Geert Lovink

"You may not be interested in cyberwar, but cyberwar is interested in you."

Interview with Svitlana Matviyenko by Geert Lovink

> #Numéro 6

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To cite this article

Résumé

Svitlana and I got to know each other online a decade earlier and met a few times here and there. We started to work together late October 2019, in Kyiv, when she invited me to participate in a conference of the Kyiv Biennale she organized, in collaboration with the Visual Culture Research Center. At the time, the war in the Donbass was already going on for a good five years with over ten thousands deaths—their photos scattered in makeshift memorials on streets and inside buildings. With the overall theme Black Cloud, the symposium was called Communicative Militarism and carried the slogan "You may not be interested in cyberwar, but cyberwar is interested in you." The description started off with the observation that "cyberwar, and overall militarisation of online communication, often remains overlooked in current discussions on surveillance capitalism, biased algorithms, and unjust infrastructures, including those of the internet." And concludes: "No matter what form it takes – subtle moulding of users' sense of reality, leaking, hacking or direct attacks on critical infrastructure, cyberwar is fully integrated in the systemic operations of surveillance capitalism by sustaining crisis as a driving force of neoliberal economy and warfare spelt out far beyond the typical domains of war." In the following email exchange, I have tried to cover both the wider context of the diary and address personal curiosities and concerns I had over past months as commissioning editor of the dispatches.

Author(s)

Svitlana Matviyenko is an Assistant Professor of Critical Media Analysis in the School of Communication, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver. She writes about practices of resistance and mobilization ,digital militarism, dis- and misinformation, Internet history, cybernetics, Soviet and the post-Soviet techno-politics, nuclear cultures, including the Chernobyl Zone of Exclusion. She is co-editor of The Imaginary App and Lacan and the Posthuman and co-author. During 2021-2022 she resided in Ukraine. Since February 2022 the Institute of Networkcultures publishes her dispatches: https://networkcultures.org/blog/author/svitlana/.

Geert Lovink is a Dutch media theorist, internet critic and author of Uncanny Networks (2002), Dark Fiber (2002), My First Recession (2003), Zero Comments (2007), Networks Without a Cause (2012), Social Media Abyss (2016), Organization after Social Media (with Ned Rossiter, 2018),

Sad by Design (2019) and Stuck on the Platform (2022). In 2004 he founded the Institute of Network Cultures (www.networkcultures.org) at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (HvA). His centre organizes conferences, publications and research networks such as Video Vortex (online video), The Future of Art Criticism and MoneyLab (internet-based revenue models in the arts). Recent projects deal with digital publishing experiments, critical meme research, participatory hybrid events and precarity in the arts.

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It's July 2022. Four months into her diary project Svitlana writes me: "The sirens are here again. Since 3 am, they say we can't ignore sirens any more, since Russia changed the tactics and is now targeting cities. I am sitting on the floor in the corridor, with my computer and my emergency backpack, waiting until the sirens stop so I can go to sleep." Already before the Russian invasion started, I contacted Canadian media theorist Svitlana Matviyenko to ask her how she was interpreting and experiencing the large-scale Russian exercises and the build-up at the border. On February 21 she responded: "I have been writing a diary since early January. I call it *Dispatches from the Place of Imminence*, in which I am trying to reflect on the situation, and particularly, the cyber warfare side of it. Some of this material can be already be published." This is how the Ukraine blog on the Institute of Network Cultures website was born. The Institute of Network Cultures is a small activist-art-focussed research centre, founded in 2004, situated inside a large Dutch polytech, the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (HvA). Its main goal is to develop international research networks around emerging topics related to critical internet culture. On the day of the invasion, February 24, 2022, she wrote me, in telegram style: "Banks are not working. ATMs give very limited cash (abt 35$), but you need cash everywhere now. All basic meds and drinking water are gone at the stores. But I was able to buy one

remaining power bank in town. Russians occupied Chernobyl." On February 25 we published her first and a dozen entries would follow. The series will continue, copy edited by London-based colleague and long-term INC collaborator Michael Dieter, who's also a member of the so-called Tactical Media Room, an Amsterdam initiative that brings together many of the local players in the academic and cultural sector that work on solidarity with Ukrainian cultural and media sector. In the period March-July 2022 the initiative held weekly meetings and organized several public debates. After the summer, the coordination mainly happened through its active Signal channel.

