

UKRAINE'S SELF-NARRATIVE OF THE EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE: REMINISCENCES OF THE FUTURE

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Abstract

At present, Ukraine may be termed an international 'pivot' in the two meanings of this word – as a rotation stem and an important issue. Russia's brutal military assault against Ukraine has shaken the international community and made it recognize the fragility of world peace and the necessity to restore and maintain it via revising and strengthening political alliances. This article examines one of the triggers of Russia's aggression ongoing since 2014 – Ukraine's formulation of the strategic self-narrative focused on its European and Euro-Atlantic perspective. We argue that this narrative, self-featuring Ukraine as a sovereign actor belonging to Europe, has ample historical grounds, dissected in this article according to Braudel's (1980) conception of 'Historical Time' that splits into long, mid and short terms. We propose and illustrate the 'IN', 'OUTSIDE', 'BACK TO', 'WITH', and 'FOR EUROPE' semantic taxonomy to unpack the strategic narrative directions from Ukraine's past to its present and future. Our analysis highlights Ukraine's being IN Europe in its long-term history which builds a bridge to the short history and present times, when Ukraine, standing against Russia WITH Europe and FOR it, aspires to be IN Europe again as an equal and reliable partner of European democracies.

Keywords: Ukraine, Europe, Russia, Russia-Ukraine war, Ukraine's self-narrative, strategic narrative, Braudel's historical periods.

Introduction

The escalation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has triggered, among many others, a major change in how Ukraine is imagined and narrated inside the country and globally. Global Soft Power Index 2022¹ found that global perceptions of Ukraine, including those in the European Union (the EU) member states, "have seen a shift as a result of Russia's invasion, with familiarity increasing by an extraordinary 44%, influence by 24%, and reputation by 12%". Moreover, "the unprecedented media spotlight on the conflict and a global rally of support for Ukraine in the face of aggression have had a positive knock-on effect on the nation's perceptions across most other Global Soft Power Index metrics, even those unrelated to the war effort".² And if some may argue that such index results could be an aberration or a mistake in methodology, the 2023 Gallup poll of the US public opinion confirms these global trends with telling numbers: "Americans are mostly positive toward Ukraine. Sixty-eight percent have a favourable opinion of Ukraine, up six percentage points from a year ago and 11 points higher than in 2020".³ The same poll finds that "Americans have become more familiar with Ukraine over time, with the percentage not having an opinion declining from 15% in 2005 to 2% today".⁴ Ukrainian commentators dealing with images and brands propose that a new brand of Ukraine quickly emerges globally – Ukrainians are fighters: for freedom, dignity, democracy, their culture and identity.⁵

The new positive narratives of Ukraine that emerge both inside and outside the country overlap. Yet, for the world public, Ukraine's self-narrative remains underspecified, since its

¹ "Russia's Soft Power Collapses Globally Following Invasion, Attitudes Towards Ukraine Soar", *Brand Finance*, March 14, 2022, <https://brandfinance.com/press-releases/russias-soft-power-collapses-globally-following-invasion-attitudes-towards-ukraine-soar>

² Ibid.

³ Jeffrey M. Jones, "Americans' Favorable Rating of Russia Sinks to New Low of 9%". *Gallup News*, March 13, 2023, https://news.gallup.com/poll/471872/americans-favorable-rating-russia-sinks-new-low.aspx?utm_source=news&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=the_week_in_charts_send_3_march_03212023&utm_term=newsletter&utm_content=image_imagelink_1

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Oleksandr Nkrashchuk and Artem Ilin, "Kraina, shcho zmyniue svit. Yak prodavaty brend Ukraina investoram pislia peremohy" ("The Country that Changes the World. How to Sell the Brand Ukraine to Investors After Victory". – In Ukrainian), *Korespondent*, August 25, 2022, <https://biz.nv.ua/ukr/economics/brend-ukrajina-yak-yogo-stvoriti-ta-zaluchiti-investiciji-novini-ukrajini-50264975.html>

particulars tend to skip the attention focus of the international media. To provide such focalization, this article aims to explore the rise of one particular self-narrative of Ukraine – as a *pivot* (the central point and ‘rotation shaft’) of the European and Euro-Atlantic integration. We argue that this narrative has emerged following the dramatic events of the Euro-Maidan 2013-2014 and has become more pronounced following the tragic events of the annexation of Crimea, the proxy war in Donbas and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022. The pre-Maidan public opinion surveys in Ukraine revealed a diverging internal narrative of Ukraine’s civilisational perspective.

