



MORE THAN IVORY TOWER  
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When I received the marvelous news that I was invited to spend the 2017/18 academic year at the famous *Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin*, I could not resist fostering a dream that for the next ten months I would hide in an ivory tower not only from my teaching

obligations, students, and seminars, but also from public presentations and discussions, and communication with media and local communities or, in short, that I will be doing something opposite to what is increasingly expected nowadays from a public sociologist and especially a Ukrainian sociologist. In fact, over the last four years, political upheavals in Ukraine and Russian aggression in Crimea and Donbas added a new dimension to my long-term study of regional and local senses of belonging in the emerging post-Soviet Ukrainian society. It is not that I prefer to hide from new challenges posed by the aggravated political situation; on the contrary, I increasingly felt how scholarly critical analysis is literally becoming vitally important for my country and a region of Eastern Europe. But the possibility to retreat to the safe harbor of an academic desk was indeed very tempting.

My book project aims at studying the interplay between (trans-)national, regional, and local models of the past and their impact on inhabitants' historical identities. This requires changing the focus from macro-level research to national/regional official models of the past and the politics of memory in relation to the local perspective and the specific methodology to be used. Methodologically, I plan to focus on personal narratives about individual life experiences. Through the analysis of in-depth interviews, more than several hundred of which I collected in different regions of Ukraine before my arrival in Berlin, I sought to understand the role of history in the everyday routine of inhabitants of local towns and to trace the complex interrelations between dominant [regional and (trans-)national] history discourses versus personal senses of the past. I also looked for the presence of marginalized voices and existing strategies of resistance to dominant models of the historical past. The bulk of my empirical data was collected since 2011 in cooperation with the "Ukrainian Regionalism" initiative that was launched by the University of St. Gallen and in several other international projects focusing on Ukraine and its neighboring cultural contact zones. As I arrived in Berlin with a massive amount of data – interviews, field notes, supporting photos, and respondents' drawings – I had a foretaste of the pleasure of organizing, coding, structuring, and analyzing it.

And at the beginning of my stay in Berlin, especially during the adaptation period, it looked like my ivory tower dream would come true. Settled in a spacious apartment located in a nice green park by the lake with beautiful swans floating around and cordially welcomed by the supportive and tireless Wiko administration and staff, who seemed to be able to resolve even the smallest problems, one might indeed feel like a guest scholar at a princely court. The initial chats with the other Wiko Fellows, who needed some time to

get to know each other, were at the beginning rather short and sporadic, although the Wiko administration did a great invisible job of ice-breaking and interconnecting various professional factions within our group. But as the academic collaboration at the Wiko took on its dynamic, I realized that there were new inspiring challenges that I had to meet during this academic year beyond the imagined pleasures of living in an ivory tower.

From the very beginning, belonging to the vibrant and diverse multidisciplinary community of the Wiko Fellows offered inspiring intellectual stimuli. Without exaggeration, our weekly colloquia opened the whole universe of German and international scholarship. Yet the unlimited possibility for an intensive individual or small-group communication and discussion with my new colleagues helped even more to question critically accepted schemes and to search for fresh perspectives. The unique opportunity to learn from cultural anthropologists about the culture of remembrance in Western Africa, or from a climatologist about cultural sensitivity and local knowledge in a course of fieldwork, or from a sociologist about methodologies of studying the “Darknet” led to several valuable intellectual revelations. Other formal and informal talks about such problems as the ethnography of violence and value in a post-genocide society; social, racial, or gender inequalities; dimensions of agency and capabilities emerging in connection with transnational migration and integration, civic activism, genealogies of human rights, and many more issues resonated profoundly with my own search for a new conceptual framework. Not less inspiring and eye-opening were my talks with those Wiko Fellows who were from the natural sciences. They made me think about the “humanization bias” and how it not only shapes our (mis-)understanding of many natural-science phenomena, but also limits our perspective on what and how social scientists should study. Interestingly, the latter talks even forced many of us to change our daily habits and to become more aware of ecological damage that our routine activities may cause to nature and to our bodies.

