Ukraine as a *Locus* of Identity:

IN FOCUS

Why History and Culture Matter

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Summary

War between Russia and Ukraine broke out on the 24 February 2022. Since then, most of the commentary has focused primarily on geopolitical and economic issues. This paper seeks to bring to the debate the dimensions of history, culture and identity. It argues that these remain crucial to understanding this war and central to the EU as it formulates a way forward.

The Russian narrative, as espoused by President Vladimir Putin, seeks to depict Ukrainians, Russians and Belarusians as one people—'the largest state in Europe'—whose origin can be traced to Ancient Rus, with Kyiv as the 'mother of all Russian cities'. Ukraine's narrative, on the other hand, has been one of gradually trying to distance itself from the Russian domain. In an attempt to reshape public discourse and perception, the country has been implementing laws promoting 'de-Stalinisation' and 'de-Communisation'.

While issues of a political, economic and defensive nature remain fundamental, these debates point to the ever-growing presence of issues concerning history, culture and identity. As the war in Ukraine shows, engaging with such debates need not be considered a death knell for the EU, but an opportunity to forge a more realistic and rounded Union.

Thus, this paper recommends that the EU continues to recognise that historical debates can lie at the base of contemporary crises. Furthermore, it argues that the EU needs to show coherence, that it can exploit its soft-power potential better, that greater civic consciousness should be encouraged and that the complementarity between the nation and Europe should be emphasised.

Keywords Russia – Ukraine – EU – Culture – Identity – Historical narratives

Introduction

On 24 February 2022, tensions between Russia and Ukraine escalated to a full-blown invasion and, consequently, war. Most analyses of this conflict have focused on geopolitical issues, though at the beginning of the war there was some engagement with the historical narratives—especially those put forward by President Vladimir Putin to justify his aggression. This paper seeks to add another dimension to the debate and argues that, along with history, matters of culture and identity are also central to understanding this war and to the EU being able to craft a strategy for its own development.

Such factors are often challenging to deal with—partly because some may view them as nebulous and hard to pin down. Yet, because of the frequent reference to identity, it is critical that politicians engage with them.

In the case of the war in Ukraine, there are two reasons for this. First, in addition to his geopolitical reasons, Putin explored these elements in the run-up to the invasion. Second, potential Ukrainian membership of the EU will require the Union to engage with questions of identity. Rather than viewing national identity and European identity as antitheses, the sentiment emerging from Ukraine shows that European identity is best viewed as an additive to a national identity rather than as a replacement. That is, 'identification with the EU and Europe is also an expression of patriotism consonant with Ukrainian national identity and the preservation of territorial integrity and national sovereignty'.[1] Thus, 'the EU should re-incorporate national and local patriotism within its narrative of supranational unity', as a recent Wilfried Martens Centre study recommends.[2] This same study argues that the polarity of globalist versus nationalist does not constitute an accurate framework. It identifies a 'Kyiv moment' that 'confirms how EU membership can be seen as, and act as, a guarantor of national identity and independence'.[3] The study rightly observes that 'the EU has a chance to profile itself not as a post-national project, but as a post-nationalist one;

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[1]   A. P. DeBattista, *The EU and the Multifaceted Challenges of European Identity*, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (Brussels, 2022), 33.

[2]   A. Blanksma Çeta and F. O. Reho, *Standing in Unity, Respecting Diversity: A Survey into Citizens' Perspectives on the Future of Europe*, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (Brussels, 2022), 11.

[3]   Ibid.

and not only as a guarantor of its member states' security but also as a protector of their integrity, autonomy, independence and identity.[4]

In responding to this war, in addition to offering the military and political support needed, the EU also has the opportunity to further develop its concept of European citizenship as a unique feature of the shared European civic space.

