrainian reading of the classical canon.[24]

Ukrainian folk dance, by contrast, has seen a much richer indigenous development. Based on fairly ancient ritual dances, different genres of folk dance developed, though little is known about the circumstances of this process due to the lack of written sources. What we do know has been recorded by the emerging Ukrainian intelligentsia during the nineteenth century. In Western Ukraine, then part of the Austrian Empire, the Театр Руської Бесіди [Rus'ka Beseda theatre] in Львів [Lviv] began to integrate dances into plays with Ukrainian motifs in the 1860s. During the 1880s and 1890s, Ukrainian operas in Kyiv also staged some folk dances. After the revolution and civil war, during the 1920s and early 1930s, Ukrainian avantgarde artists developed a new interest in folk culture, but these developments were forcefully curbed when Stalin turned against what he saw as 'national-communist deviations' among the Soviet Ukrainian intelligentsia.[25] From then on, folk singing, folk dress, and dancing became part of the domesticated Soviet Ukrainian culture, 'national in form and socialist in content'. As

21. Catherine E. Pawlick, *Vaganova Today: The Preservation of Pedagogical Tradition*; (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011).
22. For a somewhat dated, but helpful overview, see M. Pasternakova, 'Folk and Art Dance', 601–613.
23. Vasyl Verkhovinets (1880–1938) was a pioneering Ukrainian choreographer, ethnographer, and theorist who laid the foundations for modern Ukrainian dance.
24. Interwar Poland disregarded formal statutory guarantees included, among others, in the constitutions of 1921 and 1935. In case of the ethnic Ukrainians, making up 15% of the population, bilingual education, Orthodox churches, and Ukrainian cultural institutions were increasingly facing harassment, which led to the emergence of an increasingly violent clash between Ukrainian underground organisations and the Polish state in the 1930s. The consequences for ballet are discussed by Yeva Kovalenko, 'Historical Roots of Ballet Performance and Pedagogy Traditions at the National Opera of Ukraine', *Pygmalion* 14 (2022): 63–78; Nikulina, *Ballet in Ukraine*, 59–77; Pasternakova, 'Folk and Art Dance', 609–612.
25. With the term Soviet intelligentsia, we designate a new generation of educated communist Ukrainians that emerged in the phase of the Bolshevik's 'affirmative action' policies during the 1920s. They were increasingly perceived as a potential harbinger of Ukrainian independence during the 1930s and therefore eliminated. Terry Martin, 'The Soviet Affirmative Action Empire', in *The Affirmative Action Empire* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), 1–28.

'people's' art was easier to integrate into the cultural dogmas of the Soviet period, in particularly the 1920s and 30s, before Stalin's rehabilitation of Russian nineteenth-century high culture during the 1930s. In a kitschy, routinized, and petrified form, performed by both professional, like the still active Національний заслужений академічний ансамбль танцю України імені Павла Вірського [Virsky ensemble] and amateur groups, this marker of Ukrainianness persisted throughout the twentieth century, tying in only too well with the general 'ruralization' of Ukrainian culture after WWII.[26]

With Stalin's cultural revolution of the 1930s and the rehabilitation of the Russian classical heritage, the dominant Russian school was firmly reestablished, in Leningrad and Moscow as well as in the Soviet republics. All of this paved the way for the development of Ukrainian ballet in the postwar period as a provincial annex of the Soviet ballet tradition, important as it was for the Soviet self-perception of culturedness, including its external branding in the cultural Cold War.[27] Although Soviet Ukraine received ballet theatres and training academies, Kyiv remained a provincial backwater for classical ballet, with ballet productions often supplementing opera stagings and the more talented dancers and choreographers leaving for careers in Moscow and Leningrad, and later internationally.[28]