Yet intensive collaboration with an academic community of Wiko Fellows was also unexpectedly challenging. Over the last years, I have become used to participating in international projects or events where everybody was familiar with the current studies on contemporary Eastern European politics and society and specifically looked for unorthodox arguments and nuanced analysis. In contrast, during my stay in Berlin, I was surprised to see how distant current Eastern European problematics are from mainstream Western academia, even after the global turn. Quite often I encountered stereotypical viewpoints and thought patterns about Ukraine shaped by lack of information or clichéd media coverage. For many, Ukraine was still invisible or unseparated from the Russian

political and cultural space. Well, “Ukraine is not Russia”, proclaimed one of the post-Soviet Ukrainian presidents, and then this simple rhetorical formula covered the whole range of political and cultural anxieties of an emerging political nation. Thus, probably one of the biggest challenges for me was to discuss Ukraine’s origin and relationship with different cultural zones and not to slip into simplified arguments representing standard Ukrainian nation-centered narration. Have I unintentionally limited my argument to the same simple formula when colleagues asked whether Ukrainian is a separate language or whether Ukraine has its own currency, and so on? Did I literally stand for my country at each presentation? Should I have provided my audience with a more complicated and sometimes obscure picture of Ukrainian society, or was it all right to highlight these “uncharted territories” in rather essentialist terms for the sake of clarity? My wonderful Wiko colleagues from Poland and Russia, Paweł Machcewicz and Vladimir Tarnopolski, were always extremely supportive of my attempts to locate the Ukrainian case on a broader regional map. But I would feel much more secure intellectually if rich Berlin bookshops would offer at least a few Ukrainian books along with the Russian and Polish ones that would make the Ukrainian cultural landscape more recognizable.

All in all, it appeared that being a sociologist from Ukraine, which is one of the biggest European countries (both in terms of territory and population size) and which recently survived two revolutions (Orange and Euromaidan), Russia’s annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, and the military conflict over Donbas, I could not close myself within the imagined ivory tower. During my stay in Berlin, I gave altogether 17 presentations at various academic forums. After my research on internally displaced people attracted the attention of some Swiss and German academics, government experts, and the media, I had to change my initial plan and put my other academic projects aside for a while. Of course, such an unexpectedly intense academic communication outside of the Wiko opened many opportunities to “discover” German academic institutions, as my previous academic experience was mostly connected to Eastern European or English-speaking countries.

At the same time, the possibility to explore Berlin resulted in so many new findings for me. In fact, it is very difficult to be a sociologist whose field of interests lies at the intersection of urban sociology, memory studies, and identity studies and not be fascinated by Berlin’s immense transformations, rich cultural collections, diverse neighborhoods, cultural spaces, and memories. This sociological plunging into the city would not have been possible without scholarly, reflective talks with Daniel Schönplflug, Thorsten

Wilhelmy, Ursula Kohler, Katharina Bluhm, and Andrii Portnov and city walks with my old friend, Berlin-based historian Dietlind Hüchtker. This exploration also had different levels, from visiting some museum collections to discussions with a museum director organized by the Wiko, or from simply wandering through Berlin's quarters with a guidebook to organized study trips with German academics. My son's school provided yet another important channel of exploring today's German society and Berlin's diversity. Berlin is a city that is difficult to reduce to a simple formula. With its very diverse neighborhoods and multifaceted spaces, it eludes from any generalizations. Interestingly enough, with the Wiko administration's help, I managed to locate in Berlin some Ukrainians who had fled from the annexed Crimea and Donbas conflict zone.

All these activities have not eclipsed my main book project, but I had to reformulate and restructure my main argument several times. It would have been impossible if the Wiko library had not provided books for very intensive reading. Unfortunately, Ukrainian academic libraries give scholars very limited access to the newest foreign language publications. To be able to write or teach, Ukrainian scholars still must make "pilgrimages" to the good academic libraries abroad. I was not the exception. The pleasure of ordering a book or article literally from my desk in my office and receiving it within a few hours gave me the sense of being at the center of the academic universe. In fact, many other Wiko Fellows said that they had never experienced a library as efficient, supportive, and helpful.

This extraordinary year was not spent in an ivory tower, and my dream remained a dream. But I have returned home with the experience of participating in a unique scholarly project and with new arguments for my future book. In fact, I have analyzed most of my data and have begun to write. I imagine that all the materials I went through will keep me busy writing for the next several years upon my return home. The time I have spent at the Wissenschaftskolleg seemed a very short, but extremely valuable part of my academic life.