While the Euro-integration narratives were reported for majority of Ukrainian population (with some regional distinctions featuring more supporters in the western and central regions), Ukraine’s NATO-integration narratives tended to be not as supportive. In 2009, Razumkov’s Centre ran a representative national survey and found 92% of respondents in the east and 73% respondents in the south were against Ukraine joining NATO vs. 34% in the west and 53% in the centre.⁶ In a major contrast, a nation-wide poll conducted in 2022 found out that “The occupation of Crimea by Russia, the outbreak of the war in Donbas, and finally the full-scale invasion of 2022 significantly accelerated the dynamics of views and led the vast majority of Ukrainians in all regions (and all linguistic and ethnic categories) to the understanding that Ukraine should be a member of both the EU and NATO”.⁷ The same social research group discovered a strong consensus in Ukrainian society about joining the EU and NATO – 81% support Ukraine joining the EU,⁸ while 71% would vote for Ukraine to join NATO.⁹

⁶ "Stavlennia hromadian do osnovnykh napriamiv zovnishnoi polityky Ukrainy: Analitychna zapyska" ("Attitudes of Citizens Towards the Main Directions of Ukraine's Foreign Policy: Analytical Notes". – In Ukrainian), *National Institute for Strategic Studies*, March 25, 2010, <https://niss.gov.ua/doslidzhennya/mizhnarodni-vidnosini/stavlennya-gromadyan-do-osnovnykh-napryamiv-zovnishnoi-politiki>,

⁷ Anton Hrushetskyi, “Geopolitical Orientation of Residents of Ukraine: Results of a Telephone Survey Conducted on July 6 – 20, 2022”, *Kyiv International Institute of Sociology*, July 29, 2022, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1125&page=2>

⁸ Anton Hrushetskyi, “Should Ukraine Fulfill all EU Requirements for the Fastest Possible Joining: Results of a Telephone Survey Conducted on July 6 – 20, 2022”, *Kyiv International Institute of Sociology*, July 29, 2022, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1126&page=1>

⁹ Hrushetskyi, “Geopolitical orientation”.

The link between the phenomenon of war and the idea of European integration is nothing new. The project of the ‘united Europe’ came to life post WWII to prevent yet another war on the European continent. Peace is a foundational norm of the European integration. The 2004-2013 round of the EU’s enlargement has marked a new era for integrating Europe, this time post-Cold War. Another major decision was to offer the status of the EU candidates to a number of the Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia), all (but Albania) impacted by the Yugoslav wars at the end of the 20th century. The latest, 2022 EU candidates – Moldova and Ukraine – have received this status in response to the Russian full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. And while we recognise the narrative of European integration as a peace project (also celebrated by the Nobel Prize for Peace in the past), we do single out Ukraine as a special case. None of the past or current candidate countries received the status while *being* at war to defend its sovereignty, identity, dignity and survival.

We argue that the above combination of circumstances makes the narrative of Ukraine as a *pivot* of European and Euro-Atlantic integration a special case. In the core of this narrative is Ukraine’s distinct ‘storyline’ of the European perspective embedded into the country’s historical identity, assigned to the turbulent present and enigmatic future rooted in the long-term, middle-term and short-term history (following Fernand Braudel’s paradigm of the historical distances). We unpack this specific narrative perspective while engaging with a novel theory in International Relations, the strategic narrative theory.¹⁰ Contextualization of the strategic narrative in the audience’s historical and cultural background is maintained to be one of the major factors that make such narrative efficient.¹¹

¹⁰ Allister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives, Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2013). Allister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin and Laura Roselle, eds, *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations* (Ann Harbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017).

¹¹ Natalia Chaban, Svitlana Zhabotynska and Michèle Knodt, “What Makes Strategic Narrative Efficient: Ukraine on Russian E-news Platforms”. *Cooperation and Conflict*, on-line (2023), 1-22, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/00108367231161272>

We start with detailing the strategic narrative theory and its attention to the shared meanings of the past, present and future, while engaging with Ferdinand Braudel's geo-temporal paradigm of historical distances.¹² We illustrate the intersections of shared meaning with an overview of the emerging strategic narratives popular in Ukraine. Our method in the study of narratives is borrowing from history, arranging the historic milestones and their (re)interpretation diachronically and thematically, and relating the narratives' content to the present time of the Russian on-going aggression against Ukraine. Importantly, this paper is *not* a historical essay – we are not assessing differing historical research into and scholarly debates around these milestones. Respectively, we do not make extensive reference to multiple scholarly publications of the 19th – 21st centuries that, being constitutive for academic narratives of Ukraine's history, provide content of the stories shaped and spread by popular information resources. In the description of historical facts that is provided below, we make reference to the resources that are accessible and comprehensible for the wide public interested in the history of Ukraine as a part and parcel of national identity. We focus on how the stories which feature Ukraine's history and circulate within the country, being disseminated through various mass-media channels, contribute to the emerging narrative of Ukraine fighting for its European future, its independence, sovereignty and normative identity in the 21st century.

Narrative: Conceptual dimension

In social sciences, narratives, or 'stories' are understood as the "ways in which we construct disparate facts in our own worlds and weave them together cognitively in order to make sense of our reality".¹³

In other words, narratives are "frameworks that allow humans to connect apparently unconnected phenomena around some causal transformation," thus performing sense-making function.¹⁴A

¹² Fernand Braudel. *On History*, trans. Siân Reynolds (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980).

¹³ Molly Patterson and Kristen R. Monroe, "Narrative in Political Science", *Annual Review of Political Science*, no.1 (1998), 315.