Dance scholar Ania Nikulina – whose work remains the most comprehensive study of contemporary Ukrainian ballet to date – argues that the art form serves as a microcosm of broader cultural and political struggles. She contrasts the Soviet era–defined by conformity to imperial and Soviet norms with the post-independence period, marked by cultural revival and the assertion of a distinct Ukrainian ballet signature. Moreover, she highlights how Ukrainian artists are adopting postcolonial narratives to reclaim and redefine Ukrainian ballet.[29] By analyzing a collection of nation-themed librettos from the 1930s, she illustrates how Ukrainian artists sought to incorporate national folklore, history, and cultural motifs into ballet, even under Soviet rule. The most well-known example is the aforementioned *Forest Song*, choreographed by Вахтанг Іванович Вронський [Vakhtang Vronskyi, 1905–1988] in 1936. Based on Lesya Ukrainka's 1911 poetic drama, the ballet interweaves Ukrainian folklore and Slavic mythology into Russian imperial narratives, becoming a powerful expression of cultural identity and artistic agency – asserting Ukraine's presence and voice even under Soviet rule.[30]

Although efforts to assert a distinct Ukrainian identity in ballet have existed for decades, progress toward decolonization remained gradual even after Ukraine's independence in 1991, with more significant changes accelerating only in recent years. Ukraine's historical perception as a 'land in-between', allegedly lacking political subjectivity and predisposed to align with dominant empires (as critiqued by Nikulina), has long overshadowed its development of resilient horizontal societal ties. Thus, framing Ukraine's state-affiliated classical ballet institutions merely as custodians of a cosmopolitan, Russian-influenced high culture captures only a partial truth, neglecting Ukraine's longstanding resistance to imperial frameworks.[31]

However, for the time being, 'nationalisation' as decreed by Ukraine's first president, Леонід Макарович Кравчук [Leonid Kravchuk, 1934–2022] in 1992, changed very little in the ways classical dancers were trained and what they staged. Once again it was precisely 'classicism' which became a survival strategy for ballet theatres and dancers during the economic turmoil of the 1990s and the political upheavals of the 2000s and 2010s.[32] Partly it cultivated a cultural nostalgia for a high culture apparently 'untarnished' by the excesses of capitalism and the cronyism of oligarchs and partly providing occupational opportunities elsewhere. 'Ukrainization' was hardly on the agenda. It was only after the Revolution of Dignity and Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine

26. Pasternakova, 'Folk and Art Dance', 605–609. On Virsky, see also Felicity Barringer, 'Dance; A Ukrainian Troupe That Carries a Legacy', *The New York Times*, January 10, 1988, in *Gale Academic OneFile*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A175820474/AONE?u=amst&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=5878a3d3 (accessed April 25, 2025).
27. Cf. Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin*.
28. Nikulina, *Ballet in Ukraine*, 63–64, 87–90; Nikulina, 'Ballet in Ukraine: From Uncertainty to Defiance and Independence', *Dance Research Journal* 55, no. 1 (April 2023): 6–21 (15).
29. Nikulina, *Ballet in Ukraine: A Site of Tension*.
30. For the situation in the 1960s and 1970s, see the descriptive article by Sergey Nikolaevich Afanasyev, 'До історії Київської школи чоловічого балетного виконавства: 60–70-ті роки XX століття [On the history of the Kyiv school of male ballet performance of the 1960s-70s]', *Kul'tura i suchasnist' - Al'manakh* 2 (2015): 87–92.
31. Ania Nikulina, 'Ballet in Ukraine: From Uncertainty', 7.
32. Ibid., 8.

that ballet's decolonization process began to gain momentum leading to a critical assessment of the colonial 'Russian' heritage.

Ukrainian Ballet: Cutting the Umbilical Cord?

Given ballet's dominant Russian heritage and the systematic suppression of Ukrainian ballet traditions during both the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, the current drive for cultural distinction presents Ukrainian ballet dancers with a profound dilemma: How can cultural transformation be initiated and sustained within an art form so closely tied to Russian culture – one in which technique and artistry are deeply and intricately intertwined?

