

Russia Versus Europe: The Collision of Civilisations in the Works of Contemporary Lithuanian Writer Kristina Sabaliauskaitė

Jūratė Landsbergytė-Becher
Lithuanian Culture Research Institute
(Lithuania)

Abstract:

Clashes of civilisations reveal the real face of modern Europe, its past phantoms, painful stigmas, so-called breaks in historical experience, crises, and their transformation into an anti-civilisational space. Unfortunately, all this is still happening. Nonetheless, the Lithuanian writer Kristina Sabaliauskaitė opens up this current all-destructive transformation of imperial passions, taking her reader to the geopolitical intersections of history, like Russia's parading into Europe and its attempt to westernise, describing the era of Peter I through the experiences of the existential survival of his wife, Empress Ekaterina II. Kristina Sabaliauskaitė's bestseller "Petro Imperatore" [Peter's Empress] I, II (2019, 2021) revealed a shocking image of the Russian Empire, which at first Western intellectuals refused to believe, but the history of mentalities here entered the time and punched over the cultural paradigm, i.e., carried out a conversion, purifying the image of the state of terror not only in literature but also in the near reality. These interactions between text and reality provided a significant result – Sabaliauskaitė's literary phenomenon, penetrating the existence of nations and personalities and heralding a new paradigm of reflections – the collapse of the meaningful spirit of the Russian state in the face of humanistic and Christian values. This global vault of recognised values, which supposedly does not exist in the "Russian world", has been called powerless many times because, in that world, the Tsar is equated to God. The book's text highlights a specific pre-mortem downward spiral "without salvation" through the touch of humility and courage, which cannot be killed by the Tsar's order or the universal humiliation of the orgy circle even when the spiritual power of the European kernel faces despair.¹ In her two-volume work, the writer delves into the heavy darkness of Russia (Rakutis, 2022) and shows its relationship with aspects of Christianity and the linguistic "sinking" in the

trampled ground, the inability to rise from the spiral of dark orgies and catastrophes. Here, the issue of imperial grandeur – the enjoyment of life – and its controversy among Europeans, who are thirsty for the experiences of this prospective grandeur, arise. As the writer points out, the passage of time in Russian cycles, with “we can repeat,” halts space-time and hurts the meanings of existence. It becomes an anti-illusion of history, a prophetic transformation of realism, magnetising both the process of writing and reading into a geopolitical collision – a junction of civilisations, encouraging a revision of its concepts.

Keywords: Russia, Europe, Power, Cruelty, Darkness

Clashes of civilisations constantly occur even where prosperity flourishes – in that same Europe, where Georgia is one of its civilisational cradles. Here, we repeatedly face the irrational empire from the East, obsessed with expropriating new territories – Russia.

It is necessary to bring forth the deconstructive role of the Russian state concerning the maturity of civilisation and reveal its essence in literature. It becomes the turn of a new cultural paradigm based on relevant insights into European historical experiences, the reconstruction of archival documentation by purifying the timeline, reproducing the modern sense of the proximity of Russian imperialist aggression, the retro perspective of civilisational destruction from layers of the several-centuries-old memory. Such a face of war – a face of a global war against humanity – turns out to be the face of Russia, invading the comfortable European life with its existential fullness with the ingrained *bloodland* pathos. One of the authors of the new historical paradigm is the Lithuanian writer Kristina Sabaliauskaitė (*1974). Her historical narrative is greatly strengthened by experienced Russian historians, political scientists, and writers who relocated to the West: Jurij Felshtinskij, Mikhail Stancev, Vladimir Popov (2022), as well as Americans, researchers of modern history: Tymothy Snyder (2012), Anne Applebaum (2017), German Second World War documentarian Horst Ger-

lach (2022), and Lithuanian military historian Valdas Rakutis (2022). The article looks at the civilisational dimension of Russia in literature and its encounter with Europe following the two-volume novel “Petro Imperatorė” [Peter’s Empress] (2019, 2021) Kristina Sabaliauskaitė, the Lithuanian writer, Doctor of Humanities.

In her latest books, the contemporary Lithuanian writer Kristina Sabaliauskaitė, who has achieved extraordinary success, seems to have awakened Europe from its daydream. She delves into the essential, virtuous, eternally disturbing gap in the intersection of civilisations between Russia and the West. In her own way, the writer proceeds with her mission, aiming to unite nations by resisting Russian pressure and stopping imperial aggression. She continues using her own force – literary works and their presentations and focuses on the ideas of the centuries-old interactions between Russia and Europe, leading to apocalyptic catastrophes and fractures in history, after which nations strive long and hard for the revival. Certain questions regularly come to the surface, like why such collisions happen and continuously repeat themselves, why the understanding of history gets entangled, why the desire for enlightenment is defeated, and why the Russian “dark State” leading nations to countless genocides (The Economist, 2022).

War crimes and Russia. Sabaliauskaitė, with her unique talent as an art historian and literary writer of great talent being politically engaged, stands out as a particular prophet, anticipating the forthcoming events of February 24, 2022. During the pandemic, she wrote and, in 2021, published the two-volume book, now a bestseller, which shook the consciousness of the nations and was translated into several European languages. The book is called “Peter’s Empress” [Petro Imperatorė I, II] (Sabaliauskaitė, 2019, 2021), which reveals **what seemed to be impossible**, what the world could hardly believe that the catastrophic ruinous depth of Russia as a state and nation is tightly connected with the instinct of destruction. All this coincides with a turning point in history – with the era of Tsar Peter I, the ruler who most decisively pushed Russia to the West by force. To be more precise, this whole dimension opens up from a feminist perspective in a very shocking way of a woman – as well through the eyes of the prisoner of the Livonian war – his lover, the mother of his children, and finally, his wife Marta Skowronska, later Empress Catherine I (further Yekaterina I). It is how Russia’s direct confrontation with Europe, then with Livonia, begins.