¹⁴ Miskimmon et al. *Strategic Narratives*, 6.

political narrative highlights the arrangement of meaning evoked by a verbal text, and relates to the collective level of human behavior, leading to recognition of narratives' important role in shaping and expressing political identity, perspective, and ideology.¹⁵ This paper engages with one particular conception applied to understand the phenomenon of political narrative in international relations – strategic narrative theory.

Strategic narratives are defined as instruments “for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations and change the discursive environment in which they operate”.¹⁶ They are also defined as the stories furthering an official political strategy via the construction of “a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors”.¹⁷ According to the strategic narratives scholars, these objectives are achieved “by means of a particular structure including actors, events, plot, time, and setting/space”.¹⁸ These three concepts – extending the influence/managing discourses, linking meanings between the past, present and future, and setting a structure assigning agency and a frame of action – construct a theoretical scheme to assess Ukraine’s evolving self-narratives at the critical times of the war for survival. Understanding of Ukraine’s emerging and evolving strategic narratives equips scholars and practitioner with a tool to shape and understand international politics.

Following Braudel’s event-based classification of the historical period,¹⁹ we recognise three types of the past – the long history, middle history, and short history. For Braudel, it is the long history that is seen as the most important in historical imagination of a nation. In the following section, we consider a selection of historical watershed events and argue their impact on the narrative of Ukraine as a pivot of the European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

Europe in Ukraine’s self-narratives of its history

¹⁵ Evan Cornog, *The Power and the Story* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

¹⁶ Miskimmon et al. *Strategic Narratives*, 2.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Miskimmon et al. *Strategic Narratives*, 9.

¹⁹ Braudel. *On History*.

According to the ‘Historical Memory’ survey conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology,²⁰ adult residents of Ukraine tend to show an intense interest for the history of their country. The average score on a scale from 1: ‘not at all interested’ to 10: ‘extremely interested’ is 7.6 points. According to this scale, about 80% of respondents rated their interest in the history of Ukraine as quite or very strong (6-10 points), 17% – rather low (2-5 points), and only 1% are indifferent to the history of Ukraine. More than two-thirds (69%) of the country's residents became more interested in the history of Ukraine over the past ten years, and the same number (69%) felt an increase in interest in the history of Ukraine in 2022. Among the main media resources used by the respondents to obtain historically relevant information are: videos on YouTube (this resource was used by 53% of those interested in the history of Ukraine during the last year), publications in social networks (37%), television broadcasts (35%), and books (29%).

A general analysis of the ‘Ukraine – Europe’ theme in the historical narrative of Ukraine, as it is represented in various information resources used by Ukrainian public, allows for the diachronic and thematic stratifications of the key storylines based on historical facts and events. *Diachronically*, we refer them to the ‘long history’ (centuries back), ‘middle history’ (30 to 100 years ago), ‘short history’ (1 to 30 years ago), and ‘present time’ (the years of 2022-2023). *Thematically*, the historical watershed events are represented by ‘metanarratives’ (narrative formulas) which, on the one hand, subsume the respective specific facts and, on the other hand, integrate into the general concepts of ‘IN’, ‘OUTSIDE’, ‘BACK TO’, ‘WITH’ and ‘FOR EUROPE’ (Table 1). The periods of Ukraine’s history are partially compatible with those defined by Timothy Snyder.²¹

²⁰ KIIS, *Istorychna pamiat: Rezultaty sotsiologichnoho opytuvannia doroslykh zhyteliv Ukrainy, Analitychnyi zvit (Historical Memory: Results of the Sociological Survey of Adult Ukrainian Citizens. Analytical report. – In Ukrainian)* (Kyiv: Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, January 2023), 2, https://www.kiis.com.ua/materials/news/20230320_d2/UCBI_History2023_rpt-UA_fin.pdf

²¹ Timothy Snyder. “Ukrainian History, European Future”, filmed 2014; YouTube video 41:28; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qihk1rfloag>

Table 1. Ukraine's self-narratives of the European perspective: historical distances

| Historical distance | Historical period | European perspective of Ukraine's self-narrative (narrative formulas) |
|----------------------------|--|---|
| LONG HISTORY | Pre-Kyivan Rus (before the 9 th century) | IN EUROPE The territory of Ukraine was one of the migration and civilization cradles of Europe. |
| | Kyivan Rus / Galicia-Volhynia Kingdom (the 9 th – 14 th century) | IN EUROPE Kyivan Rus and Galicia-Volhynia Kingdom were influential medieval European states. FOR EUROPE Kyivan Rus hindered the conquest of Europe by the Mongol-Tatars. |
| | After Kyivan Rus (the 14 th century – 1654) | IN EUROPE Ukraine was a part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania), an influential European actor. FOR EUROPE Ukrainian Cossacks fought for Europe against the Osman Empire. |
| | Russian Empire (1654 – 1917) | OUTSIDE EUROPE Absorbed by the Muscovite State, Ukraine contributed to its Europeanization. Ukraine was deprived of its national identity. |
| MID HISTORY | Bolsheviks' Revolution and the Civil War (1917 – 1922) | IN EUROPE Ukraine, as an independent state, established diplomatic relations with European countries. |
| | USSR (1922 – 1991) | OUTSIDE EUROPE Integrated into the USSR, Ukraine loses its independence. Ukraine's aspiration for sovereignty is severely suppressed. |
| SHORT HISTORY | Post-USSR (1991 – 2013) | BACK TO EUROPE Sovereign Ukraine cooperates with Europe and aspires to become a member of the European Union. Ukraine's rapprochement with the EU is hindered by Russia economically and politically. |
| | Maidans (2004 and 2013–2014) | BACK TO EUROPE Ukrainian Maidans fought against Russia's influence and strived for European values. |
| | Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas (2014 – 2022) | BACK TO EUROPE Ukraine's rapprochement with the EU was hindered by Russia via a covert military aggression. In spite of it, Ukraine got closer to Europe. WITH EUROPE Europe helped Ukraine with reforms and imposed economic sanctions on Russia. |
| PRESENT TIME | Russia's military aggression against | BACK TO EUROPE |

