

*Круглий стіл*

«Візантійщина»:

**Образи і оцінки візантійського цивілізаційного спадку  
у Центрально-Східній Європі**

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**Byzantium, Ukrainian-Style**

Notwithstanding certain achievements in the study of the Byzantine influence on Ukrainian history, the Ukrainian humanities (history, philosophy, political science, etc.) have so far been unable to offer a properly Ukrainian vision of Byzantium and the Byzantine cultural and civilizational heritage. The Ukrainian perception of the Byzantine myth has been relinquished unconditionally to the talons of the Russian (pro-Russian) imperial discourse. In the view of most Ukrainian intellectuals the Byzantine component of Ukrainian history still remains an entirely (at best – primarily) negative experience, and it is often related as something external, imperial and anti-democratic, formulaic and pharisaic, and in the last account anti-Ukrainian.

In the Ukrainian perception of Byzantium, the Russian imperial myth of Moscow as the Third Rome dominates entirely, and, having received and accepted the Russian view of Byzantium, Ukraine has only two strategies to choose from: either to acknowledge herself as part of Russia and share in the latter's imperial vision of Byzantium, or, rejecting the Russian imperial project, to build an identity of her own, interpreting Byzantium and the Byzantine heritage as something essentially alien, negative, and external, as something that should be gotten rid of as soon as possible. Characteristic in this sense are the references to Byzantium, Byzantine heritage and its traits by the leading Ukrainian public intellectuals, such

as Mykola Riabchuk, Yaroslav Hrytzak, Oleh Pokalchuk, Oksana Zabuzhko, Oksana Pakhliovska, and some others.

Meanwhile, outside the Russian vision of Byzantium, there exists a variety of other, sufficiently productive approaches. Such is, for instance, the Western European view, within which we can clearly distinguish the peculiarities of the national schools of such “great historiographical powers” as Germany, Great Britain, and France. Or there is the American view (and the United States is also, without a doubt, a “great historiographical power,” in the sense that it explores the entire span of world history, from the primitive society in all corners of the globe and the early civilizations to the contemporary history of every country of the modern world and all the various modern social groups and aspects of life). Within the limits of the possible, the Russian Empire also strove to be a “great historiographical power,” the Soviet Union became one for a time, and the present-day Russian Federation is making the last-ditch effort to maintain this status. Concerning Byzantium, both the Russian Empire of the nineteenth and early twentieth century and the Russian Federation of the present had/have a special sentiment, experiencing it as part of their own history, which has inevitably and strongly empowered the Byzantine studies in the context of the study of Russian history.

Some countries that in no way can be counted among the “great historiographical powers” – Greece, Serbia, or Bulgaria – also have proven capable of developing their own historical/historiosophic visions of Byzantium and its heritage within their national historiographies (we will not now dwell on the question of why, in what context, and for what reasons the study of Byzantium developed in such remote and separated from the Byzantine heritage countries as

Poland, Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic, Japan, and so on). It would appear that visions of Byzantine history akin to the Serbian or Bulgarian should have emerged in the Ukrainian intellectual space, but Ukraine's continuing in the gravitational pull of the Russian state, including the intellectual pull, eventually made the differentiation and formulation of an independent Ukrainian vision of the history of Byzantium and the significance of its civilizational heritage impossible.

During a conversation with Liudmyla Tarnashynska at the First Congress of the International Ukrainianist Association in Kyiv (August 27 – September 3 1990), the American Byzantinologist of Ukrainian descent and a world-renowned scholar Ihor Ševčenko complained bitterly that he “...did not feel a subjective need among... [his] acquaintances or other presenters to trace... the Byzantine-Ukrainian connections, despite the fact that Ukraine is one of the parts of this Soviet Union that still exists, where authentic Byzantine remains are present.” Natalia Yakovenko noted a similar situation more than twenty years later: “In the whole of Ukraine there is no scholarly field that could be called Byzantinology. There are some green shoots... but they are sure not enough to set up a conference. This seems to me a huge omission, because the analysis, from the perspective of the Byzantine political tradition, of those connections and that broad cultural context into which Rus' was drawn is not developing, is not being cultivated in Ukraine. The Kyivan Rus' was shaped under the aegis of Byzantine culture, civilization, spirituality, Church, and so on. There is a very rich literature devoted to these questions.... But, unfortunately, it really is international, not Ukrainian.”

Meanwhile, in Ihor Ševčenko's precise observation, “Byzantium was not only a multinational state, but also a country that exercised enormous influence on a whole number of cultures – Southern Italian, Syrian, Armenian, South and Eastern

Slavic. And her influence on Eastern Slavic life extended from – just imagine! – the ninth and up to the eighteenth century. Rus'-Ukraine existed under this influence, the same influence enveloped Petro Mohyla and Epiphany Slavinetsky, and even – though he did not know that because he thought himself under the Polish influence – Hetman Mazepa. Thus from this angle I am a Ukrainianist, and maybe that's my perspective. The fact that I see things in a broader perspective gives me a certain advantage over other Ukrainianists...”

It seems high time for Ukrainian intellectuals to offer a separate, independent first of all from the (neo)imperial Russian, but also from the (neo)liberal Western view of the essence of the Byzantine civilization and the significance of its heritage for Ukrainian history. Highly likely it is the Ukrainian vision of Byzantium that can become very promising in many aspects – from understanding the nature of the Byzantine civilization to formulating a vision of the future for the countries of the “Byzantine circle of influence.” At least the philosophical and geopolitical musings of Andriy Okara on this subject (“In the Vicinity of the New Constantinople, or the Eastern Christian Civilization Vis-à-Vis the Newest World Chaorder”) seem much more attractive than the respective constructions of the present-day Russian public “Byzantinologists” such as Father Tikhon (Shevkunov), A. Dugin, or Egor Kholmogorov's recent opus “Byzantium: Everything You Need to Know for Arguments with Russophobes”.