Marta Skowronska, although an unfortunate urban girl of European Lithuanian-Polish origin, made her way to the Tsar's family out of the "trampled mud" using her body when she was a prisoner of war being raped and handed over to an ever-higher military leader. Her story delivers a crushing impact on the text, with its feminist openness and the awareness of a *keen non-Russian observer* from aside who has become a direct participant in the action. The thrill of impressions is almost impossible to withstand. The horrors seem to beg to be unrecognised by the depth of consciousness. The brutality of Marta's marginal context is transferred to the literary text with corresponding semantics. It is like absorbing an impossibly strong vodka. However, the shocking background of the events is also extremely accurate, tangible, corporeal, and defamatory not only in the sense of the profound literary narrative – the dull "swampy" language style but also in the sense of the scandalous opening of the present. Thus, "Peter's Empress" already described the Russian army of 2022 with its insane cruelty, forming an adequate concept of Russia as a monster. "Russia, in this sense, has not changed since the time of the Mongol Horde. War crimes are everyday life for Russian soldiers," says military expert Darius Antanaitis (Antanaitis, 2022). Sabaliauskaitė's "Peter's Empress" opens the crucial question of the present-day – what is Russia? *Can Russia become an acceptable state?* This question is repeatedly asked nowadays. Against the background of the war in Ukraine, this issue sounds extremely urgent, ringing like a bell in an emergency. Political journalist Rimvydas Valatka (Valatka, 2022) raises a question. "Is it just Putin, or is all of Russia a monster, a cruel deranged zombie, destroying civilisation out of jealousy and madness that has taken over the void?" The concept of nation's guilt started to emerge, similar to that of the Germans, who experienced remorse after World War II. It is about the repetition of the Holocaust through the genocide of the Ukrainian people. Historian Yuri Felshtinsky, who emigrated from Russia to the USA, wrote a book (now published in Lithuania, which he presented in May 2022 in Vilnius) about the Red Terror from the October Revolution to the present day, when the power in Russia was seized by the agents of the Security Service system, famous for heinous crimes from Dzerzhinsky, Lenin, Stalin to Putin (Felshtinsky, Popov, 2022). Russia's *uniqueness* in the global context is the barbaric nihilistic destruction of itself, its neighbours, and, at the same time, the entire humanity. This problem started gapping like a thousand-year-old wound, already believed to have healed, which is yawning in the *blood-*

lands already in Sabaliauskaitė's depicted image of Russia starting from the era of Peter I. In fact, what Sabaliauskaitė described was something lurking in the deep traumatic memory of the Baltic, Polish, Finnish, and other nations that had experienced the march of Russian soldiers through their land. Russia never experienced Nuremberg for its heinous war crimes, which is a big mistake according to the present political science narrative. The terror inundating Europe at the end of World War II, passing through Poland, the Baltic countries, and Germany, the horrors in Finland *were silenced, marginalised, and even not clearly named...* For example, nobody knows the town of Demmin, in Pomerania (Germany), where women and children committed mass suicide, wading into the water with stones on their necks not to be captured by Russians (reminder Gerlach, 1993). It was forbidden to speak about this, not only in the DDR. It could not remain without consequences for a long time. History repeats itself. Russia comes back onto the path of occupation and genocide. Consequently, the mistakes continued, and it finally happened. The *blindness of the dream* of relations between the West, the democratic world, and Russia evolved into a *total crisis*, the rampage of the destruction instinct, where the crimes flourished, the nations did not get apologies, and the victims were not remembered... There was never any remorse or guilt. So far, Europe's experiences with Russia, through the war crimes and destruction of one state – Ukraine could escalate into a Third global war.

Returning to Sabaliauskaitė, it is important to emphasise her public spirit, in the sense of the present day, and her commitment, as a European liberal person, to see deeper into the current shocking topic of Russia, among other statements. Speaking at her book launch, which was translated into Dutch, in Amsterdam, she described Russia's distinctiveness: "It is a medieval empire of stasis, where time is counted in cycles, where history is believed to return ("We can repeat it!"), where horror, suffering, death, a history of hatred for others overflows". It is a sick nation", which is confirmed in Sergei Loznitsa's films: "Donbass" (2018), "A Gentle Creature" (2017), "State Funeral" (2019), and "Mr Landsbergis" "To Destroy the Empire of Evil" (2021). Looking for reasons, the writer notes a remarkable difference in the concept of time, which, for Russia, is a cycle, a repetition of history, but for the West, it is progress. Russia's inability to transform itself stems from here. Instead of the change, the hysterical rage of the patient sets in that void – *pobedobesije* [victory rampage] – the exhibition of victo-

ry and brutal destruction, torture of victims, the humiliation of universal humanity. It is so characteristic of the “Russian soul”, which even Maxim Gorky also wrote about in his essay on the particular brutality of Russians (Figes, 1996). Sabaliauskaitė emphasises the disability of the transformation of the millennial state, leading to these crises.

Disability to respond. Meanwhile, on the other hand, we observe Europe’s “disability” – conservatism of values, which **prevents taking appropriate actions in the face of the crisis** (Zelenskij, 2022). It is a caution to assess adequately, a fear not to offend, “to help to save face”. It is like hypnotising a patient or being in the aura of hypnosis of a stronger being. All adds up to a morbid collision of relationships, crumbling logistics, and a weakening position of values, a slow slide into a real war, which is so falsely sought to avoid by drowning in hypnosis, gently surrendering positions. Sabaliauskaitė’s “Peter’s Empress” extremely acutely but realistically adequately contextualises the dualism of the turning point in Russian history – the attempt to “Europeanise” through the eyes of a woman from European civilisation and through the opening of mounting up bodily experiences. Everything here is also concentrated in time, in the cold counting of time from life to death, which allows the action to be experienced almost directly within hours but expands over memory levels encompassing decades without leaving the illusion of the future – desires, hopes, faith. These are the final hours of the empress’ life, her last day. Therefore, the text, the content, the semantics, and the historical documentation merge here into the heavy unity of the clock strikes like punches into the head when no one can help “remain in the margins” or “dissolve in time”. There are no ornamented modernist “daydreams”, just time that melts away as the hours pass away, enriched with Russian dark, nihilistic finality like a sword coming down on the soft shoulders of European feminine existence.

