

# THE UKRAINIAN VERTEP – NATIVITY PERFORMANCE

*On the Question of Incorporating the Christmas / Koliada Celebrations into the National Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Ukraine*

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## Introduction

Nativity performances are a common activity of the Christmas and New Year's holidays in the calendar cycle, part of a large complex of traditions associated with a variety of Christian denominations and cultures. Winter traditions are regionally diverse, connected directly with the history of the cultural group and local preferences. Even in the 21st century we can observe the religious syncretism of winter feast days, based most heavily on the Christian Christmas (*rizdvo*, різдво) and pre-Christian *koliada* (коляда) – the celebration of the solstice when the day starts to become longer and the night becomes shorter. Such longevity in the tradition bears witness to its vitality and relevance even in the current era of digital technology.

*Vertep* is usually composed of two parts: the religious scene of the birth of the Son of God; and scenes from the more contemporary life of communities satirizing unjust government, human vices and other topics. Nativity performance traditions are longstanding in Belarusian, Polish, Croatian, Serbian, Russian and other Slavic Christmas celebrations. The Ukrainian versions of this customary complex are distinctive. As in other countries, the Ukrainian *vertep* has specific regional features based on pre-Christian and Christian beliefs, lore and rituals of the core inhabitants.

*Vertep* variants can be classified according to local terminology and the form of representation in the theatrical drama. Three forms of *vertep* are found in Ukraine. The oldest known form is the puppet theatre

which is normally performed by one puppeteer (*vertepnyk*, вертепник) who manipulates the figurines within a specially built two or three-storey portable structure called a *skryn'ka* (скринька) or *shopka* (шопка). The puppeteer may be accompanied by several actors and singers who embellish the performance with their carols, singing and acting.

The *vertep* tradition also developed into a performance of live actors rather than puppets. In some places, we find remnants of the puppet theatre in the form of small *shopky* depicting the cave or manger in which Christ was born, with immobile figures fastened inside them. These *shopky* are mounted on sticks which serve as handles and are carried from house to house by participants representing angels.

A third form of the *vertep* consists more simply of a choral group which sings carols as it visits local houses, sometimes with musical accompaniment. Singers carry with them a Bethlehem star (*zirka*, зірка) as a reminder of the apocryphal story of the three wise men from the East who came to bow before the newborn Messiah.

Hybrids of these three basic *vertep* types are not uncommon. For example, in some areas one typically sees costumed groups of carolers, each playing a particular role consistent with the nativity scenario as they visit the houses, and who may also carry a *shopka* and star with them (Hromova 2008).

The midwinter cycle is conceived as consisting of three main groups of holy days. The First holy days (The Nativity of Christ [25 December, 7 January according to the Julian calendar], the Feast of the Mother of God [26 December, 8 January], Great Martyr Stepan [27 December, 9 January]) are followed soon by the Second series of holy days which features the New Year. The New Year is greeted with the dressing of a boy as a girl “Malanka” (Маланка). 31 December (13 January) is the Feast Day of Melania the Younger of Rome. At the same time, a girl dresses up as “Vasyl” (Basil, Василь), as 1 January (14 January) is the Church’s Day honoring Saint Basil the Great. The cross dressing of these two personages is generally explained as the ritual act of combining male and female principles, which was characteristic of polytheistic religions. It is understood that the Christian saints’ names are replacements for earlier personages in the pre-Christian context (Hrushevs’kyi 1923 [1993]: 167-227). In some localities, this holiday is called “crossing over” (*pereberia*, переберя), “visitations with the goat” (*vodinnia kozu*, водіння кози), or “Malanka-ing” (*malankuvannia*, маланкування), referring to the costumed activities of the role players.

