

A Profile of Valentina Izmirlieva

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE HARRIMAN
INSTITUTE'S NEW DIRECTOR

BY THE EDITORS

Valentina Izmirlieva. Photo by
Jeffrey Schiffman.

Valentina Izmirlieva became director of the Harriman Institute on January 1, 2022. By then, Russia had amassed more than 100,000 troops on the Ukrainian border, and U.S. intelligence had already warned of Russia's plans for a full-scale invasion. A few weeks later, the

U.S. Embassy in Kyiv urged U.S. citizens to consider leaving Ukraine. Unlike many who thought Vladimir Putin might be bluffing, Izmirlieva believed the warnings. "I was pretty certain that it was going to happen," she says, months later, in her office at the Harriman Institute.

When Russia invaded on February 24, it was evening in New York. Izmirlieva didn't sleep all night, tossing, turning, and thinking about what the Harriman Institute could do to help Ukrainians and opposition-minded Russians who would inevitably be displaced by the war. The next day, she sought advice from her predecessors and colleagues, but there was no playbook, no advice to give: Russia's full-scale invasion was uncharted territory. At the office, the mood was predictably somber. "That night we ordered pizza for the students," she recalls. "It was a silent occasion. Everyone just sat and ate pizza, and we didn't talk."

Right away, Izmirlieva started planning the Institute's response. First, two panel discussions that would address the invasion: a scholarly response to Putin's February 21 speech claiming that Ukraine was a Bolshevik creation, and an expert discussion about the unfolding war. Then, she brainstormed ways to help the displaced. Izmirlieva got in touch with Mark Mazower, Ira D. Wallach Professor of History and director of Columbia's Institute for Ideas and Imagination (II&I) at Columbia Global Centers | Paris. Together they came up with a plan for four Harriman residencies at II&I that would bring displaced Ukrainian artists and writers to Paris for a year. The Harriman residents, who started this fall, include a poet, a filmmaker, and a musicologist. There is also a special journalist residency sponsored by our Paul Klebnikov Fund. But Izmirlieva's work to help the displaced didn't end there: she worked with the Slavic Department and the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences to help evacuate Serhii Tereshchenko, a doctoral candidate in Columbia's Slavic Department who was in Kyiv when Russia invaded; and with the Climate School, Columbia Global Centers, and the Heyman Center to bring Julia Lajus, a Russian environmental historian displaced due to her opposition to the war, to the Department of History for a year. She also partnered with the Institute for Human Sciences in





Vienna and the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute in Cambridge to establish nonresidential fellowships for Ukrainian colleagues, with the Harriman funding eight scholars.

Izmirlieva's quick and creative response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine is not surprising; she is known by friends and colleagues for her ability to foster collaboration among diverse groups of people and unexpected partners and to transform difficult situations into rewarding ones. And she gets people around her to think critically. "Intellectually, Valentina has always been exceptional; she always has a unique perspective," says political scientist Ivan Krastev, permanent fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. Krastev has known Izmirlieva since high school, and his enthusiasm when talking about her is palpable. One of her remarkable qualities, he says, is her ability to fall in love with the work of other people. "If she reads something that impressed her very much or is taken by somebody else's idea, she can talk about it for hours," he says.

Above: Izmirlieva at age 3 with her father, Boris Izmirliev, in Sofia.

Born in Communist Bulgaria, Izmirlieva graduated first in her class in Bulgaria's elite English-language high school and dreamed about studying American literature. There was no such discipline in Bulgarian universities, however, and she chose instead to major in medieval Bulgarian studies. Medieval texts attracted her as an intellectual puzzle: they were strange and opaque to the modern eye and required a new interpretative key, an entirely different type of knowledge.