This issue manifests in two key areas: the classical canon, with ballets such as *The Nutcracker*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Swan Lake*, all set to the famous scores by Tchaikovsky, which often serve as survival strategies for Ukrainian ballet in both domestic and international contexts. Secondly, the codified training methods persisted, particularly the internationally renowned Vaganova technique. While no explicit ban on classical ballet repertoire exists, there is a concerted effort to disentangle from Russian cultural hegemony. This includes rejecting collaborations with Russian-affiliated artists and institutions, as well as promoting homegrown talent and narratives. The Національний академічний театр опери та балету України імені Тараса Шевченка [Taras Shevchenko National Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre of Ukraine] has, for example, resumed performances since mid-2022 under wartime conditions, balancing classical works with Ukrainian-themed productions. This approach favors the promotion of national identity over imposing outright bans on classic repertoire. However, it remains a dilemma which is poignantly articulated also by the dancers of the *United Ukrainian Ballet*:

> Russian heritage is a kind of imprint in classical ballet and as such an elephant in the house. Everything you do always has to go around this elephant and say we're not doing the same as the Russians [...] but we have nothing literally nothing to show so we need to build up that base that is like heritage we have some heritage. [...] We also have a kind of moral obligation. If you are not sitting in Kyiv or some other place where they bomb you, you have to do something. How liberating is that and yet how limiting for being an artist. We cannot give up, that's why we need to fight. [...] They [the Russians] want to demolish us and remove us from the map as a nation. So, we thought it's a maybe chance or opportunity to prove this is not right so we established this company.[33]

Another challenge concerns repositioning oneself as a classical dancer towards the codified Vaganova technique and body aesthetic, which have been passed down through generations dancers and ballet masters in Ukraine. The latter undoubtedly represents a shared intangible physical heritage.[34]

Like many other facets of Soviet culture, the Vaganova system mirrors and perpetuates Russian high culture, underscoring the internal struggle between preserving cultural heritage and redefining Ukrainian ballet's own identity. In Nikulina's words, '[t]he very popularization and near fetishization of the "common" Soviet Vaganova method might serve as one more of the examples of ballet technique oriented toward and aligned with the past'.[35] Indeed, what complicates the departure from Russia's legacy is that Ukrainian ballet teachers and dancers have undergone a uniform ballet training regimen throughout the former Soviet Union and the post-Soviet space. Nikulina quotes a Ukrainian dancer saying 'they have trained within the same method, the method of the Vaganova book. She has written down and deciphered all the movements and all the republics – Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan – have studied this book'.[36]

Interviews conducted by Nikulina at the Київське державне хореографічне училище [Kyiv

33. Interview conducted by Anna Seidl with the dancers of the United Ukrainian Ballet in July 2024 in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.
34. See Adrienne L. Kaeppler, 'An Introduction to Dance Aesthetics', *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 35 (2003): 153–62; Helena Wulff, 'Ethereal Expression: Paradoxes of Ballet as a Global Physical Culture', *Ethnography* 9, no. 4 (2008): 518–35.
35. Nikulina, *Ballet in Ukraine: A Site of Tension*, 91–100, quote 129.
36. This is a quote from an interviewee in Nikulina, 'Ballet in Ukraine: From Uncertainty', 15.

National Ballet School] in 2018 disclose that among local ballet instructors and students a quest for homogeneity and consistency persists, on the one hand, while simultaneously practices are emerging that are deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric of Kyiv and Ukraine, 'much more emblematic of the grassroots Maidan movement that defined the new independent identity of Ukraine in the twenty-first century'.[37] While the former is associated with a distinct sense of nostalgia and adherence to the Soviet-era Vaganova technique, the latter suggests a challenging tension between honoring ballet's cultural origins and simultaneously transcending Russian dominance. Nikulina concludes that both uncertainty and defiance epitomize Ukrainian ballet's transitional phase – 'already independent, yet not fully assimilated into the cultural context of Central and Western Europe'.[38]

Within this yet-to-be-fully-defined cultural framework, Nikulina's study of Ukraine based ballet companies reveals that national traditions currently intersect with remnants of centralized Soviet culture and that 'large swaths of newly acquired global practices, which can be broadly described as "Western"".[39]