In the following email exchange, I have tried to cover both the wider context of the diary and address personal curiosities and concerns I had over past months as commissioning editor of the dispatches.

Geert Lovink: Reading your dispatches I have often tried to imagine the environment in which you have been writing: a table with a view, in a small town, a house perhaps, with a garden, not far from a Soviet style block of flats, not unlike the Bukovina region that I do know; a green and lush, sleepy 19th century landscape where time stands still, with deep marks of the Soviet era. For sure, I am romanticizing. Can you still see the ordinary in the midst of all the violent, depressing war news?

Svitlana Matviyenko: It's true, the urban landscape of my town, Kamyanets-Podilsky, which is as old as Amsterdam, is complex and layered. From my window on the top floor of the tallest building in town, I see the thirteen-century castle, the Old Fortress, built on the island surrounded by the river Smotrych, and I see the nineteen-century architecture mixed with Soviet-era buildings as well as several ridiculous private houses of the local rich – I call them "architectural porno" for their desperate effort to simulate medieval castles and churches.

But the fields and villages around town that spread kilometres and kilometres towards the horizon, that I observe from my balcony, really make it easy to overlook the occasional ugliness by focusing on the magnificent ancient landscape of Podilsky Tovtry. "Tovtry" is the local name of rocky arc-shaped ridge, a barrier reef from the Miocene Sea that stretches parallel to the ancient coastal line, since this land is the bottom of that ancient sea. If you travel one hour south-east from my town towards Kytaihorod and the abandoned villages nearby, there is a place known to all geologists of the world: you encounter an unprecedented

number of visible layers of geological periods – nine, if I remember correctly, with their typical fossils all open for you to observe and touch as you walk along the 541-million-year naturally formed "road" down the valley, where in the 1940's, my father used to walk their cow to graze, when he, not even a 10-year-old boy, had to work nights and days like other Soviet peasant children after WWII, to survive, which prevented him from finishing elementary school.

Historically, the town has been the nexus of different cultures and ethnicities – Ukrainian, Jewish, Armenian, Turkish, Polish, and Russian. Although it was not exactly a peaceful coexistence at all times, these people demonstrated an impressive appreciation for each other's cultural artefacts that were not erased or demolished, but carefully preserved. Where else will you see, for example, a catholic cathedral with an attached minaret and the statue of Virgin Mary on its top? That's Kamyanets.

War really makes your optic hyper-sensitive to the ordinary and to the everyday surrounding overall. While any war, probably, has this effect, this current conflict has revealed the shocking urge for the erasure of people and culture on the part of our invaders, when everything that survived World War I and II is now being demolished and destroyed in the centre and south-east of the country. There is a new sense of ultimate fragility of all life and non-life forms, including that 541-million-year stony landscape…

GL: You are neither a war reporter on the ground, nor a Western opinion maker. You have become a North-American media theorist, academic, teacher. How would you describe your role? I read your dispatches as a hybrid genre between political analysis, media theory and a personal diary. By the way, I always wanted to ask you: is there an actual diary? You make notes first, you told me. Lately someone asked if the entries were written in Ukrainian or Russian. I know they are written by you directly in English, but is there an issue of language for you in this case?

SM: This *is* an actual diary, but there are still unused drafts and many undeveloped notes that will join the text when it becomes a book. I had to leave some things out. Sometimes, it was the matter of pressing time. You remember, probably, that I used to send the dispatches every several days, and I was not able to include and develop everything that I noted. A month into the war, I became part of some initiatives of which I still

cannot speak on record or publicly since it would put some people at risk. Then, of course, just like we cannot photograph local infrastructures of defence or strategic objects, we cannot talk about some details or circumstances, which I keep writing about in my notes. Other events of the war are admittedly very hard to evaluate either due to a lack of information or, on the contrary, due to their overwhelmingly heated or distorted perception.