The time left for the Empress is one day, during which all her life flashes before her eyes. It begins with a prayer: “*In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit...* The last strike. Nine o’clock. Darkness approaches” (Sabaliauskaitė, 2019, p. 5). The text begins with a monologue about the contact between life and death. It breathes with constant catastrophe and the frenzy of nothingness; there is not a single drop of trust for the environment, only the unmasked face of betrayal, only the desperate search for survival in the transformation of borderline situations into horror and an endless amount of dirt, in which life is lost. Such is the background

of the opening of the Empress' psychological, archaic world, which dictates the pulsation of survival states... The dirt of the swamps is absorbed from the context into the text and overwhelms the reader. Words are like clock-work, sharp and offensive, leading to the flinches of the controversial wounded, the piled-up bodies, and the battlefields of the survivors. It is a heartfelt fiesta of disability and contempt.

If we compare Sabaliauskaitė's texts, we see a noticeable change in the style of her new work. It is not baroquely ornamented language as in "Silva Rerum" about The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Sabaliauskaitė, 2008-2016) but instinctively heavy as if chopped by Russian curses, humiliatingly "mucked" with soldiers' boots, depressingly pressing down... Like a projection of the fate of the dying Empress with pauses of memory breathing from the European past to the triumph of snakelike darkness that has crept from the Russian world and the insidious uncertainty of the humiliation turns of history... Breathing with time and immersing in the increasingly complex and overly astonishing archaeology of the infinities of the "Russian world" – such dynamism of Sabaliauskaitė's text makes it menacingly sustainable, connecting epochs and evoking a terrifying existential meaning of actual truth. **And highly accurate in terms of time – the ringing of the bell predicts a new intersection of civilisations – Russia versus Europe.**

Several aspects that make her work parallel the current political paradigm

1. Incredibility of cruelty. The world could not believe that the instinct of Russian imperialism overrides economic rationality, questions of values, cultural heritage, an archetypal feeling of sacredness and humanity, and the rich maturity of history and civilisation. The historical context of "Peter's Empress" shows Russia's instinctive demonism and the fact that "all power from God belongs to the Tsar" replaces the ethical principles of honour and unleashes the horror and humanity of autocratic power and humiliation of others. An uncontrollable schizoid orgy of punishments begins, an incredible image of a horror empire – the State of Terror. Europe is **forced out** of its *daydream* state to **wake up** in a new reality. Such a field of experiences led to an increasingly dark, grotesque image of Russian "greatness" as instrumentalism of fear.

A factor of incredibility that dominates the context of the Empress and the present. It is clearly repeated in the field of Russian imperialist warfare. No one, or almost no one, expected the brutality of the Russian Federation's army, which seems impossible in the 21st century, but the military history experts of the Baltic countries, Poland and Finland "were not too surprised". They remember well Katyn, Rainiai, Klepočiai, Pravieniškės, Kurapaty, Červenė. Meanwhile, in the historical two-volume work by Sabaliauskaitė, this description of the breathtaking atrocities of the Russian army constantly "smears the text" and disturbs the rational balance of the perception of the world and civilisation. This constant inversion of reality and semantics undermines confidence in normality, world order, and progression. It is like going back to the beginning of Christianity. Even reading the images in what seems to be purely historical context, the reader quivers and becomes *humiliated* by the chilling proximity of such a sudden anti-European reality. Existence was trampled to nothingness by a wild force described by a woman:

"It seemed that there was a crowd of them there; it did not matter to them that I was still alive <...> I was lucky they had not drawn their swords yet – they pulled them out for fun at the very end, usually when the woman had already lost consciousness... But the worst thing was that they were laughing, laughing, spitting out the phlegm; it was funny to them; they were laughing and screaming out words that I did not understand at the time... I saw everything like from above, almost from the clouds – and myself, and the horde that had fallen on me, and their officer, who was approaching, shouting a few words in German, then in Russian: "Ei, psy, atstupite, eta chorošaja, etu – v nevoli, nievyjabite mne jejo v kašu", later, when I learned their language, I understood the words: "Hey, dogs, stand back, this one is beautiful, this one is a prisoner, don't make her into a pulp for me"... <...> but then I could not even scream, and the same later, hundreds of times in my dreams, when I want to scream, but the voice no longer existed in my throat... Then many times, I saw what happens when Russian soldiers rape a woman to a pulp; usually, only her twisted arms and legs remain on the ground, and only the bloody pulp lies where her stomach and womb were... <...> Later, I could recognise all of us (raped prisoners of war, J.L.) from our eyes <...> as

if a dark void had appeared in their bottom forever, a hole that gapes even when you laugh with happiness... Me? Have I survived? Now, it seems to me that Marta Helena Skowronska may have died just then... <...> I lost my crucifix from my neck there; it was left somewhere in a puddle of mud, semen, and blood, along with my childhood faith. I really couldn't speak; my voice was gone – like in a dream when you want to scream, but you can't..." (Sabaliauskaitė 2019, 28-29).

Present. No one could believe what happened in Bucha, Borodianka, Irpyn, and Mariupol in 2022... These images changed the European transatlantic paradigm of the Russian-Ukrainian war: the support to Ukraine with weapons began, and the military campaign to seek victory over Russia started. In this way, the timeless omnipotence of Russian imperialism believed for millennia must have been broken, together with the potential of propaganda narratives extracted by the instruments of fear and the most sophisticated hybridity. The interplay of incredibility and reality changed the current ideological equations: West / Russia. There was always a guilt and remorse from the West. The overturn of concepts proved powerless against the facts. Meanwhile, much to the dismay of Eastern Europe in earlier epochs, Western European thinkers admired Russia for various reasons of their own pragmatic ego, for unleashing their impulses and instincts and encroaching on rival territories of Eastern Europe.

2. The civilisational synopsis of European-Russian attraction as a carnival of death. French thinkers from the Enlightenment epoch were famous for their admiration for Catherine II and their love for Russia. Voltaire congratulated Russia for trying to withstand the divisions of the Rzeczpospolita (Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth), although, actually, the first European Constitution was declared in this state, the so-called *Republic of Two Nations*, on May 3, 1791, the second in the world after the Constitution of the United States of America (1787). But it did not matter to the educators! Voltaire specifically named Russia as the bearer of progress, as a power that civilises chaotic Eastern Europe. It is a terrible paradox and human short-sightedness: Russia was then a state of serfdom and the prison of nations known for the humiliation and enslavement of its own people, the *bloody land* of suppressed Decabrist Revolt, and other uprisings. However, Daniel Didro wrote: "I never felt so free as when I lived in Russia." (Kuolys, 2022). Such an intellectual constant of France (only Jean Jack Rousseau

opposed it, but he was not widely heard) could almost have held until today if not for the war in Ukraine. Ukraine can perhaps change this millennium paradigm of the world, Europe in the shadow of Russia. Now Ukraine is the bearer of hope and a miracle, the saviour of Eastern Europe...