The house visitations and performances involve games, the sowing of cereal grains in the houses (*posivannia*, посівання) and well-wishing for a good and prosperous year (Fedas 2001: 14-17). The Third cycle of holy days includes the Feast of Theophany of the Lord (Богоявлення Господнє, Водохреща, Йордан) and the Feast of Saint John the Baptist. This is the concluding series for the midwinter holidays. On the eve of Theophany, often called “Second Christmas Eve” (*Druhyi Sviat-vechir*, Другий Свят-вечір) and in some places “Generous evening” (*Shchedryi vechir*, Щедрий вечір), the entire family sits again as at Christmas Eve supper, eating dishes analogous to that major ritual evening meal in the first cycle of holy days.

In some villages, particular forms of the *vertep* may be performed not only on Christmas itself but during the entire cycle of midwinter feasts. This trend has become more widespread since the establishment of Ukrainian independence in 1991 and in connection with large organized theatrical concerts.



Figure 1. *Vertep* with «Bethlehem stars.» Educational theatrical laboratory «Snipohraf» of the Lviv Author's Drama Theatre «ScenA8.» Photo by O. Vodolaskiy, 13 January 2020, Lviv, Ukraine.

### Current State of Research

Following the recommendations of the Expert Commission on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (Експертна рада з питань нематеріальної культурної спадщини), the Ministry of Culture

and Informational Politics of Ukraine (Міністерство культури та інформаційної політики) has now confirmed several elements of the Christmas / New Year's cycle of holidays in particular areas of the country. As of March 2023, among the 63 elements in the National Register of ICH of Ukraine, we see: The singing tradition of the village of Luka, Kyiv-Sviatoshyno district, Kyiv oblast, which includes Christmas and New Year's carols (*koliady*, *коляди*, and *shchedrivky*, *щедрівки*) in the repertoire of the group "Chervona kalyna" (Червона калина), Inventory number (охоронний номер) 006.nks<sup>1</sup> (Ukrainian Center for Cultural Research 2018); the Hutsul carols and ritual dances (*plies*, *плес*) of the Verkhovyna district, Ivano-Frankivsk oblast, Inventory number 018.nks (Interfax 2020); building of the large spherical Christmas star from the village of Matskovychi, Inventory number 028.nks (Lvivs'ka oblasna viis'kova administratsiia 2022);<sup>2</sup> the ritual of men's caroling in the Bukovynian New Year's Malanka tradition, Inventory number 031.nks (Ukrainian Center for Cultural Research 2022d); the Christmas tradition of *Moshu* (Мошу, men's caroling) in the village of Orlivka, Izmail district, Odesa oblast, Inventory number 033.nks (Ukrainian Center for Cultural Research 2022f); the international Christmas festival "Koliada na Maizliakh" (Коляда на Майзлях, Festival of Christmas in the Church of Christ the King, Maisli neighbourhood, Ivano-Frankivsk city), Inventory number 043.nks (Ukrainian Center for Cultural Research 2022b); the ritual of house visitations for sowing grains, with a horse, in the village of Vistria, Chortkiv district, Ternopil oblast, Inventory number 051.nks (Ukrainian Center for Cultural Research 2022e).

These seven inventoried customs and performances are varied and original but do not encompass the diversity of midwinter celebrations in Ukraine. Many additional outstanding customs, rituals and theatrical forms from this part of the calendar cycle are not yet identified in the National Register. For example, the elaborate rituals for Christmas Eve are not represented at all by the Expert Commission for Intangible Cultural

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1. The suffix .nks is transliterated from the Ukrainian .нкс, which is an acronym for "нематеріальна культурна спадщина," the Ukrainian term for Intangible Cultural Heritage.
  2. The village of Matskovychi (Maćkowice) is situated in Przemyśl County in Poland. Most of its large Ukrainian population was resettled away during WW2 and operation Visla in 1947. Knowledge of making these spectacular Christmas stars was reinvigorated by former Matskovychi residents now living in several villages in Ukraine as well as in the town of Dubliany near Lviv.