I do touch upon some of the controversial topics in my text, but in some cases I need more time myself to process what is happening. All these notes will make it to the planned book version, as I think—or I really hope—it would be possible to reveal many incredible details of pride and disappointment in about half a year or so from now, when the manuscript goes to the press; I have started reworking the early entries already. This may look like an unusual way of writing a diary, but then maybe it has to do with the fact that it is a war dairy, with its temporal folds that will fully open for the reader with a certain delay. In this sense, writing a war diary is a very particular practice, I suppose.

I write this diary in English. Despite the occasional grammar issues and my thick accent, this is the language that, at this point of my life, gives shape to my thoughts faster than other languages, including my both native languages– Ukrainian and Russian. I speak Ukrainian with all my friends and colleagues, and will with my father, who speaks "Surzhyk," a local dialect that combines Ukrainian, Russian, and other words that are typical only for this region; I speak Russian with my mother; and I speak only English with my sister who lives in Chicago, and who speaks Russian with both of my parents. So, it's complicated.

GL: During Covid, while you were in the south-west of Ukraine, you continued your teaching commitments online, like most of us, via Zoom and Teams. This is a part of your life and work you have not yet written about in the dispatches. Can you share some your insights with us on this? Vancouver is literally on the other side of the globe. During the war period you spent a considerable amount of time there, virtual, mentally, workwise.

SM: It's true. Like everyone, I began teaching online in March 2020 due to the Covid pandemic with the beginning of the quarantine. In February 2021, I went to Ukraine, after almost two years of not being able to see my 85-year-old parents, which was hard for me as they both were not

feeling well, and then my mother broke her spine on the third day after I got to my hometown. So, I continued online teaching from a different time zone with a 10-hour difference from my university. Then, by the end of summer 2021, I discovered I was sick and needed treatment, which I immediately began in Ukraine, because by then I already lost my Canadian health care plan, so my university approved a prolonged stay until Spring 2022. In February 2022, however, the Russian invasion brought the war regime on top of all the "unusual circumstances."

When we started using Zoom, in Spring 2020, with my colleagues at the School of Communication, we were rather concerned over the adoption of Zoom by our and other universities due to many security and privacy problems that had been found in how this platform operated, including poor encryption, tracking attendees of the meetings and more. Many of us experimented with other platforms, but I am not sure this is still the case. While in Vancouver, like many, I remember I often experienced so-called "Zoom fatigue," but I did not feel any of that in Ukraine: I guess, amidst everything going on with my family and in my country, the hierarchy of risks changes your attitude and perception. That is how bad tech sinks into our lives, in the circumstances of threats and risks. In February and March of 2022, when the telecommunication infrastructure was damaged by shelling, and I lost the possibility of using video or voice, I had to quickly redesign my graduate seminar to adjust to the circumstances by moving to text communication via Google Docs. The impact of the last two and a half years of Covid and the war has only started showing up – my vision, of course, got much worse (I've changed my glasses twice already); my short-term memory fails spectacularly and in the strangest ways: I may "forget" for whom I am writing an article while in the process of writing it and need to scroll up to the text's title to remind myself of the details.

Teaching during the war has been more challenging for me content-wise. I had several difficult moments when I lost sense of what I was doing and why – and the waves of depression keep returning more regularly now, after the war has entered a slow grind, which also tells me it may become endless. Teaching the works of thinkers who, at this moment, call your country to surrender and cede the territories to the imperialist state has been, to put it mildly, a devastating experience of disorientation and disappointment, undermining the core of my being. It feels like we are back in the eighteenth century and all the volumes of post- and decolonial thought are evaporating as we speak.

GL: You must have thought about this. How would you write the additional chapter on the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine if your 2019 book *Cyberwar and Revolution: Digital Subterfuge in Global Capitalism* that you co-authored with Nick Dyer-Witheford would have a second edition? How do you see this war in light of the cyberwarfare tactics that you described in that book? There is fake news, but also drones and occasional news of Russian cyber-attacks. However, if I think of comparisons, it is Putin's Syria strategy that comes to mind: brutal urban destruction Aleppo-style, not sophisticated hacks, or am I wrong here?

