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CULTUROGRAPHY OF THE
RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR

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Ukrainian Cultural Front: The “Cancel Culture” Discourse

Abstract

The essence of the phenomenon of “cancel culture” and the reasons for its relevance in contemporary cultural discourse have been uncovered. Its impact on the protection and preservation of national identity, politics, and intercultural relations has been characterized, and the potential risks of its spread have been considered. The practice of “cancel culture” elicits ambivalent attitudes – it is seen as an opportunity to draw attention to unfair actions, discrimination, and to encourage the protection of democratic values and human rights. However, “cancel culture” also acquires a negative interpretation as posing a potential threat to freedom of speech and constructive criticism. Achieving open dialogue and free expression of different opinions is crucial here. Discussions on “cancel culture” during the war reflect tendencies towards resistance and the protection of national self-identification. It’s not just about internal processes of combating Russia’s cultural expansion but also about efforts to represent Ukraine on the international stage. Sometimes, proponents of Russian culture try to dissociate it from imperial ambitions and contemporary war crimes. However, certain European countries are gradually beginning to reassess their stance on these issues, showing increasing solidarity with Ukraine by boycotting Russian cultural events and critically assessing its real impact in the contemporary world. Ukrainian cultural and art institutions, amidst the war, have lost a significant amount of talented youth who left Ukraine, but they adapt their current capabilities to conduct various events to psychologically support Ukrainians. Cultural initiatives allow promoting Ukrainian culture globally and reflecting the true realities of the war. Cultural exchanges during festivals, exhibitions, biennales, musical and theatrical tours play a significant role, aiming to promote Ukrainian culture in the world: Ukrainian artists are participants in the Frankfurt Book Fair, as well as the Maltese Biennale, where the Ukrainian pavilion was opened for the project “From South to North” by artist A. Kakhidze. Such events create a platform for discussing issues of memory, history, and cultural connections at the international level.

Keywords: cancel culture, Ukrainian cultural front, information war, cultural dialogue, freedom of speech.

Problem statement. The unfolding of the Ukrainian cultural front and discussions around “cancel culture” touch upon many spheres of public life: from politics to art and education. In the context of war and political changes occurring in Ukraine, this discourse acquires particular

relevance. Specifically, it encompasses issues of the representation of Russian culture and art in Ukraine, rethinking the role and significance of historical figures, events, cultural and artistic phenomena, as well as the democratic principles of modern society.

The “cancel culture” discourse, considering the current events in Ukraine, implies a critical review, and in some cases, rejection of the creativity (legacy) of many cultural and art figures whose activities are associated with a colonial past or related to actions considered immoral, unjust from the perspective of contemporary values. This also concerns issues regarding the use of the national language, use of symbols, protection, and preservation of national identity.

At the same time, it is necessary to consider that recourse to “cancel culture” is not only actively encouraged and applied but also provokes disputes, particularly regarding freedom of speech, the possibility of dialogue, and reconciliation in society. Critics of “cancel culture” argue that it can limit the open discussion of vitally important issues and expressions of civic stance.

In the context of full-scale military aggression and cultural expansion by Russia, the application of “cancel culture” mechanisms takes on particular acuteness, as the current situation requires not only a response to external threats but also a deep analysis of national values and identity, as well as active efforts to spread and popularize unique examples of Ukrainian culture.

State of scientific development. The literature on “cancel culture” explores various aspects, including its impact on corporate social responsibility, collective actions, academic freedom, and the pursuit of transformative justice.