Russia's perception of Ukraine

On 12 July 2021 Putin published a lengthy article titled 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians'. It builds on his premise that Russians and Ukrainians are 'one people' and that the partitioning of this 'historical and spiritual space' is a 'great misfortune and tragedy'.[5]

Putin purposely weaves a linear narrative, tracing Russia's origin to Ancient Rus, of which 'Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all descendants'. They constituted the 'largest state in Europe', bringing together 'one language', 'economic ties' and a single 'spiritual choice', brought about by the 'baptism of Rus'. He quotes a saying, attributed to Oleg of Novgorod, which describes Kyiv as 'the mother of all Russian cities'.[6]

He argues that, despite the travails which attempted to divide the people, they remained united in language and religion. The role of religion—and of the Russian Orthodox Church—in Putin's mind is not to be underestimated. He argues that the conversion to Catholicism in Lithuania was part of the 'process of Polonization and Latinization', which aimed to oust Orthodoxy. These points often emerge in the narrative he tries to construct. He attributes the name 'Ukraine' to the Old Russian word 'okraina', meaning periphery and border territories. At the same time, he claims the term 'Ukrainian' 'originally referred to frontier guards who protected the external borders'.[7]

He is equally adamant that the formation of 'the idea of Ukrainian people as a nation separate from the Russians' is of external origin, with 'no

4   Ibid.

5   V. Putin, 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and the Ukrainians' (Moscow, 12 July 2021).

6   Ibid.

7   Ibid.

historical basis'. According to Putin, Lenin exacerbated the problem when he created the USSR and included the 'right for the republics to freely secede from the Union' in the text of the 1924 constitution. Nonetheless, he contends that 'inside the USSR, borders between republics were never seen as state borders; they were nominal within a single country'. The changes in 1991 led to a situation where, according to Putin, people 'found themselves abroad overnight' and robbed of 'their historical motherland'. While he claims that the choice to secede must be respected, he contends that the new individual republics 'must return to the boundaries they had had before joining the Soviet Union'. The return to such boundaries has led to there being several exclaves in parts of the former Soviet Union, particularly in the Ferghana Valley. In addition, this situation also sees Russia attempting to maintain its influence in various parts of Central Asia, in particular Kazakhstan. Putin claims to respect the 'Ukrainian language and traditions' and the Ukrainian 'desire to see their country free, safe and prosperous'. At the same time, however, he also claims that the 'true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia' due to the 'spiritual, human and civilisational ties' formed 'over centuries' and the two countries having 'their origins in the same sources', while also being 'hardened by common trials, achievements and victories'.[8]

Putin's statements represent a 'use and abuse' of history.[9] For example, the claim of the existence of a continuous nation since the Kyivan Rus, united by linguistic, cultural and blood ties, holds considerable political weight. At the same time, it lacks the necessary nuance that serious historiography requires.

Nonetheless, some knowledge of history is required to understand the arguments put forward by Putin. They must also be viewed in a continuum since his public pronouncements include a curious mix of tsarist imperial nationalism, resurgent Orthodoxy and Soviet propaganda—in essence, they represent Putin's version of 'Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality'.[10]

Since the mid-2000s there has been a general rehabilitation of White Russian émigrés. Their works have enjoyed a renaissance, and some White

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[8]   Ibid.

[9]   M. MacMillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History* (London: Profile Books, 2010).

[10]   'Правосла́вие, самодержа́вие, наро́дность'. This slogan was adopted as the governing principle during the reign of Tsar Nicholas I (1825–55) and continued to be a guiding principle of government policy during later periods of imperial rule. See S. Cannady and P. Kubicek, 'Nationalism and Legitimation for Authoritarianism: A Comparison of Nicholas I and Vladimir Putin', *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 5/1 (2014).

