

## **Ukraine's Development in Identity and Politics Since Its Independence**

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Emerging as an independent nation following the collapse of the U.S.S.R. in 1991, Ukraine has faced a slew of geopolitical challenges over the past three decades. Escaping from Soviet influence and developing its own national and ethnic identity has been a continuous adversity for the country, and likely will continue to be for years to come. The annexation of Crimea, the Orange Revolution, and Euromaidan were all focal points in Ukraine's strive for autonomy and freedom from the Soviet Union's grasp. This essay will analyze Ukraine's intricate history and political systems which continue to face the challenge of its geopolitical legacy, all the while advancing its complex national and ethnic identity.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine gained independence with a 92% support rate for its separation (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022). A huge Russian-speaking diaspora found itself within the borders of what came to be Ukraine, leading to confusion and anxiety about the concept of ethnicity (Harris, 2020). Leonid Kravchuk was elected as the first president of the independent Ukraine—at the time of the U.S.S.R.'s collapse he was favorable, establishing independence for Ukraine quickly and successfully. “Kravchuk cleverly switched from communism to Ukrainian nationalism without a hitch, gaining popular credibility with surprising talent” (Åslund, 2009, p. 34). The president also played a crucial role in establishing a sense of nationalism in the country at the start of its independence, adopting three national symbols: the trident, the blue-and-yellow flag, and the old national anthem. “His shortcoming, however, was that he had a minimal political agenda, essentially consisting of the establishment of the Ukrainian state and amicable foreign relations as well as his maintenance of power” (p. 35). He was also indecisive and uneducated on the topic of economic policy, and uninterested in political institution-building. Unlike Russian President Boris Yeltsin, Kravchuck barely used his

powers, leaving Ukraine's parliament dysfunctional and fractured for more than a decade; however, his virtues lay in the fact that he stuck to peacefulness and democratic rules both in foreign and domestic affairs.

Although support for the country's independence was incredibly high, Ukraine faced many challenges following its separation from the Soviets. Specifically in the 1990s, Ukraine experienced significant suffering as a result of its Soviet-planned economy collapsing. "There was widespread economic suffering, with shortages, blackouts, inflation, and spiking emigration" (Lutsevych & Wallace, 2021). Russia's economic recovery from the Soviet Union's collapse was similarly an unsteady one. After the collapse, Yeltsin initiated a series of "shock therapy" reforms in an attempt to quickly move the Russian Federation over to a market economy. With this came a strict limitation on government spending, state investments being redirected from military industries to consumer production, a cut on government subsidies, the elimination of government price controls, privatization of major production sectors, and the revoking of government control over foreign trade (Hays, n.d.). For Ukraine, its greatest economic problem lay in the persistence of the ruble zone, which consisted of fifteen central banks that were still issuing rubles following the Soviet Union's collapse (Åslund, 2009, p. 37). "Ukrainian officials hoped to exploit the ruble zone for continued access to cheap Russian raw materials and credits, therefore postponing their long-declared introduction of a national currency." Ukraine's involvement in the ruble zone was on-and-off, with its exit being repeatedly declared but not actually happening. In an attempt to separate from the ruble zone, Ukraine introduced their own coupons, *karbovanets*, which essentially functioned as cash while bank transfers still operated in the ruble zone. "It was a mess, and the National Bank of Ukraine (NBU) continued to issue ruble credits." Due to this wild monetary regime, the country

experienced significant hyperinflation during 1993, arguably being “the single biggest blow to Ukraine,” according to Åslund.

After losing nearly a quarter of its gross domestic product in the 1990s due to the socioeconomic crisis, Ukraine experienced some benefits from privatization and liberalization reforms—by the late 2000s, inflation had been effectively managed, and a resurgence in growth and investment contributed to elevating output to levels never seen before the country’s independence (Minakov & Rojansky, 2018). Ukraine operates as a unitary premier-presidential republic, in which the elected president rules alongside a cabinet and prime minister. Following multiple leadership changes throughout the 1990s, the country took a turn in 2004, experiencing the first of two significant revolutionary cycles in its history thus far. During the presidential runoff election in 2004, nonpartisan exit polls “had given Yushchenko a commanding lead, with 52 percent of the votes, compared to Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich's 43 percent” (Karatnycky, 2005, p. 35-36). The second round of the highly contested presidential election took place on November 21, and by the next day it was clear that President Leonid Kuchma’s regime had rigged the elections to the advantage of Yanukovych, who was Ukraine’s current prime minister at the time and was largely supported by Russia (Åslund & McFaul, 2006, p. 1). Without hesitation, former prime minister Victor Yushchenko declared that the election and victory had been stolen from him. In response to the fraudulent election, protests immediately sparked across the country. “Within days, an estimated 500,000 protestors gathered in downtown Kyiv, waving orange flags and wearing orange clothing, the chosen color of Yushchenko’s campaign and the subsequent revolution” (Bivings, n.d.). This was the last straw for Ukraine—Yanukovych’s ties to Russian political and criminal groups were well known, and much of Ukraine had already grown impatient with the widespread political corruption at the