One viewpoint highlights the complex relationship between the cancel culture and corporate social responsibility. It discusses how social media platforms have become powerful tools for holding corporations accountable for their actions, such as in the case of Aunt Jemima syrup, where social outrage led to significant brand changes. This reflects a broader trend where legislation may not ensure corporate accountability, but public pressure through digital platforms can force companies to align their practices with their stated values of social justice and activism (Brill 2021). Another analysis looks at the cancel culture through the lens of social psychology, suggesting it can serve as a means of collective scrutiny and empowerment for marginalized groups. By calling out harmful behavior or biases, cancel culture can act as a modern form of protest or boycott, aimed at reducing the social and economic power of individuals or organizations that cause harm. This process can expand opportunities for those who have been marginalized, giving them a platform to validate their experiences and participate in collective actions (Traversa, Tian, and Wright 2023, 3).

Debates extend to the academic sphere, where concerns are expressed about a cancel culture that suppresses intellectual debates and academic freedom. The fear is that a widespread cancel culture may lead to the ostracism of opposing views, limiting the diversity of thought and potentially adhering to a progressive orthodoxy that silences conservative voices and diverse perspectives (Norris 2020). In the realm of transformative justice, cancel culture is scrutinized for how well it aligns with broader practices of justice aimed at addressing the root causes of systemic problems. The criticism is that while the cancel culture seeks to hold people accountable, it can also perpetuate a culture of fear, secrecy, and isolation, contradicting the principles of transformative justice, which emphasize healing, understanding, and systemic changes. The dialogue around transformative justice suggests a need for more nuanced approaches to accountability that go beyond public shaming and canceling, focusing instead on healing and systemic solutions (Brown 2021).

These perspectives illustrate the multifaceted nature of cancel culture, demonstrating its potential as both a tool for social responsibility and a complex phenomenon with potential drawbacks, especially in terms of suppressing dialogue and the risk of simplifying justice to public condemnation without a path to repentance or understanding.

Several studies are dedicated to the media and acceleration of the cancel culture. Graciela Bianca Jaafar and Herna Herna (2023) highlight how media accelerates the cancel culture phenomenon through social networks, leading to broader and quicker spread of boycotts. Jiarui Liu and Zhihan Su (2023) examine the impact of the cancel culture on social media and the academic environment, underlining how digital culture and social networks contribute to the spread of this phenomenon. Recent research is also focused on online reputation management and counterstrategies. Nkrumah (2024) emphasizes the importance of transparency, stakeholder engagement, and strategy adaptation to reduce reputational risks in the era of cancel culture. Hannah Marsh (2022) investigates how political affiliation and generational differences affect the propensity to participate in the cancel culture, highlighting the necessity of understanding this phenomenon for reputation management. An important aspect of the research is the psychological consequences and impact on public discourse. Xin Yuan (2023) draws attention to the psychological effects of the cancel culture, especially on academic and social life, proposing legal measures to reduce its negative impact. Lucia Picarella (2024) critically analyzes the relationship between the cancel culture and the spread of fake

news, discussing their combined impact on public discourse and democracy.

The phenomenon of “cancel culture” and the associated concept of the cultural front have not yet received comprehensive justification and consideration in Ukrainian humanities research; there are only individual interpretations of it in the context of the socio-political situation that has developed in Ukraine. Galyna Grygorenko thus reveals its essence: “We are confident that culture is indeed the second front... our northern neighbor conducts a very aggressive policy precisely in the cultural field... The cultural front is extraordinarily complex” (Grygorenko 2022). Volodymyr Tylishchak, Deputy Head of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, also speaks about the strength of the cultural front in Ukraine, about Ukrainian cultural positions in the world, about how Ukraine should counter Russian propaganda, what needs to be done first for Ukraine to be always remembered, and for the interest in us to be maintained as long as possible (Zelichenko 2022).

The goal of the article is to reveal the essence of “cancel culture” in the context of the unfolding Ukrainian cultural front, its impact on the preservation of national identity, on politics, and intercultural relations in the conditions of the current war, to identify potential risks and limitations regarding its spread, and to emphasize the need for a balanced approach to cultural policy implementation.