The religious context that supplied them with meaning appeared exotic and exhilarating against the official atheist backdrop of Bulgarian society in the 1980s. Advancing quickly in her studies, Izmirlieva entered so creatively into the current scholarly discourses that she was offered a researcher's position at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences immediately upon defending her undergraduate thesis. That position could easily have become a lifelong career, but, as Izmirlieva joked, quoting John Lennon, life happened while she had other plans. She had wanted to study American literature—a path closed to her in her native Bulgaria—but it was Old Bulgarian literature, the path she chose by default, that opened to her the road to the United States.

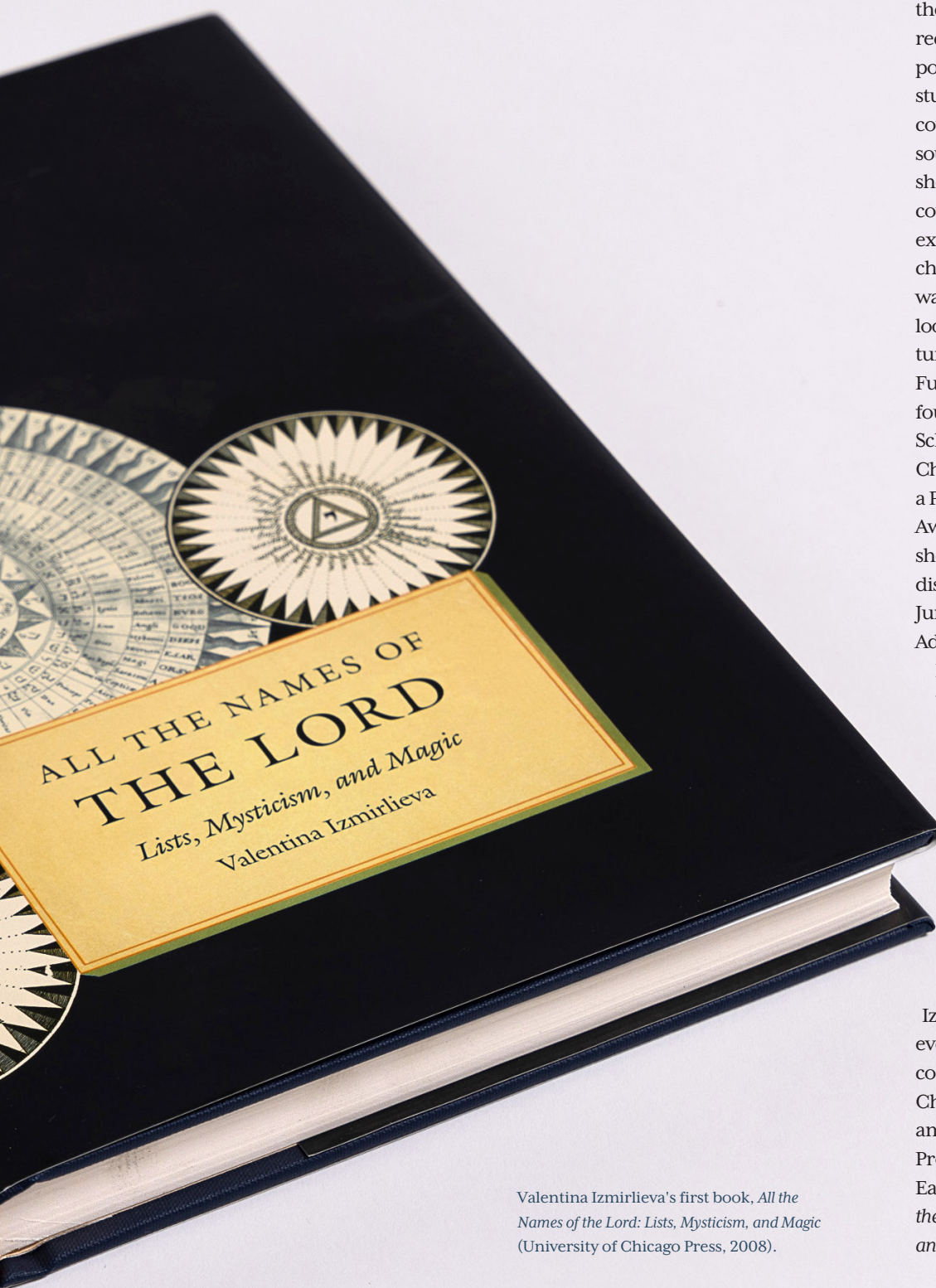
When Bulgaria's long-term Communist leader Todor Zhivkov fell from power in November 1989, the Fulbright competition opened in the country for the first time to candidates beyond those normally handpicked by