time. Yanukovich's supporters in eastern Ukraine threatened secession from the rest of the country, and on December 3rd, 2004, the Supreme Court ruled the election as invalid (Comunale, 2023).

The Orange Revolution lasted from November 2004 until January 2005, and had a profound impact on Ukrainians' sense of nationalism. "Most people on both sides of the border continued to regard the fates of the two notionally separate countries as inextricably intertwined. This changed dramatically in 2004 when millions of Ukrainians mobilized in defense of free elections" (Dickinson, 2020). Up until this point, the political, cultural, and economic boundaries between post-soviet Ukraine and Russia were blurred, largely in part due to the continued prevalence of Russian influence in Ukraine's media and popular culture (Kuzio, 2021). "The protests served as a national awakening, establishing Ukraine's democratic credentials and setting the country on a path that diverged sharply from the increasing authoritarianism of Vladimir Putin's Russia" (Dickinson). Prior to the Orange Revolution, citizens in both Ukraine and Russia viewed the two countries as being inevitably woven together. Following the protests, this was no longer the case. Within Russia, the revolution triggered a notable shift in atmosphere as Moscow aimed to prevent the spread of democracy from Ukraine. This manifested in an unusual display of state-sanctioned nationalism that embraced a connection to the Soviet legacy, while at the same time downplaying the wrongdoings of the Communist era. "In the sixteen years since the Orange Revolution, Ukraine has staged eight national votes without ever witnessing a return to the kind of political oppression and rampant vote-rigging that remains routine elsewhere in the former USSR." This accomplishment has reinforced the concept of European identity within the Ukrainian population and has heightened the psychological sense of detachment from authoritarian Russia.

As Ukraine transitioned from the transformative aftermath of the Orange Revolution, it found itself once again at the crossroads of political upheaval not even a decade later. “After pro-Kremlin President Viktor Yanukovich took power in 2010, the political and business landscape in Ukraine was gradually deteriorating” (Sobolieva, n.d.). In a 2010 study, it was found that more than half of Ukrainians polled by the Razumkov Center, 56.6 percent to be exact, believed that political censorship still existed within Ukraine (Interfax-Ukraine, 2010). In November 2013, Yanukovich's refusal to sign the eagerly awaited Association Agreement with the European Union, coupled with his subsequent acquisition of a loan from the Kremlin, ignited protests across the nation. The largest demonstration unfolded in Kyiv on Independence Square, marking a critical turning point in Ukraine's political landscape. This became known as Euromaidan, or the Revolution of Dignity. According to Volodymyr Kulyk, head research fellow at the Institute of Political and Ethnic Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, “The cataclysmic events of 2014—namely, the victory of the Euromaidan revolution against the authoritarian and Russia-leaning regime and the subsequent Russian military intervention in Crimea and the Donbas disguised as the protection of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers—have strengthened Ukrainian citizen’s identification with their country and its eponymous nation” (2023). In one of his studies, Kulyk found that after Euromaidan, Ukrainian citizens began to more positively view certain nationalistic elements like the flag, state language, and national anthem. In comparing pre- and post-Euromaidan patterns of identification through native language and nationality, Kulyk found a shift from Russian to Ukrainian categories, which he interpreted as “a kind of bottom-up de-Russification, a popular drift away from Russianness.”