| | | |
|--|--------------------------|--|
| | Ukraine (2022 – present) | <p>Ukraine's rapprochement with the EU is hindered by Russia via an open military aggression. In spite of it, Ukraine is getting even closer to Europe.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">WITH EUROPE</p> <p>Europe helps Ukraine to win the war and defend European values. Europe will help Ukraine with economic reconstruction.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">FOR EUROPE</p> <p>In the war with Russia, Ukraine defends itself and European democracies.</p> |
|--|--------------------------|--|

The narrative formulas, integrated into the general concepts of ‘IN’, ‘OUTSIDE’, ‘BACK TO’, ‘WITH’ and ‘FOR’ Europe subsume the following facts belonging to the long, mid and short history viewed from a vantage point of the present time.

IN EUROPE

LONG HISTORY

Pre-Kyivan Rus (before the 9th century). The territory of Ukraine was one of the migration and civilization cradles of Europe. The lands of Ukraine were populated as early as 1 million years ago. This narrative communicated by various sources (see as an example YouTube production)²² present these lands as a ‘migration cradle’ of Europe: from here, the ancient people moved to the west, east, and north of Europe. In pre-historic times, the territory of Ukraine was also one of ‘civilisation cradles’ of Europe: it hosted the ancient centers of agriculture, domestication of the horse, application of the wheel, and use of metal. Archaeological discoveries on the territory of Ukraine tell us about the ancient Cucuteni-Trypillia Civilisation (3.5 – 1 millennium BCE) described by historians as an “enigmatic culture”, that “predates the earliest known cities in Mesopotamia”,²³ with the Trypillia megacities on the territories of Ukraine and its neighbours being the largest known settlements in the

²² Illarion Pavliuk and Volodymyr Rybas,. “Kod natsii. DNK-portret natsii” (“Code of the Nation. DNA-Portrait of the Nation”. – In Ukrainian), filmed 2012 at Show Time Production, video 1:09:12, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7tWfDB19-c&t=15s>; Illarion Pavliuk and Volodymyr Rybas, “Kod natsii. DNK 2. U poshukakh zhinky” (“Code of the Nation. DNA 2. In Search of the Woman”. – In Ukrainian), filmed 2013 at Show Time Production, video 1:03:26, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eD4PXRmxPWY>

²³ Laura Spinney, “The Rise and Fall of the Mysterious Culture that Invented Civilisation”, *NewScientist*, February 24, 2021, <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg24933230-900-the-rise-and-fall-of-the-mysterious-culture-that-invented-civilisation/>

4th millennium BCE in Europe and possibly the word.²⁴ The following centuries saw the lands of Ukraine as a place where migrant flows of many ancient peoples – Scythians, Sarmatians, Goths, Gunes (the 1st millennium BCE), to name just few – intersected and impacted the local peoples. Each group brought in different outlooks, customs, traditions, tools, inventions and political ambitions.²⁵

Ukraine's territory, featuring social and economic advances, gave rise to early medieval societies that came next. They had multiple vibrant tribes and tribal unions, fighting, negotiating and aligning with each other. The ancient states of Ants and Dulibs, or tribal unions of Kuiavia, Slavia and Artania stood at the origins of the ancient Rus state.²⁶ It is this historical period that is argued by historians to offer the toponym *Rus*, originating from the name of a tribe that lived in the delta of the three rivers in Central Ukraine – the Ros', the Rosava and the Rosavycia (an opinion supported by most of the Ukrainian historians).²⁷ The name was later appropriated by the Muscovite rulers.