the Party operatives. Her colleagues at the Academy of Sciences and scholars in West Germany, who had published and promoted her work, campaigned for her to apply. The result was life changing. Izmirlieva became the only woman in the first cohort of

Bulgarian Fulbright scholars after the collapse of Communism, chosen from a pool of more than 400 candidates. She left on the day she cast her vote in Bulgaria's first democratic elections in June 1990.

Leaving was difficult. She had a life in Sofia, and the initial period





Valentina Izmirlieva's first book, *All the Names of the Lord: Lists, Mysticism, and Magic* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

of the country's transition to democracy was an exciting time. "Bulgaria was exploding with enthusiasm, with all the rallies and all the changes," she recalls. Exchanging this new world of possibilities at home for a graduate student's life in the United States, a country in which she did not know a soul, felt like a gamble. But she thought she was going only for a year, and she could not resist the opportunity to expand her horizons as a scholar, to challenge herself in new and creative ways. And she found what she was looking for. The one year of studies turned into nine. The original one-year Fulbright scholarship got extended into four and augmented by a Centennial Scholarship at the University of Chicago, where Izmirlieva pursued a Ph.D. in medieval Slavic studies. Awards continued to accumulate: she received a prestigious Whiting dissertation scholarship, followed by a Junior Fellowship at the Institute for the Advanced Studies of Religion in Chicago.

For her dissertation, Izmirlieva chose to focus on a short text ("the size of a postcard," she says), titled "The 72

Names of the Lord." The choice initially baffled her advisers.

No one really knew what this strange list of names was supposed to do or where it came from. The assumption was that it had Byzantine origins, but no one had discovered any Byzantine traces of it.

Izmirlieva's curiosity and persistence eventually paid off. She proved, conclusively, that this Slavic text was a Christian adaptation of a Kabbalistic amulet and constituted a rare case of Provençal influence on Balkan and East Slavic cultures. Her first book, *All the Names of the Lord: Lists, Mysticism, and Magic* (University of Chicago Press,

2008), grew from this discovery to encompass much more expansive intellectual landscapes, from Orthodox theology of divine names to an original theory of list-making as a tool for producing visions of comprehensive order. The book has been influential beyond the fields of Slavic and medieval studies, in such diverse disciplines as theology, linguistics, and art history. Significantly, the Harriman Institute had a big share in its success: the book is part of the series *Studies of the Harriman Institute*, whose editor, Ronald Meyer, was instrumental in securing a contract with University of Chicago Press.

The same qualities that had pushed Izmirlieva beyond Bulgaria and had won over her skeptical advisers in the U.S. showed through again in the job market. Her brilliant performance even compelled Columbia's Slavic Department to reframe its own search for a literature professor, which was initially intended for a Dostoevsky specialist. "Her ability to think on her feet was obvious already at the initial interview," recalls Irina Reyfman, professor of Slavic languages, who was on the search committee, but Valentina really "dazzled" the audience with her campus job talk. "It's a rare thing for a candidate to create this kind of effect when people start spontaneously thinking and expanding," says Reyfman.