In her work, “Silva Rerum”, Sabaliauskaitė critically, perhaps grotesquely illuminates this sunset of the romance between Voltaire and Russia – romance with Catherine II. The Sunset King was also Stanislav August Poniatowsky, another lover and admirer of Catherine II, and he brought the Crown of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to its collapse. The absurdity of Russian Imperialism, blood, and fear hypnotised and enslaved not only the rulers but European wisdom, too.

Russia’s *rapprochement* seemed even more sinister and grotesque in its integrals of showmanship and instinctual horror of treachery and brutality. Sabaliauskaitė describes one of the many schizoid feasts proving the omnipotence of Peter I – the All-Drunken Sinod:

“That’s right; there is nothing in the world more powerful than the Batushka Piotr Alekseevich – if Batushka wants, he takes it and turns our whole white world upside down, and everyone obeys him.” Toadhead Varka was right as always: never before had Peter proven his will to such an extent. It was no ordinary All-Drunken Synod. This time it was politics – complete subjugation, humiliation, and ridicule of everyone” (Sabaliauskaitė, 2021, p. 84).

3. The helplessness and inability to resist the power. Coexistence.

“For those men of power who tried to resist such masquerade blasphemy, they pulled their pants off and ordered them to sit on the ice of the Neva with their bare bottoms being poked by the swords of the soldiers. So, I couldn’t resist – all I was left was to endure Peter’s will and live on... <...> God often closes his eyes to even worse things than Peter’s mockery of old age and physical misshapes: in my mind, I just said to myself: forgive us, Lord, Peter doesn’t know what he is doing...” (Sabaliauskaitė, 2021, p. 82-83).

An important constant – the inability to resist permeates the entire context like a power paradigm of Russian rulers.

“But I didn’t want to judge myself, to resist anymore; I realised that I couldn’t change anything here... Maybe it meant that I got along with Russia the way you get along with benign and non-fatal disease or disability, let’s say, strabismus. Maybe I got used to squinting and not seeing what I was powerless to change. Perhaps strabismus of the soul is also possible. Or maybe it just meant that we were all Peter’s prisoners and the imprisoned could not change the order of the prison. Not one survived of the few who resisted Peter’s will refused to participate in the masquerade wedding, and were sat on ice – some froze right in place, others died after an illness” (Sabaliauskaitė, 2021, pp. 85-86).

Coexistence with Russia happened in denial of human dignity – it was the fate of Europeans in Russia. It is a condition that everyone who wants to survive must accept... Do not see, be silent, and *accept the living with the disease*. The All-Drunken Synod described by Sabaliauskaitė had a special significance as a fiesta of humiliation – “tearing off the masks”, universal humiliation, so it is impossible even to imagine what courage and self-respect those who resisted had to have... The *All-Drunken Synod* and *Wedding of the Handicapped* are indeed a text filled with an anti-ethical layer of detail, which makes even Sabaliauskaitė’s text sound heavy. The Russia of the era of Peter I is here with the chilling darkness of its anti-civilisational depth that one should even want to keep silent about such a truth... It is better to move on to other aspects of the context.

However, it is still worth returning to the wedding procession of the All-Drunken Synod, the image of which eloquently suppresses the universal humiliation of the Russian epoch:

“With the ringing of the bells, we moved along on the ice of the Neva, towards the wooden Trinity Church – and the first sledge moved with poor fatties ridden with gout in them, in the second sledge, the children were freezing, and stutterers were screaming till their voices were silenced by hoarseness, followed by the bride’s entourage, which was put together with the handicapped, incapable of moving the toothless decrepit oldies. Following them in a sleigh, the self-proclaimed Tsar of the Synod, Fyodor Romodanovsky, bulged on a toy throne, dressed as the biblical King David, with a jagged

crown, and, instead of a harp, he held a lyre covered with a bear fur in his hands which he dawdled to the left and right, making a strident sound. Romodanovsky's sleigh was pulled by four bears and pushed by one more from behind – the poor beasts were prodded with spears, so the three roared and growled as much as their sharp red jaws allowed. In another sleigh, there was the eighty-four-year-old groom and his thirty-four-year-old bride, Anka Pashkova, the widow of Captain Stremonchov, who found herself in this unenviable position most likely because her father was one of the fiercest and most disobedient orthodox men who endlessly pestered Peter, and she was widowed, and it happened because no one else voluntarily decided to marry her. She had to play the Kingdom of Spain, surrendering to the Pope, so the poor woman dressed in black limped half-lying in a sledge because she already had difficulties sitting straight up...<...> And what could Anka Pashkova do? What could any of us have done? Nothing. <...>

It was proof: the Tsar would tell everyone what a person's last will should be, the Tsar would impoverish other sons by depriving them of their inheritance, the Tsar would recruit them, only with permission could one marry and start a family, and the Tsar would silence all the nobles, forcing four hundred of the most important nobles to fool around like animals, the Tsar will ban all the old barbaric customs and introduce his own, new, even more, terrible ones. If necessary, the innocent old and sick people will be made fun of, and the holy rites of marriage will be mocked; if necessary, the church icons and the Lord Himself will close his eyes against all blasphemies – if only the Tsar orders. Because from now on, what is to be considered barbaric will depend only on him, the Tsar and the Father of all Russians, Pyotr Alekseyevich. From now on, he, like God, will decide what is sacred for a Russian and what is not. <...>

On the tenth day, Peter held a final assembly in the Senate, where each guest was required to drink from a large cup with a double-headed Russian eagle. There were those who managed to escape after deceiving the guard, and there were others who did not survive. It is only later that we learned that Henrich Keldermann, one of Peter's former tutors, a man highly educated in Paris, Oxford, and Padua, somehow had come home after drinking that cup and fell as-

leep, resting his head on the table, as he was used to. Only he did not wake up: in the morning, his wife and daughters found him in rigour. Peter, when he sobered up, paid for his funeral and ordered to hand a pension to his widow but didn't grieve too long: a good party always requires sacrifices. Besides, he knew one could always buy another trained *Keldermann* from abroad.