Kyivan Rus / Galicia-Volhynia Kingdom (the 9th – 14th centuries). *Kyivan Rus and Galicia-Volhynia Kingdom were influential medieval European states.* The early medieval states of Kyivan Rus (882 – 1240) and the Kingdom of Galicia-Volhynia (1199–1349/1392) were meaningful actors in the international relations of the medieval Europe. Both of them facilitated economic, political and cultural development of the eastern Slavic peoples and made them fully-fledged participants of the political and cultural processes unfolding in the then medieval Europe. One of the milestones of that period, resonating with the narrative of Europe, is the adoption of Christianity by Kyivan Rus in the 9th century.²⁸ This period is credited by Ukrainian historians to produce the ethnonym of *Ukraine* originating from *krai* 'land', or *kraina* 'country'.²⁹

²⁴ John Chapman, Bisserka Gaydarska, and Marco Nebbia, "The Origins of Trypillia Megacities", *Frontiers*, May 31, 2019, <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fdigh.2019.00010/full>

²⁵ Oleksandr Palii, *Korotkyi kurs istorii Ukrainy (A brief Course in the History of Ukraine.* – In Ukrainian) (Kyiv: A-BA-BA-GA-LA-MA-GA, 2023), 37–77.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Oleksandr Palii. "Mify i teorii, sprostovani litopysamy i faktamy. Nazva Rosiia – utvorennia lysh 18 stolittia" ("Myths and Theories Refuted by Chronicles and Facts. The Name Russia was Formed Only in the 18th Century". – In Ukrainian), *Ukrinform*, November 16, 2021, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-society/3351508-mifi-i-psevdoteorii-sprostovani-litopisami-i-faktami-nazva-rosiia-utvorennia-lis-18-stolitta.html#:>.

²⁸ Palii, *Korotkyi kurs*, 129 – 185.

²⁹ Palii. "Mify i teorii".

The medieval history of Ukraine also brings forward a story of Ukrainian people as survivors of the 120-year-old Mongolo-Tatar invasion (in contrast, this invasion lasted 300 years in the Muscovite lands). The Ukrainian people were not decimated or relocated to different lands. On the contrary, the ancient Rus' traditions of governance were retained and transposed into the next era in the medieval history of Ukraine – the Polish-Lithuanian period. A story-line of autonomous governance is further supported by the historical records of Ukrainian towns and villages as a part of the medieval state of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (existing between the 13th and 18th centuries). The central role in this process belonged to the Kingdom of Galicia-Volhynia (1199–1349/1392).

After Kyivan Rus / Galicia–Volhynia Kingdom (the 14th century – 1654). Ukraine was a part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania), an influential European actor. The medieval period also brings in the narratives of Ukraine being divided while ruled by geo-political rivals – the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Moscow state. Historians find this particular period to be a battleground of narratives. Alternative histories were and are created and imposed, not lastly to serve the imperial interests of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union in the past, and the Russian Federation nowadays (consider, for example, an infamous article by Putin “On historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians” (2021)³⁰). Within this span of time, we may distinguish three major inputs contributing to the “IN Europe” dimension of Ukraine’s self-narrative of European perspectives. First, it is the story of Ukraine as a part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the largest, powerful eastern European state in the late medieval history of Europe. Second, it is the storyline reflecting on the territories of Ukraine that ended to be an autonomous self-governed region of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to become the Ukrainian Cossack state called Zaporizha Sich (the 16th – 18th centuries) located on the left bank of the river Dniro.

³⁰ Svitlana Shipchenko and Kyrylo Perevoshchikov, “On the Historical Unity of Lies and Vladimir Putin”, *Vox Ukraine*, July 21, 2021, <https://voxukraine.org/en/on-the-historical-unity-of-lies-and-vladimir-putin>

Throughout its existence, Zaporizha Sich was in one way or another dependent on the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Russian Empire or the Ottoman Empire, which involved Ukrainian Cossacks in various military missions.³¹ The third narrative input is linked to Hetmanate, the Ukrainian military Cossack state (1648 – 1764), initially led by the statesman military leader and diplomat Bohdan Khmelnytsky. Hetmanate was a short-lived experiment in European democracy where state leaders were elected. Hetmanate presented an ongoing inspiration for independent governance for the Ukrainian people as a part of the European political space. This state had also created a rich cultural environment that produced a distinct Cossack baroque style in architecture, fine arts, music, and craft-and-folk art³² – the cultural output that serves yet another example of Ukrainian contribution to a wider European cultural fabric of the time. Arguably, these three inputs add to the agency-focused normative / political narrative of the present-day Ukraine.

The history of the independent Cossack state refutes one of the myths which has triggered Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, and which has been voiced by Putin. It is the myth about the Donbas as the lands of Russia, "donated" by it to Ukraine during the Soviet era. The territory of Donbas (the regions of Donetsk, Luhansk and Mariupol') was settled by Ukrainian Cossacks in the 1650s, long before Russia arrived there in the 18th century, having destroyed the Cossacks. Before the Cossacks settled in the Donbas and, in general, before the beginning of the history of both Ukraine and Russia, these lands had been populated by different peoples for 5 thousand years. Further debunking of the myth of the "Russian" Donbas is associated with its industrial development, allegedly initiated and ensured under Soviet rule. In fact, the main large enterprises of Donbas, later nationalized by the Soviets, were founded and developed in the 19th century thanks to European investments from English, Scottish, German and Belgian businesses.³³

³¹ Palii, *Korotkyi kurs*, 189–207.

