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Borderland No More? Shifting Security Dynamics in Ukraine

Angela Kachuyevski

Abstract: This paper examines how Ukraine has been seen as a contested borderland between Russia and the European Union, within which both see an important normative and political role for themselves—a role that has increasingly become mutually exclusive as trade and political alliances become increasingly more formalized. This “shared neighborhood” falls within what Russia views as the “Russian World,” and as such constitutes a core part of Russia itself. Yet, this view has come into increasing conflict with identity dynamics in Ukraine, where there is a growing nationwide consensus on foreign policy and increasing identification with Ukraine as a national homeland in areas traditionally considered “pro-Russian.” Given significant shifts since the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the Russian-supported separatist conflict in Donbas, I conclude with some suggestions about how the current war might strengthen these tendencies and further consolidate Ukrainian national identity.

Keywords: Identity; Russian World; Ukraine; Russia; EU.

Introduction

At the time of writing this article, Russia is engaged in a brutal and broad scale attack on Ukraine. Despite the fact that conflict over Ukraine’s future and the future of regional alliances, east and west, are longstanding, and indeed the fact that active military confrontation has been ongoing since 2014, most did not expect the scale and intensity of the military action that we have seen unfold for several months. This article cannot address the dynamic and tragic events unfolding in real time. Rather, I hope to offer some context to help shape understanding of earlier conflict and the current war in Ukraine. While not denying the importance of how material factors, such as North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion and EU enlargement, may have contributed to Russian President Vladimir Putin’s decision to go to war, I focus on important identity issues that add additional context through which to examine these events. Specifically, I illustrate how post-Soviet Russian efforts to construct a national identity have coalesced around a neo-imperial vision of Russia’s place in the world that posits a special role for itself in the post-Soviet space. This vision has driven much of Putin’s thinking about Ukrainian statehood and Russia’s interests. This article adds to the broad conversation on imperial impulses in Russian foreign policy by including an analysis of Ukrainian perspectives, which makes clear that Russia’s neo-imperial vision of a “Russian World” is unlikely to achieve its desired objectives, and in fact may be leading to the opposite—a major shift in Ukrainian identity led in significant part by shifting identities of Russian-speaking Ukrainians. I argue that identity issues are a significant cause of Russia’s war in Ukraine, but also are precisely the reason this war will not achieve Russian objectives due to the shifts in Russian-speaking Ukrainian identity.
To this end, I first consider how Ukraine has been seen as a contested borderland between Russia and the EU, within which both see an important normative and political role for themselves—a role that has increasingly become mutually exclusive as trade and political alliances become increasingly more formalized. I then outline how the concepts of a “near abroad” and a “Russian World,” developed in Russia, have come into increasing conflict with European integration, which contributed to Russia’s decision to engage in a “special military operation” to instill a friendly regime in Kyiv. Russia’s assertion of a special role in the post-Soviet space, however, is increasingly at odds with identity dynamics in Ukraine, where there is a growing nationwide consensus on foreign policy and increasing identification with Ukraine as a national homeland in areas traditionally considered “pro-Russian.” Given significant shifts since the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the Russian-supported separatist conflict in Donbas, I conclude with some suggestions about how the current war might strengthen these tendencies and further consolidate Ukrainian national identity.

Ukraine as a Contested Borderland in the ‘Shared Neighborhood’

Russia and the EU have each defined a role for themselves in the region surrounding their borders that is based upon both economic interests and shared cultural values. That is, each imagines a normative, cultural space that unifies populations beyond their geographic borders, and an economic zone that benefits from deeper integration. This opens, in principle, the possibility for both cooperation and for conflict in the “shared neighborhood” as the economic interests and the cultural values of Russia and the EU could be mutually reinforcing, but could also be cast in mutually exclusive, incompatible terms, which unfortunately has been the case in Ukraine. Ukraine has in general served as a contested borderland between Russia and the EU wherein each has offered competing and exclusionary visions for cooperation. For example, economic integration has required a choice between an association agreement with the EU and membership in Putin’s regional alternative, the Eurasian Union. Further, cultural values have at times also been presented in exclusionary rather than inclusive terms, especially as Moscow asserts the existence of a “Russian World” in the same exact space where the EU is promoting a normative order that seeks to solidify common European values.