SM: Several years back, Nick and I were often told, with implied criticism, that our term "cyberwar" and the emphasis on "war" seemed blown out of proportions. "War involves bloodshed," we were told. But we emphasized that cyberwar is both "cyber" and "kinetic," morphing and oscillating between these two poles, where, in a blink of an eye, it becomes total bloodshed, mobilizing populations within the complex assemblages of communicative militarism, where commercial platforms are merged with military technology and techniques of social engineering and psyops. Its temporality is defined by both brisk tactics and long-term strategies, like those implemented by Russia Today, for example, which aim to shape useful audiences across the world, to build their trust by parasiting, like John Carpenter's *The Thing*, all progressive concerns and agendas so that people are tricked into thinking this channel indeed shares their values, while methodically planting the idea that Ukraine is ultra-nationalist through and through, and, therefore, is a threatening fake state – a very comforting idea, to be honest, for the left and liberals who proved incapable of fighting far-right groups in their own countries: Ukraine has become a realm of outsourced failures for all. It is also a phantasmatic playground, the very existence of which allowed many in the world to stage their own economic and political fantasies, and score points. So, I guess, it could be interesting to engage again in the psychoanalytic discussion of these "structures" that not only take to the streets, but also go to war.

Another theme that we addressed rather briefly in the book, and that certainly demands an extensive discussion now, is the nuclear dimension of this war, which reveals the disturbing imperial legacies from Soviet and pre-Soviet "external" and "internal" colonial practices in the current Russian energy terrorism. Nuclear cyberwar is not just about the infamous red button, but the weaponization of the physical atomic energy infrastructure and its computational components by disconnecting

nuclear plants from the international monitoring systems.

Lastly, this eight-year war reveals itself as the first war seen by the world spectator almost in real time. It does not mean, however, that this war is fully transparent or observable for a human eye. Probably, on the contrary. With all the available immediacy by means of AI and OSINT, weaponized and used for targeting, and with all the Maxar-powered optics, this is certainly an a-human war in several ways: it operates at machinic speeds – either too fast and too slow – by excommunication, reification, resourcification, and elimination of the user – a civilian or a soldier.

GL: You've described the live Azovstal resistance broadcast from inside the besieged Mariupol steel factory in April 2022 as an unprecedented cyberwar event. Can you take us back? What exactly happened there?

SM: This relates to my previous point about the war being open to real-time observation. Indeed, the case of the 84-day Azovstal steel plant resistance was extraordinary for different reasons. Azovstal was fully blockaded by Russian forces on April 10th, and Ukrainian soldiers with many civilians were locked underground without water, food, meds, and ammunition. Many wounded lost their limbs or died due to the lack or absence of antibiotics. The conditions there were terrifying. Several attempts—seven, they now say—to deliver all these necessary things to Azovstal by helicopter failed one after another, with the Ukrainian side losing both pilots and helicopters altogether. At the same time, the defenders were able to video- and photo-document their life underground, as Dmytro Kozatsky did, showing the insides of the legendary "Fortress Mariupol" one day before the extraction (which, however, would eventually turn into straightforward captivity in the territory of the grey area of the so-called DNR); and to continue communicating not only with their commanding officers and journalists, but with the broader world by posting appeals and even by holding international live press conferences in English from underground while Russian forces bombarded the Azovstal territory with artillery and aircraft.

GL: One of the most significant developments in the Western/US internet context during the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been Elon Musk's attempt to take over Twitter. How did people in Ukraine perceive the turmoil this caused? Twitter may be a mid-sized social network in terms of users, yet it plays an important role in terms of agenda-setting for the

Western news. Would you say that Telegram is playing a similar role?