During her 22 years as a Columbia faculty member, Izmirlieva has further diversified her research and emerged as an effective and popular teacher. Her courses range from medieval literature and history of religion in Russia to critical theory, gender studies, Slavic modernism, and Balkan cultural politics. Marijeta Bozovic, Izmirlieva's former student

and dissertation advisee, now an assistant professor at Yale University, says that she took as many of Izmirlieva's classes as possible during her studies at Columbia. "Valentina's a very provocative seminar leader with extremely high standards for her students. Instead of handing over answers, she pulls the solution out of the classroom so that there is a collective sense of conjuring and seeking revelation. There's something a bit magical and extremely satisfying in that approach," she says.

Izmirlieva has also actively worked to improve existing opportunities for graduate students and to create new ones. In 2001, she established a course competition in the Slavic Department that allows graduate students to teach an undergraduate course of their own design. This initiative was so successful that the competition was adopted as a model for all departments in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Columbia. The students return her devotion. In 2017, Izmirlieva

received a Lenfest Distinguished Columbia Faculty Award, largely on the initiative of her graduate students. The award recognizes her as a "brilliant teacher and mentor" and "a pioneering scholar whose work has sparked a shift away from the study of monolingual cultural traditions to a broader, interdisciplinary approach that encompasses the full cultural and linguistic complexity of Eurasia."

The book *Izmirlieva* is completing now is an excellent case in point. It puts on the map the virtually unstudied transnational phenomenon of the Christian "hajjis" in the Ottoman Empire and explores their role in building Balkan national elites. This unique group of Eastern Orthodox pilgrims to Jerusalem—Greek and Bulgarian, Serb and Wallachian, Moldovan and Albanian—all modeled their journey on the Muslim Hajj to Mecca. In the process, they transformed the old Christian tradition of devotional travels into a new tool for social mobility. This book is quite a departure from Izmirlieva's first,





Valentina Izmirlieva. Photo by Jeffrey Schiffman.

shifting the focus from the Middle Ages to the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century and from Judeo-Christian mystical traditions to institutional and cultural structures within an Islamic empire. At their core, however, both books pivot on the same concern for the complex and creative ways in which different religious communities interact when forced to live together in conflict and compromise.

With her initial plan for the book nearly realized, Izmirlieva discovered information in Bulgarian historical archives that made her rethink the entire project. While the Christian hajj to Jerusalem is traditionally understood as a strictly male endeavor, new documents revealed that women not only went on the journey but also were crucial to its success. “While men were in charge of logistics, the ritual aspects of the Christian hajj were fully controlled by the women,” Izmirlieva says. Her colleague Mai Ngai, Columbia’s Lung Family Professor of Asian American Studies and History, who was a fellow resident with Izmirlieva at the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers of the New York Public Library in 2012, was greatly impressed by her research. “Valentina’s work on the women hajjis is absolutely brilliant,” Ngai says. “She has uncovered something that nobody has seen before.” And Ivan Krastev commends her decision to rewrite the book so close to its completion as a mark of integrity, courage, and flexibility of thought: “I felt that this is what academia should be about. And yet it’s a rare thing. I’m not sure many scholars, myself included, would choose to do the same.”

The wide scope of Izmirlieva’s research and her innovative approach



Izmirlieva with 2022 Harriman Writer in Residence, award-winning Bulgarian writer Georgi Gospodinov, at the New York Public Library, September 2022.



Izmirlieva at a conference in West Berlin reading an article by Klaus-Dieter Seeman during her first trip to the West, August 1989. Photo by Klaus-Dieter Seemann.



were a perfect fit for the Harriman Institute from the beginning of her time at Columbia, and her involvement in the Institute deepened during her tenure as chair of the Department of Slavic Languages (2016–2019). Over the years, Izmirlieva has organized numerous lectures, panel discussions, and conferences at the Institute; has repeatedly served on the Executive Committee; and has helped forge new partnerships for the Harriman community with other units at the University, especially Columbia Global Centers. The formats of her engagement have been as varied as the topics: the panel discussion “Lolita in New York 50 Years Later” at Miller Theatre, with Jason Epstein and Orhan Pamuk (2008); international conferences on healing practices in Central Asia, hosted by the Global Health Center for Central Asia at Columbia’s School of Social Work (2012); a speaker series, “Women and Resistance in Russia (2019),” which brought to campus the high-profile Russian journalist Yevgenia Albats.