The United Ukrainian Ballet/ Ukrainian International Ballet: Resilience in Exile

UUB and UIB, as expatriate companies, are taking Ukrainian ballet's dilemma clearly a step further. The dancers experience the Russian legacy in terms of history, ideology, and aesthetics as a form of foreign social imposition and colonization that they seek to completely exhort. In the words of one dancer:

> Something shifted [since the Russian invasion] in our perception on who you are also as artists because Ukraine decided not to do Russian stuff, so we have nothing, literally nothing to show. We have some heritage but it is not known as it is very old and European people won't understand it. So, it needs to be adapted to the modern world to modern life for people to understand and to love the Ukrainian culture. I guess this is what we are trying to do now to create something new like quality Ukrainian stuff.[40]

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, numerous Ukrainian dancers from various cities and regions found shelter in the Netherlands. Male dancers were initially not allowed to leave the country as they awaited their call-up for military service. This changed when former Dutch ballerina Igone de Jongh supported the initiative to set up a company of Ukrainian refugees that was approved by the Dutch government, with financial support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and national corporations. Anticipating the international attention a company of exiled dancers would attract, the Ukrainian government made an exception and allowed the male dancers to join the group. This was the birth of UUB, a company of initially 60 dancers whose main mission was described by the Ukrainian ambassador Maksym Kononenko in 2022 as follows: 'Ballet in Ukraine has always been under Russian influence. This link must now be broken in order to highlight the uniqueness of Ukrainian culture'.[41] Shortly after his statement, the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture appointed the dancers as cultural ambassadors. In our interviews, one of the dancers suggested that

> in this way we are trying to protect our country. The Ukrainian Ministry of Culture doesn't have, you know, [such] long arms to reach [across] Europe so I guess it's our duty as Ukrainians to do such thinking, at least to try.[42]

Soon after its formation, the dancers gained significant international attention, particularly when the distinguished Ukrainian-Russian choreographer

37. Ibid., 16.
38. Ibid., 18.
39. Ibid., 19.
40. This quote comes from an interview conducted by Anna Seidl and Christian Noack with the Ukrainian dancers in Scheveningen (The Netherlands), July 2024.
41. Francine van der Wiel, 'Nieuw United Ballet wil geen Zwanenmeer dansen', *NRC*, June 2, 2022, https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2022/06/01/nieuw-united-ukrainian-ballet-wil-geen-zwanenmeer-dansen-a4131201 (accessed August 20, 2024).
42. Interview conducted by Seidl with the dancers of the United Ukrainian Ballet in January 2024.

Алексей Ратманский, [Олексій Ратманський, Alexei Ratmansky] became their patron.[43] Born to a mother from St. Petersburg and a father from Kyiv, Ratmansky embodies a hybrid identity as he was raised in Kyiv, received his training in Moscow, and embarked on his dancing career with the National Ballet of Ukraine. As student in Moscow, he was frequently identified as 'the boy from Kyiv'.[44] Since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014, he has consistently advocated support for Ukrainian ballet culture, emphasizing that 'Ukraine has never been more united' in this 'renaissance of politics, identity, culture, and ballet'.[45]

For Ratmansky, UUB serves as a metaphor for a painful 'schism' that represents not only a national tragedy but also a deeply personal crisis: 'My identity is really broken', he says, 'to be able to function, I need to find a way to glue it all back together' – 'I have to shut out this [Russian] side of my history'. He will not return to Russia 'until Putin is in jail', he continued in an interview.[46] Like the expatriate dancers from UUB, his work as an artist and choreographer represents a rebellion from afar – an act of resilience that underscores the power and potential of Ukrainian ballet as it proves to evolve independently of Russian influence. Although Ratmansky does not perceive himself as a political artist, especially after 2022, he has taken an outspoken stance against Russian aggression following the invasion of Ukraine: 'The situation brings art and politics together in such an obvious way, in a way I've never experienced before'.[47] In her 2023 biography *The Boy from Kyiv*, Marina Harss highlights how Alexei Ratmansky – once deeply embedded in Russian ballet institutions, including his tenure as artistic director of the Bolshoi Ballet – underwent a profound transformation, particularly after 2022. He publicly cut ties with Russia, prohibited performances of his works there, and emerged as a vocal advocate for Ukrainian identity and culture within the world of ballet.