SM: Unless I missed something, there was no concern whatsoever regarding Musk's attempt to take over Twitter. Partly because neither the Ukrainian government nor Ukrainian users are particularly concerned about the corporate politics of social media platforms. Before the invasion in February, the government had been reimagining itself using Silicon Valley style rhetoric and logic of start-up culture ala "the state in a smartphone" (держава в смартфоні). Also, the most popular platforms are Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Telegram and only then Twitter, followed only by the blocked Russian platforms Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki. The ideas of deregulation are usually met with excitement, unlike the ideas of regulation. In my casual conversations with people about Musk, the move towards deregulating Twitter and what it would mean, for example, for Russian disinformation campaigns, people usually reacted by dismissing my arguments by saying "it cannot be so," or "Musk knows what he is doing." Musk is a hero in Ukraine. This perception has been shaped earlier, when his biography by Ashlee Vance was translated, published, and widely read in Ukraine, from what I heard it was a bestseller, then his ongoing confrontation with Director General of Roscosmos Dmitry Rogozin certainly added to his popularity, and, of course, his overall story of "successful success." But still, all this is nothing in comparison with Musk's help to Ukraine over the last several months.

First of all, the immediacy of his reaction was spectacular. Vice Prime Minister of Ukraine and Minister of Digital Transformation Mykhailo Fedorov tweeted to Musk on February 26th, and on February 28th, the first Starlink terminals were in Ukraine. Here, as always, a war is the context for setting new precedents in logistics. The use of the Starlink satellite system in the context of war was also an unprecedented learning and testing experience. The presence of Starlink in Ukraine matters a lot. The government and military have both relied on these encrypted satellites. The Ukrainian drones operate via Starlink connections, whose encryption seems rather resilient having survived massive cyberattacks from Russia, while SpaceX keeps rewriting the code. In fact, the Ukrainian troops in the Azovstal steel plant were able to maintain contact with their commanders and conduct live video interviews with journalists, as that I mentioned above, because they had a Starlink system in the blockaded steel plant. The connection was stable there until the final hours of the soldiers' presence at the plant and this is despite Russia's aggressive radio-

electric warfare tools that have been used extensively in this war. So Starlink constitutes an important layer in this complex cyberwar assemblage. Using it, however, posits some threats, as it happens, because these transmissions can be triangulated and targeted, as John Scott-Railton noted, given the history of Russia targeting satellite communications in several previous military involvements.

It was rather telling when Serhiy Volynskyi, commander of Ukraine's 36th Separate Marine Brigade, also blockaded at Azovstal, appealed to Musk for help asking to rescue soldiers by means of the extraction procedure from the besieged plant in a tweet on May 12th. "People say you come from another planet to teach people to believe in the impossible. Our planets are next to each other, as I live where it is nearly impossible to survive. Help us get out of Azovstal to a mediating country. If not you, then who? Give me a hint," he wrote. It is incredibly painful to read these words, a gesture of despair directed to someone who in the imagination of many embodies the Good.

GL: You have often been to the Chernobyl Zone, already many years ago. You have done research there and recently got a Canadian grant to continue that work on the ground. How do you look at that topic, that place, in light of the war? And what are your research plans at the moment?

SM: By now, I've got already two Canadian research grants for the projects "Chernobyl Science" and "Border as Medium: A Case of the Chernobyl Zone", and I am launching the work here as I will stay in Ukraine for another year. It will be tricky, as the access to the Zone is extremely restricted now, but I am working on obtaining the pass. Parts of the Zone are mined, but the military have been working on eliminating them for quite some time. I've been always extremely careful on my field trips, the safety rules are pretty much the same – no wandering off route, no touching objects, no eating outside, long sleeves / no shorts, even in heat, no smoking, no interaction with wild animals. The radiation level remains safe. I have an incredible team of people here who spent over 20 years researching and monitoring the Zone, who were first to get back to their offices and labs after the Russian troops withdrew. And I have a broad network of people living inside and immediately outside the Chernobyl Zone. Several bridges on the way to Chernobyl are now demolished, so it also posits a certain difficulty. One of my projects was supposed to be about the border infrastructure, which is nonexistent now.

At the same time, there are so many new questions and perspectives opening up now in relation to the recent occupation, one of which is again about the contours of the Chernobyl Zone, given its distributed territoriality. 2022 was certainly the most important year for Chernobyl Zone history after 1986, as it revealed both imperial and colonial legacies of the Soviet Union that so powerfully came forward, carried forth by the forces of the Russian Federation through the Chernobyl Zone, in the first days of the invasion.