Amidst the last days of Euromaidan, 30,000 Russian troops entered Crimea while Yanukovich’s pro-Russian regime was focused on killing protesters in downtown Kyiv

(Minicozzi-Wheeland, n.d.). The troops were dressed in unidentifiable green uniforms and seized the Crimean parliament building just days after Yanukovich fled to Russia amidst the protests (Comunale, 2023). “Pro-Russian legislators then convened and elected Sergey Aksyonov as prime minister.” On March 16th, 2014, a referendum was held in which Moscow claimed that 96.7 percent of Crimeans voted to become part of Russia, essentially claiming Crimea as now being part of the Russian Federation. “According to a May 2014 report from the Russian Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights, there was possibly only a 30 percent turnout of the Crimean population when voting on the independence referendum.” NATO and the West both disputed Russia’s referendum claim, and Russia’s role in annexing Crimea has been condemned by the international community as not only illegal, but also as being a flagrant disregard for both Ukraine’s sovereignty and international law (Harris, 2020).

Since gaining its independence in 1991, Ukraine has experienced two revolutions, the annexation of the republic on its southern peninsula, significant political corruption, and serious tensions with Russia. In 2019, Volodymyr Zelenskyy was elected as Ukraine’s current president, with his anti-corruption platform gaining him widespread support and a landslide win over incumbent Petro Poroshenko (Ray, 2023). Within the first 100 days of his presidency, Zelenskyy established a one-party majority in the Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine’s unicameral parliament, something no other president had ever done before (Ruble & Minakov, 2022). This was regarded as perhaps being “a mark of Ukrainian voters’ intense desire for change that they gave Zelensky and his party... a generous mandate, amounting almost to *carte blanche*, to fix some adamant problems and set Ukraine firmly on a westward orientation.” In the years since his election, Zelenskyy has held a steady opposition to Putin and a strong resolve for peace and

anti-corruption, gaining the admiration and support of international leaders across the world (Pereira, 2022).

After Crimea's annexation, Ukrainian exports to Russia collapsed "from \$29 billion in 2011 to roughly \$5 billion in 2021. Meanwhile exports to the EU almost doubled since 2012" (Lutsevych & Wallace, 2021). Since Russia's invasion into Ukraine in 2022, the European Union united with Ukraine in opposition to Russia, "compelling it to vigorously support Ukrainian democracy, and to seek alternative energy supplies." Lutsevych and Wallace argue that Ukraine is likely closer now to gaining membership to the EU than it ever has before. In addition to being a key partner for the EU, Ukraine also has the capability of its armed forces to defend its territory, and any remnant of a dream of Ukraine being a solidified part of a Russian sphere of influence is gone. Ukraine also has a gas agreement with the European Union, which is transited across Ukraine from Russian fields and into the EU; this agreement will run until 2024. "Before the 2022 invasion it was widely understood that so long as this vital energy supply ran through Ukraine, Russia was unlikely to invade and the EU was compelled to mediate often conflicting Ukraine-Russian gas relations." In response to the invasion, Germany's new government of Olaf Scholz pledged to increase their defense spending and divest themselves from Russian energy suppliers, instead investing in helping to arm Ukraine.

Ukraine's relationship to the West, especially to the United States, since 1992 has largely ridden on the momentum of the successful Lisbon Protocol (Garnett, 1996, p. 104). After the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, "the newly-independent states of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine inherited more than 3,000 strategic nuclear weapons..., as well as at least 3,000 tactical or battlefield weapons" (Reif, 2020). The U.S. and Soviet Union announced in 1991 the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives, the objective of which was to substantially reduce their tactical



nuclear weapons arsenals. By the end of 1992, all of the dispersed Soviet tactical weapons were reportedly returned back to Russia; however, the strategic weapons posed a larger issue. In a series of talks between Russia, the U.S., Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Belarus, an agreement was reached known as the Lisbon Protocol, which made all five states party to the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. This treaty “required Washington and Moscow to each cut their deployed strategic nuclear forces from approximately 10,000 warheads apiece to down below 6,000 warheads.” The Lisbon Protocol signaled the intentions of Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan in becoming non-nuclear-weapon states, a commitment that all three states met and continue to abide by to this day. According to Sherman Garnett, former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary for Defense for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia, “It is difficult to overestimate the legacy of the nuclear period in U.S.-Ukrainian relations. The resolution of the nuclear question created a pattern of U.S. engagement and cooperation with Ukraine” (p. 114). While Ukraine has achieved successful relations with the West, Russia certainly hasn’t; one of the key reasons for this being Russia’s consistent failure to work in a constructive manner with any of Ukraine’s leaders since 1991 (Kuzio, 2021).

