

ZATYSHOK/ GEZELLIGHEID. ON STRAW ART AS A TOOL FOR CONNECTING, HEALING AND STRUGGLING

TEXT Friso Wiersum PHOTOS Dzherelo

Looking back at the last years, the war in Ukraine has resulted in a sense of solidarity towards Ukraine but also among the EU as a community. With Ukraine now as a confirmed EU candidate country, a perspective and invitation of getting to know each other between Ukraine and EU countries emerges, a cultural dimension accompanying the wider process of reform and civil society strengthening.

The Culture of Solidarity Fund opened a dedicated call looking to promote the visibility and embeddedness of Ukrainian culture across Europe, in partnership with EUNIC (the network of EU National Institutes for Culture), with funding from the Government of Flanders and the European Cultural Foundation and additional contributions from the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Czech Centres.

One of the grantees in this edition was the project Zatyshok/Gezelligheid by the Ukrainian School “Dzherelo” in Amsterdam, Ukrainians in the Netherlands Foundation. Their Maryna Staryk, one of the administrators and curriculum designers in the school, told us about their project.

FRISO WIERSUM: When did Dzherelo start?

MARYNA STARYK: “It started in 2014 after the Revolution of Dignity. That was a big push for Ukraine to move away from Russian influence and start its movement back into Europe, towards the European Union.

The school was intended as a heritage school, meaning open for children who were not born in Ukraine, but to Ukrainian parents who want to keep their language and culture. It is an extracurricular school, open on Sundays. Our goal was to entice our parents and children to get interested in Ukraine and build motivation to learn the language through culture. So, no grammar-based curriculum, but play hands-on. For we humans like stories, we like touching things, for that’s how we open up to a culture.

Since February 24th, two years ago, our school has doubled in size, tripled actually. Now it’s steadily double to what we had prior to the full-scale invasion. So now the makeup of our students is half refugees, half expats and immigrants. That shifted our focus to different approaches because our refugee children, a lot of them come from heavily russified regions, but the language of instructions is in Ukrainian.”

FW What did your project entail?

MS “Over the course of the “Zatyshok/Gezelligheid” project, the Ukrainian Cultural Center and School “Dzherelo” conducted nine workshops, and an exhibit of Ukrainian straw art with deep roots in European straw art tradition by Mariia Ivanyshyn, an artisan from Ukraine, who was able to travel from Lviv for the opening. In addition, two talks by Olena Braichenko, a renowned Ukrainian studies scholar, have helped contextualize the renewed interest in Ukrainian culture and history among the Ukrainians and the international audience in the Netherlands. We were able to promote a talented, civically engaged Kyiv-based illustrator Mari Kinovych whose personal story and visuals were one of the main inspirations for our project.”

FW Did you already know this straw art from when you were a kid?

MS “I did not. It’s regional. It’s from the western parts of Ukraine where it borders with Poland, which has a similar thing, but they decorate the straw with paper. Lithuania has a really amazing pyramid looking shape that was actually listed through UNESCO. Their shape is different from the Ukrainian one. The Fins have it, the Swedes have it. Just to show that Ukraine has had connections to other European countries. We always emphasize that this straw art is not unique to Ukraine.

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But this straw art has become a hit in Ukraine over last winter. Every hipster in Ukraine has a pavuk in their house and every cool coffee shop, or concept store shows them. So yes, we hit on something that coincided with what is going on in Ukraine. It left its regional context and it became something like a tool for decolonization and healing and feeling that you belong to a bigger idea that is Ukraine.”

FW Seen in this light, your project was part of a greater struggle?

MS “It is important to do everything to compensate for the lack of knowledge about Ukraine in the rest of Europe. This lack is to a large extent the result of Russian cultural diplomacy policies based on spreading narratives, where Ukraine and other postcolonial/colonized nations and indigenous peoples, were denied subjectivity. This needs and can be rectified by producing a critical mass of cultural and cross-cultural projects with decolonial/postcolonial optics – letting Ukraine speak up and regain agency, so it can start participating fully and on equal terms in strengthening Europe and its democratic values.”

FW What do you consider to be the biggest role for European cultural solidarity to play?

MS “Unity is what gives Europe strength. The biggest urgency in Europe regarding cultural solidarity initiatives now should be realizing how fragile peace is, and that culture plays a crucial role in safeguarding it. In order

to achieve lasting peace in Europe, we need to further foster empathy and trust towards lesser-known, underrepresented and vulnerable European cultures. The first step – a better understanding of their cultures and history. Projects like “Zatyshok/Gezelligheid” hold space for the agency of these cultures, and they

should be supported systematically as an affirmative action, and in large numbers. The long-term goal of this support would be moving from increasing the visibility of Ukraine, to a deeper and a more nuanced understanding of its key role and place within the greater European family.”

MARYNA STARYK

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1-3 PHOTOS: courtesy of Dzherelo.

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