Russians have been ceremonially reburied in Russia. In 2007 the émigré Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia[11] signed an Act of Canonical Communion with the Russian Orthodox Church.[12] Putin personally instigated and supported this move; to celebrate the reunion, he gave a celebratory reception at the Kremlin.[13]

Paradoxically, these moves were marked by a 're-Sovietisation' of public life. Stalin's role during the 'Great Patriotic War' (the use of which term ignores the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact) was appraised anew and subjected to considerable revision. Putin depicted Stalin as the primary victor of this war, as the man able to defeat Nazism and forge a Soviet superpower that held a nuclear arsenal. Putin's support for Stalin downplayed 'his crimes against millions of Russians, Ukrainians and other people'.[14] This contrasted sharply with his criticism of Lenin, whom he blamed for 'creating an artificial Ukrainian identity.'[15]

The discourse on 'denazification' must also be placed within this historical prism. Russia often uses it to denounce all those who 'refused to accept that they are Little Russians'[16] and not with the meaning given to it in the West. Thus, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy—who is Russian-speaking, Jewish and eastern Ukrainian—is paradoxically denounced as a 'Nazi' by virtue of his support for NATO and desire for EU membership. The residents of cities which are Russian-speaking and have in the past voted overwhelmingly for pro-Russian parties are also labelled 'Nazis' if they resist the illegal Russian invasion—as was the case in Mariupol.[17]

Putin's appeal to history also allows him a certain degree of flexibility in making his claims. He describes the collapse of the Soviet Union as a tragedy and almost refuses to accept it as a historical reality. In calling for

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[11] The Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia established itself as the de facto ecclesiastical jurisdiction that was independent from Moscow following the Bolshevik revolution. It refused to accept the decision by the Moscow Patriarchate to recognise the political legitimacy of the Bolshevik regime and thus remained separate from it until the formal unification in 2007. During this time it became a symbol of the legacy of the White Russian émigrés, famously canonising the Romanov family in 1981 (the Moscow Patriarchate would follow suit in 2000).

[12] T. Kuzio, 'Imperial Nationalism as the Driver Behind Russia's Invasion of Ukraine', *Nations and Nationalism* 29/1 (2023), 30–8.

[13] *The Kremlin*, 'A Reception on Behalf of the Russian President Was Held in the Kremlin in Honour of the Reunification of the Russian Orthodox Church' (19 May 2007).

[14] Kuzio, 'Imperial Nationalism', 34.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

the restoration of all Russian lands, he is appealing to a particular brand of irredentism—though where and how he traces the boundaries of these 'Russian lands' is never clearly defined. Nonetheless, not all of Soviet Russia is worth praising in the narrative Putin weaves. Lenin, for example, remains anathema due to his preference for some level of self-determination.[18]

It is also worth analysing how identity, history and culture affect international relations; after all, foreign policy often depends on how a particular country views the 'other'. Historically, the idea of 'Holy Russia' as the 'protector of Orthodoxy' was not simply directed against the expansionary Ottoman Empire but also against neighbouring Catholic Poland and Protestant Sweden. From a Russian perspective, the idea of Europe embodied schism and separation. Moreover, while the tsarist court was somewhat integrated into the European cultural milieu, the Bolshevik Revolution—a thoroughly 'Western import'—continued to sever Russia's link with Europe. In effect, the period following 1917 was one of a gradual de-Europeanisation, with the eradication of the aristocracy and the intelligentsia, the symbolic renaming of towns and cities, and the choice of Moscow as the capital. While 'Russian émigré culture . . . saw Europe as the saviour of Russia', the opposite could be said of those who occupied high office in the Kremlin.[19] To some extent, the same process of de-Europeanisation continues in Russia today.

Ukrainian and European identity

Significantly, issues of identity are just as important in Ukraine. In contrast to the Russian perspective, however, in Ukraine 'de-Stalinisation' and 'de-Communisation' were vital acts of policy, designed to reshape public discourse and perceptions. In 2015 Ukraine introduced four laws to 'de-Communise' the public space. They included viewing Stalinism and Nazism as twin crimes, banning Nazi and Communist symbols, commemorating the Second World War rather than the Great Patriotic War and rehabilitating nationalist groups that fought for independence. The Soviet security

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[18]   B. Girvin, 'Putin, National Self-Determination and Political Independence in the Twenty-First Century', *Nations and Nationalism* 29/1 (2023), 41.