Heritage. Significantly, the ritual complexes vary in every region, even in very small areas. A similar richness and geographic diversity are apparent in the customs for New Year's, for the eve of Theophany and for Theophany itself. As is evident, the National Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Ukraine reflects only fragments of the local traditions of the midwinter cycle in terms of geographic and chronological range.

I have undertaken preliminary research into the traditional celebrations of the midwinter cycle in specific settlements of the Central Boiko region, Opillia and in Lviv. In addition to my own collected findings, I analyzed the characteristics of the Ukrainian *vertep* as reflected in the abundant historical materials documented by other authors.

I used comparative historical and analytical methods as a base for studying the Ukrainian *vertep* and paid specific attention to aesthetic analysis. I studied general connections among the descriptions of the *vertep*, their historical elements, systematic qualities and the values they expressed. Taken together, the results constitute a strong argument for a proposal to include the *vertep* into the National Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Ukraine.

The history of *vertep* research in Ukrainian territories can be divided into several periods, defined by the active interest and capacity to study the phenomenon, with breaks created by political shifts of varying significance.

*Vertep* was studied quite actively in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a period which is characterized by a strong interest in ethnic traditions as a function of Romanticism which was manifested in many spheres of cultural life widely across Europe. This period was disrupted at the beginning of the First World War though by then it had produced numerous valuable analytical publications based on substantial collections of field research, questionnaires communicated by mail respondents, older memoirs and texts of itinerant *vertep* puppeteers. Particularly important publications were contributed by Ivan Franko (1885: 268-270, 279-283; 1906 [1982]: 170-365), Oleksii Veselovs'kyi (1870), Hryhoryi Halahan and Pavlo Zhytets'kyi (1882; Zhytets'kyi 1892), Oleksii Selivanov (1884), Petr Morozov (1889), Mykhailo Vozniak (1912), Oleksandr Kysil' (1916) and others.

The next period, between the two great wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is characterized by the publication of several monographs with deeper analysis of this cultural phenomenon (Markovs'kyi 1929; Riezanov 1927).

In the period from 1940 to the 1980s, when Ukraine's occupation by Muscovy was more aggressive and more complete, *vertep* existed semi-legally. Articles, television programs, films, and other public representations of it appeared only after stern Soviet censorship. It was generally presented with the negative connotation as a relic of uneducated villagers. Nonetheless, despite Soviet ideology, various analytical articles appeared in Ukraine (Danchenko 1973; Fedas 1987), as well as brief information from Ukrainian diaspora writers (Rudnyc'kyj 1962-1972: 363-364; Voropai 1958; Kylymnyk 1964).

The start of the contemporary period of study of the ethnic *vertep* tradition can be identified as the beginning of the 1990s, associated with the dismemberment of the Soviet Union, the achievement of Ukrainian independence, the mass movement of national associations and parties and somewhat earlier, the resurgence of the Ukrainian churches – the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church – from the shadow of the Kremlin's prohibitions. Feeling the need of the Ukrainian people for the revitalization of the banned Christian customs and ritual actions, these religious denominations, along with numerous cultural organizations and academic institutions, took up this momentum and actively supported the development, re-engagement, study and popularization of these traditions.

I further subdivide this new period of the evolution of the Ukrainian *vertep* and its research into two phases. The first of these was related to the national uplifting, as throughout the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the focus of revitalization and research was primarily on the ancient features of the tradition based on documented forms (Kharchyshyn 1997).

From the middle of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we find increasing significance of *vertep* performances which interpret the existing scenarios and are reflexively adapted to the new environment, responding to the heated contemporary political and socio-economic situation. Key events in this shift of emphasis for the *vertep* were the Orange Revolution of 2004-2005, the Revolution of Dignity 2013-2014 and most importantly, the Muscovite-Ukrainian war which was started by the invaders in 2014 and continues until today. The shifts in the tradition to contemporary issues are reflected not only in the theatrical components of the *vertep* (characters, costumes, props), but especially in their commentary. In this regard, we see a continuation of an important characteristic of this traditional activity,

long related to moral education and social analysis.