Still the most prominent vehicle for Izmirlieva’s involvement with the Harriman Institute is her global initiative Black Sea Networks (BSN), which she launched in 2016 with a two-year grant from the President’s Global Innovation Fund at Columbia

and matching Harriman funds. As a scholar, Izmirlieva has always aspired to expand the purview of her field beyond the Cold War logic that so often defines it. “All these places that are so culturally different—Central Europe, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia—are lumped in together with the Soviet Union and Russia, which provides only one context for understanding their distinctive histories,” she says, noting that she has devoted her career to researching other relevant contexts. BSN, a groundbreaking global initiative anchored in the Black Sea as a hub of cultural, political, and historical interest, is her most ambitious project yet. The new framework proposes to reorient Slavic studies from a shared Slavic identity imagined as homogenous toward shared spaces, where Slavs and non-Slavs are bound together by durable links of conflict and competition, cooperation and creative compromise. “Shared lands are heavily contested, which makes land-based studies ideologically fraught,” she says. “Focusing on the sea decenters the Slavic field in a way that reveals new heuristic advantages.”

Under the BSN umbrella, Izmirlieva has brought scholars from multiple disciplines and locales together in several research streams, each generating conferences, publications, and exhibitions. Currently, the most active stream investigates what she calls

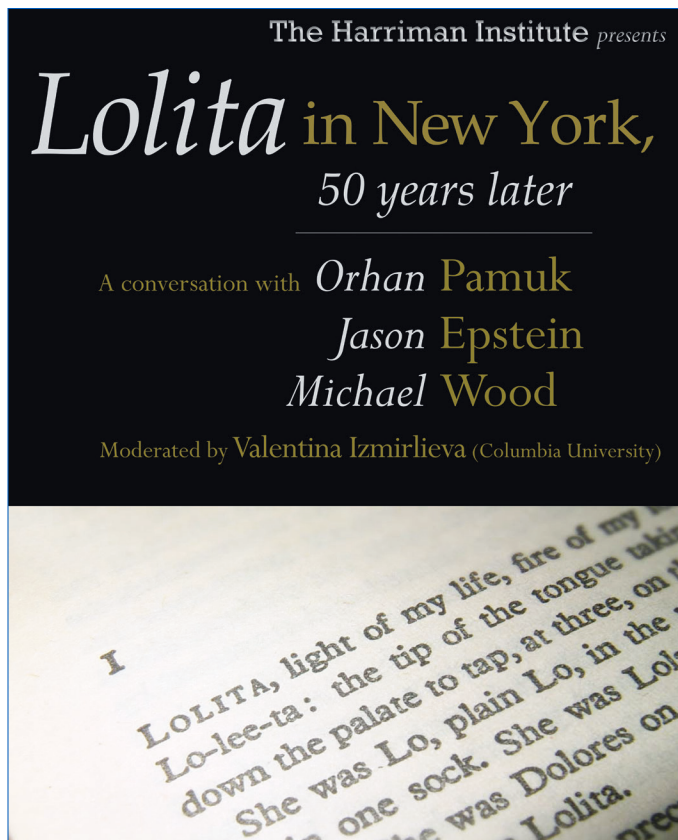
Left: Izmirlieva with medievalist Klimentina Ivanova, at the Tenth International Congress of Slavists in Sofia, Bulgaria, September 1988.

“the Black Sea Exodus,” the migration wave across the sea from Crimea to Constantinople in the wake of the Russian Empire’s collapse after the Bolshevik Revolution. A symposium in Istanbul in June 2022 and a planned exhibition at Istanbul’s Pera Museum aim to explore the influence of the empire’s refugees on cultural life in the Ottoman capital. Other streams have studied the contested history and symbolism of Crimea, the cultures of post-socialism around the Black Sea littoral, and the legacies of ancient Black Sea myths in modern Europe.