[19]   G. Delanty, *Inventing Europe: Idea, Identity, Reality* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995), 62–3.

archives were also opened for scholarly scrutiny. These were laws with which the Russian Federation vehemently disagreed.[20]

From the Ukrainian perspective, the idea of there being one Russian people was imposed towards the end of the Tsarist reign and encouraged through the forced teaching of the Russian language and the harassment of Ukrainian cultural institutions. During the Soviet period, the situation was more ambivalent. Some individuals switched comfortably between a Russian and Ukrainian identity—sometimes depending on political expediency. For example, Leonid Brezhnev described himself as Ukrainian when he lived in Dnipro but changed his ethnicity to Russian when he moved to Moscow. According to Miller, this situation continued in post-Soviet Ukraine, with many people simply changing their ethnicity on their passports.[21]

After 1991 attempts were focused on 'making Ukrainian identity irreversible'.[22] There were, however, some ambivalent attitudes towards this, due perhaps to both the 'super-minority' of Russians living in Ukraine and the seven million Ukrainians residing in Russia. Miller contends that the independent Ukraine had inherited two identities: a Western form of Ukrainian nationalism that enjoyed the support of the diaspora and a Russian 'super-minority' of eight million Russians living in the south-east of the country.[23] Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and the creation of the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics proved to be pivotal moments in terms of Ukrainian identity. Over six million people 'who adhered either to Russian, or Eastern Ukrainian, or even internationalist post-Soviet identity'[24] ceased to identify in these ways. This change provided a good opportunity to emphasise the collective memory, the symbols and the narratives of Ukraine itself. In the post-Crimea period, Ukrainian identity is no longer forged by politics but by the reality of war. According to Miller, 'Now that hostilities in Ukraine have increased to a terrifying degree in both intensity and scale, with heavy casualties among both the military and the civilians, and with entire towns razed to the ground, the radicalisation of anti-Russian sentiments as a consolidating element of Ukrainian identity is becoming widespread.'[25]

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[20] Kuzio, 'Imperial Nationalism', 34.

[21] A. I. Miller, 'National Identity in Ukraine: History and Politics', *Russia in Global Affairs 20/3* (2022), 107.

[22] Ibid., 108.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., 109.

[25] Ibid., 110.

With the outbreak of the war, expressions of Ukrainian identity can be described as being 'existential' in character, since Ukraine is fighting for both the right to exist and the right to determine the nature of that existence. Paradoxically, the Ukrainian identity is also 'existential' for Russia—it seeks to foster an identity that is subservient to Moscow and its worldview.[26] It is interesting to note that, in addition to targeting military and infrastructural targets, Russia is attempting to destroy the markers of Ukrainian 'culture, history and heritage', including 'theatres, concert halls, libraries and museums.'[27]

The overwhelming response of Ukraine has not been to retreat to an ethnicity-based national identity but, instead, to affirm a more robust identification with the state and Europe. Based on original survey data, Onuch notes that 'Ukrainians are also simultaneously increasingly identifying with pro-democratic and pro-European positions'.[28] This shift predates the 2022 Russian invasion and can be linked to the 2019 election cycle, when the opposition adopted a discourse that focused on 'democratic Europeanness' and a shared European civic space.[29] This emphasis can be found in many of the speeches delivered by President Zelenskyy, who sought to focus on the 'liberal democratic EU and European values such as respect for diversity (linguistic and/or ethnic) linking Ukraine's endemic oligarchy and corruption to "non-European" behaviour'.[30] Such comments were remarkably prescient given that Zelenskyy is a Russian-speaking Ukrainian from Ukraine's south-east.

