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Ukrainian versus Pan-Russian Identities: The Roots of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

This article critically analyses commonly used descriptions of Ukrainian politics as divided between 'nationalist' versus 'pro-Russian', and 'ethnic' versus 'civic' forces which do not adequately explain Ukrainian politics or understand the roots of Russian military aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. An alternative framework is provided of competition between Ukrainian identity, which believes Ukrainians are a distinct people different to Russians, and pan-Russian identity, which believes Russians and Ukrainians are 'fraternal brothers' who have always been and always will be united in the Russian World. The Euromaidan Revolution, Russian military aggression in 2014, increasing domination of Ukrainian identity policies and weakness of pro-Russian political parties led to the progressive marginalisation of pan-Russian identity in Ukraine. The marginalisation of pan-Russian identity and unwillingness of Presidents Petro Poroshenko and Volodymyr Zelenskyy to implement the Russian version of the 2014-2015 Minsk Accords, which would have transformed Ukraine into a Russian satellite, led to the Kremlin's decision to launch a full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022. The goals of Russia's full-scale invasion were and remain regime change (i.e., installation of a pro-Russian puppet regime), destruction of Ukrainian identity (i.e., de-nazification) and its replacement with a hegemonic pan-Russian identity in a truncated (i.e., without Crimea and New Russia [southeast Ukraine]) Little Russian satellite controlled by Russia (i.e., de-militarisation).

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This article is divided into three sections. The first section discusses nationalism and nation-states and how purely civic states exist only in theory. This section critically engages with the hitherto commonly held description of Ukraine as divided between ‘nationalist’ and pro-Russian’ forces and ‘ethnic’ and ‘civic’ presidents. Centre-right Ukrainian presidents, although described as ‘nationalist’ and ‘ethnic,’ have a better track record on democratisation and elections than ‘liberal’ (centrist) leaders. The second section offers an alternative framework for understanding Ukrainian politics as a struggle for dominance between Ukrainian identity, which views Ukrainians as a distinct people to Russians with a different and democratic political culture, and pan-Russian identity, which views Russians and Ukrainians as always having been closely united in an unbreakable bond. Since 1991, Russia has intervened in Ukrainian affairs in support of pan-Russian identity with the goal of Ukraine following in the footsteps of Belarus under self-declared President Alexander Lukashenka. This had always been difficult because Belarus is very different to Ukraine where pan-Russian identity struggled to become dominant; of Ukrainian presidents only Viktor Yanukovich supported pan-Slavic identity. The third section explains how the Euromaidan Revolution and Russian military aggression in 2014 led to the progressive marginalisation of pan-Russian identity and the dominance of Ukrainian identity in Ukraine. The Party of Regions disintegrated in February 2014 and its two successors, the Opposition Bloc and Opposition Platform-For Life Parties, were far less popular. Ukraine’s de-communisation laws banned Communist and Soviet symbols, which the Communist Party of Ukraine (the Party of Regions satellite political force) refused to jettison, thereby leading to its inability to participate in elections. The growth of support for Ukrainian identity and the loss of sixteen percent of voters in Crimea and the Donbas, many of whom would have traditionally voted for the Party of Regions and Communist Party of Ukraine, made it impossible for pro-Russian parties to win parliamentary and presidential elections after 2014 (see D’Anieri, 2019b).

The new reality of a dominant Ukrainian identity and marginalisation of pan-Russian identity, coupled with Russia’s failure to impose its version of the 2014–2015 Minsk Accords which would have transformed Ukraine into a Little Russian satellite, led to Russia’s decision to launch a full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022. The goal of the special military operation was, and remains, regime change (i.e., installation of a pro-Russian puppet regime), destruction of Ukrainian identity (i.e., de-nazification) and installation of a hegemonic pan-Russian identity in a truncated (i.e., without Crimea and New Russia [southeast Ukraine]), Little Russian satellite controlled by Russia (i.e., de-militarisation).

Understanding Nationalism and Nation-States

Fully civic states only exist in theory (see Kuzio, 2002). Scholars who define politics in post-communist states as divided between civic and ethnic political leaders have wrongly assumed civic states exist outside of theoretical models; they do not (see Onuch & Hale, 2022). In practice, nation-states have always included civic and ethno-cultural attributes. Nevertheless, scholarly literature has traditionally described European and North American states as civic and central-eastern European countries as ethnic.

This article proposes an alternative framework of competition for dominance between Ukrainian identity, which views Ukrainians as a people distinct to Russians, and pan-Russian identity, which views Russians and Ukrainians forever united as ‘fraternal brothers.’ Table 1 provides a comparison of the different policies promoted by Ukrainian identity and pan-Russian identity. Only applying the label ‘nationalist’ to Ukrainian identity sends a wrong and confusing signal that it is undemocratic and intolerant while its ‘pro-Russian’ competitor is

TABLE 1 Ukrainian in Competition With Pan-Russian Identity.

	Ukrainian Identity		Pan-Russian Identity
Policies	Centrist and Centre-Right Parties		Communist Party of Ukraine, Party of Regions, Crimean Russian Nationalists
Ukrainian People	Ukrainians are the core, titular nation. Ukrainians are a distinct people separate to Russians.		Ukrainians and Russians are co-members of a bicultural nation.
Reforms	As in Europe, a culture of individualism and love of freedom. Support for political, legal, and economic reforms and to move Ukraine away from the Soviet legacy and the Russian World and closer to Europe.		As in Russia, a collectivist and authoritarian political culture. Weaker support for liberal and political views and democratisation. Opposition to, or disinterest in, reforms.
Religion	Support autocephaly for the Orthodox Church of Ukraine		Oppose autocephaly for Ukrainian Orthodox. View the Russian Orthodox Church as the pan-Russian Church of the eastern Slavs.
Language	Support only Ukrainian as the state language and oppose Russian as a second state language.		As in the USSR, the Russian language is superior to Ukrainian. Support for Russian to be constitutionally elevated to a second state language or legislatively made into an official language in regions with a high percentage of Russian-speakers.
Attitudes to History	Ukrainian history is independent of Russian history. The <i>Holodomor</i> was a genocide against the Ukrainian people. Official recognition of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). De-communisation laws led to the great patriotic war being replaced by World War II and the banning of Communist, Soviet, and Nazi symbols. From Russia's 2022 invasion, support for Ukraine's de-Russification.		Ukraine is part of eastern Slavic history where Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians were born together in Kyiv Rus and would remain forever united. Uphold the Soviet view of the 1654 Treaty of Pereyaslav as the 'reunification' of Ukraine and Russia. There was no <i>Holodomor</i> , only a Soviet-wide famine that equally affected Russians and Ukrainians. Russians and Ukrainians jointly celebrate victory in the great patriotic war.
Soviet Nostalgia	No nostalgia for the USSR.		Strong sentiments of Soviet nostalgia.
Foreign Policy	<i>Centrists until 2004:</i> Ukraine joined only economic bodies in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and opposed joining CIS	<i>Centre-right:</i> Withdrawal from CIS structures, return to Europe, and support for EU and NATO membership.	Ukraine as part of the Russian World and a member of the Eurasian Economic Union. Ambivalent or hostile towards Europe and disbelief in Ukraine

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Policies	Ukrainian Identity	Pan-Russian Identity
	Centrist and Centre-Right Parties	Communist Party of Ukraine, Party of Regions, Crimean Russian Nationalists
	political and security structures. Supported NATO and EU membership.	surviving a reduction of of economic and trade ties with Russia. Strongly opposed to NATO membership. In 2013, Yanukovich refused to sign an Association Agreement with the EU.

somehow less ethnic and thereby more civic. In fact, both identities include ethno-cultural factors; for example, the former promotes one state language (Ukrainian) while the latter supports two state languages (Ukrainian and Russian). Zbigniew Wojnowski (2017, p.16) reminds us of that eastern Slavic (i.e., pan-Russian) nationalism was a key component of Soviet culture because the USSR was a ‘nationalist state,’ showing how east Slavic (pan-Russian) identity also incorporates ethno-cultural factors.

Civic attributes in a nation-state traditionally refer to state institutions, the constitution, political system, and legislation. Ethno-cultural factors in a nation-state encompasses the designated official (sometimes referred to as state) language, culture, historical myths, and national symbols. The proportion between civic and ethno-cultural attributes in nation-states is a dynamic process that has changed throughout history (see Kuzio, 2002). In the twentieth century, the civic component became proportionally larger as Western nation-states became more inclusive of previously marginalised groups and more tolerant of different views on traumatic periods of history. Western nation-states, for example, did not grant the vote to women until after World Wars I and II; France and Italy expanded their franchise to women as late as 1944-1946, a decade later than Turkey.