Peter had a long and difficult recovery after the carnival as if he was crawling out of a dark cave buried under the ground. Sometimes he was haunted that someone was trying to kill him, and more and more often, he imagined that it was his son, Aleksej” (Sabaliauskaitė, 2021, pp. 81, 82, 84, 85).

4. God's power and Tsar Almighty. Trespassing all red lines: all power is given by God! Here, Sabaliauskaitė also seems to be digging around in the black mud of a dark Russian cave with her text, splashing it over the 21st-century European human consciousness. The reversal of concepts is revealed as a straightforward narrative of the unconquered direction of the text lines. It climaxes with the bellowing and roaring of undefeated minotaurs proclaiming, “**All power comes from God!**” [Vsia vlast ot Boga!]. **These were the words revealing limitless power handed over to the Tsar.**

The writer constantly emphasises this monstrous aspect of omnipotence and connects it to the feminism theme – the trampling of a woman, converting the relationship between a man and a woman into an end to her life, a paranoid morbid union of coercion, love, and death eventually turning into another trespassing of the *limit of the red lines*: the scientific surrealism of *Kunstkammer* of Peter I.

The climax of cruelty.

The writer focuses on the particularly colourful feminist aspect of the gruesome images of the death procession, following one after the other in the nemesis of the red-haired beauty from the West, Maria Hamilton. As Ekaterina Marta's power grows and rises with the number of children she bears to Peter, death continues to spiral in her estate. Sabaliauskaitė writes:

“On August 31, I gave birth to a healthy, beautiful girl whom we named Natalya. And then something painfully pierced me, not just the horror that someone could raise a hand to kill a baby, but rather the worry that no woman is immune to a fickle fate. After all, Mary

just as innocently was once laying in her mother's arms, and if to believe Willem Mors, no Zodiacs could have predicted such a fate.

Fate was our mansion. And Peter, who exploited her with everyone's understanding, later forgot what he did. Unfortunately, she fell in love with the wrong man herself – a coward who didn't want to marry, and she couldn't find a suitable groom. The curse was that love was followed by pregnancies one after another. No one took care of her, didn't advise her, not even me... After all, during the trip, she saw how Peter treated me; she saw tears, lonely months of waiting, humiliation, and many bruises. Who could defend Mary, who? <...> In November, Peter's court sentenced Mary Hamilton to death. According to the ukaz, the child murderer should be punished as it should be, and until the sentence is carried out, she should be kept chained in the fortress.

He announced and forgot. Peter was very busy: it seems that he also interrogated the conspirators of Aleksej Petrovich (already convicted of treason, his murdered son – J.L.). Finally, just before Christmas, nine were beheaded and impaled on stakes in Holy Trinity Square” (Sabaliauskaitė, 2021, p. 234).

“It is as if a cry of godly repentance breaks out here, but... I was calm that whatever happened, I would definitely be able to pull Mary through.

Willem Mons (the later Ekaterina's lover, who was also decapitated and the head was preserved in the *Kunstkammer*) used to say that the only culprit was the wrong timing – Friday, March 13, a day when sometimes the will of the devil breaks through. After all, Tsarina Praskovya nor I managed to beg a pardon <...> That evening, Apraksin and I begged for Mary, and even Pyotr Tolstoy, who interrogated Mary, tried to soften Peter's heart...

Nothing had helped. Peter retorted that such was the will of God, *Vsiakaja vlast ot Boga*. <...> He, the Tsar, will not break his own ukaz, and even more the one of the Lord God. Let Mary be the example.

Until the last moment, when Mary Hamilton climbed the scaffold, wearing her best, almost new dress, which I had sent to her, of white silk, with black ribbons on the bodice and the sleeves, with a pale face, with carmine lips, and crimson hair, curled and coiled like coral or the veins of human blood; we believed, we all who gathered together believed that Peter, seeing her so beautiful, humble, so tortured, so repentant, would mercy her. After all, earlier, he craved her, once

visited her, kissed her, penetrated her, and felt that she was good, and then laying down next to her, he gently wrapped her hair in his big hand...

When he stepped on the scaffold, approached the quivering, beautiful like a picture Mary and kissed her passionately on the forehead and then on the lips, a sigh of admiration wafted through Holy Trinity Square <...> *vot vot*, the play was to have a happy ending for the lovers, but there was no hope left in the eyes of the these nine impaled heads in the square since last December, eyes had long since been eaten down to the eye sockets by gulls and crows. Then Peter, after waiting for a little, whispered something right into the executioner's ear, and you could see the salivating crowd just waiting for the lucky outcome.

Peter's grace was very simple that the executioner with his hands would not touch the body once fondled by the Tsar <...> Therefore, it was a single strike, accurate, not with an axe, but with a sword, as they do to the nobles: the head flew right under Peter's feet, red jets mixed with red hair and grey sludgy and trampled snow.

It was fortunate that I had gotten confirmation from Peter, no matter how changeable and shaky it may have been, that the *Kunstkamera* items would not be placed in our house. Mary's head in a jar, in alcohol, was kept out of my sight. <...> When we finally built the *Kunstkamera* palace, it was moved to a place of honour in the main hall. Later, one of the English ambassadors in Petersburg, apparently no less mad than Peter, after standing for hours by a jar of alcohol and Mary's head, used to say that he had never seen a more beautiful face. Freak...

If he had seen her alive... With red hair, with black eyebrows, and the corner of her lip rising slightly askew before the fireworks of laughter...

<...> I did not save Eva Golender, Vasily Olsufiev's young wife, either. <...> The shy ones were forced to drink during assemblies. <...> No one could leave sober. He organised one such masquerade in the Senate. Thirty women were frightened and did not come to avoid a severe hangover, and Eva, of course, who was already pregnant. Peter was furious and told them to meet next Sunday to drink the *penalty* [Big Eagle Cup], that awful glass of vodka. Eva Olsufieva, when

she found out, came running to beg me to defend her that she could not go indeed; her belly was already huge.