Presentation of the main material. The term “cancel culture” became widespread in scientific discourse at the beginning of the 21st century. It signifies the public condemnation or boycott of public figures, companies, cultural and art figures, politicians for their statements and actions filled with offensive, unacceptable content and meaning, which can manifest in various forms – from racist or sexist comments to the rejection and denial of certain social or political movements.

Resorting to the practice of “cancel culture” has a dual effect: on one hand, it can draw attention to unfair actions, discrimination, encourage changes in society, provide an opportunity to express certain demands, and protect civil rights. On the other hand, it is legitimate to worry that “cancel culture” may lead to the silencing of unconventional thoughts, the cancellation of democratic freedoms, to biased attitudes towards individuals without due consideration of circumstances, and to an atmosphere of fear and suspicion. Therefore, “cancel culture” often faces criticism for the potential threat of limiting freedom of speech, as, aiming to detect and punish unacceptable behavior, the public may

inadvertently suppress the free exchange of thoughts, ideas. People begin to fear expressing their thoughts to not become victims of “cancellation.” “Cancel culture” encourages the spread of instant reactions, unthoughtful statements, which may result in condemnation of others due to a lack of proper information, ignorance, or misunderstanding of the context, comprehensive analysis of the situation. “Cancel culture” can deepen the existing polarization in society, causing division between different groups, activating its dynamics. This approach is harmful to communication and understanding, and it does not facilitate dialogue. Another significant warning about the application and spread of “cancel culture” is the risk of unfair or inappropriate punishment due to reliance on unverified facts or committed errors, where a person can lose their reputation, job, and social connections without the possibility of restoring them. Furthermore, in a society dominated by “cancellation,” constructive criticism is devalued, and the opportunity to account for mistakes, to avoid repeating them is lost. Therefore, it is important to maintain a balance, not to allow political persecution or wrongful punishment.

Overall, discussions around the problem of “cancel culture” reflect a more complex societal situation – the contradiction between the desire for freedom of speech and the need to counter discrimination, to promote inclusivity in society. Here, it is extremely important to achieve a balance that will allow to effectively highlight and resolve issues without destroying the practices of open dialogue and free expression of various thoughts.

In the current situation, the concept of the Ukrainian cultural front has also become widespread. Its essence is revealed by Galyna Grygorenko, Deputy Minister of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine:

We are confident, and I think everyone felt during this full-scale war, that culture is indeed the second front. Moreover, ...culture has been our first front for the last 300 years. Actually, our northern neighbor conducts a very aggressive policy precisely in the cultural field... The cultural front is extraordinarily complex. In European countries, when we demand, for example, the cancellation of some cultural events involving Russians and Russian cultural figures, we often encounter the assertion that culture is outside politics, and the territory of art is where you must seek understanding and dialogue. This compulsion to peace and reconciliation through art is an incredibly challenging task for any artist (Grygorenko 2022).

The Ukrainian cultural front and “cancel culture” unfold on several levels, ranging from the complete non-acceptance of Russian culture to international support for Ukrainian identity. The current situation in Ukraine convinces us that culture has become an important means of resistance and self-expression of the nation in wartime.

According to *Vox Ukraine* (Grygorenko 2022), cultural institutions in Ukraine have suffered not only significant material and financial losses in the conditions of war but also lost a significant number of talented youth who left Ukraine. Despite this, they continue to work actively, adapting their current capabilities for conducting various events to psychologically support Ukrainians. Cultural initiatives play a key role in promoting Ukrainian culture at the international level and in reflecting the realities of war.

According to *Suspilne* (Zelinchenko 2022), it is crucial to distinguish between the concepts of culture and propaganda, especially when Russian culture is used to justify imperial ambitions and current crimes. Some European countries are gradually beginning to rethink and reassess their attitude towards Russian culture, showing solidarity with Ukraine by boycotting Russian culture or critically assessing its real impact. All this reflects the ongoing and complex struggle of Ukrainians to preserve cultural identity in wartime, highlighting the importance of supporting Ukrainian culture as a means of national self-expression and international recognition.