Against this backdrop, Ratmansky's support for and collaboration with UUB has taken on political significance, as reflected in the heightened international media attention and a wave of invitations for the company between 2022 and 2023 to perform at prestigious venues, including the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, the London Coliseum, and the Sydney Convention & Exhibition Centre.

The company's inaugural performance (September 2022) was Ratmansky's renowned production of *Giselle*. Since this ballet originates from the Romantic era (1848) and predates the Russia's Imperial Ballet period, it poses no direct conflict with the new Ukrainian cultural policy. Thematically and ideologically, this ballet also serves as an appropriate projection surface for reflecting Ukraine's cultural values. While the young and innocent peasant girl Giselle embodies the pure, spiritual, and unembellished beauty of dance, the aristocratic elite, positioned in contrast, performs a courtly and highly stylized form of dancing.[48] One could discern a symbolism that attributes a more primordial concept of dance to the Ukrainian soul, in contrast to the highly stylized movement codex associated with the Russian ballet. In the course of the first act, Giselle's warmheartedness and love for the nobleman Albrecht are misguided, as he betrays her innocence, what results in her death from a broken heart. The famous second act (the 'white act') portrays Albrecht's transformation as he moves from guilt to sorrow, from bearing the weight of blame to receiving Giselle's boundless forgiveness. It is not necessary to explore the ballet's connotations in depth – some of which may be only aspirational in this context – but the use of inner beauty as an absolute defense against the aristocratic order seems to resonate, in one way or another, with Ukrainian cultural resistance, as clearly reflected in the company's mission statement: 'We fight the ugly. The evil, the deadly, the inhumane. We

43. The endorsement followed as Ratmansky resigned from his work at the Bolshoi Theater in the wake of the Russian invasion.
44. 'A Leading Choreographer Joins the Ukrainian War Effort, With Classical Ballet', *Dance Resource Center*, [n.d.], https://www.danceresourcecenter.org/trending-topics/ratmansky-joins-the-war-effort-with-classical-ballet/ (accessed August 22, 2024).
45. Lyndsey Winship, 'Ballet and Bombs: How Ukraine's Dance Stars Are Defying Putin from the Hague', *The Guardian*, August 23, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2022/aug/23/ballet-bombs-ukraines-dance-stars-defying-putin-giselle-ratmansky-hague (accessed August 22, 2024).
46. Ibid.
47. Marina Harss, 'A Leading Choreographer Joins the Ukrainian War Effort, With Classical Ballet', *The New York Times*, August 30, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/30/arts/alexei-ratmansky-ukrainian-ballet-dancers.html (accessed August 22, 2024).
48. See Evan Alderson, 'Ballet as Ideology: "Giselle", Act II', *Dance Chronicle* 10, no. 3 (1987): 290–304.

fight with beauty. Discipline. Love. Music. And muscle'.[49]

At the end of each performance of *Giselle*, the company appeared on stage singing the Ukrainian National Anthem, wrapped in the Ukrainian flag. This final act conveyed the political urgency of the company on at least three levels. Firstly, because it symbolized the (re-) awakening of Ukrainian ballet. Secondly, because it rendered the struggle of an entire nation for its cultural and political independence visible for an international audience. Finally, with an elder generation of visitors, it evoked a sense of déjà vu reminiscent of the Cold War era, during which ballet was positioned at the center of an ideological conflict between East and West.[50]

Following a wave of international acclaim, the company officially concluded its performances on 1 March 2024. The cessation of subsidies, coupled with a lack of demand for an additional classically anchored company in the Netherlands, resulted in insufficient financial backing from sponsors after a period of only two years. Overnight, the dancers, shortly before celebrated by the global press and sought after for international tours, found themselves without support or a job.