<...> Peter answered me <...> if I am a pain in the neck again, the vodka penalty will be waiting for me too. I did not manage not to change his mind <...> Eva got scared and didn't show up at the assembly on Sunday, even though she was told to come. Instead, she gave birth to a stillborn child, tormented by fear throughout the night. Master Peter had already sent guardsmen to arrest her for disobedience for whipping, but instead, he received an unusual package. Eva sent him her stillbirth baby in the spirit in a jar with the inscription: "Here is a gift for you for the new Kunstkamera that is being built." It must have been more than a gesture for Peter; he took it as a joke rather than a message of deadly bitterness from Eva. Maybe he didn't even think someone could do this to him with such contempt, hatred, and a silent curse. After all, all the power of the Tsar came from God. And that time also from vodka..." (Sabaliauskaitė, 2021, pp. 238-242).

5. Darkness: no escape. Russia has a historical inability to transform, conversion into a zombie, enjoying sadism, a sabbath of torture (what we hear from Bucha 2022 – even against babies!). Paradoxically, and again, it unexpectedly emerged in the current war of aggression against Ukraine: hybrid inverted concepts of all-annihilating terrorism, the designation of genocidal war as a "special operation", hatred of the Ukrainian people stretching into universally supported genocide became like a mental illness, hysteria of hatred for others when sick Russian women urge their husbands to torture Ukrainian children, carve five-pointed stars on of them, to rape them all... It is not what the only savage soldiers say, but their women in the remote Russian areas... Russia unfolds with its eeriness both in Sabaliauskaitė's "Peter's Empress" and in the present reality as an utterly unbelievable cloaca of horror and terror, erupting *unexpectedly* in the lands of the most hated nation. So, it is stated both in political science and modern philosophy and by historians (Snyder, 2012, Appelbaum, 2017) that this is the inter-section of civilisation and anti-civilisation. Sabaliauskaitė opens it as a procession of absurdity, digging out of the cave... but never coming into light. It is the writing about death and consciousness spilling out in all its depth, reaching a break in time with the slip of the Empress's final hours. There is no future

here – and so, the fatal merry-go-round of Russian-European relations spins – possibly temporarily, waiting for the stroke of the last hour.

Sabaliauskaitė's writing can be compared to writing in a constant relationship with death, when the creator is either extremely self-conscious or becomes a "different self – the doppelganger" or universalises herself in self-destruction. In this sense, Sabaliauskaitė also experiences the transformation of Yekaterina (Marta Skowronska) in her own way. She wades through a difficult textual procession of humiliation and power demons rummaging in the cave and plunges into the darkness of horror, guilt, and the merging of Europe's collusions with Russia (see term non-lightening in Algis Mickūnas, 2016), from which the necessity for transformation should emerge. However, it only erupts with European soberness, as if by accident, just provoked by children...

"No, it's not too late, it's only four o'clock. It's already dark, but it is probably because of the storm.

It's dark. Your Majesty is very dark.

I see her face, that face of our Princess Wilhelmina in Berlin, gently strained with the polite, truthful contempt that a girl can feel for an older woman. And the desire to humiliate because of the inexorably passing beauty. You are old, I am young! And to take revenge. For Peter's behaviour. I can't do anything to him, I'll do it to you! <...> Peter, visiting us at the Berlin mansion on the way back to Russia, paid attention to her: he recognised her, lifted her with his hands, and kissed her cheeks. My Lord, how wildly she shrieked, this little Wilhelmina, how she slapped Peter's face with her hands and kicked his stomach with her feet, trying to break free and screaming that she couldn't bear any tenderness from strangers, that he was disgusting to her, he stunk, and that his kisses offended her – let her go immediately! As Peter laughingly set that little Hockenzollern back on the ground, and the King of Prussia and his Queen, pulling polite faces, tried to pretend that nothing had happened here, the dishevelled little princess, as she passed by, staring at me, said, "Your majesty is very dark. Very dark. Dunkle." She put everything in that one word, in that darkness – dark, tanned, unclear, unwashed, impolite, uneducated, and the commoner.

She was so small but humiliated us so politely. You couldn't find anything to pick on. <...>

It was really Peter's fault – why did he have to grab her? And I got that child's revenge for this. But Peter didn't care at all – he liked to grab and tease other people's children if he wanted to. He even grabbed the seven-year-old King Louis XV in Paris. <...> Apparently, it seemed to him that a child is not quite a person, a toy just to be enjoyed. Even if he is a foreigner and even if he is the anointed rightful ruler of another country. Honestly, I think Peter didn't think anything bad; he was just simple and sincere, as is customary in Russia. After all, Wilhelmina of Prussia slapped and kicked Peter, unlike the French king, who was trained to act politely. Brave little princess when you think about it. Girls' femininity at dawn is sometimes braver than of the old women at sunset" (Sabaliauskaitė, 2021, pp. 193-195).

6. Horrifying details of red lines. The last point in the Christianity aspect. In the environment of universal submissiveness to the Tsar, in parallel, the increasingly bold revelation of the woman's self and deep self-defence thrived too. The dominance of the instincts of attraction and the soft bodily powers taking over the narrative are noteworthy. Physicality, striking in both youth and old age, and the "dirt" of the text – the semantic "abscesses" of the Russian world plunge the readers of Sabaliauskaitė's book into an unbearable procession of darkness... As if it was led by Death herself, coloured by the splendour and the grotesque price of the power of proud rulers...A procession was full of human flaws, but it was much more deterring with its universal humiliation for old age, infirmity, disdain for otherness... It is a procession fundamentally different from the procession of "Silva Rerum"; it is a movement where there is no breathing *thought – freedom of will*... The horrifying episodes of torture-like scenes from early Christianity chain it together. One of the turning points here is the murder of the Tsarevich Alexei, the son of Peter I, by torturing him with the hands of the Tsar himself... This episode does not even "have a text" anymore; it refuses to be named, though; it is described in spare detail, but only in small fragments, exposing a silent breathtaking horror...