Ethnic versus Civic? Nationalist versus Pro-Russian?

Scholars have described Ukraine as divided between a ‘nationalist’ West and a ‘pro-Russian’ East or between ‘ethnic’ and ‘civic’ presidents. Some of this reflects Hans Kohn’s artificial division between civic Western and ethnic eastern states (see Kuzio, 2002). Onuch and Hale (2022) define Petro Poroshenko as an ethnic president in contrast to civic Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Civic is used subjectively in contemporary Ukrainian studies by applying it to politicians who scholars view positively, although often without placing the term within the theoretical literature. Civic is used in contemporary Ukrainian studies in four different ways:

1. Nation-states are composed of civic and ethnic attributes and the proportion between them changes over time, as with Ukraine since 1991 (Kuzio, 2002). Both identities in Ukraine – ethnic Ukrainian and east Slavic – include ethno-cultural (and civic) attributes. But of the two identities, only ethnic Ukrainian is committed to strengthening the civic component through its stronger support for democratisation.

2. Ukraine became increasingly civic since the 2013-2014 Euromaidan Revolution (Aliyev, 2019, 2021; Barrington, 2021; Bureiko & Moga, 2019; Chuprya, 2015; Kaihko, 2018; Kulyk, 2014, 2016; Pop-Eleches & Robertson, 2018).
3. Ukraine became civic in 2019 with the election of Zelenskyy (Onuch & Hale, 2022, 18).
4. Georgii Kasianov (2018, pp.113, 142) is critical of 'nationalist' memory politics under Presidents Viktor Yushchenko and Poroshenko and believes the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory had the possibility to become 'a serious academic and analytical centre' and Ukraine adopted 'pluralistic' memory politics during pro-Russian and authoritarian Viktor Yanukovich's presidency (2010-14). Petro (2023b) argues there is a need for tolerance and more 'civic identity' in Ukraine by ending the discrimination of Russian speakers, Russian language, and Russian Orthodox Church (Kuzio, 2020, pp. 82-105; Petro, 2023b).

Ukrainian politics is described as a struggle between 'nationalists' and 'pro-Russian forces,' a framework which negatively others the former but not the latter. It is theoretically and comparatively misplaced to define only one side of Ukrainian politics as 'nationalist.' Nationalist and ethnic Ukrainian presidents are, for example, described as promoting 'nationalising policies' which are unpopular with Russian speakers (Eras, 2023, p.118). Ukrainian politicians are 'nationalist lawmakers,' the Orthodox Church of Ukraine is a 'nationalist alternative' to the Russian Orthodox Church and 'nationalists' call for the de-russification of Ukraine (Petro, 2023b).

Of the two competing identities in Ukraine, pan-Russian is more authoritarian and intolerant. Upholders of pan-Russian identity in Ukraine and Russia are hostile to policies in support of the Ukrainian language which they condemn as persecution and discrimination of Russian speakers. Popova and Shevel (2024, p.109) write that pro-Russian forces would continue the Soviet era marginalisation of the Ukrainian language in Ukraine. In Belarus, Lukashenko's pan-Russian identity policies have continued Soviet era Russification and the marginalisation of the Belarusian language.

Tamta Gelashvili (2023) continues a common misnomer of conflating nationalists and the centre-right in Ukrainian politics. Serhii Plokhy (XII-XIII, pp.264, 270, 279) describes divisions in Ukraine over history as between 'pro-Soviet' and 'pro-nationalist' forces and Zelenskyy having created a 'new majority' composed of 'nationalists and liberals.' Popova and Shevel (2024, pp.58) similarly describe Ukraine's centre-right as a 'nationalist faction' aligned with the reformist camp in Ukraine. In the same breath, Popova and Shevel (2024, p.58) place Ukraine's 'nationalist faction' in the same ideological camp as the 'red-brown' (i.e., communist-fascist) coalition which launched a coup d'état against Russian president Boris Yeltsin in autumn 1993.

Ukraine is led by 'Ukrainian nationalists' since the Euromaidan Revolution and President Poroshenko 'adopted an increasingly nationalist stance' after taking 'over the nationalist discourse' used by former President Yushchenko (Gelashvili, 2023). Poor use of terminology mirrors Russian disinformation about Ukraine. Established in 2015, the data base of the *EUvsDisinfo* project of the European External Action Service's East StratCom Task Force includes over 1,000 Russian media entries condemning the Euromaidan Revolution as a putsch that brought nationalists and neo-Nazis to power.¹ Russian President Vladimir Putin (2022a) claimed that Russia's recognition of the 'independence' of the Donetsk Peoples Republic (DNR) and Luhansk Peoples Republic (LNR) and special military operation (i.e., full-scale invasion) came about because of the 'genocide of the millions of people who live there and who pinned their hopes on Russia.'

Ukrainian nationalist politicians are 'authoritarian' (Gelashvili, 2023), Russophobic, persecute Russian speakers and the Russian Orthodox Church (compare the similarities between Petro, 2023b and Lavrov, 2023). The greatest threat to Russophones comes not from Ukrainian nationalist policies but from Russian military aggression that has primarily affected Russian speaking southeastern Ukraine. The Russian-speaking port of Mariupol² was razed and tens of

thousands of its pre-war population of 450,000 were killed, filtrated, deported to Russia, their children were abducted, and they became IDP's (internally displaced persons) (see *We Had No Choice*, 2022). Russia's destruction of Ukraine is 'constructive destruction' and a 'myth of fascist erasure' that would re-juvenate Russia and lead to its rebirth in a new era (Garner, 2023, pp.123-124, 126, 137, 139, 143). Since 2022, Russia is 'where fascist destruction and regeneration are ordinary' and 'a place where fascist language and symbolism run rampant' (Garner, 2023, p.143). Russia will be reborn and purified through the 'obliteration of Ukraine' and a 'cycle of destruction, rescue, and resurrection' (Garner, 2023, pp.123, 125, 127). Since February 2022, Russia has launched over 10,000 S-300/400, Iskander-M and Kinzhal missiles and 5,000 Shahed drones at Ukrainian civilian targets and utilities infrastructure. In only five days between 29 December 2023-2 January 2024, Russia launched 300 missiles and 200 drones against Ukrainian regions in the largest attacks since the first day of the invasion (Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, 2023, 2024).

Using Ukrainian nationalism as a catch-all-term for political forces seeking Ukraine's future in Europe is accompanied with the exaggeration of Ukraine divided into pro-Russian and Ukrainian nationalist regions,; that is, a country with a bi-cultural identity (Kuzio, 2020, p.114; see Kuzyk, 2019; Brik & Murtazashvili, 2022). Petro (2023a, pp.36-89) describes Ukraine as 'two nations in one state.' Arel and Driscoll (2023) describe the conflict in Ukraine from 2014-2021 as a 'civil war' between Ukrainian and Russian speakers. Like most scholars, Plokhyy (2023, p.235) describes the 2014-2021 conflict in Ukraine as a 'Russian-inspired and funded insurgency,' rather than a civil war (see also Kuzio, 2020, pp.106-132; Wilson, 2016).

Using the terms 'nationalist' and 'ethnic' to describe centre-right political parties and presidents in Ukraine is confusing for four reasons. Firstly, it has little in common with comparative politics while negatively othering one wing of Ukrainian politics. Centre-right parties in Europe and North America are usually not defined as 'nationalist' and yet some of these parties, for example in France and the US, incorporate policies from the far-right. Secondly, conflating Ukraine's centre-right and far-right makes it difficult to explain why the latter failed to win votes in elections held during a war with Russia; traditionally, support for ethnic nationalism tends to grow during a bloody conflict. Thirdly, every Ukrainian region, except one, voted for Zelenskyy, who is Jewish-Ukrainian, in the 2019 presidential elections. Fourthly, if the centre-right are understood as nationalists they should be opposed to Ukraine's membership of the EU, as is the case with populist nationalists throughout Europe. In fact, national democrats are the country's most strident supporters of returning Ukraine to Europe (see Wolczuk, 2000).