> You know, yes, we got into like deep depression because you don't want to believe it yet, it was such a fairytale. [...] It gets you really down because you know we are not like just a normal theater, we're like a family. Dramatic circumstances united us so it's more than just collective where you work. It's something more. So, it's even more painful to lose those people.[51]

Strategies of Resilience

UUB's farewell gala had been advertised under the suggestive title 'Ukraine 4ever – You can't kill the dance', emphasizing their mission statement one last time: 'to protect, support, and spread Ukrainian culture, which has come under great pressure since the war'.[52] However, just as the widespread expectations that Ukraine would quickly succumb to the Russian invasion proved incorrect, UUB demonstrates resilience and continues their work.

In 2024, the UUB transitioned into the Ukrainian International Ballet (UIB) under new Ukrainian leadership of dancers Kseniia Novikova, Iryna Khutorianska, and Vladyslava Kovalenko, operating as a smaller ensemble of ten dancers. The company's 'resurrection' signaled the start of a gradual transformation, redirecting its focus inward and rebuilding from the ground up a distinct artistic identity. With each ballet production, their own unique signature becomes more visible, which is also reflected in their program titled *INdependent24*, which premiered on 25 August 2024 in The Hague.[53]

UIB's productions and self-representation have become a collective effort as Khutorianska, Kovalenko, and Novikova operate with a bottom-up approach that empowers dancers to take active roles in artistic direction and programming. There no longer seems to be a need for prominent figures like De Jongh and Ratmansky or the grand opera houses of the world stage. Instead, a different kind of leadership – female, emerging from the company's own dancers – and a new type of classical performer have emerged. Moreover, choreographers largely come from within the company, and performances are primarily staged in the Netherlands.

Promoted as 'riveting contemporary ballet', the first production *INdependent24* is set up to 'merge raw emotions with exquisite dance to illustrate themes of resilience, humanity, and cooperation between Dutch and Ukrainian cultures'.[54]

> But there are better ways to encourage ourselves and stay positive and find possibilities

49. United Ukrainian Ballet, 'Official Website', https://uniteukrainianballet.com/ (accessed August 22, 2024).
50. The 1956 Bolshoi Ballet tour to London is particularly memorable, as it marked the first time the prestigious company performed in the West during the Cold War. The tour profoundly impacted on Western audiences, who were amazed by the dancers' technical brilliance and emotional depth. This tour elevated Soviet ballet's reputation as among the world's best. See Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin*; David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
51. Author interview with Anna Seidl, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, January 2024.
52. United Ukrainian Ballet official website, https://uniteukrainianballet.com/ (accessed August 22, 2024).
53. Premiere August 25, 2024 at the Korso Theater in Den Haag (The Netherlands).
54. 'Ukrainian International Ballet presents: *INdependent24*'. Advertisement folder.

> how we can continue. So, we started to apply for a grant from some European foundations and created this new project [*INdependent24*]. The first piece is about our Ukrainian experiences as refugees here in the Netherlands. How we, as foreigners, got used to a different environment, different people, different culture. The second one is about our inner world and our joy and sadness and all the emotions we experienced since the war started.[55]

Since the beginning of the interviews with the dancers in 2022, there has also been a notable rise in their self-awareness and confidence, supported by narratives of strength and resilience.[56] Over the eight-month period during which interviews were conducted, a distinct cultural philosophy began to crystallize, one that is also strongly positioned in contrast to Russian ballet and its established norms.