Over the course of the last three decades, Ukraine has separated itself more and more from Russia following its two revolutions and Crimea’s annexation. “Despite the apparently decisive nature of Ukraine’s geopolitical divorce from Russia, the confrontation between the two countries continues and is currently at its bloodiest stage” (Kuzio, 2021). In February 2022, Russian forces attacked Kyiv in an attempt to overthrow President Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s government (Bigg, 2023). Russia’s full-scale invasion has continued since 2022, and a litany of violations of international humanitarian law have been committed by Russian forces—most prevalently an indiscriminate bombing and shelling of civilian areas, which have hit homes and

educational and healthcare facilities (Wareham, 2023). “The death, devastation and destruction inside Ukraine have been staggering—forcing millions of Ukrainians to flee and uprooting a third of the entire population” (USA For The UN Refugee Agency, 2023).

Russia’s full-scale attack on Ukraine stems from decades of strain on Russia’s end to control Ukraine’s political outcomes. “Putin has long been fixated on controlling Ukraine. He’s tried repeatedly—albeit unsuccessfully—over the past 20 years to bend Ukraine to Russia’s will” (Hill, 2023). In attacking Ukraine, Putin hopes to restore Ukraine as part of the Russian national patrimony, resist any further eastward expansion of NATO, and reclaim Russia’s historical sphere of influence. Amidst the war, political scientist Dr. Marnie Howlett has found that a strong sense of nationalism among Ukrainians has still remained, and arguably even grown, since the initial invasion in February 2022 (2023, p. 64). “Beyond ordinary citizens’ tangible efforts to support the military and defend their cities and towns, overt expressions of nationhood have been widely observed across the country since February 2022, and shared globally across multiple platforms, especially in video form.” In addition to an increased sense of Ukrainian nationalism, anti-Russian ethnic nationalism has also become prominent among Ukrainian public discourse (Lieven, 2023). “Old insults and new epithets like ‘Rashist’ (a fusing of ‘Russian’ and ‘Fascist’)” have been used by Ukrainians toward Russians. At its core, the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine has been about “each country redressing its national position vis-à-vis the other: Ukraine is seeking to extricate itself from the Russian sphere of interests while Russia is determined to re-establish this relationship, if necessary, by breaching international law” (Harris, 2020). Ukraine’s conflict with Russia stems from a significant instrumentalization of historical narratives, namely a fear of the repetition of past events.

In its three decades of independence, Ukraine's revolutions, ongoing war, and severe tensions with Russia have contributed not only to its unique development as a post-Soviet nation, but also its particular ethnic and national identity. Ukraine's most recent—and only—census was conducted in 2001, and “revealed a massive re-identification into Ukrainians among people who (or whose parents) used to consider themselves Russians” (Kulyk, 2017, p. 17). The concept of identity specifically has been mobilized and instrumentalized by Russia with the purpose of polarizing Ukraine's society in an attempt to divert attention from political reforms and illustrate to Russian citizens that the interests of Russia override international law (Harris, 2020). Ukraine's 2014 presidential elections especially politicized ethno-linguistic and regional identities. “Political parties adopted the habit of using the ‘language issue’ and regional differences to mobilize their electorates,” which eroded social cohesion within Ukraine (Minakov & Rojansky, 2018).

Despite Ukraine's reforms, revolutions, and intermittent bursts of progress, Ukraine still has much work ahead of it in creating a thriving market and stable systems. Its notable diversity in regional, economic, and political interests makes it quite different from countries like Poland or the Baltic states, in which there is absolutely no question of these countries' basic Western orientation (Garnett, 1996, p. 115). “Ukraine's hybrid politics and resulting political cycles have had important impacts on prosperity, social security, and basic living conditions for ordinary Ukrainians” (Minakov & Rojansky, 2018). Since its independence in 1991, Ukraine has faced a myriad of challenges such as political corruption, economic hyperinflation, multiple revolutions and large-scale protests, continued striving for autonomy and freedom from the shadow of the Soviet Union, and an ongoing war with Russia. These have all contributed to its current ethnic

and national identity, and will continue to influence not only Ukrainians' sense of identity, but also its future within both the Western and European spheres.

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