Changes in Ukrainian Identity

Changes in Ukrainian identity had been taking place in an evolutionary fashion since the late 1980s and these became more rapid after 2014, and especially following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. Conflicts, wars, and bloodshed have always speeded up the crystallisation of national identities. The Euromaidan Revolution brought about a major growth in civic and nationalist activism that was continued in the form of volunteer groups supporting the army and the formation of volunteer battalions from self-defence groups in the Euromaidan Revolution (see Poznyak-Khomenko, 2020).

Many scholars have written about both the growth of civic and ethnic identity in Ukraine since the Euromaidan Revolution with civic and ethnic identities spreading from the west and centre to Ukraine's southeast. Petro denies the validity of Ukrainian polling data since 2014, believing it understates pro-Russian feelings, exaggerates anti-Russian attitudes, and downplays regional divisions (Kuzio, 2020, p.108). Several scholars, including Onuch and Hale (2018) in an earlier study, have written about how Ukraine became more civic after 2014 (see Aliyev, 2019, 2021; Bureiko & Moga, 2019; Chuprya, 2015; Kaihko, 2018; Kulyk, 2014, 2016;

Pop-Eleches & Robertson, 2018). Onuch and Hale (2022, p.202) ignore important changes that took place prior to Zelenskyy's election in 2019 and only focus on one aspect of identity – civic – which had already been growing.

Ukraine's greater civic identity was reflected in a majority of Ukraine's Russophones showing their loyalty to ethnic Ukrainian identity over the Russian World (i.e., pan-Russian identity) (Bureiko & Moga, 2019, p.138). Volodymyr Kulyk (2014, pp.120–121) writes that 'modern Ukrainian anti-imperial nationalism' has a 'deeply inclusive' nature and is supported by Russophones and Jews in Ukraine; Ukrainian identity is opposed to Russian imperial nationalism and competes with pan-Russian identity. Russian speakers were prominent in Ukrainian forces fighting for Ukraine in the Donbas between 2014–2021 (see Aliyev, 2019, 2021). Changes in the identity of Russian speakers in Ukraine's southeast were especially pronounced in Zelenskyy's home region of Dnipropetrovsk where the most radical de-communisation process took place (see Kuzio et al., 2022, p.814; Oliynyk & Kuzio, 2021).

Democrats and Authoritarians in Ukraine

Stephen Shulman (2005, p.82) wrote that ethnic Ukrainian identity (which I have changed to Ukrainian identity in this article) had not hindered democratisation in Ukraine, 'as scholars and commentators who promote "good" civic national identity over "bad" ethnic identity seem to believe.' Communist and authoritarian pan-Russian identity has impeded while Ukrainian identity has promoted democratisation and market economic reforms.

Gelashvili (2023, p.5) describes 'Ukrainian nationalists' as nativist and authoritarian in contrast to Zelenskyy who is a liberal. Onuch and Hale (2022, pp.8, 10, 23–24) stress Zelenskyy's emphasis on citizenship as being different to earlier presidents by promoting 'civic national belonging,' a 'strong sense of civic duty' and Ukraine's 'diversity.' Popova and Shevel (2024, p.189) describe Zelenskyy's 2019 election as the victory of 'civic' Ukrainian identity.

Zelenskyy's 'civic Ukrainian national identity' is not fundamentally different to that espoused by four earlier presidents (Leonid Kravchuk, Leonid Kuchma, Yushchenko, Poroshenko); all five presidents are supporters of an Ukrainian identity. National democratic forces, whether Ukrainian dissidents in the USSR or the Ukrainian Popular Movement for Restructuring (commonly known as *Rukh* [Movement]), supported an inclusive, civic understanding of the Ukrainian nation in the 1990s. In 1991, Ukraine provided citizenship to all those who were resident in Ukraine. Crimean Tatars, Jews and other national minorities have been included within *Rukh*, Yushchenko's Our Ukraine, the Poroshenko Bloc, and its successor the European Solidarity Party. Poroshenko's 2019 election slogan 'Army, Faith, Language' was different to Zelenskyy's election platform. But Poroshenko's election slogan would not be unusual among politicians in Western democracies if their countries were at war. Upon being elected, Zelenskyy did not change any of his predecessors policies, unlike Yanukovych who cancelled decrees honouring nationalist leaders that had been signed by Yushchenko, upgraded Russian to an official language, and adopted the Russian understanding of the 1933 famine as Soviet-wide and not directed at Ukrainians. After being elected, Zelenskyy became in some areas more radical on ethno-cultural questions. Poroshenko largely ignored the Russian occupation of Crimea while Zelenskyy insisted the Minsk Accords be revised to include Crimea, he launched the Crimean Platform in 2020 to lobby the international community to not recognise its occupation, and he has supported the military liberation of Crimea. During Zelenskyy's presidency there have been greater restrictions on the Russian Orthodox Church, four pro-Russian television closed were closed, and twelve pro-Russian political parties have been banned.

The ethnic versus civic framework brakes down when one investigates the record of national democratic Ukrainian presidents having been more tolerant of their political opponents and

respective of election outcomes than Ukraine's liberals. Presidents Kravchuk, Yushchenko, and Poroshenko did not attempt to remain in office unconstitutionally and did not question election results that voted them out of office in 1994, 2010, and 2019 respectively. Centrist President Kuchma floated the idea of describing his second term as his first because it had taken place after the adoption of Ukraine's constitution in 1996, arguing this allowed him to stand for a 'second term' in 2004 (Kuchma decided against taking this path). Elections cannot be held in May 2024 under martial law which is in place since Russia launched its full-scale invasion. Zelenskyy will remain president until the military situation improves and martial law is ended.

President Yanukovich used selective use of justice to imprison opposition leaders Yulia Tymoshenko and Yuriy Lutsenko. During Zelenskyy's presidency, criminal cases were launched against Viktor Medvedchuk, leader of the Opposition Platform-For Life Party, and Poroshenko, leader of the European Solidarity Party. Popova and Shevel (2024, p.202) describe the criminal charges against Medvedchuk for treason as being long overdue because of his close ties to the Kremlin; meanwhile, they write those criminal charges against Poroshenko 'appeared problematic for the democratic credentials of the Zelenskyy administration.' Twenty criminal cases were opened against Poroshenko and his bank accounts were frozen (Usi kryminalni spravy Poroshenka, 2020). A government of national unity during the war (see Karatnycky, 2023) is impossible because these criminal cases against Poroshenko are suspended, not closed, and they could be revived after the war ends. Half of Ukrainians believed the criminal cases against Medvedchuk and Poroshenko to be political persecution, with 28 percent disagreeing. Meanwhile, 46 percent did not believe the veracity of the accusations while 40 percent did (Kyiv International Institute of Sociological Studies, 2022). Kyiv Mayor Klitschko accused Zelenskyy of harbouring authoritarian tendencies after Poroshenko was blocked by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) from travelling abroad to meet Western political leaders (Bennets, 2023).

Threats to Ukraine's media freedom are of concern since Russia's invasion of Ukraine when independent television outlets were integrated into a national marathon.³ Three television channels then owned by Poroshenko were refused access to the national marathon which removed them from being transmitted electronically. Since then, Poroshenko's three channels are only accessible on cable TV and the Internet. Popova and Shevel (2024, p.227) described discrimination against Poroshenko's media as 'concerning, as it represented a narrowing of the information space.' Ukrainians view the national marathon as 'state propaganda' (see Méheut & Mitiuk, 2024). Overall Zelenskyy's democratic record is poorer than that of Poroshenko throwing into doubt descriptions of him as being more civic than his predecessor.

If civic is understood as a greater commitment to democratic values and ethnic (and nationalist) as less supportive of democracy a civic-ethnic framework is of little theoretical and comparative use in understanding Ukrainian politics. Shulman (2005) showed how supporters of what he defined as ethnic Ukrainian ethnic identity are more committed to civic identity of the state, and thereby democratisation, than their east Slavic identity competitors (in my article these have been changed to Ukrainian in competition with pan-Russian identities).