This emphasis on the European dimension of Ukraine was strongly evident after the start of the war. It is also a running theme in Zelenskyy's speeches at home and abroad. His speech at a special plenary session of the European Parliament on 9 February 2023 touched upon these themes.[31] He sees no tension between the two natures of Europe as representing both the nation-state and something more extensive, and argues that these reflect 'what our Europe, a modern Europe, a peaceful Europe, gives to the world'. He defines Europe as a place where 'everyone matters', 'the law rules' and 'diversity is a value and the values of the different are united by fair

26   E. Knott, 'Existential Nationalism: Russia's War Against Ukraine', *Nations and Nationalism* 29/1 (2023), 48.

27   Ibid.

28   O. Onuch, 'European Ukrainians and Their Fight Against Russian Invasion', *Nations and Nationalism* 29/1 (2023), 54.

29   Ibid.

30   Ibid., 56–7.

31   V. Zelenskyy, 'Russia Is Trying to Destroy the Ukrainian European Way of Life; We Will Not Allow That', speech at a special plenary session of the European Parliament, Brussels, 9 February 2023.

equality.' He argues that Europe should be where 'the borders are inviolable, but their crossing is not felt'. For Ukraine, Zelenskyy argues, Europe is 'a way home'—echoing the political discourse in favour of democratisation in Central Europe and other states in the late 1970s and 1980s. He builds his speech on this premise: 'All Ukrainian men, all Ukrainian women. Of different ages and different political beliefs, different social status, different views on religion, with different personal stories, but common European history with all of you.'[32]

This allows Zelenskyy to frame the war in European terms: Russia is a threat not solely to Ukraine but because of what it seeks to destroy beyond Ukraine. 'In order to be able to wage this war, the Kremlin has been consistently destroying, step by step, year after year, what we see as the basis of our Europe.' Thus, defending Ukraine is framed as the defence of Europe and Europe's peace and security. Zelenskyy asks rhetorically: 'Will all of this be possible if we do not defeat the anti-European force that seeks to steal Europe from us, from all of us? No. It is only our victory that will guarantee all of this—each of our common European values.'[33]

The war has made it possible for Ukrainian leaders to frame the two causes as expressions of each other: nationhood and Europeanness. Rather than compete against the other, the two forms of identification enrich one another.

The EU's response

The EU institutions—particularly the European Parliament and the European Commission—have been vociferous in their support for Ukraine. The European Council, despite the member states' various geopolitical realities and varied foreign-policy posturing, has agreed on several sanctions aimed at Russia. While the effectiveness of such sanctions will only be seen in the long run, the invasion of Ukraine has injected new energy into the EU.

In an op-ed titled 'Ukraine Is Europe', President of the European Parliament Roberta Metsola argues that Europe depends on peace in Ukraine and transitional justice in the region. She notes that the European Parliament has been instrumental in calling for a special tribunal to bring war criminals to justice and that such crimes have no statute of limitations. Moreover,

[32]   Ibid.

[33]   Ibid.

she makes the case for the EU imposing sanctions on Russia that target 'individuals and entities that support Putin's illegal war.'[34]

Metsola also refers to a potential 'Liberation Day', which would be the first step in Ukraine's pursuit of EU membership. She adds that the latter would help with 'rebuilding a free Ukraine' in both the physical sense and in terms of its administrative, judicial and governmental structures.[35]

A similar tone was adopted immediately after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. At a plenary session of the European Parliament on 1 March 2022, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen lamented the return of war to Europe.[36] She frames Russia's invasion of Ukraine as part of a historical continuum of war in Europe, one that specifically includes the Balkan War and the Soviet invasion of Prague and Budapest. She also describes it as a clash of civilisations: 'between the rule of law and the rule of the gun; between democracies and autocracies; between a rules-based order and a world of naked aggression.' Viewed through this prism, 'how we respond today to what Russia is doing will determine the future of the international system'. Thus, the Commission president seems to view the war as an existential threat to Europe's ability to thrive and survive.[37]

According to von der Leyen, Europe's response has three prongs. The first is humanitarian, through the use of the temporary protection mechanism for those fleeing war. The second is economic, through sanctions aimed at targeting some sectors of the Russian economy. The third is through the suspension of licences for communication outlets owned by the Russian state, including *Russia Today* and *Sputnik*, thus limiting their ability to spread propaganda.[38]

In her speech she recognises that such measures will be implemented at a difficult time for Europe as it attempts to recover from the pandemic. However, she frames this debate in existential terms: as a defining moment that will test Europe's freedom and honour. It is also an opportunity to make a case for a more 'independent tomorrow'—though, in this case, the reference is purely to Europe and its need to be more independent regarding energy and defence.[39]

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[34] R. Metsola, 'Ukraine Is Europe', *The Times of Malta*, 24 February 2023.