The practice of “cancel culture” is also associated with the cessation (or “cancellation”) of support for public figures and companies after they have engaged in unacceptable or offensive actions or statements about Ukraine. Its introduction has sharpened the problem of freedom of speech, raised questions about the activity of social media in upholding moral standards and fair treatment of individuals, often condemned without respecting the right to defense. Critics argue that the cancel culture can lead to inadequate punishment without due process, harm open discussion, and encourage self-censorship. On the other hand, proponents of “cancel culture” believe that it is only in this way that accountability can be demanded from influential individuals, especially in situations where traditional systems of justice and media have failed to do so.

Greg Lukianoff and Ricky Schlott (2023) described “cancel culture” as a phenomenon that arises from a “protective” culture on university campuses, where people are unwilling to engage with ideas or speech that may be uncomfortable or challenging. International authors, including Lisa Nakamura (2013) and Francis Lee (2017), view

“cancel culture” as a form of cultural boycott or self-regulation in communities, especially to counter inappropriate behavior and opinions or those containing offensive attitudes.

Despite a certain negative undertone in the meaning of cancel culture, it is considered a tool for social change, giving a voice to those with less influence, as well as the opportunity to hold people accountable when other systems do not facilitate this. “Cancel culture” is characterized by the collective public rejection of the statements and actions of relevant individuals, spread on social media, triggered by strong negative emotional reactions, and aimed at applying punitive actions to them.

In Ukraine, the cultural front and discussions surrounding the issue of “cancel culture,” especially during the war, have transformed into an important aspect of resistance and self-identification. It’s not just about internal changes in the sphere of culture but also about efforts to present Ukraine on the international stage and combat Russia’s cultural expansion.

Ukraine has suffered significant losses due to the departure of a considerable number of cultural and art figures abroad because of military aggression, negatively affecting the activity and development of the cultural sector. This necessitates developing new models to encourage and reward professionals to attract and retain them in the sphere of cultural activity, which remains one of the least financially supported (Grygorenko 2022).

Promoting Ukrainian culture on the international stage is critically important, especially during the war. Ukrainian artists are actively working to spread a positive image of the country abroad, undertaking various cultural actions – from charity exhibitions in London to concerts in New York (New Voice 2022; Dobrodom and Holik 2023).

In response to Russian aggression, some countries are boycotting Russian culture as a sign of solidarity with Ukraine. This process is aimed against Russia’s attempts to use culture to spread its political influence (Zelinchenko 2022).

Today, the role of culture in diplomacy and education is significantly increasing. Cultural initiatives, including Ukraine’s participation in international biennales, become an essential means of promoting Ukrainian art and culture globally, stimulating global dialogue and cooperation (Cultural Strategy Institute 2022). Cultural initiatives are an important tool of diplomacy and country representation at the international level; they not only promote Ukrainian culture but also facilitate international dialogue and cultural exchange, reveal the essence of complex

socio-political processes, and convince of the necessity of support and aid for Ukrainians (Cultural Strategy Institute 2022).

Cultural and art figures play a significant role in countering aggression and the information war: participating in charity events, organizing fundraisers, carrying out educational work to popularize examples of Ukrainian cultural heritage, and providing accurate information about the war (Zelenskyi 2022). Thus, cultural activity can be an instrument of struggle and self-expression in difficult circumstances, and art, education, and cultural initiatives influence society in Ukraine and beyond. In a globalized information space, the cultural front plays a key role in the fight for identity, independence, and recognition.

The issue of “canceling” Russian culture in response to Russia’s full-scale military aggression against Ukraine is exceptionally complex and multifaceted. It cannot be reduced to a simple rejection or non-acceptance of certain cultural phenomena; it involves complex, ambiguous questions of national identity, history, and moral responsibility.