The Struggle for Dominance in Ukraine

Since 1991, Ukrainian leaders could nation-build their country around a distinct Ukrainian nation, drawing on Ukrainian identity, or a Russian-Ukrainian state, based on pan-Russian identity (Shulman, 2005). Russia supported and interfered through soft power and military aggression in favour of the latter. Competition between the pro-Russian Party of Regions supporting Yanukovich's candidacy and pro-European forces backing Yushchenko's candidacy during and after the 2004 presidential elections and Orange Revolution was drawn upon by Shulman (2005) to create a framework for understanding these competing identities in

Ukrainian politics. Zhurzhenko (2021, p.1447) writes that until 2014, Ukraine was faced by political competition between the Party of Regions and Communist Party of Ukraine on the one side, supporting pan-Russian identity, and national democrats and nationalists on the other, backing Ukrainian identity. Popova and Shevel (2024, pp.47-48, 81, 86, 88) divide Ukrainian politics between those supporting a Ukrainian nation distinct from Russian and backers of a common pan-Russian identity of Russians and Ukrainians.

Drawing on Shulman's (2005) framework, this article proposes that five Ukrainian presidents (Kravchuk, Kuchma, Yushchenko, Poroshenko, Zelenskyy) pursued Ukrainian identity. Popova and Shevel (2024, pp.99, 106) write that only Yanukovich 'embraced the Russian-Soviet-East Slavic identity' (i.e., East Slavic understood as pan-Russian). Language policies changed very little between Kuchma and Yushchenko and only Yanukovich attempted to introduce two state languages (Popova & Shevel, 2024, p.110). Pan-Russian identity is different in many major policy areas from Ukrainian identity (see Table 1).

Ukrainian Identity

Left-wing, centrist and centre-right parties' approach ethno-cultural policies differently in Western democracies. Ukraine's centre-right (national democrats), in a similar manner to the centre right in European and North American democracies, have emphasised Ukrainian ethno-cultural aspects of identity. Ukraine's liberal (centrists), like left-wing and centrist parties in Western democracies, support multiculturalism and are less hostile to immigration than their centre-right opponents. There have been only small differences between the ethno-cultural policies pursued by centrist (i.e., Kuchma, Zelenskyy) and presidents allied to or from the national democratic camp (i.e., Kravchuk, Yushchenko and Poroshenko). This provides an explanation as to why this article classifies national democratic Poroshenko and centrist President Zelenskyy as upholders of Ukrainian identity.

Centrists and national democrats have supported Ukrainian as the only state language, autocephaly (independence) for Ukrainian Orthodox from the Russian Orthodox Church, a Ukrainian history separate to that of Russia and the eastern Slavs, condemned anti-Ukrainian policies undertaken by the Tsarist Empire and Soviet Union, defined the 1933 *Holodomor* as a genocide against Ukrainians, and supported the rehabilitation of Ukrainian nationalist groups. Ukrainian identity supports Ukrainian membership of NATO and the EU to escape the Russian and Soviet past and prevent Ukraine's incorporation into Russia's sphere of influence. Upholders of Ukrainian identity see Ukraine *outside* while supporters of pan-Russian identity see Ukraine *inside* a pan-Russian identity and Russian World.

Pan-Russian Identity

In 1991-1993, Belarus began state and nation-building around a Belarusian titular nation, drawing on a Belarusian identity distinct from Russian. The election of Lukashenka in 1994 changed nation-building policies in Belarus to that of creating a Russian-Belarusian state within a pan-Russian identity. Russian leaders believe Ukraine should resemble Belarus by building a Russian-Ukrainian state within a pan-Russian identity. Yanukovich's election in 2010 provided Russia with the opportunity to fashion Ukraine into a state resembling Lukashenka's Belarus built upon a hegemonic pan-Russian identity. President Dmitri Medvedev's (2009) open letter to Yushchenko outlined several domestic and foreign policy demands that Russia expected Ukrainian's next president to implement. These included no longer describing the *Holodomor* as a genocide, elevating the status of the Russian language, supporting a dominant status for the Russian Orthodox Church, ending the goal of seeking NATO membership, and

prolonging the agreement to station the Black Sea Fleet in Crimea. These policies were implemented during Yanukovych's presidency.

Returning to the presidency in 2012, President Putin set his goal as the 'gathering of Russian lands' (see Kuzio, 2022a, pp.156-176) and the prevention of Ukraine signing an Association Agreement with the EU. In 2012, political technologist Kirill Frolov, who was working for the Russian presidential administration, outlined an exhaustive list of goals for making pan-Russian identity dominant in Ukraine. Many of these policies were implemented during Yanukovych's presidency, they were included in the Minsk Accords, and introduced in Russian-occupied Crimea and the Donbas after 2014 and southeast Ukraine after 2022 (Frolov Leaks, 2018):

1. Ukraine should join the Eurasian Economic Union and turn away from the European Union.
2. Elevate Russian to a second state language.
3. Introduce the federalisation of Ukraine with the goal of the 'maximum weakening of the Ukrainian state.'
4. Legalise the canonical status of the Russian Orthodox Church and remove the legal registration of Ukrainian Orthodox Churches supporting autocephaly.
5. Change the 'temporary' status of the Black Sea Fleet to a permanent naval base in Sevastopol.
6. Discontinue the 'falsification' of history and 'Banderite trends in education and upbringing.'
7. Restoration of the 'all-Russian self-identity of the *triune* (composed of three parts) Russian people' (i.e., pan-Russian people).
8. Russia be permitted to establish control over Ukrainian gas transportation and key industries.
9. Creation of a Russian-Ukrainian military union and removal of 'Banderite trends' in the army and SBU.

Yanukovych officially backed Ukraine joining the EU's eastern Partnership while pursuing domestic policies, such as imprisoning his political opponents, that undermined this goal. In November 2013, Yanukovych declared his intention to not sign the Association Agreement provoking the Euromaidan Revolution and a major political crisis that led to him fleeing from Ukraine in February 2014. Putin's goal had been for Yanukovych to drop the EU Association Agreement and instead for Ukraine to join the Eurasian Economic Union after he was to be re-elected in 2015; countries can only be in one customs union. Similar pressure upon Armenia worked and it backed away from signing an Association Agreement with the EU and joined the Eurasian Economic Union. Putin was less fortunate in Ukraine and having lost the opportunity to pressure Ukraine to take its place as Little Russia within a pan-Russian nation as a satellite, Russia invaded and annexed Crimea and backed pro-Russian proxy movements in southeastern Ukraine.

Eastern Slavic identity and unity was a central element of Soviet political culture where Ukrainian loyalty to the USSR 'was tantamount to a close Ukrainian-Russian political union' (Wojnowski, 2017, p.115). It is therefore not surprising Belarus and Russia have maintained and revived elements of the Soviet system and fanned Soviet nostalgia (see Kryshatanovskaya & White, 2009). Upholders of east Slavic (i.e., pan-Russian) identity view Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians as 'fraternal brothers' who never experienced conflict in their historical relationship and are forever united. Soviet identity was 'a composite East Slavic identity' at the heart of which were joint accomplishments, such as victory in the great patriotic war (Wojnowski, 2017, p.16).

As Plokhly (2023, p.295) writes, the promotion of a Soviet people and the eastern Slavs as 'fraternal' and united through the 'friendship of peoples,' bore fruit in Ukraine and Belarus

where it 'produced lasting effects in the east Slavic core of the Soviet Union.' 'Little Russian nationalism' was promoted by Soviet nationalities policies through historiography where Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians were described as born together in 'Kievan Russia' (Kyiv Rus) and 'reunited' in the 1654 Treaty of Pereyaslav. Plokhyy (2023, pp.284-286) describes Kyiv Rus as the 'foundation myth' for Russian imperial nationalists when a 'big Russian nation' (i.e., pan-Russian nation) composed of great Russians (Russians), little Russians (Ukrainians), and white Russians, (Belarusians) existed. President Putin and Russian imperial nationalists describe Russian statehood as being born in 'Kievan Russia' and existing for a thousand years (Koposov, 2022, 160; McGlynn, 2023a, p.29). A non-imperial history that traced the origins of Russian history to Novgorod, rather than Kyiv and separate to Ukrainian history, existed in the 1990s but this view of Russian history became marginalised under Putin from the 2000s (see Tolz, 2002).