[35] Ibid.

[36] U. von der Leyen, speech on the Russian aggression against Ukraine given to a plenary session of the European Parliament, Brussels, 1 March 2022.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.

The narrative woven by the European institutions is striking. It renews the sense of closeness among Europeans by linking the suffering of the Ukrainian people with the effects that sanctions will have on citizens in the EU. The war in Ukraine is depicted as the ultimate expression of a fight for European values: 'Nobody in this hemicycle can doubt that a people that stands up so bravely for our European values belongs in our European family.'[40]

Perhaps in recognition of this, President Zelenskyy and 'the people of Ukraine' were awarded the International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen in 2023. At the awards ceremony, von der Leyen once again touched upon such themes: 'Ukraine incarnates everything the European idea is living for: the courage of convictions, the fight for values and freedom, the commitment to peace and unity.'[41] She equates Ukraine's victory and peace in the region with fulfilling a 'European destiny.' The speech concludes with the catchphrase 'Slava Ukraini! Long live Europe!', thus signifying that Europe's future is intrinsically tied to the outcome in Ukraine.[42]

Potential for the EU: recommendations

The EU has a multifaceted challenge on its doorstep. In addition to the political, economic and security concerns, there is the humanitarian challenge to deal with and the need to counter the Russian propaganda that is trying to justify the transformation of Ukrainian identity—and the transformation of Ukraine and Ukrainians into a 'Little Russia'. The above discussion suggests that the EU is engaging, and should engage, with questions of identity, culture and history as it seeks to grow and develop.

The EU should continue to recognise that historical debates underpin the current crisis.

The 1973 Declaration of European Identity—signed by the foreign ministers of the then nine European Economic Community member states in the year of the first enlargement process—identifies 'history' as something which causes disunity. It argues that the nine member states have 'overcome their past

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[40] Ibid.

[41] U. von der Leyen, speech on the occasion of the International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen 2023 for H. E. Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of Ukraine, and the people of Ukraine, Aachen, 14 May 2023.

[42] Ibid.

enmities and have decided that unity is a basic European necessity to ensure the survival of the civilisation which they have in common'.[43] While understandable given the context of the time and the still-fresh memories of the Second World War, this view of history as a problem can be somewhat misleading, because many of the debates concerning Russia's invasion of Ukraine involve the use and abuse of history. Engaging with the historical narratives, no matter how difficult this may be, may enable the EU to understand the conflict more fully and to counter more effectively the arguments put forward by Russia. This need for understanding has to be better appreciated among European political communities and think tanks. A failure to engage with the historical narratives on their own terms may result in a stilted and misleading debate.

The EU needs to be coherent if it is to be effective in identity building.

Effective identity building always occurs against the backdrop of opposing values or priorities, since this allows the polity to define itself and what it stands for. The challenge posed by the war in Ukraine has forced the EU to debate what it stands for and how it wants to define itself in relation to the authoritarian states threatening its integrity. At the same time, it must be consistent in its treatment of such states and be wary of engaging in a too-friendly way with other out-of-area players that may threaten its integrity in the future—not least the People's Republic of China and Azerbaijan. This is particularly relevant since China is manoeuvring to be seen as a potential broker in Ukraine, despite several human rights concerns. Similarly, an improvement in EU–Azerbaijan relations would raise questions over the EU's commitment to its values, particularly following the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The EU needs to exploit its soft power.