Russia has defined the former Soviet republics as part of their special sphere of influence since the fall of the Soviet Union, given the long history as a shared state and the corresponding economic, cultural and social ties. While, upon independence, then-President Boris Yeltsin initially adopted a more liberal, Western-oriented foreign policy, domestic pressure, international events, and perceived disregard for Russia’s interests, as well as perceived discrimination against the Russian-speaking population left living outside of Russia, encouraged a turn to a more nationalist policy. The former Soviet space has a long history as a shared state and long-standing economic, cultural and social ties. Yet, this space is currently populated with independent states that have their own national interests and that are engaged in nation-(re)building processes that in many cases emphasizes national
languages and culture rather than a regional shared past. Thus, the character of this space is contested in terms of cultural ties, security cooperation, and economic integration. Russia has preferred to take the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) that was created in 1991 as a replacement for the Soviet Union as a base from which to build a regional order, which some former Soviet republics have rejected in favor of greater national autonomy and sovereignty in foreign policy, possibly due to Russia’s own policies and self-asserted role in the region.

The EU has also developed specific policies toward states in the region. In 2004, with the accession of several new members in Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic, the EU developed the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). The objective was to avoid “the emergence of new dividing lines between the enlarged EU and our neighbors and instead strengthening the prosperity, stability and security of all.”2 The underlying concept is that this increased prosperity, stability and security are enhanced by encouraging shared values, including democracy, the rule of law, and the respect for human rights.

The ENP applies to states that border on the EU, thus extends to the east and the south of the EU border, which includes states from the former Soviet Union and also the countries along the Mediterranean basin. In 2009, regional engagement and cooperation in Eastern Europe was strengthened through the creation of the Eastern Partnership (EaP). The EaP has three objectives: accelerating political association, furthering economic integration between the EU and EaP neighbors, and providing for citizen mobility.3 Multilateral cooperation includes cooperation in four main areas, designated as platforms. Platform one focuses on democracy, good governance, and stability; platform two focuses on economic integration and convergence with EU policies; platform three focuses on energy security; and platform four focuses on contacts between people. Thus, the EaP provides significant and substantive support from the EU specifically targeted on democratic and market-based reform in order to promote mutual security through enhanced political and economic integration and greater stability in the region.

In 2011, through the ENP, the EU promised additional support for and greater cooperation with states that could exhibit success in promoting “deep and sustainable democracy” and “inclusive economic development.” For democracy to qualify as deep and sustainable, it must include free and fair elections, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association, an independent judiciary, anti-corruption tools, and democratic control over the military, and must foster a strong and vibrant civil society.4 In the EaP, economic integration plays an additional important role in the project to build a normative space that also promotes prosperity and interdependence. Association agreements, which include Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA), are an integral part of this economic integration process. The goal is to build greater prosperity through interdependence by the creation of a free trade zone that requires Eastern European participating states to meet EU standards for business, finance, banking, and trade. By strengthening governance and increasing prosperity in the “neighborhood,” deepening
regional integration would hopefully lead to greater stability and security in the region. Yet, deepening regional integration through the EaP could also be seen as a threat to Russia's own plans for economic integration in the “neighborhood,” especially given that signing an association agreement would preclude membership in the Eurasian Customs Union. Whether or not this was the intention of the EU, or even a valid concern, Moscow indeed viewed the EaP as “a way to isolate Russia from its neighbors,” which stands in direct opposition to Russia's plans for the “neighborhood.”

From the Soviet Union to the ‘Russian World’

Russia's plans for regional integration, and its vision of its role in the world and, in particular, in the post-Soviet space, stem from the dissolution of the USSR and the resulting consequences for Russia. On December 8, 1991, Russian President Yeltsin, Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk, and Belorussian President Stanislav Shushkevich met in secret to reach an agreement on dismantling the Soviet Union. Seeking greater political and economic autonomy for their respective republics, the three leaders designed a loose union of independent states to replace the highly centralized USSR. This arrangement, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), provided for economic cooperation and joint control over strategic forces, but removed the central political structure headed at that time by former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. The role of the CIS was vaguely specified, opening the way for future conflict over plans for regional integration.

A number of factors led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, but the role of Yeltsin should not be underestimated as his drive to maximize Russia's sovereignty and material interests and defeat his foes in the Kremlin played a critical role. Not long after the dissolution, however, it became clear that the Soviet demise would lead to major challenges for Russia. For example, Russia had to deal with the loss of control over strategically important territory, including a number of bases in neighboring states that housed Soviet forces. The presence of very large Russian minority populations living outside Russia's borders in the newly independent states further complicated matters, and Russia's potential role in protecting their interests became a matter of regional contention.