Pan-Russian identity places Ukraine within the Russian World led by Russia as the leading nation of the East Slavs. Ukraine does not possess a history independent of Russia but is part of a common eastern Slavic history stretching from the medieval 'Kievan Russia' to the present day. Putin (2023a) includes Kyiv Rus within the Russian World, alongside the Muscovite Kingdom, the Russian Empire, USSR, and the Russian Federation. Putin's attendance at the 1025th anniversary of the Baptism of Kyiv Rus in summer 2013 in Kyiv was a 'mystical experience' that led him to believe in the need to fight for Ukraine (Zygar, 2023, p.276). A thousand years of continuous Russian history is only possible by laying claim to 'Kievan Russia' and Vladimir (Volodymyr) the Great who baptised Kyiv Rus in 988 in Chersonese, Crimea (McGlynn, 2023a, p.13). In 1988, the millennium of the baptism of Kyiv Rus was celebrated in Moscow. After the annexation of Crimea, a Vladimir cult in Russia led to the installation of monuments of him (Koposov, 2022, 160). In 2016, a monument to Volodymyr the Great was unveiled next to the Kremlin in Moscow, a city which was founded in 1147 and therefore did not exist when he ruled Kyiv Rus in 978-1015. Kyiv Rus is called only Rus in Putin's Russia to erase Ukrainian history and claims to the medieval state (Garner, 2023, p.193).

The unity of eastern Slavs is set in stone and can never be broken, ruling out Ukraine possessing independent agency to decide its domestic and foreign policies. Upholders of pan-Russian identity are not critical of Ukraine within the Tsarist Empire and Soviet Union and view the *Holodomor* as a common Soviet tragedy that affected Russians and Ukrainians in a similar way. Pan-Russian identity includes Ukraine within the Soviet and Russian narrative of the 1941-1945 great patriotic war (Plokhyy, 2023, p.255). From 1995, Russia annually held great patriotic war parades. Under Putin, these parades became 'sacralized and canonized' with the addition of heavy military equipment in the annual parades from 2008 (Aron, 2023, p.57). Ukraine's shift to celebrating World War II from 1939-1945 challenged not only Russia's quasi-religious cult of the great patriotic war but also its status as a great power which emerged from the Soviet victory over Nazism (McGlynn, 2023a, p.15). In Russia, the quasi-religious cult of the great patriotic war has been accompanied by the rehabilitation of Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin (see Khapaeva, 2024; Kuzio, 2017), a process which also began to take place in Ukraine during Yanukovich's presidency.

Yanukovich did not support Ukraine's religious autocephaly and during his presidency there was intolerance towards the Greek-Catholic and Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarch Churches. Pan-Russian identity upholds the Russian Orthodox Church as the canonical Church uniting eastern Slavs, a status it has possessed since 1943 when Stalin revived the Russian Orthodox Church as a religious confession for the eastern Slavs (i.e., pan-Russian nation). The domestic and émigré branches of the Russian Orthodox Church were re-united in 2007 in the same year the Russian World foundation was launched (Kuzio, 2022a, pp.204-227). The Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian World are important avenues for Russian soft power in Ukraine that went into decline after 2014, and especially from 2018-2019 when the Patriarch of Constantinople, the head of the world-wide Orthodox Church, removed Ukraine

from under the canonical territory of the Russian Orthodox Church and granted autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. Forty percent of Russian Orthodox Church parishes were to be found in Ukraine.

The Language Question in Ukraine

Proponents of pan-Russian identity do not view the continued domination of the Russian language as problematical, buying into the Soviet promotion of Russian as the language of universality, modernity, and urban life. Proponents of a pan-Russian identity in Ukraine proposed Russian be elevated to a second state language, a step which required two thirds of parliamentary deputies voting to change the constitution. This was an impossibility because the Party of Regions and Communist Party of Ukraine possessed an insufficient number of deputies; they therefore adopted legislation in 2012 that upgraded Russian and other minority languages to official status in areas of Ukraine where it was used by more than ten percent of inhabitants.

Proponents of Ukrainian identity strongly opposed the elevation of Russian to a second state language believing such a step would continue to marginalise the Ukrainian language. The Soviet regime promoted the Russian language in the USSR and the Soviet policy of Russification is implemented in Lukashenka's Belarus and Russian-occupied Ukraine. As Zhurzhenko (2021) has written, the Russian language continued to dominate Ukraine until the Euromaidan Revolution which upholders of Ukrainian identity believed was a product of centuries of Russification, state repression and discrimination. State affirmative action for the Ukrainian language was only implemented in a determined and consistent fashion from 2014 when Ukrainian policymakers were able to give greater support to the Ukrainian language because of the marginalisation of pan-Russian identity. Greater support for the Ukrainian language was also in response to Russia's weaponisation of culture and language in its hybrid warfare against Ukraine.

The language question is important to *both* Ukrainian and pan-Russian identities; it is therefore mistaken to write it is not a priority for most Ukrainians (Onuch & Hale, 2022, p.104) or is only important for Ukrainian nationalists. Differences in language usage became less important (Onuch & Hale, 2022, pp.105-106) not because Zelenskyy was espousing a civic identity but because Russian speaking Ukrainians, appalled by Russia's military aggression, began to psychologically move away from Russia and closer to Ukrainian speakers (see Kulyk, 2023). This trend dramatically increased after Russia's invasion when millions of primarily Russian speaking Ukrainians from the country's southeast were killed, deported, became IDP's in western and central Ukraine or fled abroad as refugees. 18-29-year-old young Ukrainians have become the most negative age group towards the Russian language, with 84 percent supporting its removal from state and official useage (Kyiv International Institute of Sociological Studies, 2024).

Radical changes in Ukrainian identity after 2014 did not automatically lead to the growth of the number of Ukrainian speakers because changing one's daily language use is a longer process than changing a person's ethnic identity. The growth of Ukrainian identity and patriotism after 2014 therefore led to support for Ukrainianisation with a gradual increase in the use of Ukrainian. The number of Ukrainians declaring themselves to be ethnic Russians declined from 22 percent in the 1989 Soviet census, 17 percent in the 2001 Ukrainian census and only five percent in recent surveys. 92 percent of the population of Ukraine consider themselves to be ethnic Ukrainian (Rating Sociological Group, 2022), making Ukraine the fourth most nationally homogenous country in Europe. By 2023, 69 percent of Ukrainians could speak Ukrainian fluently and 78 percent declared Ukrainian to be their native language (an increase from 68 percent in 2015 and 52 percent in 2006). Only five percent of Ukrainians declared Russian to be their native language (down from 14 percent in 2017 and 31 percent in 2006) (Razumkov Centre, 2023).

From 2014, language was no longer viewed as a marker of loyalty to Ukraine because Ukrainians came to understand identity as more multifaceted (see Bureiko & Moga, 2019). Only 24–25 percent in Ukraine's southeast linked patriotism to speaking Ukrainian while a higher 64–71 percent believed the Ukrainian language to be an important attribute of the country's independence (Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 2020). In Russia, an opposite trend was taking place of the growth of imperial nationalism, as witnessed by the rehabilitation of White Russian emigres and the re-publication of their writings (see Kuzio, 2022a). Plokhyy (2023, p.296) described Russia as returning to 'outdated ways of thinking about nations and their relationship to language and culture.'

Different Strands Within Ukrainian Identity

Because centrist political parties upheld a Ukrainian identity, they were able to cooperate with national democrats during most of Kuchma's presidency in the 1990s. After Kuchma left office in 2004, centrist parties in southeastern Ukraine became marginalised by the rise of the Party of Regions political machine (Kudelia & Kuzio, 2015). The dominance of the Party of Regions political machine in 2005–2014 correlates with the most intense period of political and identity conflict in Ukraine. Although defined as centrist, the Party of Regions was fundamentally different to centrist parties it had eclipsed, especially in its backing for pan-Russian identity. Ukraine's regional divisions became more acute because of intense competition for dominance between political forces promoting pan-Russian identity (i.e., Party of Regions, Communist Party of Ukraine) and Ukrainian identity (i.e., liberal centrist, national democratic, and nationalist parties). Petro writes that peace could have been achieved in the Donbas in 2014–2021 by Ukraine embracing its bicultural (pan-Russian) Ukrainian-Russian identity (Kuzio, 2022b, p.136). This article argues that compromise between Ukrainian and epan-Russian identities would have been impossible for two reasons. Firstly, supporters of both identities sought to dominate the country; this was especially seen during Yanukovich's presidency. Secondly, the Kremlin would have never accepted a compromise bi-cultural state as Russian imperial nationalism increasingly drove Russia's policies towards Ukraine after Putin returned to the presidency in 2012.

