Ukraine's Search for Legitimacy

Building on Part 1 A Cultural and Spiritual Vision of Russian Unity, this essay examines Ukraine's search for legitimacy.

The first indication of Ukraine's attempt to establish itself as a distinct entity was the evolution of its name in Western languages. Prior to its 1991 unilateral independence, the term "the Ukraine" was used in English, indicating a territory within a larger political entity as opposed to a sovereign state. This usage, common for territories rather than nations, mirrors other regional terms, such as "the Midwest" or "the Balkans," both of which refer to parts of larger wholes from which those territories derive their identity.

The shift to "Ukraine," without the definite article, served as a symbolic linguistic assertion of its status as a separate entity. The Ukrainian government pushed for linguistic distinction in order to create a national identity, promoting the use of the preposition "in Ukraine" instead of the historically common "on Ukraine" in Russian. This latter distinction is particularly consequential, as the preposition "on" implies a region or borderland, whereas "in" suggests a nation-state with defined, respected borders. Thus, Ukraine rejects the longstanding Russian perspective of its identity as a mere periphery.

Yet these changes betray an artificiality—a construct reflective of ontological insecurity. Having severed their historical connection to the larger Russian body from which their identity is derived, Ukrainians find themselves existentially confused, grappling with the question of what it truly means to be Ukrainian beyond merely being "not Russian." This negative identity raises awkward questions concerning substantiality and historical coherence.

A common History

The common history of Russia and Ukraine is rooted in the Kievan Rus, the medieval Slavic vorlage civilization. In the 10th century, Prince Vladimir of Kiev adopted Orthodox Christianity as the state religion, establishing Kiev as the birthplace of a shared Slavic identity. Ukraine's existence as an independent nation-state is not a natural outgrowth of history but rather a 20th-century geopolitical fiction. Kievan Rus is the historical and cultural root of the Russian state, with Moscow emerging only after the Mongol invasions displaced power from Kiev.

For centuries, this truth remained self-evident, as Ukraine's status as a borderland—located "on the edge" (a rough translation of the term "Ukraina" in Old Slavic)—was only intelligible within the Russian context. The Russian World spiritually unites Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus as interconnected territories, irrespective of modern political borders. Ukraine's separation as an unnatural fracture disrupts historical continuity. Moreover, flirtation with Western secularism signifies a rejection of the shared cultural and spiritual legacy, threatening the integrity of a civilization that stands as the last bulwark against Western secularism on one side and the expansion of radical Islam on the other.

Ukrainian nationalists have resurrected the historical figure Stepan Bandera—a third-rate Che Guevara—transforming him into a symbol of resistance and a "cult of opposition" against Russia. This alignment with Bandera, who led the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) during World War II, collaborators in Nazi War crimes, reveals the reactionary nature of contemporary Ukrainian nationalism—a movement built squarely on the rejection of Russia.

Bandera serves as a figure of lawlessness and rebellion of the historical bonds that have united the Russian and Ukrainian peoples. Consequently, Ukraine's rabid nationalism, conceived in evil, is marked by the ignominy of its inception. Ukrainian nationalists desperately cleave to any nefarious ideology to escape acknowledging their historic place in the Russia family.

The 2014 Maidan protests further exemplify the divide in perspectives. In Russia, these protests are viewed as a Western-backed coup that disregarded Ukraine's historical and cultural identity, while Western narratives frame the uprising as a courageous stand for democracy. From the Russian viewpoint, the Maidan movement has been destabilizing, splitting the country into pro-Western and pro-Russian factions and leading to violence. The crisis that ensued—culminating in Russia's annexation of Crimea and the ongoing conflict in the Donbas—has exacerbated the schism within Ukraine, with the eastern regions rejecting the legitimacy of the Maidan movement.

To Russia, the uprising represents a misguided attempt by the West to mold Ukraine into a symbol of resistance against Russia. In idealizing Ukraine as a democracy-in-waiting, the West overlooks the cultural and historical context that has historically bound Ukraine to Russia, instead portraying the country as a blank slate for Western ideals. However, the divide left in Maidan's wake—a fragmented nation with contested regions—highlights the challenges inherent in forging an apophatic national identity rooted in opposition to Russia rather than in historical veracity.

Demographically, Western Ukraine, with its historical ties to Poland and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, starkly contrasts with Eastern Ukraine, which is ethnically Russian in the most acute sense. The modern Ukrainian state is largely a remnant of Soviet administrative decisions when regions like Crimea and the Donbas, home to a significant ethnic Russian population, were incorporated into Soviet Ukraine for convenience.

The post-Soviet recognition of Ukraine as a wholly independent nation is thus seen as artificially constructed—a Western imposition that relies on external support to maintain a national identity that fails to resonate with the majority of its own population. Ukrainian men have no appetite to fight their fellow Slavs and go to extreme measures to evade conscription.

From a geopolitical standpoint, Russia's desire for reintegration is a response to the use of Ukraine by NATO and the EU as a proxy battleground. Russian foreign policy, articulated by figures like Alexander Dugin and inspired by Mearsheimer's "offensive realism," views NATO's expansion as an existential threat to Russian sovereignty.

For Putin, the concept of "denazification" forms part of a broader ideological struggle against Western cultural decay, positioning itself as a defender of traditional Judeo-Christian values in opposition to Western secularism. Thus, Russia's intervention in Ukraine is presented as a necessary step to protect its cultural integrity.

Rediscovering a Common Destiny

Ukraine as Russia's wayward sibling rather than a sovereign peer is an invocation of centuries-old bonds, both sacred and cultural, forged in the crucible of Kievan Rus—the spiritual and cultural foundation for modern Russia. The unity of the Slavic peoples posits a mystical inheritance: a land bound by shared Orthodox faith, language, and collective memory. For Russia, this unity is existential, a vision of Eastern Slavs as a single spiritual and historical family disrupted by Western secularism.

In contrast, Western discourse champions Ukraine's independence as a triumph of democratic self-determination. Russia as the last bastion against the moral relativism and materialism, holds firm to communal values and a vision of Russia "bordering on God". Ukraine's post-Soviet nationalism, as a newly minted identity, while compelling to a West eager to align Ukraine against Russia, lacks historical coherence.

For Russia, Ukraine's enamorment with NATO and the EU is a use of its historic territories as a pawn in the West's strategy of encirclement—a notion steeped in Mearsheimer's "offensive realism" and echoed by the Slavophiles' warnings of Western rationalism's moral void. Russia seeks reclamation—a return to origins, where Crimea, Donbas, and Novorossiya are not mere regions but embodiments of an indivisible Slavic spirit. At its core lies a philosophical and cultural gulf as vast as it is ancient.

Ultimately, Russia's call for the Ukraine's reintegration draws upon a sense of shared destiny and an assertion of spiritual kinship that stands as a sign of contradiction to Western secular values. A future built solely on opposition—whether through Western fantasies of "freedom" or through a nationalist rejection of Russian influence—leads only to greater bloodshed. A lasting peace will require recognition of their shared history and both turning to face each other in the light of a common destiny as Slavic brothers.