On one hand, Russia uses culture as an ideological weapon, promoting the Russian language, literature, music, and various artistic examples internationally, aiming to highlight its advantages and diminish the significance of other cultures, especially Ukrainian. There are instances where Ukrainian culture is viewed in the context of Russian culture, which is unacceptable to Ukrainians. On the other hand, many prominent cultural figures traditionally associated with Russia have deep connections with Ukraine – origin, long-term residence, influences, etc. It is impossible to completely reject such figures without threatening the loss of an important part of the national cultural heritage. A balanced resolution of the problem is necessary to counter Russian cultural expansion and propaganda while preserving cultural achievements and identity. A thorough analysis and reinterpretation of these cultural figures’ creative activities in the context of Ukrainian national history and an objective acknowledgment of their contribution to Ukrainian culture are needed.

In today’s globalized reality and information warfare, the idea of “canceling” Russian culture as a response to aggression highlights questions about distinguishing between cultural dialogue and conflict and using culture as a means to counter hybrid warfare. It is important to emphasize that such “canceling” should not be an end in itself or a condition for cultural self-isolation. Instead, it is a tool for unveiling the truth about historical connections, cultural influences, and shared heritage

distorted or concealed by ideological propaganda. Efforts should be directed towards supporting and developing cultural identity, Ukrainian language, literature, art, and history at the international level.

This entails several directions of activity, one of which is creating educational programs for listeners at different educational levels, revealing the multifaceted nature of Ukrainian culture and its interaction with other world cultures. Models such as the Erasmus+ international student and teacher exchange program and the Fulbright initiative, which allows researchers to disseminate scientific information and rich cultural experience, can be chosen as examples. Cultural exchanges through organizing and conducting festivals, exhibitions, musical and theatrical tours are also of great importance for promoting Ukrainian culture abroad, with support from programs like the British Council. Ukraine’s participation in international book fairs, especially the Frankfurt Book Fair, where the best Ukrainian authors and new literary publications were presented, should be noted. On March 14, 2024, the Ukrainian pavilion was opened at the Maltese Biennale – a project “From South to North” by artist Alevtina Kakhidze on the theme of decolonization and reflection on the imperial past against the backdrop of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Dialogue and critical reflection on the historical legacy and contemporary context of cultural interactions are aimed at developing and strengthening cultural ties through public lectures, round tables, discussion clubs, where historical connections between cultures and contemporary cultural interactions are discussed. Projects like “The Memory Studies Association” create a platform for discussing issues of memory, history, and cultural relations at an international level.

Financing artistic projects, film festivals, and musical initiatives today is critically important. Among them is the film “Atlantis” by director Valentyn Vasyanovych, which depicts post-war Ukraine and reveals the perception of contemporary Ukrainian reality abroad. Culture and art have a unique ability to elicit emotional responses and stimulate action. For example, the documentary “20 Days in Mariupol” is not just an artistic work but a documentary testimony of the war, a humanitarian catastrophe of our times. By influencing public consciousness, culture unites people, becoming a powerful tool for dialogue between them, an important means of international recognition and support for Ukraine, and a way to influence global opinion and politics. The awarding of an Oscar to “20 Days in Mariupol” is fundamentally important not only for Ukrainian cinema but for the global

cinema, as it demonstrates its societal effectiveness, the ability to reveal the essence of contemporary crises. Equally indicative was the vigorous reaction of not only the Ukrainian but also the international community to the omission of the award ceremony for “20 Days in Mariupol” from the international telecast of the Oscars (Lutsenko 2024). This reaffirmed the impact cultural events could have. The ceremony organizers were forced to include footage of the film’s award in the international telecast of the Oscars, convincing our contemporaries that the public voice had been heard (Carey 2024), and it has an undeniable impact on political decisions.