The Ukrainian *vertep* tradition currently functions in the second phase of its fourth historical period. Currently, it is an important indicator of social attitudes and a resonator of collective thought about ethnic, national and international political problems.

Afanasii Shafonskyi made the first general definition of *vertep* in 1851 (Shafons'kyi 1851: 28-29). From that time on, the core of this definition can be found regularly in explanatory dictionaries, reference books, encyclopedias and collective works (Hrinchenko 1907-1909 [1958]: 138; Rudnyc'kyj 1962-1972: 363-364; Busel 2005: 122; Iarmolenko 2010-2020: 3:280; Zhaivoronok 2006: 77; Pylypchuk 2010: 363-375.).

In recent years, we have witnessed a new increase in academic research interests in the ancient forms of the Ukrainian *vertep*, a retrospective analysis using new approaches, especially culturological ones (Izvarina 211; Kornii 2021; Luhova 2016a; Luhova 2018; Pylypchuk 2016; Stefura 2011). For example, museologists have now digitized the materials related to the Sokyrins'kyi *vertep* (Halahan *vertep*) from 1770, which consist of copies of the notes and the puppet stage (Ukrains'ka literaturna hazeta 2021; Morozova 2022). A number of researchers have produced academic and semi-popular publications, particularly Oleksandr Kurochkin (1998; 2014a; 2014b; 2014c), Oleksandr Kozholianko (2018), Tetiana Zinov'ieva (2003a; 2003b; 2003c; 2005), Liudmila Herus (2017) and Oleksandr Kolomyichuk (2021). These texts turn their attention to the evolutionary processes of particular midwinter rituals and performances and their value as memorials.

Tetiana Zinov'ieva's dissertation research focuses on important problems of the *vertep* (Zinov'ieva 2006a). It is part of a particular group of publications which deal with modifications of the texts, the characters, the plot lines and the costumes, as they reflect key socio-political issues, particularly related to the revolutionary and military events in the international context (Holovko, Nikol'chenko, and Nikol'chenko 2018; Hromova 2016; Kurylenko 2015; Luhova 2016b; Kharchyshyn 2005a; Iaremko 2022).

It is understood that the publications mentioned above do not comprise a complete historiography of *vertep* research, but simply represent some of the highlights which suggest the relevance of research on this subject, the viability of the tradition, its responses to the current processes of globalization. These materials underline the significance of preserving all forms and local variants of the midwinter celebrations.



### Key Issues Related to Inscription into the Inventory for ICH

When considering the inscription of these phenomena, the first issue is selection: Which midwinter rituals, and from which localities, should be proposed first for consideration for the country's representative inventory of intangible cultural heritage?

Certainly, the residents of many Ukrainian localities would want to have their particular tradition added to the National Register. Such a desire is to be expected, since once a cultural element has secured its Inventory number, it should hypothetically become more popular and lead to a significant development of tourist infrastructure in the relevant region. Balancing such optimistic expectations, one can imagine reservations about such a development. The diversity of variations in narrowly specific locations results in a great number of forms of the midwinter celebrations. Documenting the majority of traditional variations and tying each to a concrete settlement would convert the National Register into a statistical manual of Ukrainian culture and undermine its function as a document featuring the outstanding and exceptional cultural phenomena.

A second issue, territorial representation, is related to the first. An illustration of a tradition other than *vertep* sheds light on challenges related to this issue. The element "Wild beekeeping" (bortnytstvo, бортництво) has been entered into the National Register for Intangible Cultural Heritage of Ukraine. The official description of wild beekeeping in connection with its Inventory number 011.nks associates the tradition with the Zhytomyr and Rivne oblasts. However, we also find "Wild beekeeping of the Kyiv Oblast" (Бортництво Київської області), with Inventory number 047.nks, which can be understood as a more generically national phenomenon (notwithstanding that it is identified with an administrative oblast rather than an ethnographic region. An ethnographic ascription would have been more logically consistent.)