The emergence of issues concerning history, identity and values implies that, although this is primarily a war for geopolitical influence, it is also being fought on ideological and cultural grounds—and on the vision the two blocs have for their territories, near abroad and neighbouring countries. Thus, the arguments must be matched with posturing that is consistent with the standpoints they adopt. This will enhance the soft-power credentials of Europe and may open up new opportunities in this regard. There are several tools

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43   European Communities, *Declaration on European Identity* (Copenhagen, 14 December 1973), 2.

which could be exploited to further enhance Europe's soft-power potential. The most significant, and tangible, are the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Global Gateway strategy. But the EU could also build alliances which do not clash with the values it claims to uphold.

The EU needs to distinguish between ethnic and civic consciousness.

The unfolding situation also shows the two different worldviews at play. On the one hand, Russia is building on an ethnic nationalism which claims that 'an individual's deepest attachments are inherited, not chosen'.[44] In this regard, the national community is seen as the defining aspect of the individual, with less emphasis on the individual's ability to define and shape the national community. In contrast, Europe could emphasise the value of patriotism, which 'envisages the nation as a community of equal, rights-bearing citizens, united in patriotic attachment to a shared set of political practices and values'. This is essentially the form of nationalism which Ukraine seems to be promoting. It is also one that the EU can—and should—embrace as it is 'necessarily democratic since it vests sovereignty in all of the people'. The EU must, however, avoid demonising nationalism, for this 'is not one thing in many disguises but many things in many disguises'—much depends on the context, and it can 'have dreadful consequences in one place, and innocuous or positive ones in another place'.[45]

The EU needs to emphasise the complementarity of the nation and Europe.

The war in Ukraine demonstrates the complementarity of the idea of the nation and Europe. In Ukraine, identification with Europe and membership of the EU are not seen as weakening Ukrainian patriotism or national identity but rather, as strengthening it. Similarly, from the Ukrainian vantage point, membership of the EU is seen as something which can preserve territorial integrity and national sovereignty.

To drive this point home, however, there needs to be a change in the political discourse. Protecting sovereignty, territorial integrity and national identity is

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[44] M. Ignattief, *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993), 7–8.

[45] Ibid., 14.

necessary to preserve Europe and the EU. The EU will struggle to develop further if such principles are weakened through a breach of subsidiarity or through rhetoric which is perceived to encroach on a member state's sphere of influence. Such weakening might result in new political formations that could capitalise politically by engaging with themes of a primordial nature which emphasise the role of the nation above everything else.

The war is prompting greater appreciation of the independence and interdependence of member states.

The events unfolding in the EU's neighbourhood also demonstrate that Europe's independence and strategic autonomy cannot be achieved without securing the independence of its member states and prospective member states. While much of the political discourse focuses on the pooling of sovereignty, less attention is often given to the need for states to assert their own independent policies, consistent with the provisions in the treaties.

Conclusion

The idea of the nation and issues concerning identity need to be engaged with not merely to avoid future conflict but also to understand present disputes. In other words, conflicts often have deep historical roots which cannot be erased overnight. Moreover, the discourse on nationhood and national identity deals with a sense of belonging and thus with matters that are primordial in nature. This sense of belonging cannot be erased or replaced easily—and nor should it be, since good European citizenship is dependent upon being a good citizen of the respective nation-state.

In many ways, engaging with such a discourse—and avoiding pitting the national interest against the European interest—helps to strengthen the EU's ability to think strategically and be resilient. And both a clear strategy and resilience are needed in view of the various debates which are likely to intensify in the coming years. Proceeding in this way will allow the EU to develop in such a manner that it is not seen as a threat to existing structures, but as an additive, strengthening them. The principle of subsidiarity itself reflects the ability to accommodate the different viewpoints present in the Union.

As the war in Ukraine has shown, engaging with such debates need not be considered a death knell for the EU. On the contrary, they represent an opportunity to forge a more realistic and rounded Union.

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Credits