Onuch and Hale (2022, pp.252, 260) confusingly write that Zelenskyy's vision of Ukraine is 'defined primarily by civic rather than ethnic criteria' and his vision is one 'defined by civic rather than any ethnic litmus test.' But Zelenskyy did not reverse Poroshenko's Ukrainian identity policies in the fields of education, the media, language, and de-communisation. Poroshenko and Zelenskyy supported the foreign policy goals of seeking NATO and EU membership, as did Kuchma and Yushchenko (see Kuzio & Jajeczyk-Kelman, 2023, pp.207–234; Onuch & Hale, 2022, pp.222, 233). Ukrainian popular support for integration into the EU rested on reforms implemented under Poroshenko; meanwhile, Ukrainian support for NATO and EU membership increased in response to the 2014 crisis, and not necessarily because of Zelenskyy's policies.

Onuch and Hale (2022, pp.57, 145) emphasise growing attachment to the Ukrainian state since 1991 as being 'less about ancestry and ethnicity' because when thinking of what is a Ukrainian 'they increasingly think of civic rather than ethnocultural criteria.' Ukrainian opinion polls since 2014 show the opposite to be the case (see Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 2020; Rating Sociological Group, 2022; Razumkov Centre, 2023). In seeking to differentiate civic Zelenskyy from his supposedly ethnic predecessor Poroshenko, Onuch and Hale (2022, p.271) credit the former with changes in Ukrainian national identity that are in fact more attributable to decades of support by presidents upholding a Ukrainian identity, as well as Russian military aggression in 2014 and 2022. The growth of Ukrainians upholding European values is in of itself a product of a long-standing call to 'return to Europe' and move away from Russia that has existed since the 1990s (see Wolczuk, 2000).

Russia's Full-Scale Invasion in Support for Pan-Russian Identity

Paul D'Anieri (2019a, p.94) writes in his detailed study of Russian-Ukrainian relations that most Russians have always viewed Ukraine as 'fundamentally Russian.' In 1991, Russia was ready to jettison the non-Slavic peoples of the USSR but not Belarus and Ukraine (Kuzio, 2022a, pp.137-139; Plokhly, 2023, p.295). This is coupled with a Russian imperial nationalist mindset that 'seeks an order based on the dominance of great powers that was widely accepted in the era prior to World War I' (D'Anieri, 2019a, p.276; Kuzio, 2022a, pp.137-139). Russian imperial nationalists view the former USSR as Russia's exclusive sphere of influence and Ukraine and Belarus as its inner pan-Russian core.

Since 1991, Russia supported political forces who upheld pan-Russian identity in Ukraine; that is, a Ukraine constructed in the image of Lukashenka's Belarus. Russian protection of compatriots in the former USSR has existed since the early 1990s. Half of the Russian speakers outside the Russian Federation and inside the former USSR were to be found in Ukraine and therefore Russia's long-term foreign policy goal of protecting Russian speaking 'compatriots' and elevating Russian to a state language inevitably led to friction with Ukraine. Putin twice visited Ukraine in the 2004 elections to support Yanukovich's candidacy, strongly backed his candidacy in the 2010 elections, pressured Yanukovich after 2012 to turn away from the EU and take Ukraine into the Russian World and Eurasia, and after the full-scale invasion, brought him back from exile in Russia to be the Kremlin's puppet ruler if the invasion had successfully defeated Ukraine in a few days, as had been envisaged but did not take place.

Russia opposed every aspect of Ukrainian identity policies that became dominant after 2014 under Poroshenko and Zelenskyy. During Poroshenko's presidency, the Ukrainian language was elevated, Ukraine's education system was Ukrainianised, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine received autocephaly, de-communisation laws were implemented (see Oliynyk & Kuzio, 2021), and electronic and social media from Russia were banned. Zelenskyy did not overturn any of these policies.

Ethnic Ukrainian policies became dominant after 2014 under Poroshenko and Zelenskyy. During Poroshenko's presidency, the Ukrainian language was elevated, Ukraine's education system was Ukrainianised, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine received autocephaly, de-communisation laws were implemented (see Oliynyk and Author), and electronic and social media from Russia were banned. Zelenskyy did not overturn any of these policies.

Imperial Nationalism in Russia

After 2014, nationalism was not taken to be important in Putin's Russia (for a survey see Kuzio, 2020, pp.82-105; Kuzio, 2022b). Hale described Putin as an instrumentalist leader using nationalism to remain in power who used the annexation of Crimea to boost his popularity (see Kolsto & Blakkisrud, 2016; Laruelle, 2019). Hale wrote that nationalism in Putin's Russia declined from 2015 (see Kuzio, 2020, pp.1, 8, 60, 72, 83, 86, 88-89). In fact, imperial nationalism grew after 2012 in Russia, paving the way for the 2022 invasion.

Meanwhile, Russian leaders' obsession with Ukraine as a renegade Little Russian province was given insufficient attention (see Sharafutdinova, 2020). Mikhail Zygar (2016, p.258) wrote that Putin has always been obsessed and frustrated with Ukraine from the first day of his 2000-2004 presidency saying, 'We must do something, or we'll lose it' (see also Belton, 2020, p. 385; Zygar, 2022, 2023, p.217). When somebody mentions Ukraine in front of Putin, 'he flies into a fury; the words at the end of his sentences are replaced by Russian expletives. For him, everything the Ukrainian government does is a crime' (Zygar, 2016, p.4). US National Security Adviser John Bolton said that Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev never raised his voice in negotiations except during a meeting in 2019 when 'We got a 20-minute

oration about Ukraine and the history of it' which was 'was very emotional and uncharacteristic for him' (Grove et al., 2023). Patrushev was closely involved in decision making and planning Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov was calm until the Ukrainian question came up in negotiations in Geneva and then banged his fists on the table and shouted 'We need Ukraine! We won't go anywhere without Ukraine!' (Goryashko et al., 2023). Kuchma described Putin's obsession with Ukraine as 'a kind of mania or mental disorder' (Harding, 2023b). Kuchma believes that Putin's goal is the destruction of Ukraine as a 'competitive alternative to Russia' (Harding, 2023b).

Downplaying nationalism in Russia and not recognising Russian leaders' obsessions with Ukraine has made it difficult for scholars to understand the role of Russian imperial nationalism behind Putin's full-scale invasion and the brutality of the Russian army committing war crimes (see Deryugina et al., 2023; Gorodnichenko et al., 2023; Kuzio, 2022b). On 17 March 2023 and 5 March 2024, the ICC (International Criminal Court) issued arrest warrants for Putin and Russian Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova and Russian military commanders Sergei I. Kobylash and Viktor N. Sokolov.⁴

De-humanisation took place before genocide was committed in the *Holodomor* and Holocaust. De-humanisation of Ukraine and Ukrainians has been taking place in Russia since the 2000s⁵ (see Into the Heart of Darkness-What Russia Wants in Ukraine, 2022; Kremlin Hate Speech Incites War Crimes in Ukraine, 2022; The Idea of Ukraine is Based on a Mythologised Lie, 2019; When Words Kill – From Moscow to Mariupol, 2022). This important issue has been largely ignored by scholars (an exception is Garner, 2023, pp.83, 88, 124, 177; McGlynn, 2023b; Minchenia et al., 2018).

The *EUvsDisinfo* project has amassed a large data base of 16,268 cases of disinformation in the Russian media. The Kremlin's obsession with Ukraine and Ukrainians is evident in 8,261 of these disinformation cases being about Ukraine, a figure which is greater in number than cases on the US (7,000), EU (6,154), and NATO (3,278).⁶ These Russian disinformation cases deny the existence of Ukraine, describe Ukraine as a US puppet state, claim Russians and Ukrainians are 'one people' and allege the Ukrainian language is a Russian dialect.⁷

McGlynn (2023a, p.75) writes that after years of propaganda and disinformation on Ukraine, de-nazification of Ukraine 'did not sound obscene – it sounded overdue.' A think tank, the Institute of for the Study of War, that has provided a daily analysis of the Russian-Ukrainian war, wrote (Kagan et al., 2023):

'Russian President Vladimir Putin and many Kremlin officials have driven deep into the Russian political consciousness the ideas that Ukraine has no independent identity and no basis to continue to exist as an independent state; that any Ukrainian government not totally subservient to Moscow is a pawn of the West and a threat to Russia; that Ukrainian opponents of Russian rule are Nazis intent on conducting genocide against Russians in Ukraine; and that Russia has a legal, moral, and religious obligation to extirpate these supposed threats and restore Ukraine to its rightful place as a historically Russian land. Putin has made these arguments part of his 2024 presidential election platform. Russian administrators are inserting them in curricula throughout Russia and occupied Ukraine. Kremlin mouthpieces speak to the Russian domestic audience with one voice along these lines. Putin is training Russians to commit themselves to the task of subjugating Ukraine, and that training will neither stop nor vanish following some negotiated ceasefire. It will, in fact, shape the thoughts and likely policies of Putin's successors for years or decades.'