"He was lying covered up to his neck in a black velvet shroud as required by Orthodox custom, with one hand exposed for kissing. Anna Kramer, having crossed, silently approached and corrected the shroud;

she pulled it even higher, up to the chin. It occurred to me that she hid black lament and stitches on his neck. But it shouldn't be like that...

One or some other of the gathered timidly went to the coffin to kiss the dead man's hand, but when they got there, they froze.

Anna Kramer approached that hand now and then: she kneeled for a few moments, like patting it or like kneading it, and then returned. Then she whispered something to Johanna, something like, "Oh, dear, the wax has cooled down; the nails don't hold".

But I must have misheard it. It must have been a mind play: the stitches on the neck and those half-ripped, waxed fingernails. There was no way that Peter would have allowed his son to be tortured by pulling the fingernails off...

"Oh Absolom, oh Absolom, oh my son..." Teofan Prokopovich dedicated the funeral sermon to the traitor, the biblical son of David. Absentees later speculated whether Peter had shed a tear or not after all. He shed a tear, he did. Not only did he wipe them, but he cried too. I saw tears running while holding the candle, even though he was not in a mourning suit. I think he felt sorry for himself. <...> But maybe it is, in fact, the law of time? Just like Peter fought the old order, so his son did with his father's new one, which, in turn, may seem old to him. Maybe time in Russia did not flow like a river but was simply condemned to go in a circle?" (Sabaliauskaitė, 2021, pp. 222, 223).

The all-seeing face of God remains in that circle... Demanding repentance. No response.

"Lord have mercy..." Here sounds the majestic, captivating voice of Teofan Prokopovich; you wouldn't confuse it with anyone. When you open your eyes – yes, it's him, and candles are lit, and myth is burned, and, besides him, six more popes have gathered. So, the last anointing is being prepared. He is now the most influential clergyman here. It started to rise then, after the trial of Aleksey Petrovich... Theophan gave Peter an answer that three metropolitans, five bishops, four archimandrites, and a dozen important popes who had learned the Holy Scriptures could not give him.

Teofan Prokopovich uttered simply what the ruler wanted to hear: "*Vsiakaja vlast – ot Boga.*" All power comes from God. Peter liked those words so much that he started the entire Church reform based on them,

like on dogma in Russia. *Vsiakaja vlast – ot Boga*, and most of all, first of all, the power of the Tsar. Even the popes had to obey the Tsar.

Teofan Prokopovich became the bishop of Pskov for these words alone. I made him archbishop of Novgorod and head of the Synod. I needed him by my side. Alexander (Menshikov, the first mighty lover of Katherina, the first mighty lover of Katherina, who created the Empress with his cunning wisdom, J.L.) also agreed. What could be better than the head of the Church saying that everything you will do is God's will? *Vsiakaja vlast – ot Boga*, all power comes only from God. And the Tsar is from God, his vicegerent. <...>

And now the last sacrament, one more time. One happened when I was sick, a week and a few days ago. Lord, have mercy, so I'm dying indeed... Burning, burning, and I feel nauseous.

Teofan Prokopovich holds Peter's favourite and cherished icon, Spas Nerukotvornyj, the face of Jesus on the canvas of Saint Veronica. That face is tortured and angry, without a trace of compassion in its eyes. They stare angrily, with indifference; the drops of blood from the thorns on his forehead are brighter than the rubies on the lapel. Don't look at me, Lord... There were years – you protected and cared about me; there was a time when you ruined me, condemned and punished me... All this time, I tried not to lose hope. I believed, and I tried to act righteously. Haven't you forgotten?"

There was a time when I loved You being little; I trusted You. There was a time I was afraid. However, I always felt I was under Your will, watched by Your eyes. Why are they so cold now, emotionless, in the icon? Without love... After all, I have always been devoted to you..." (Sabaliauskaitė, 2021, pp. 228, 229).

Time turns around, and the procession leads to the icon... But repentance does not bring the consolation of forgiveness. Where omnipotence prevails, God is associated with the darkness of guilt, too. And no help.

Sabaliauskaitė's "Peter's Empress" images macabrely coincide with the photos of war crimes in Bucha, Borodianka (bodies without fingernails), 2022, with the chilling gazes of the current political leaders... The turning of time rings the bell again: the paradigm of Russian victories and omnipotence is impossible to accept! The intersection of civilisations has to change it at this time – to turn it towards humanity. Starting with repentance...

7. Looking for alternatives in the Christianity aspect. Sabaliauskaitė's texts also cause the syndrome to seek *resistance to the procession of darkness*. Here comes a desire to reject, turn away, close your eyes, and state the impossibility. We can point out the difference in the rhetoric of the Christian tectonic layers of the particular time. The baroque texts of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth epoch also record marginal situations for humanity. However, they receive a fundamental turning point – a rupture, a conversion, when a new choice is made, for example, a *conversio* of a denomination or simply a direction of life occurs (Dilytė-Čiurinskienė, 2022). Then, life simply changes in a fairer direction. Alternatively, a *transit* – death happens, which is symbolised by the fulfilment of justice – salvation on a higher level, even with the help of an animal. For example, the cruel killing of Saint Josaphat (bishop and martyr Josaphat Kuntsevych) by the rampaging mob is described in this way. Many works of poetry are dedicated to this event; some of them distance themselves from brutality and purify the symbolic meaning: the ship of Joseph sailing into the sky, the helmsman, the oar, and the river:

“The Holy one, why do you still linger in the swelling waves? Swim to the high vaults as soon as possible...”

And here comes an unexpected saviour, not from the human world:

“Unexpectedly, a dog, the guardian of the Holy Shepherd, comes running, and his growl wakes up the lying bishop... Is the Hero still alive?” Is he lost? A brave victim falls, and his own blood increases the blood of the Martyr.

A terrible crime, and the savage mob!” (Sarbievijus, cited by Dilytė-Čiurinskienė, 2022).

A *conversio* takes place – a person and an animal exchange their places. The brutality of the incident is called a crime. This way, the marginality of the situation is recorded in the Latin poetry rhetoric of Motiejus Kazimieras Sarbievijus (1595-1640). Remarkably, Pope Urban VIII commissioned him to compose the other story about the son who was thrown into the Tiber River by his father and also rescued by a dog. “The dog turns into a father, and the father turns into a dog.” (Sarbievijus, cited by Dilytė-Čiurinskienė, 2022).