To differentiate the wild beekeeping of the Kyiv oblast from the more general tradition of Polissia (a broad northern ethnographic region of Ukraine which includes much of the Kyiv oblast), the text of the description presents the following explanation: "A unique characteristic of the tradition of wild beekeeping in the Kyiv area (Ivankiv village, Vyshhorod district, Kyiv oblast) is the relatively greater incidence of this tradition, using log hives, as well as more classic wild beekeeping" (Ukrainian Center for Cultural Research 2022a). Vague and subjective statements such as "relatively greater" could be used for countless traditional activities and



I feel that such a phrase does not generate a convincing argument for inscribing a phenomenon as a separate element in the national inventory.

Another example of a problematic engagement with the territorial principle is illustrated by the registration of elements involving Easter eggs (*pysanky*, писанки). Element 012.nks in the Inventory is the “Tradition of Hutsul *pysanky*” (Традиція гуцульської писанки), localized to a series of mountain villages and towns in the Nadvirna, Kosiv and Verkhovyna districts of the Ivano-Frankivsk oblast, the Putyla and Vyzhnytsia districts of the Chernivtsi oblast and the Rakhiv district of the Zakarpattia oblast – that is, including the Hutsul ethnographic territories straddling three oblasts (Arsenych 1987: 24-26). Under Inventory number 046.nks, we also find the element «The Ukrainian Easter Egg: Tradition and Art» (Українська писанка: традиція і мистецтво) (Ukrainian Center for Cultural Research 2022g). The text for this latter element, under the rubric for geographic range, reads: “The territory of Ukraine. The *pysanka* is distributed across all oblasts of contemporary Ukraine. Namely: the Dnipro River region, Polissia, Volyn’, Podillia, Halychyna, Precarpathia, Bukovyna, Pokuttia, Southern Bessarabia, Tavria, Crimea, the Don River area, Sloboda Ukraine, and Siveria” (Наддніпрянина, Полісся, Волинь, Поділля, Галичина, Прикарпаття, Буковина, Покуття, Південна Бессарабія, Таврія, Крим, Донщина, Слобожанщина, Сіверщина). It is striking that this extensive list of regions does not include the Hutsul area. We can infer that the list was manipulated so as not to duplicate an existing ICH element, the *pysanka* writing of the Hutsul region.

We also notice a different type of problem in the geographic list above. In this lineup, the historical-administrative unit “Halychyna” (referring to the Habsburg Crownland of Galicia prior to 1918), the physical-geographic area “Precarpathia” (the lowlands northeast of the Carpathian Mountains) and the ethnographic designation “Pokuttia” are each enumerated. They all overlap substantially and identify the non-mountainous parts of the current Ivano-Frankivsk oblast. This shows a lack of conscientious processing of the documentation for the ICH element, revealing carelessness on the part of the nominator and poor work by the Expert Commission which reviewed the proposal.

In contrast to these problematic examples, the element “The Culture of Preparing Ukrainian Borshch” (Культура приготування українського борщу), Inventory number 022.nks, is much more successful. As noted in the accompanying description, this tradition is distributed over all oblasts of Ukraine (Ukrainian Center for Cultural Research 2022c). Given such

a broad geographic range, it is obvious that the components of this dish in various parts of the country may differ. Indeed, even every cook might prepare *borshch* with a special taste. For this reason, localizing this element to a specific small territory would clearly have been counterproductive.

The examples above help orient us in relation to the appropriate territorial attribution of the *vertep* and its potential nomination for the National Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Ukraine, the primary subject of this study.