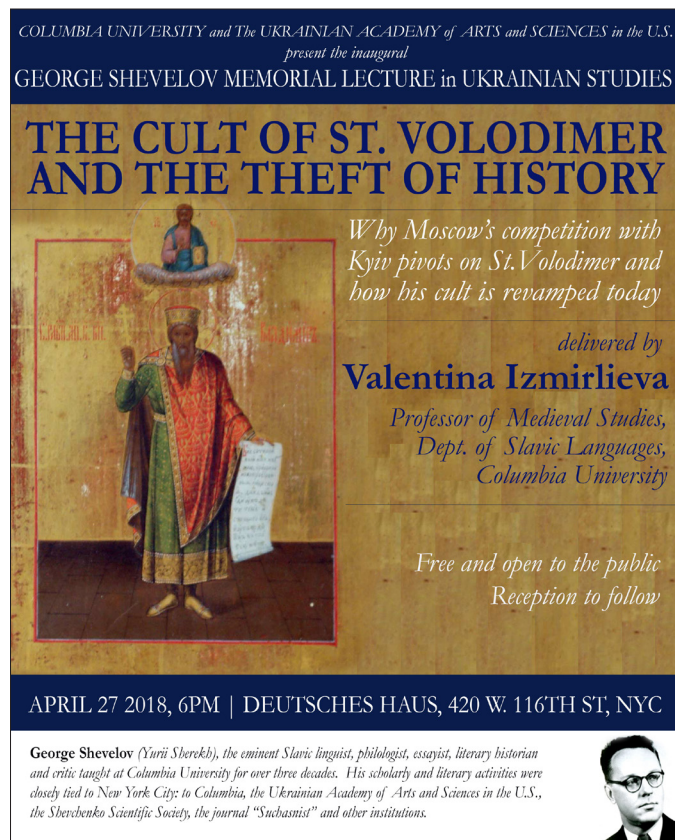
The Harriman Institute has been a close partner since the project’s inception, and much of Black Sea Networks’ current activity continues under its auspices. Former Harriman director Alexander Cooley, who serves on the Advisory Board of BSN, commends Izmirlieva for her ability to bring together such diverse communities of scholars and institutional partners. “It is



Left: Izmirlieva at the Kyiv National Opera House, September 2018. Photo by Antonina Berezovenko. Izmirlieva was in Kyiv to deliver the keynote lecture, “Solidarity of Strangers, or Orthodoxy as It Should Be,” for the international workshop “Religion, Migration and Social Change in the Eastern Orthodox World.”



Poster for the "Lolita in New York, 50 Years Later" event organized by Izmirlieva at the Harriman Institute in 2008.



Poster for the Inaugural Memorial Lecture of Ukrainian Studies in Honor of Professor George Shevelov, Columbia University, April 2018.

one thing to embrace diversity and interdisciplinarity in theory, but far more challenging to effectively promote, as Valentina has, new opportunities for local interactions, communications, and mutual learning," he says.

With no end in sight to the war in Ukraine, Izmirlieva has not stopped thinking of new ways to bring continued attention to the

plight of Ukrainians and the global consequences of Russia's unprovoked war. Since she became Harriman director, Izmirlieva has wanted to create an environmental program at the Institute. By bringing displaced Russian scholar Julia Lajus to the Harriman, she has laid the groundwork: the Institute will work with Lajus and Columbia Climate School on a yearlong workshop series about the

dire environmental consequences of Russia's war on Ukraine. "It's so easy to get overwhelmed by the chaos of the war, so easy to get discouraged by the scale of damage and destruction," says Izmirlieva. What's kept her going is a phrase from the Talmud: "Whoever saves one life saves the world entire." She has adopted it as her mantra. "I keep repeating to myself: One person at a time. Just help one person at a time." ■