The phenomenon of a fragile symbol – a saviour, a miracle, a journey of light to heaven is observed here, which is not present in the Russian context of Peter I by Sabaliauskaitė, where everybody stayed in the dark side of the world. It is also the view of Eastern Europe towards Russia – without illusions, with a warning and a cry for help. And with the expectation of a miracle, this time from Ukraine.

Conclusions

In her literary work, the Lithuanian writer Kristina Sabaliauskaitė, delving into the dark essences of the Russian-European civilisational crossroads, opens up a picture full of the terrifying horrors of this collision, not analysing but often wishing for dreams. It is not only the great bloodland of wartime but also of the country's own destruction. It is a paranoid state of being in power, defined by equating the Tsar with God, an absolute fusion of power and disability. This coercive integral (or intonational kernel) is developed in the monologue of the lifelong dimension of the Empress' experiences of being a partner of the Tsar. A chilling line of reality becomes parallel to the *surreality* of life. Sabaliauskaitė unfolds the deadly procession of borderline situations, led by Peter, the Tsar's court, or Death itself, and which rises by crossing each time higher red lines with horror, blood, suffering, betrayals, and revenge, always led into a new eclipse. In the end, this procession leads the participants to death as punishment. No one can resist him, no one ... only a child who does not yet understand sequences of this horror. In that sense, Sabaliauskaitė *leaves no hope here*.

The present and the position of the writer are equally important. Western civilisation is deluded by the hypnosis of Russian mysticism culture. Russia once again shows its face as a terror state. A paradigm must be changed and understood, and conversion should be reached. Such a choice of a correct direction at a crossroads, standing on the limit, is a natural way out for a thinker and poet. The collision of civilisations opened in Europe, in Ukraine. This rupture point – the turning point felt by the writer is the new level of the intersection of civilisations that have come from the times of the Russian Empire to the present time.

References:

- Andrijauskas, A. (2006). *Alternation of Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art*. Vilnius: Lietuvos kultūros tyrimų institutas.
- Antanaitis, D. (2022, May 4). Be kaukių. Kaip suprasti karą. Pokalbis su atsargos majoru Dariumi Antanaičiu. [Without masks. How to understand war. Interview with Reserve Major Darius Antanaitis]. [Video]. LRT.
<https://www.lrt.lt/mediateka/irasas/2000212499/be-kaukiu-kaip-suprasti-kara-pokalbis-su-atsargos-majoru-dariumi-antanaiciu>.
- Applebaum, A. (2017). *Red Famine. Stalin's War on Ukraine*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.
- Dilytė-Čiurinskienė, O. (2022, July 7–10). “Ribinių situacijų retorika LDK poezijos tekstuose”. [Rhetoric of boundary situations in the texts of the GDL poetry], [Conference presentation]. Academic Study Week “Baltos lankos”, Druskininkai. <http://www.semiotika.lt/akademine-studiju-savaite-baltos-lankos/>.
- Felshinsky, J, Popov, V. (2022). *Nuo raudonojo teroro iki mafijinės valstybės: Rusijos specialiųjų tarnybų kova dėl pasaulinio viešpatavimo 1917-2036*. Vilnius: Briedis.
- Figes, O. (1996, June). Maxim Gorky and the Russian Revolution. *History Today*. 46 (6): 16. ISSN 0018-2753. EBSCO host 9606240213.
- Gerlach, H. (1993). *Nightmare in Red*. New York: Pine Hill Press, Kindle ed.
- Kuolys, D. (2022, June 24–27). “Vakarai ir Maskva” [The West and Moscow]. [Conference presentation]. Konferencija Santara – Šviesa, Alanta.
<https://www.santarasviesa.lt/2022-m-santaros-sviesos-suvaziavimas-antra-diena>.
- Mickūnas, A. (2016). *Lithuania and Globalisation*. Vilnius: Mykolo Riomerio universitetas.
- Rakutis, V. (2022). *Prieš panyrant į sutemas. Lietuva XVIII amžiuje: kai ir Lenkija, ir Varšuva buvo mūsų*. [Before drowning into the dusk. Lithuania in the 18th century: when both Poland and Warsaw were ours]. Vilnius: Alma litera.
- Sabaliauskaitė, K. (2022, March 29). Kristinos Sabaliauskaitės balsas Europoje. Michael Krielaars interviu su Kristina Sabaliauskaite leidiniui NRC. [The voice of Kristina Sabaliauskaitė in Europe. Michael Krielaars interview with Kristina Sabaliauskaitė for NRC publication]. LRT Kultūra: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/kultura/12/1657398/kristinos-sabaliauskaites-balsas-europoje-mano-ginklas-mano-zodziai>.
- Sabaliauskaitė, K. (2019). *Petro Imperatorė I*. [Peter's Empress]. Vilnius: Baltos lankos.
- Sabaliauskaitė, K. (2021). *Petro Imperatorė II*. [Peter's Empress]. Vilnius: Baltos lankos.
- Sabaliauskaitė, K. (2008–2016). *Silva Rerum I, II, III, IV*. Vilnius: Baltos lankos.
- Snyder, T. (2012). *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*. London: Basic Books.

The Economist: Briefing. (2022. July 28). *A dark State: Vladimir Putin is in thrall to a distinctive brand of Russian fascism*. (Editors note).

<https://www.economist.com/briefing/2022/07/28/vladimir-putin-is-in-thrall-to-a-distinctive-brand-of-russian-fascism>.

Valatka, R. (2022. April 20). Nuomonės. Kaip mus mausto rusų advokatai? [Opinions. How do Russian lawyers mislead us?] [Podcast]. LRT.

<https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/nuomones/3/1676272/rimvydas-valatka-kaip-mus-mausto-rusu-advokatai>.

Zelenskyj, V. (2022) *Ukraine proposes to adopt a resolution condemning energy terror*. UN Security Council Meeting, Nov. 23, 2022.

<https://www.ukrainianworldcongress.org/speech-by-president-zelensky-at-the-un-security-council-meeting-nov-23>.