³² Lev Okinshevych and Arkadii Zhukovsky, "Hetman State", Internet Encyclopaedia of Ukraine, accessed February 10, 2023, <http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CH%5CE%5CHetmanstate.htm>

³³ "Mif o podarennom Donbasse" (Myth About the Donated Donbas. – In Russian), filmed 2022 at 1 + 1, video 09:10, <https://www.facebook.com/media.1plus1/videos/1069577117242777>

MID HISTORY

Bolsheviks' Revolution and the Civil War (1917-1922). Ukraine, as an independent state, established diplomatic relations with European countries. A quick look into the last century history brings to the forefront the story of the statehood, albeit contested. Its first chapters highlight the creation of the Western Ukrainian People's Republic, Ukrainian People's Republic, and the Ukrainian People's Republic of Soviets following the aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution in 1917.³⁴ These attempts in state construction serve another input into the narrative of Ukraine's distinct strive for sovereignty and state building. For example, the Ukrainian People's Republic (divided between Poland and Soviet Russia as a result of the Civil War, ceased to exist in 1921), in several years of its governance established and maintained diplomatic contacts with many foreign states.³⁵

OUTSIDE EUROPE

LONG HISTORY

Russian Empire (1654-1917). Absorbed by the Muscovite State, Ukraine contributed to its Europeanization. Ukraine was deprived of its national identity. This period in the history of Ukraine brings forward a narrative where the country was facing three civilisational scenarios, each presenting Ukraine with differing sets of threat perceptions – Islamic powers in the south, Catholic influences in the west and the Orthodox paradigm in the east. By offering a military alliance to Ukrainian leaders in 1654, the eastern Muscovite state used this political move to absorb Ukraine of Hetmans and deprive Ukraine of its independent direct contacts with Europe. The Cossack state was subsequently eliminated. Integrated into the Muscovite upper classes, Ukrainian elites facilitated the Europeanisation of the Muscovite state.³⁶ It is in this historical period when the Muscovite state, in a

³⁴ Oleksandr Palii, *Korotkyi kurs*, 337-348.

³⁵ "Ukrainian People's Republic", Wikipedia, Google, last modified April, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukrainian_People%27s_Republic

³⁶ Leonid Ushakov, "Elity – neodminna oznaka zhyttiezdatoho suspilstva" ("Elites are an Indispensable Sign of a Viable Society". – In Ukrainian), *Den'*, February 15, 2018,

major re-branding exercise, had taken the title of the *Russian Empire*, reflecting on the European past and political glory of Kyivan Rus. Importantly, multiple historical works report how Ukrainian language and culture were suffocated in the Russian empire, while Ukrainian ethnos was framed to be of minor value and subservient to the Russian one.³⁷ The single most succinct example of Russia's pathological refusal to acknowledge the existence of a separate Ukrainian identity remains the Valuev Circular. This 1863 Czarist decree banning the publication of Ukrainian-language literature declares: "a separate Ukrainian ("Little Russian") language never existed, does not exist, and shall not exist."³⁸

MID HISTORY

USSR (1922-1991). *Integrated into the USSR, Ukraine lost its independence. Ukraine's aspiration for sovereignty was severely suppressed. As a part of the USSR, Ukraine was not an independent international actor. Although Ukraine, alongside the USSR and Belarus, was one of the four founding members of the former Soviet Union (1922) and one of the founding members of the UN (1945), it did not do it as a sovereign state. Ukraine's membership in the UN is rather accounted for by the USSR's desire to acquire a heavier influence in this organization. In the USSR, any Ukrainian move towards sovereignty was mercilessly suppressed. One of the most tragic pages in the history of Ukraine is artificially created Holodomor / Great Famine (1932-1933) which took lives of millions of Ukrainians. The exhibition "Holodomor-genocide in the language of numbers" represented the quotes and data from both the organizers of Holodomor and the scholars who investigated and wrote about this crime. About 7 million people, or a third of the population of Ukraine at that time, were*

<https://web.archive.org/web/20180219034934/https://day.kyiv.ua/uk/article/kultura/elity-neodminna-oznaka-zhyttvezdatnogo-suspilstva>

³⁷ "Tak borolysia z ukrainskoiu movoiu. Khronika zaboron za 400 rokiv" ("How They Fought With the Ukrainian Language. Chronicle of Supressions for 400 Years". – In Ukrainian), *Istorychna Pravda*, July 3, 2012, <https://www.istpravda.com.ua/digest/2012/07/3/89519/>

³⁸ Peter Dickinson, "Ukraine's Fight Against Russian Imperialism is Europe's Longest Independence Struggle". *Atlantic Council*, August 23, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukraines-fight-against-russian-imperialism-is-europes-longest-independence-struggle/>

named victims.³⁹ Another tragic act was massive repressions against and physical elimination of Ukrainian cultural and political elites.⁴⁰ Throughout the Czarist and Soviet eras, Russia's many landmark crimes in Ukraine were accompanied by relentless waves of russification in every sphere of Ukrainian life.⁴¹