The third issue which arises in this discussion is chronological – the calendrical attribution of the *vertep* events. A reform of the church calendar is currently underway in Ukraine (Pravoslavna Tserkva Ukrainy 2023). In 2022, Christmas was celebrated for the first time on 25 December by the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, according to the Gregorian Calendar. (Prior to this, it was celebrated on 7 January, according to the Julian Calendar). A shared date for Easter has not yet been formally agreed upon. The transition from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar cannot take place instantly, even after formal announcements from both Ukrainian churches. A certain percentage of the faithful will continue to celebrate Christmas on 7 January, as was the case in 2023. Thus, we can expect that for several years the Christmas and New Year's celebrations will be marked with a double observance. Related to this, the theatrical events of the *vertep* will take place in a broader range of time, starting 24 December and sometimes continuing all the way to 20 January in the next calendar year.

### Key Characteristics of the Ukrainian *Vertep*

Certain further arguments also support the addition of Christmas/Koliada celebrations featuring *vertep* into the National Register of cultural heritage of Ukraine. The dynamism and elasticity of the *vertep* constitute an important argument for its inscription. The Ukrainian *vertep* has a binary structure, with a first act presenting the adoration of the Magi at the birth of the Messiah, as an expression of the Christian idea of salvation, and a second act containing secular skits. These two halves of the performance are not oppositional, however, but bring the idea of the Creator closer to the audience, animating the “*sacrum*” while also cultivating certain traditional moral principles in the “*profanum*.” Zinov'ieva observed that the classic binary form of the *vertep* in the performance and in the architecture (the first act being performed on an upper storey of the puppet theatre stage, and the

secular act below) allowed the harmonious coexistence of the “canonical” as well as the “democratic” scenes. This allowed the tradition bearers to “freely introduce new scenes with new characters and to omit the older, less relevant motifs” (Zinov’ieva 2006b: 11-12). The *vertep* puppet structure is not really a piece of architecture, but a model of architecture illustrating the architectonics of a building on a smaller scale. Indeed, this structure is also understood as a model of the Cosmos, with its upper “heavenly” and its lower “earthly” levels. Whereas Zinov’ieva suggests that new scenes and new characters in the *vertep* drama are found only in the puppet-based performances of the *vertep*, I observe that they are characteristic for the non-puppet formats as well. Certainly, Zinov’ieva is correct in pointing out that the second, “profane” act of the *vertep* performance, which depicts common social life, remains dynamic and reflective of events, current issues, and trends (Zinov’ieva 2006b: 12). Similar views have been expressed by other *vertep* researchers (Zakal’s’ka 2018; Fedas 2002; Kharchyshyn 2005b: 86).

Another important feature of this phenomenon is what Iosyp Fedas calls its “forms of life” (форми життя) (Fedas 2002: 34). I prefer the more specific term «forms of representation» (форми репрезентації) but find his observation generally useful. The *vertep* exists: in an «ethnographic form of representation» (етнографічно-побутова), tied directly in with the overall midwinter celebrations; in a «theatrical-concert form of representation» (сценічно-концертна), in which the scenario is sometimes presented outside the context of the holy days; and a «static-illustrative form of representation» (статично-зображальна), referring to *vertep* elements presented in figurative painting, applied art objects, theatrical decoration, monumental art, graphic productions and in other physical media.

Fedas notes that, in the first two forms of representation identified above, the *vertep* functions orally. Orality is an important criterion for designating an element of intangible cultural heritage and the value of safeguarding it. *Vertep* is also clearly traditional in that the general content of the performance is remembered by each generation (though each generation may also modify its contents). *Vertep* is also prescriptive in that the storyline is set in advance, the personages are stereotypical and their behavior is predictable (though as they play, they also allow for re-ordering and substitution) (Fedas 2002: 34).

*Vertep* transcends older understandings of conservative ritual folklore and takes its place as a living creative form of expression of the people, along with oral lore and the decorative arts such as embroidery, *kylym* weaving, *pysanka* writing, ceramics, wall painting and other genres. We can

observe the use of the *vertep* themes to engage universally with diverse contexts which are expressed in its multiple media – acting, vocals, music, choreography, recitation and scenography.