Deputy head of the Russian Security Council Dmitri Medvedev (2023a) described the Ukrainian language as a 'dialect' of Russian and, like other Russian leaders (see Putin, 2008), derogatorily depicts Ukraine as 'not a country but an artificial collection of territories.' Medvedev called Ukrainians 'bastards and freaks' and promised 'For as long as I live I'll do everything I can to make sure they disappear' (Garner, 2023, p.13). Putin (2023b) describes New Russia (southeastern Ukraine) as always having been pro-Russian because it is 'historically a

Russian territory.’ ‘Neither Crimea nor the Black Sea region has any connections to Ukraine,’ Putin (2023b) added. Putin and other Russian leaders have reiterated that Odesa, Mykolayiv, Kherson, Kharkiv, Dnipro, Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities are ‘Russian’ (Medvedev, 2023b; Putin, 2023b, 2023c). The only Ukrainian cities not claimed by Russia as ‘historically Russia’ lie in western Ukraine, a region that imperial nationalists do not include within the Russian World.

Russia is implementing Russification, re-sovietisation, and de-Ukrainianisation in occupied southeastern Ukraine using policies introduced in 2014–2021 in Crimea and the Donbas (see Barbieri, 2023; McGlynn, 2023b; Oliinyk, 2023).⁸ 38 museums have been damaged or destroyed by artillery and missiles, with an estimated \$2.6 billion in damage to Ukraine’s cultural heritage. 480,000 artworks ‘have fallen into Russian hands’ (i.e., have been looted) since the launch of the invasion (Inside the hunt for Ukraine’s stolen art, 2024). Ukrainian-language books are being burnt and monuments to Ukrainian literati and history, such as the *Holodomor*, are being destroyed (see Garner, 2023, p.124; Higgins, 2023; Kurin, 2023; Shydlovsky et al., 2023; Small, 2023; Whitaker, 2023).

Myths Underpinning Russia’s Full-Scale Invasion

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine came about because Russian leaders no longer believed it was possible to use soft power to make pan-Russian identity dominant in Ukraine. In July 2021, Putin published his thesis denying the existence of Ukraine and Ukrainians which provided the ideological underpinning for Russia’s full-scale invasion (Putin, 2021). Two years later Putin’s thesis was expanded into an 800-page collection of 242 documents on the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians (*Sbornyk dokumentov “Ob istoricheskom yedynstve russkykh i ukriantsev,”* 2023).

By 2020–2021, the only manner in which pan-Russian identity could become dominant in Ukraine, Russia believed, was through a surgical military intervention with the goals of regime change, destruction of Ukrainian identity (de-nazification) and, following this, the installation of pan-Russian identity upon a truncated Little Russian satellite (de-militarisation). Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Mikhail Galuzin (2023) reiterated Russia’s goals as a ‘neutral, non-aligned, and nuclear-free status for Ukraine,’ ‘its demilitarization and denazification,’ as well as ‘recognition of new territorial realities’ (i.e., Kyiv accepting the loss of Crimea and the southeast) and ‘ensuring the rights of Russian-speaking citizens.’

Four myths underpinned Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine (see Plokyh, 2023, pp.264–279, 283–298).

The first myth, largely ignored by scholars of Russian nationalism, is the revival of the Tsarist and White Russian émigré imperial nationalist claim of a pan-Russian nation. Speaking to the World Russian Peoples Council, Putin (2023a) lamented how in 1917 and 1991 there had been an ‘artificial’ and ‘violent division’ of the great Russian nation, ‘a *triumph* of Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians.’ Putin (2023b) described the war in Ukraine as a ‘civil war between brothers who stand on different sides’ (i.e., good Little Russians and evil Ukrainian Nazis).

White Russian émigré writers and generals have been officially reburied in Russia and their books republished in mass editions and circulated in schools, the armed forces, and among state officials and politicians. Fascist and anti-Semitic White Russian émigré writer Ivan Ilyin, who denied the existence a Ukrainian people, became Putin’s favourite author in the 2000s, nearly two decades ago (Barbashin & Thoburn, 2015). Ilyin’s writings were re-published in large editions and assigned to provincial governors and military leaders to study (Aron, 2023, pp.132–133).⁹ Putin supervised the re-burial of Ilyin’s remains in Moscow’s Donskoy cemetery. In 2023, the Ivan Ilyin Higher Political School was created in the Russian State Humanitarian

University to develop new teaching materials in the humanities and social sciences based on pan-Russian identity lying at the core of Eurasian civilisation and Russian spiritual values.

The second myth is southeastern Ukraine is 'historical Russian lands' wrongly included by Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin within Soviet Ukraine (see Kuzio, 2022a). As Plokhyy (2023, p.XII) writes, 'history is central to Ukraine's current war with Russia.' On the 350th anniversary of Peter the Great's birth in June 2022, Putin denied Russia had conquered land controlled by Sweden in the Great Northern War: 'He [Peter the Great] was not taking away anything, he was returning' (Aron, 2023, p.114; Putin, 2022b). Putin holds a similar view of himself entering Russian history as the 'gatherer of Russian lands' in Ukraine and Belarus (see Kuzio, 2022a, pp.156-176).

Putin (2008) described Ukraine as an artificial construct six years prior to the 2014 crisis in his speech to the NATO-Russia Council. Crimea and southeastern Ukraine were annexed to Russia in sham referendums in 2014 and 2022 respectively. Russian imperial nationalists seek to control a truncated Little Russia incorporating only west-central and east-central Ukraine and excluding Ukraine's southeast and Crimea that have become part of Russia. Western Ukraine would be allowed to be quasi-independent, or Poland would be encouraged to annex the region¹⁰ (Kuzio, 2022a, pp.1-34, 137-139).¹¹

The third myth is the description of Ukraine as overrun and led by Nazis requiring its denazification. Soviet propaganda attacked Ukrainian 'bourgeois nationalism' which as a 'term was fluid and open to interpretation.' Ukrainian 'bourgeois nationalism' was understood as somebody 'who articulated an understanding of what it meant to be Ukrainian that differed from the official Soviet script' (Wojnowski, 2017, p.123). Contemporary Russian propaganda and disinformation similarly abuse the terms Ukrainian nationalists and Nazis as catch-all descriptions of Ukrainians from across the political spectrum who support a Ukrainian identity distinct from Russians. Russia therefore sees no difference between Poroshenko and Zelenskyy who in their eyes are both nationalists and Nazis, irrespective of the latter's Jewish ethnicity. The Russian media regularly accuse Zelenskyy, four of whose family were murdered in the Holocaust, of being a Nazi or a supporter of neo-Nazis in Ukraine; for example, 'Zelenskyy is the heir of German Nazism.'¹² Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov ridiculed the incompatibility of Jewish-Ukrainian Zelenskyy supporting neo-Nazis, retorting (falsely) that Nazi leader Adolf Hitler also had Jewish blood.¹³

The Russian media first conflated the Orange Revolution with the great patriotic war, 'albeit on a lesser scale' (McGlynn, 2023a, p.61), with this going mainstream in 2014 as 'war merging' where boundaries are blurred between a contemporary war and myths of past wars (Baekken, 2023). This conflation massively expanded after the 2014 crisis and 2022 invasion when Donbas separatists and the Russian army were portrayed as fighting a second great patriotic war against Ukrainian Nazis (Aron, 2023, p.60). Russia's 'memory war turned into a real war,' Jade McGlynn (2023a, p.64) writes. Ukrainian nationalists and Nazis were not representative of most Ukrainians who, Russian imperial nationalists were convinced, viewed themselves as a Little Russian branch of the pan-Russian nation and sought to live in harmony with their Russian 'fraternal brothers' in the Russian World.