Viewed through the lens of decolonization, the interviewees see the cultivation of a new kind of classical dancer as a central element to their artistic transformation – one that consciously departs from the model of the 'Russian dancer' by placing greater emphasis on emotional authenticity and personal expression rather than technical precision and inherited stylistic norms. 'We're already different because we're Ukrainians and we're dancing and expressing ourselves in our own way'.[57] Their distinct criteria and idiosyncrasies are also evident in how they perceive the *ballerina*. In Russia, the ballerina inherently holds celebrity status and embodies the enduring mystique of ballet in contemporary Russian culture. Prior to Russia's invasion, two dancers affiliated with the Bolshoi Theatre epitomized Russian excellence and artistry, setting international standards. Renowned prima ballerinas Svetlana Zakharova and Olga Smirnova were considered the best of their time – extraordinary and unattainable – a sentiment that is echoed in their self-esteem. Vaganova-trained Smirnova speaks of her unique ability to listen to herself, her sense of proportion, knowledge, and experience, all of which define her as a true ballerina, 'different from ordinary mortals'.[58] Zakharova, notorious for her loyalty to Putin, has been a member of the United Russia political party since 2007 and, since 2023, is under sanctions by the Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council for anti-Ukrainian activities. By contrast, Olga Smirnova defected to the Netherlands at the outset of the Russian invasion and is currently a principal dancer with the Dutch National Ballet.

When asked whether they had attended any of Smirnova's performances in the Netherlands, the dancers of the UUB admitted to having seen her in the main role of *Raymonda* but added that they left after the intermission. Smirnova seemed too cold and distant to them – too Russian:

> I've seen *Raymonda* but it is so perfect, so, you know, brilliant, so rich and shiny, but what I miss are emotions. Yeah, I miss the soul. Artificial maybe and untouchable. I was bored too. And I even left before the second part. She's [Smirnova] so cold, she's just, yes. She's just doing her job. She was so Russian, but it doesn't fit anymore in today's society. But they teach them to be like this in Russian ballet.[59]

While this comment may appear offhand, it is significant in the context of their transition. The dancers indicated that Smirnova lacked warmth, heart, and connection with the audience, despite being technically flawless: 'Ballet used to be like a beautiful picture somewhere very far and the dancers are like angels and the audience just look at them. We want to be closer to the audience to the people because we really open our soul, so we want to be honest with public'.[60]

In casual conversation, some of the dancers ironically called themselves 'bad dancers. We're not [as] high quality dancers as they are'.[61] This would be a rather unusual statement unless understood in the light of the ongoing cultural war, in which the dancers from UUB are trying to establish a new type of artist emphasizing different values distinct

55. Author interview with Anna Seidl and Christian Noack, Scheveningen, The Netherlands, July 2024.
56. Resilience is emphasized in public statements, interviews, programming, and social media posts.
57. Author interview with Anna Seidl, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, January 2024.
58. *Olga Smirnova: A Prima Ballerina's Journey*, directed by Michael Sugrue (The Key Productions, 2020), YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahv_uSswoCY (accessed April 21, 2025).
59. Interview with Seidl, Amsterdam (The Netherlands), January 2024.
60. Ibid.
61. Conversation with Seidl and Noack, Amsterdam (The Netherlands), April 2024.

from the aesthetic norms of Russian ballet. Being a 'bad dancer' means aligning themselves with values also prominent in the collective Ukrainian mindset which have become important characteristics during the Russian war.[62] Virtues such as compassion, dedication, national pride, and warmth have become integral to the company's artistic identity, guiding their public statements and artistic announcements. Terms like 'emotions', 'feelings', 'humanity', 'gratitude towards the Dutch community', and real-life stories of Ukrainian dancers are also central to *INdependent24*. The announcement of the performance states:

> At a time when the whole world is 'cracking' at the seams, drowning from the worst sides of human nature, the choreographers created a performance based on the principles of sensitivity, humanity, and compassion for each other, where the dance calls on the heart and mind to choose 'humanity' as the main tool of coexistence in the world.[63]

Currently, UIB is preparing its second project – a triple bill performance. According to Novikova, Khutorianska, and Kovalenko, the production is conceived as a form of *Lived Ballet Theater*, emphasizing powerful, authentic storytelling and a deep exploration of the concept of time. In the description shared with the authors of this essay, the performance invites audiences on a 'seamless journey through past, present, and future: from the inspiring legacies of Ukrainian and Dutch artists to contemporary cultural exchange and artistic innovation between "East" and "West", and forward to the empowering narratives of contemporary Ukrainian women'. At the time of writing, in Spring 2025, the stage has become a transcultural space where dance transcends borders.