We understand that the structure of the *vertep* is not designed for a literal representation of reality but a figurative one based on models from other genres of theatre arts. In modified scenarios, characters are only retained if they carry a representational significance, grotesqueness for example, or importance in a relevant historical period. This figurative quality results in a symbolic representation of the social events as they resonate for the participants.

For example, the Ukrainian folkloric theatre “Berehynia” in Rome, supported by the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church, performed a *vertep* during the Christmas holidays on 21 November 2013, featuring the key antiheroes that led to the Euromaidan protests. King Herod’s character had clear allusions to Putin, and the Devil role involved clear associations with the criminal president Yanukovich, who later escaped as a fugitive, with remarks about his “proFFessorship” and “Christmas tree” (*iolka*, йолка) (Kashchy 2013).<sup>3</sup> In the winter of 2023, ten years after the Revolution of Dignity and during the Moscovite-Ukrainian war, a group from the city of Mukachevo played a *vertep* drama in which the hero and the antagonist engaged in a dialogue, the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Valerii Zaluzhnyi and King Herod-Putin (Zakarpattia 24 2023).

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3. Viktor Yanukovich misspelled the word “professor” with two “f”s (along with 11 other errors) on the form for declaring himself candidate for election as President of Ukraine in 2010. This became a popular meme decrying how he and others gained high positions despite their low level of education and qualifications. The Revolution of Dignity started in November 2013 when a group of student protesters were beaten and dispersed from the *Maidan Nezalezhnosti* (Independence Square, Майдан Незалежності) in central Kyiv. It was announced officially that the protesters had to be removed in order to safely set up the large annual Christmas tree in that area, so that Kyivites could begin celebrating the holidays. Yanukovich spoke Ukrainian rather poorly, and when he was announcing the “positive news” that the “troublemakers” were gone and the tree would be set up, he could not remember the Ukrainian word *ialynka* (ялинка) for Christmas tree, and hesitated, then used the Russian word *iolka* (“ёлка,” Ukr spelling “йолка”). The 35-metre tree frame was indeed set up but was soon encircled by a great many more protesters for several months during the Revolution of Dignity. Yanukovich’s security forces, called Berkut, were central to the brutality of the conflict. The Christmas tree image became a powerful meme representing the Revolution.

Such representations of political events of international significance during the *vertep* demonstrate how it functions as a platform to express the perspectives of not only the small local groups that mount them but the population in general. The Ukrainian *vertep*, embedded as it is in the ritual complex of midwinter holidays, demonstrates local tastes in its particular performances, which never repeat identically from one utterance to the next.

The practice of *vertep* as a Ukrainian folk tradition is said to have originated from school dramas of theology students in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, with additional roots in mystery plays of the medieval Catholic west. These sources, however, are only two identifiable influences on an indigenous folk theatre with its own oral traditions. It is deeply integrated into Ukrainian culture.

The most important and decisive argument for inscribing the element of Ukrainian *vertep* into the inventory of intangible cultural heritage is that this form (and genre) of theatre can represent Ukraine to the world and can become an important instrument of cultural diplomacy. Because of the broadly adaptable themes, it does not require a detailed explanation of its components or its overall storyline. The Ukrainian *vertep* is a longstanding complex of traditional creativity which has not stopped developing, but continuously modifies itself in accordance with the internal needs, external influences, collective outlook and political positions of the bearers of this culture in Ukraine.

### A Proposal in Place of a Conclusion

The above discussions of selection, territorial representation and calendrical connections of the *vertep* traditions allow a better understanding of the problematics of inscribing this element into the National Register of ICH in Ukraine, with the goal of safeguarding and popularizing it. The review of literature on the *vertep*, the research methods and results of this study provide a strong basis for its inscription.

The Ukrainian *vertep* is a widely distributed traditional activity of the midwinter calendar, a bright and joyous, unique folk theatre which historically combined veneration of the Christian Nativity and earlier rituals of celebrating the *Koliada*. I propose that the element of Ukrainian *vertep* should find its rightful place in the representative National Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Ukraine.

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