The term “near abroad” entered mainstream discourse in 1993, when then Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev laid out the tenets for a new Russian foreign policy concept. The term connotes a feeling of closeness that, in turn, offers a nuanced distinction between territory that is “truly” abroad, and thus considered a foreign country, from neighboring territory that was part of the former Soviet Union, and therefore not “truly” a foreign country. Russian policy has been that Russia has the right, indeed responsibility, to exert special influence in these territories. Building upon this concept, a political movement in the 1990s arose that sought protection for Russian minorities in the “near abroad,” and even possibly a change in borders to incorporate the Slavic lands of Belarus and Ukraine into the Russian Federation. Indeed, Russian policy has articulated the concept of “compatriots” as a category of non-citizens, living outside of Russia, who nonetheless, to a certain extent,
fall under Russian responsibility. The definition is extremely broad, extending to anyone who feels a “spiritual connection” with and an ancestral connection to Russia, which in effect confers a sort of ideational citizenship upon this group that, even if only symbolic, nonetheless seeks to extend Russian influence beyond its geographic borders.9

The compatriot policy exists within the context of the “Russian World” concept that is not only popular, but in fact constitutes a core element of Russia’s current state-driven national identity project. This concept posits Russia as a distinct civilization that transcends Russia’s current territorial borders to constitute a wider “Russian World” that extends beyond Russia’s geographic and ethnic boundaries.10 The “Russian World” concept asserts that it is a “naturally existing civilizational community,” not a branch of European civilization, and emphasizes the cultural basis of identity rooted in the Russian language and shared Orthodox Christian faith.11 This civilization shares a common past, and is currently wrongfully, indeed perversely, divided into separate states, resulting in a “divided people.”12 In this context, Ukraine and Belarus are seen not only as members of Russia’s natural zone of special influence, but as integral parts of the “Russian World” based upon the Eastern-Slavic “civilization” rather than as separate nations or nationalities. This construct, together with the earlier concept of the “near abroad” justifies, from the Russian perspective, a special role for Russia in former Soviet republics in protecting the security of the Russian World civilization.

But this view of a “natural” special role for Russia is not necessarily shared. Ukraine, in particular, has been quite protective of their sovereign interests, irrespective of whether leaders have been from the east or the west of the country and irrespective of their first language. Given that Russia has constructed for itself a role as regional protector of Russian-speakers, ethnic Russians and compatriots living in neighboring states, they have consistently engaged in an “othering” process by which Ukrainian officials are accused of violating minority rights if they promote Ukrainian as the state language and are framed as nationalists if they do not share Russia’s articulated historical memory.

Identity Dimensions of the Current War

Russia’s decision to launch military action in February 2022 is not only due to what it perceives as threats to its security, but also due to its perception that a core part of what it defines as the Russian civilization, the “Russian World,” is being torn away from Moscow’s grasp. This is made clear by the numerous official public statements questioning Ukrainian statehood on cultural and spiritual grounds. Russia has often asserted a connection between historical and cultural ties on the one hand and economic interests on the other in the Ukraine case, wherein numerous official statements underscored Russia’s opposition to Ukraine’s pursuit of European integration through an association agreement. In the summer of 2013, only months in advance of the Maidan revolution, Putin tied economic arguments together with a cultural-historical case for Ukrainian integration with Russia, noting that while, in modern times, the Ukrainian and Russian peoples exist as distinct
nations, nonetheless a shared heritage, as expressed most fundamentally by the birth of orthodox Christianity in ancient Kyiv, has resulted in “common spiritual values that make us a single people.”\textsuperscript{13} He then went on to discuss the rapid economic growth and success after a previously divided Ukraine was “reunified” with Russia in the seventeenth century. He emphasized Ukraine's role in Russian, and later Soviet, spiritual and cultural life, and stressed the economic and technological successes of the time.\textsuperscript{14}

The clear message conveyed was that Ukraine is a fundamental part of the Russian civilization and has always been better off when firmly tied to Russia. He ended his remarks by noting that, “we live in different countries today, but this fact in no way crosses out the common historic past that we share, and that is our asset and the foundation upon which we can build new integration ties,” and further, “competition on the global markets is very fierce today. I am sure that most of you realize that only by joining forces can we be competitive and stand a chance of winning in this tough environment.”\textsuperscript{15} Thus, Putin's argument explicitly tied cultural and historical elements to economic interests and, in so doing, essentially laid the basis for an identity conflict as EU expansion was seen as directed not only against Russian political and economic dominance in the region, but also Russian cultural dominance as Western norms of democratic governance, tolerance and secularism spread into the Eastern Partnership countries. Indeed, “Putin appears to truly believe that the West poses a threat not only on the state level (the level of Russia's external interests) but also on the level of society and the Russian way of life.”\textsuperscript{16}