One of Russia's myths related to this historical period holds that Crimea's seizure by Russia in 2014 rectifies an injustice – the transfer of this “immanently Russian” territory to Ukraine. Meanwhile, the Russian chapter in Crimea's written history (from the 9th century BCE to date) the Russian chapter equals to mere six per cent. Before 2014, the year of Crimea's annexation from Ukraine by Russia, the peninsular was under Russian control for a total of only 168 years. Russia is only one of several powers that aimed to dominate Crimea. In fact, it was a part of Soviet Russia no longer than it was a part of Soviet Ukraine. Contrary to the popular myth – that the peninsular was a gift to Ukraine in 1954 to celebrate its “union with Russia of 1654” – Crimea's transfer to Ukraine aimed to improve the peninsula's economy which was then in poor shape because of difficulties with water supply and a scarcity of farmers.⁴²

BACK TO EUROPE

SHORT HISTORY

Post-USSR (1991 – 2013). Sovereign Ukraine cooperates with Europe and aspires to become an EU member state. Ukraine's rapprochement with the EU is hindered by Russia economically and politically. Looking into Braudel's 'short' history, we may argue that the end of the 20th century and

³⁹ “The Number of Holodomor-Genocide Victims in Ukraine are Often Intentionally Diminished – Scientists”, *Holodomor Museum*, September 13, 2018, <https://holodomormuseum.org.ua/en/news/the-number-of-holodomor-genocide-victims-in-ukraine-are-often-intentionally-diminished-scientists/>

⁴⁰ Tonia Andriichuk , “Erasing Ukrainian Collective Memory”, *Ukrainer*, December 23, 2022, <https://ukrainer.net/erasing-ukrainian-memory/>

⁴¹ Dickinson, “Ukraine's Fight Against Russian Imperialism”.

⁴² Duncan Allan et al., “Myths and Misconceptions in the Debate on Russia”,. *Chatman House*, May 13, 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/05/myths-and-misconceptions-debate-russia/myth-12-crimea-was-always-russian>

the start of the 21st century features integration processes on a global scale. Not only the EU has enlarged its membership dramatically in the decades following the fall of the USSR, but regional integration projects have appeared around the world, from MERCOSUR in South America, to NAFTA in the North, to African Union in Africa, SAARC in South Asia, ASEAN in South Eastern Asia, and the PIF in the Pacific, to name few. Beyond regional integration projects, multiple multilateral fora have also grown in membership. The integration and multilateral modes, however imperfect, have sent positive messages to the newly independent post-Soviet countries, including Ukraine. After Ukraine got its independence in 1991, following the collapse of the USSR, it features as a fully-fledged subject of international politics, entering various international multilateral organisations. Ukraine became a member the IMF (1992), European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (1992), World Bank Group (1992-2004), Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (1995), Council of Europe (1995), the WTO (2008) and more than a dozen of other multilateral organisations uniting and synergizing efforts of multiple sovereign states in diverse issue-areas. In this period, the theme of international recognition – including from European partners – weaves into the self-narrative of Ukraine.

Ukraine observed the consequences of the ‘European choice’ for the countries from the former socialist camp after the fall of the Berlin wall, as well as by the three Baltic states which once were part of the USSR. When faced with a dilemma of two regional politico-economic integration projects representing two civilisational frames – the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union headed by Russia – Ukraine proclaimed its ‘European choice’, now legalised in Ukraine’s Constitution. Post-Soviet Ukraine invests heavily into its relations with the European Union in the spheres of economy, education, science and culture. This period was also marked by Ukraine’s formulation of its open intention to join the EU and NATO – the so-called European and Euro-Atlantic ‘vectors’. Yet, this period in the most recent history shows that the pro-European course of Ukraine irked and clashed with orientations and outlooks of the Russian Federation. Russia did not stop its attempts to return Ukraine into the orbit of the Russian political and economic interests, back under Russia’s control.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, as one of the founding states of the CIS (the Commonwealth of the Newly Independent States), Ukraine was never a full member, being suspicious of the revised imperial policy of the Russian Federation. An associate member between 1994 and 2018, Ukraine left the CIS following the war unleashed by Russia against Ukraine in 2014. This period features multiple efforts by the Russian Federation to sabotage Ukraine's rapprochement with Europe, including gas and trade wars as well as political provocations affecting both Ukraine and the EU. The narrative of Ukraine's move to Europe and ultimate escape from Russia's influence gains strength.

Maidans (2004 and 2013-2014). Ukrainian Maidans fought against Russia's influence and strived for European values. Russia's pro-active antagonism towards Ukraine's civilisation choices and its course toward Europe led to Russia's unleashing the hybrid war against Ukraine. This war has engulfed political, diplomatic and informational spheres. Russia sought to restrain Ukraine with pro-Russian leadership. Yet, all such attempts resulted in the consolidation of the Ukrainian civil society that organised and led the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004), and later the Euromaidan developed into the Revolution of Dignity (2013-2014). The two Maidans have defended the democratic choice of the Ukrainian society and rebuffed political endeavours to steer Ukraine off its European course (the trigger of Euromaidan was the infamous decision of the then Ukrainian president Yanukovich to reject the signing of the Association Agreement with the EU). Importantly for the understanding of Ukraine's present-day narrative, the Euromaidan was also a fight against corruption and reactionary influence of Russia and a battle for the European democratic norms and values. For Ukraine, the Euromaidan protests are often cited by experts as a watershed moment in the post-independence identity struggle between those who felt kinship with Russia, and those who leaned toward Europe.⁴³