Russian imperial nationalists believe there are no obstacles to Ukraine becoming a state built upon a pan-Russian identity, provided Western powers did not intervene through colour revolutions and transforming Ukraine into an Anti-Russia. Ukrainians were simply 'confused' Russians. Moscow Spartak fanatic ('ultra') Ivan Katanaev said 'Ukrainians are just Russians who've become like cattle' (Garner, 2023, p.111). The Kremlin believed it knew Ukraine's 'true identity' better than Ukrainians; therefore, Russia set about restoring the Little Russian identity through a special military operation (McGlynn, 2023a, p.164). Russian imperial nationalist and Donetsk separatist leader Pavel Gubarev warned that Ukrainians, 'are Russian people possessed by the devil. We are coming to convince them, not to kill them. But if you don't want us to change your minds, then we will kill you. We will kill as many as we have to. We will kill

one million, or five million. We can exterminate all of you.’¹⁴ An invading Russian soldier explained to a stunned Ukrainian civilian in Mykolayiv ‘We’re here to liberate you. To protect you’ from ‘Fascists, Zelenskyy, and his Nazis’ (Harding, 2023a, p.3).

The myth of Western conspiracies to destroy the pan-Russian nation has existed since the late nineteenth century when Russian imperial nationalists viewed Ukrainian identity as artificially promoted by the Austrians and Poles. Putin added two new conspirators – Lenin (who artificially promoted a Ukrainian identity by giving Ukrainians a Soviet republic) and the US (which allegedly organised colour revolutions and transformed Ukraine into Anti-Russia).

The fourth myth condemns the West using xenophobic discourse as being behind the transformation of Ukraine into an Anti-Russia that constituted a threat to Russia’s security. Leon Aron (2023, p.36) writes that ‘a perennial war with the America-led “West”’ became integral to the regime’s legitimization.’ On 24 February 2022, the day Russia launched its special military operation, Putin accused US-controlled NATO of establishing a ‘military foothold’ on ‘territories adjacent to Russia, which I have to note is our historical land’ (i.e., Ukraine) where it is building a ‘hostile “anti-Russia”’ (Putin, 2022a). Russian imperial nationalists do not view Ukraine as a real country and have demanded negotiations with its ‘puppet masters’ (i.e., Washington) with the goal of the West recognising Ukraine as belonging to Russia’s sphere of influence (i.e., part of the Russian World). This was the essence of two Russian ultimatums to NATO and the West in December 2021 (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021a, 2021b).

These four myths have little to do with reality. They reflect Russian imperial nationalist mythical imagination of Ukraine as a Little Russia that should resemble Lukashenka’s Belarus. Russian imperial nationalists ignored the inconvenient reality that Ukraine and Belarus are very different. Pan-Russian identity never had a dominant position in Ukraine where it commanded the allegiance of only one out of six presidents. Meanwhile, pan-Russian identity was more popular than a Belarusian identity distinct from Russian in Belarus, at least until mass protests against election fraud in the 2020 presidential elections.

Imperial nationalists believed pan-Russian identity would have become dominant in Ukraine through a combination of Russian soft power and external intervention in support of pro-Russian forces. By 2020–2021, Russian imperial nationalists came to the realisation Ukraine was being lost and could only be returned to the Russian World through a special military operation that would bring a quick victory (Russian soldiers were issued with parade uniforms for a victory parade in Kyiv). Because Russian imperial nationalists believe Ukraine is an artificial construct and Ukrainians are not a separate people, the special military operation used only 175,000 troops, and failed in its goal of a quick victory, leading to a long-drawn out war. In 1968 the Warsaw Pact invaded Czechoslovakia, a country with less than a quarter of Ukraine’s population, using a quarter of a million troops.

CONCLUSIONS

Purely civic states only exist in theory as nation states are composed of civic and ethno-cultural attributes. This article argues that ‘nationalist’ versus ‘pro-Russian’ and ‘ethnic’ versus ‘civic’ frameworks for Ukrainian politics and presidents do not adequately provide an understanding of the roots of Russia’s long-standing inability to accept Ukrainian independence, Russia’s intervention in Ukrainian policies, and military aggression in 2014 and 2022. This article proposes an alternative framework of competition for dominance between Ukrainian identity, which views Ukrainians as a nation distinct from Russians, and pan-Russian identity, that believes Russians and Ukrainians are ‘fraternal brothers’ who are forever united. This article argues that a compromise bi-cultural Ukrainian-Russian state was impossible because supporters of both identities sought to dominate Ukraine and the only outcome acceptable to Putin

and Russian imperial nationalists is Ukraine transformed into a truncated Little Russian satellite (Ukraine without Crimea and its southeast) where pan-Russian identity is hegemonic. Of Ukraine's six presidents, five (Kravchuk, Kuchma, Yushchenko, Poroshenko, Zelenskyy) are defined in this article as upholding Ukrainian identity and Yanukovich as backing pan-Russian identity.

Competition for dominance between Ukrainian identity and pan-Russian identity produced political crises, violence, and two popular uprisings, the Orange, and Euromaidan Revolutions. Conflict was especially acute between the Orange and Euromaidan Revolutions when the Party of Regions was a formidable political force and Ukraine's only political machine (see Kudelia & Kuzio, 2015). Together with its Communist Party of Ukraine satellite party, the Party of Regions won plurality in the 2006, 2007, and 2012 parliamentary elections and won the 2010 presidential election. Russia pinned its hopes on Yanukovich bringing Ukraine into the Russian World and Eurasia and imposing a hegemonic pan-Russian identity. When this strategy failed, Russia took revenge in 2014 by annexing Crimea and supporting pro-Russian proxy forces in southeast Ukraine.

The Kremlin viewed the Minsk Accords as a mechanism to transform Ukraine into a Little Russian satellite. Popova and Shevel (2024, p.216) write that the Kremlin viewed the Minsk Accords to 'vassalize' Ukraine. Both Poroshenko and Zelenskyy refused to implement the Minsk Accords because they would have transformed Russian-controlled DNR and LNR into a *de facto* Trojan Horse inside a federalised Ukraine that would be able to dictate and control the policies of a weak central government. Poroshenko and Zelenskyy implemented ethno-cultural and foreign policies that cemented the dominance of Ukrainian identity and marginalisation of pan-Russian identity.

The marginalisation of pro-Russian forces and loss of voters in Russian-occupied Crimea and Donbas undermined pan-Russian identity. The Kremlin came to the realisation that soft power and other forms of Russian intervention would not bring about the dominance of pan-Russian identity and, with the publication of Putin's (2021) ideological thesis on Russian-Ukrainian unity, made the decision to launch a full-scale invasion. Russia's goals continue to be to destroy Ukraine because it is Anti-Russia, replace Ukrainian identity with a hegemonic pan-Russian identity in a truncated Little Russian satellite.

Although Russia had never reconciled itself to accepting Ukraine as an independent state it was Putin that ultimately made the fatal decision to launch a full-scale war, the first in Europe since World War II. Four outdated historical myths that believe Ukraine is an artificial construct and Ukrainians are not a separate people led to a mistaken belief Russia's special military operation would be quickly won. Instead, Russian military aggression in 2014 and full-scale invasion in 2022 increased Ukrainian identity and made it dominant in Ukraine while relegating pan-Russian identity to the historic past.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest and I have adhered to all the ethical guidelines.

ENDNOTES

¹ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?text=euromaidan>.

² <https://20daysinmariupol.com/>.

³ <https://kyivindependent.com/a-power-grab-or-a-weapon-against-russia-ukraines-tv-marathon-explained/>.

- ⁴ <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/statement-prosecutor-karim-khan-kc-issuance-arrest-warrants-against-president-vladimir-putin-and>
- ⁵ See Sergej Sumlenny on the growth of the Russian imperial nationalist, Stalinist, and anti-Ukrainian book market since the mid-2000s. <https://twitter.com/sumlenny/status/1707407873603428717>.
- ⁶ As of December 2023: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/>.
- ⁷ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/>.
- ⁸ <https://almenda.org/en/category/pub/monitoring/>.
- ⁹ Ivan Ilyin's work can be accessed at: <https://imwerden.de/author-217>.
- ¹⁰ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?text=poland%20>.
- ¹¹ <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-13-2023>.
- ¹² <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/zelensky-is-the-heir-of-german-nazism>.
- ¹³ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/lavrov-so-what-if-zelensky-is-jewish-even-hitler-had-jewish-blood/>.
- ¹⁴ 'Russian leader in Donetsk says millions of Ukrainians will be killed unless they submit to Russia,' *Russian Media Monitor*, 12 December 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zClrdGzC2yA>.

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