Thus, while for Ukraine integration with the EU could be part of a balanced policy of cooperation with both eastern and western neighbors, for Russia this would be seen as a departure from the “Russian World” and therefore unacceptable on both economic and cultural levels as it would not only challenge Russia's plans for regional economic integration, but would also challenge Russia's perception of self as Ukraine shares the “common spiritual values that make us a single people.”\textsuperscript{17} Further, Putin argues that Russia and Ukraine are “not simply close neighbors but, as I have said many times already, we are one people. Kiev is the mother of Russian cities. Ancient Rus is our common source.”\textsuperscript{18} In a long essay written in the summer of 2021, Putin went further, arguing that modern Ukraine is entirely a construct of the Soviet period, and blaming hostile external forces for an anti-Russian project that he (in the main incorrectly) posits the Ukrainian people themselves reject.\textsuperscript{19}

Hence, while Ukraine can self-identify as a European country with ties to both eastern and western Europe, Russia sees Ukraine as an integral part of the Russian civilization that therefore cannot naturally belong in Europe, and any moves toward European integration must be the result of hostile external actors seeking to divide the “Russian World.” Russia cannot be seen as a completely different civilization, separate from (and indeed in a moral and spiritual sense superior to) the rest of Europe, if what it sees as a major part of the “Russian World” successfully integrates into Europe, and any wish of Ukraine to do so constitutes betrayal. Indeed, what the EU has presented as a normative project directed at stabilizing the region and promoting mutual security is seen as a threat to Russia's unique and increasingly conservative national identity, which is threatened by the spread of EU values.\textsuperscript{20}
Ukraine, therefore, has been a contested part of the neighborhood wherein cultural, historical, normative, and economic links overlap and intersect in ways that make cooperation between the EU and Russia possible, but which in fact have encouraged conflict as economic, governance and cultural issues associated with integration were increasingly seen in Moscow as a zero-sum game.

The End of the ‘Two Ukraines’ Narrative

While Russia was motivated in part by identity issues to resolve the Ukraine question with decisive military action, they are unlikely to succeed over the long term for precisely the same reason. Although Putin argues that Ukraine is a construct, not a nation or even a proper state, and belongs firmly embedded in the Russian civilization, Ukrainians themselves reject this view decisively. While once it might have been possible to talk about “two Ukraines,” divided into a pro-Russian east and a pro-European west, since 2014 there has been significant consolidation around a civic national identity. The narrative on “two Ukraines” posits a Russian-speaking east against a Ukrainian-speaking west, with incompatible geo-political orientations divided by preferences for greater integration with Europe or with Russia. This division is one of the most frequently cited reasons why post-Soviet Ukraine has struggled to develop a unified national identity, and in fact has deep historical roots. Even as far back in history as Tsarist times there was a distinct eastern Ukrainian identity that was compatible with the Russian language and culture, and later exhibited acceptance of the Soviet system. In post-Soviet Ukraine, this has made it complicated to agree upon a “national idea” that embraces diverse linguistic identities and different memories of the past.

While it is possible to imagine the Ukrainian nation to be ethnically and linguistically based, it is also possible to imagine a much more inclusive vision, one that centers on identification with the state, not on language or ethnicity. Kyiv has, since independence, tried to both assert difference with Russia, while embracing Russian-speaking citizens as a legitimate part of the polity. This has required careful balancing, as it is particularly necessary to differentiate oneself from an “Other” who is ethnically, culturally, and linguistically close, and who refuses to fully accept that the two are indeed separate nationalities. Yet, in order to both draw distinctions between Russia and Ukraine, and include Russian-speaking Ukrainian citizens in the Ukrainian polity, efforts to construct Russia as the “Other” had to “tread carefully when differentiating between ‘our Russians’ and ‘those Russians’ living in the neighboring Russian Federation.”

On an official level, Ukraine has adopted a civic definition of the nation since independence, which theoretically opens the space for individuals to assert differing versions of Ukrainian identity. Yet, at the time when the Ukrainian Constitution was in the process of being developed, it was not clear whether the nation would be seen as the “cultural” or the “political” one. Since independence, the embrace of an inclusive definition of a civic nation has co-existed with a nation-building process that promotes the Ukrainian language,
culture, and historical memory. Yet, since the *Maidan* revolution, Russian aggression in Crimea and subsequent outbreak of war in Donbas in 2014, ample survey data demonstrate that there has been growing consensus on many identity issues and a stronger connection to Ukraine, as well as shared values and political principles and a rejection of ethno-linguistic criteria for belonging to the nation. Indeed, Russian-speakers in Ukraine’s east and south participating in surveys and semi-structured interviews shared the same views on Russian aggression as the rest of the country did, pointing to national consensus, not an ethnic or linguistic divide.