Conclusion

Since the Revolution of Dignity, Ukrainian ballet has become deeply entwined with the nation's struggle for independence – a conflict shaped by centuries of colonial repression and cultural erasure. The preliminary findings of this ongoing study suggest that the strategies and philosophy of UUB and UIB are closely tied to developments in civil society and Ukrainian cultural policy. From the Revolution of Dignity, through the beginning of the war in the eastern part of the country, to Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukrainian society has demonstrated a strong sense of community and collective responsibility, which is also reflected in the statements and the self-image of the dancers. Our findings confirm the presumption that the war has significantly impacted the self-identification processes of Ukrainians, accelerating the decolonization of their socio-cultural space.[64] In their effort to move beyond Russian and Soviet heritage, the Ukrainian dancers distinguished themselves by a new set of aesthetic values, which, in their words, builds on the 'resilience of the human spirit'. However, while it proved relatively easier to bypass the dominant Russian tradition in terms of ballet music and repertoire, the challenges of reviving the erased or destroyed Ukrainian tradition suggest also a shift towards incorporating international ballet practices – *INdependent24* was a collaboration between a Dutch and a Ukrainian choreographer.

Shedding off the deeply internalized conventions of the Vaganova school seems to be even more difficult. In this respect, among the Ukrainian dancers in the Netherlands the war has accelerated disengagement with the aesthetics and philosophies of the Vaganova school. Such tendencies have already been noted by Nikulina during here participant observation in the late 2010s and early 2020s at the Kyiv State Choreography College, which she described as a site of 'contested technique', while still finding 'multiple versions of "classical", "Russian", and "Soviet" ballet aesthetics find[ing] their way into the classroom'.[65]

On the outskirts of The Hague, where most of the dancers live together in a former school building, the ghosts of the Russian/Soviet past have been more thoroughly exorcised. Consciously negating Vaganova's concepts, including that of

62. Olga Marukhovska-Kartunova et al., 'Contemporary Socio-Cultural Shifts in Ukraine', 1386–1394.
63. 'Independent24', https://korzo.nl/en/shows/agenda/independent-24/2024-08-25-1600/ (accessed August 22, 2024).
64. Marukhovska-Kartunova et al., 'Exploring Contemporary Socio-Cultural Shifts in Ukraine', 1386–1394.
65. Nikulina, 'Ballet in Ukraine: From Uncertainty', 16.

the *ballerina*, the dancers of UIB aligned themselves with a more fundamental concept of dance, one that perceives the dancing spirit as an embodiment of a spiritual self.[66] In the interview from July 2024, one of the dancers almost casually mentioned in this context the philosopher Григорій Савич Сковорода [Hryhorii Skovoroda, 1722–1794], who has been portrayed either as the Ukrainian or Russian Socrates and whose influence is pivotal in shaping the ideas of the Ukrainian 'philosophy of the heart':

> It was always there probably but now through what you went through it becomes even clearer. Dancing is about the values inside ourselves and the world's values. You look at it differently now you know what is important and unimportant. This has completely changed for us now that we understand that humans and human relationships [are] the most important thing [in] our human lives. We are about real relationships, real humans, real emotions, and real values.[67]

As an expatriate company, UUB and UIB occupy a unique position in Ukraine's effort of decolonization: 'We started to present ourselves to the Europe scene and show that we are different from Russian culture. I strongly believe we have our own path'.[68]

Moreover, the transition from UUB to UIB highlights a political process as the dancers are actively involved in asserting a distinct Ukrainian voice in ballet – one that is also shaped through dialogue with Western dance traditions. However, there can be no doubt that the dancers with their renewed, small company still understand themselves as serving the national cause – whether this will be officially recognized by the Ukrainian government and Ukraine's cultural institutions remains to be seen.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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66. Sabine Huschka, *Moderner Tanz: Konzepte, Stile, Utopien*; (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 2002).
67. Author interview with Anna Seidl and Christian Noack, Scheveningen, The Netherlands, July 2024.
68. Ibid.