Similarly, the creation of the “Crimean Platform” signifies international recognition of Ukraine’s cultural and political rights in Crimea. This was manifested in active cooperation with relevant organizations, including UNESCO, regarding the protection of cultural heritage, as well as in diplomatic initiatives to promote Ukrainian culture and counteract cultural aggression. Work in each of these directions requires resources, energy, creativity, and only through such a comprehensive approach can Ukraine’s recognition in the world be achieved.

Thus, “canceling” Russian culture is not merely a rejection of its values but a constructive process aimed at spreading Ukrainian culture, its perception, and recognition in the world, countering attempts to devalue its significance. In this context, “cancel culture” is not an end goal but a means to protest attempts to use culture as a tool of aggression and to protect another’s cultural identity.

Conclusions. “Cancel culture” is a historically temporary practice necessitated by the need to liberate and provide the world with truthful information about the cultural and artistic heritage appropriated by the empire. It is important in debates on “cancel culture” to understand culture as a dynamic, multifaceted process. A critical approach to cultural heritage will not only allow the cancellation of what promotes ideological aggression but also uncover new, previously overshadowed pages of shared history and culture.

One possible solution to the dilemma of “cancellation” could be the development and implementation of educational programs as a basis for forming an objective, unbiased attitude toward cultural achievements and addressing complex issues such as identity and national belonging.

Moreover, it is important to activate cultural exchange and dialogue at the international level, through which Ukrainian culture will emerge as self-sufficient, unique, and diverse. Openness to the world and cooperation with international cultural institutions and organizations will help counter cultural expansion and propaganda.

Thus, the problem of “cancel culture” of Russian culture in the context of military conflict requires a comprehensive approach, a balanced approach to critical reevaluation of heritage, and the preservation of cultural diversity and dialogue. This necessitates collective efforts and collaboration of educators, cultural and art figures, researchers, and the general public.

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Український культурний фронт: дискурс «культури скасування»

Стаття має за мету розкрити сутність явища «культура скасування» (*cancel culture*) та причини його актуальності в сучасному культурному дискурсі. Визначено його вплив на захист і збереження національної ідентичності, політику та міжкультурні відносини, а також розглянуто потенційні ризики його поширення. Практика культури скасування викликає амбівалентні відносини: її бачать як можливість привернути увагу до несправедливих дій, дискримінації та підтримки демократичних цінностей і прав людини. Водночас культура скасування набуває негативної інтерпретації як потенційна загроза свободі слова та конструктивній критиці. Досягнення відкритого діалогу та вільного висловлення різних поглядів має вирішальне значення.

Дискусії про культуру скасування під час війни відображають тенденції до опору та захисту національного самовизначення. Йдеться не лише про внутрішні процеси боротьби з культурним розширенням Росії, а й про зусилля представити Україну на міжнародній арені. Іноді прихильники російської культури намагаються відокремити її від імперських амбіцій та сучасних воєнних злочинів. Однак деякі європейські країни поступово переоцінюють свою позицію з цих питань, демонструючи зростаючу солідарність з Україною шляхом бойкоту російських культурних заходів і критичного оцінювання їхнього реального впливу в сучасному світі. Українські культурні та мистецькі установи під час війни втратили значну кількість талановитої молоді, яка залишила Україну, проте вони адаптують свої поточні можливості для проведення різноманітних заходів з психологічної підтримки українців.

Культурні ініціативи дають змогу просувати українську культуру глобально та показувати справжні реалії війни. Культурні обміни під час фестивалів, виставок, бієнале, музичних і театральних турів відіграють значну роль, зосереджуючись на просуванні української культури у світі. Наприклад, українські художники беруть участь у Франкфуртському книжковому ярмарку, у Мальтійському бієнале, де 2024 року було відкрито український павільйон для проекту «From South to North» («З півдня на північ») художниці Алевтини Кахідзе. Такі події створюють платформу для обговорення питань пам'яті, історії та культурних зв'язків на міжнародному рівні.

Ключові слова: культура скасування, український культурний фронт, інформаційна війна, культурний діалог, свобода слова.

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