Because Russian was the main language of social mobility and inter-ethnic communication for many years, the Russian language is prevalent in urban areas and among the cultural, economic and political elite, no matter one’s ethnic background. Most Ukrainian citizens who mainly speak Russian possess, according to survey research, an increasingly salient Ukrainian identity, which could be viewed as a rejection of Moscow’s claim to “protect” them and a sort of “refusal to identify with the enemy.” Russian-speakers in Ukraine have primarily remained Russian-speaking, but language use does not appear to influence attachment to the Ukrainian state, despite the east-west linguistic divide. In fact, Russian-speaking Ukrainians have increasingly identified Ukrainian as their native language, even if they continue to speak primarily Russian and may not even speak Ukrainian well. The result is that more people consider Ukrainian their native language than actually regularly speak it. Identifying Ukrainian as one’s native language, regardless of regular use or even proficiency might be a way to express national identity. Yet, as they are becoming “more Ukrainian,” they are also changing the meaning of what that means.

Conclusion

It is too early in this war to draw any meaningful conclusions about what the war means for the future of Ukraine, Ukrainian national identity, or relations with Russia. But a few observations can be made. First, scholars writing soon after the Soviet collapse expected that Russian-speaking populations would resist nationalizing moves by newly independent states, and perhaps even form a distinct identity in the post-Soviet space. In Ukraine, however, as substantiated by the numerous survey studies and analyses cited above, we have seen that language usage among Russian-speakers has not significantly changed, but at the same time, identification with Ukraine as a homeland and with the Ukrainian language as a native tongue have both markedly increased. This trend intensified after the *Maidan* revolution and Russian aggression in Crimea and Donbas, so there is reason to expect that it will only grow stronger after the war ends, perhaps even resulting in greater regular usage of Ukrainian. While it is too early for significant scholarship to exist, emerging evidence suggests strong national unity and the erosion of regional differences. For example, while 65 percent of Ukrainians in February 2022 primarily identified as a citizen of Ukraine, rather than with their region, the number today is 85 percent. Additionally, 98 percent of Ukrainians who lived before February 24, 2022 and live now in Ukrainian government-
controlled areas reject Russian narratives about the causes and justifications for the current war and instead agree with the Ukrainian government position. Further, 100 percent of those who fled Russian-controlled areas reject the Russian narrative in favor of the Ukrainian one, and 81 percent of those living under Russian occupation express the same pro-Ukrainian views. Indeed, while before the war 54 percent of the primarily Russian-speaking south and 62 percent of the primarily Russian-speaking east favored friendly relations with Russia, without customs or visas, those numbers have diminished to 14 percent and 17 percent respectively. In fact, 90 percent of Ukrainians in the south and 85 percent in the east, both Russian-speaking areas traditionally seen as more pro-Russian, now express a negative view toward Russia. Russian aggression seems to have achieved Ukrainian national unity rather than what Putin seems to have expected given his July 2021 article.

Second, given this evidence, it is extremely clear that the “Russian World” concept is a complete and total failure. It failed first as an effort at bolstering Russian soft power by attracting Russian speakers abroad, and now it is failing as an effort at hard power as Russian speaking cities fight off Russian aggression and assert their Ukrainian identity. As the emerging evidence above indicates, pro-Russian sentiment in the east and the south of the country that existed before 2014 has been weakened by eight years of war, and has severely deteriorated since February 2022, replaced by increased attachment to Ukraine and to strengthening Ukrainian identity, regardless of ethnicity or language use. It seems reasonable to infer that the current war will only further solidify these identity shifts, perhaps irreversibly.

Finally, whether or not it was ever appropriate to distinguish between “two Ukraines,” now it is imminently clear that there is one Ukraine. Previous regional differences in geo-political orientation and attachment to a national idea are disappearing. In the midst of Russian aggression, the nation is united from Kharkiv in the east to Lviv in the west. Russian-speaking cities are bearing the brunt of the military aggression and are proving their opposition to Putin’s “special military operation” and rejection of his “Russian World” thesis with bravery and fierce resistance. It seems clear that Putin has managed to unite not only the West, but also all of Ukraine, which can hardly have been his intention. Ukraine is a borderland no more.

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Endnotes


6. Approximately 25 million Russians were living in the Soviet Union, but outside the borders of current day Russia, upon the collapse of the USSR.


18. Putin, “Address.”


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Books: Feldman, Lily Gardner, Germany’s Foreign Policy of Reconciliation: From Enmity to Amity (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 20-33


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Feldman, Germany’s Foreign Policy of Reconciliation, 73-78.
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