⁴³ Anders C. Hardig.. "Defending Europe: How Cultural Identity Shapes Support for Ukraine and Armed Resistance Against Russia", *The Conversation*, March 22, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/defending-europe-how-cultural-identity-shapes-support-for-ukraine-and-armed-resistance-against-russia-178226>

Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas (2014 – 2022). Ukraine's rapprochement with the EU was hindered by Russia via a covert military aggression. In spite of it, Ukraine got closer to Europe. The annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014 and a proxy war led by Russia against Ukraine in Donbas since 2014 were the two reactions by Russia to the Euromaidan and its outcomes to Ukraine's civilisational choice. So, the story is about Russia violently opposing Ukraine's move away from Russia's political economic and cultural influence, and about Ukraine's desire to enter the 'safe heaven' of NATO to protect itself against Russia. As a result, Ukraine has got closer to Europe.

PRESENT TIME

Russia's military aggression against Ukraine (2022 – present). Ukraine's rapprochement with the EU is hindered by Russia via an open military aggression. In spite of it, Ukraine is getting even closer to Europe. The narrative in this period renders the following storyline: unable to eliminate Ukraine's pro-European outlook and aspirations, and incapable to subvert Ukraine by political means, on 24 February, 2022 the Russian Federation unleashes a full-scale military assault against Ukraine. The democratic world, including partners in the EU, recognises the courage of Ukraine and the bravery of its army. Ukraine is granted the status of a candidate for accession to the EU.

The war unleashed by Putin's regime in 2022 is merely the latest chapter in a dark saga of Russian imperial aggression against Ukraine that stretches back centuries. The Ukrainian people may have officially achieved statehood more than three decades ago, but they are still battling to defend their country against a far larger and more powerful neighbour who refuses to accept the reality of an independent Ukraine.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Dickinson, "Ukraine's Fight Against Russian Imperialism".

WITH EUROPE

SHORT HISTORY

Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas (2014 – 2022). Europe helps Ukraine with reforms and imposes economic sanctions on Russia. Ukraine's self-narrative in this period is clear in assigning the roles of allies and enemies of Ukraine. The EU and the USA imposed economic sanctions on Russia in retaliation for its invasion of Ukraine. Ukraine signed Deep and Comprehensive FTA and Association Agreement with the EU and started reforms. Ukraine has been granted a visa-free travel to the Schengen Agreement countries.

PRESENT TIME

Russia's military aggression against Ukraine (2022 – present). Europe helps Ukraine to win the war and defend European values. The narrative continues to outline allies who provide Ukraine with an ever-growing support at times of war started by Russia. The EU, together with the USA and other democratic countries, does its best to help Ukraine with weapons and finances in response to the aggression by Russia. Europe accepts millions of Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war. Ukraine receives the status of a candidate for EU membership.

The overwhelming and emotional European support for Ukraine is not simply a result of the greater scale of Russian aggression compared to 2014. It is also related to the growing perception inside the EU that Ukraine is, indeed, European. The rise of European support for Ukraine is the result of a campaign fought by Ukrainians in recent years to shift Ukraine's identity away from Russia and toward the European Union. Given Russia's military capabilities and geographical proximity, Russian aggression is of particular concern to the European Union states. Throughout Europe, Ukraine is being framed as a distinctly 'European' country, whereas Russia remains the threatening 'other'. With its latest invasion of a European country, Russia continues to be seen as barbaric while at the same time Ukraine is swiftly being embraced as part of the civilized European community, valiantly defending its independence on the frontlines against Russia, once again. Many international

observers appear unable to grasp the colonial context underpinning today's Russian invasion of Ukraine. This reflects an even more fundamental failure to recognize that modern Russia remains an almost entirely unreconstructed imperial entity. Unlike the great European empires of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Russia never experienced a decisive break with the imperial past; nor did it fully relinquish its claims to neighbouring nations. In terms of both domestic and foreign policy, today's Russian Federation is still guided primarily by the politics of empire.⁴⁵

Russia's military aggression against Ukraine (2022 – present). Europe will help Ukraine with economic reconstruction. Arguably, Ukraine's future membership in the EU and NATO is a leading political narrative. In addition, a range of meanings guide Ukraine's narrative on economic levels. This narrative is future-oriented. Ukraine's economic story frames the country as an important and capable global and regional player, and increasingly so in the future.⁴⁶ On a systemic level of the strategic narrative, it highlights Ukraine as an agriculture actor able to influence the global food security chain. Ukraine is also a key infrastructure actor, where European and Asian trading routes intersect. The Black and the Azov Seas are also considered within the infrastructure story line. Ukraine is rich in minerals (iron ore, manganese, shale gas, titanium deposits); it has an industrial and scientific potential; it is interested in power production and renewable green energy. Regrettably, this positive and assertive self-narrative has been severely tested by the cruel reality of the war and all the destruction and damage it has caused to the economy of Ukraine. Yet here appears a new, future-oriented narrative – of Ukraine's economic reconstruction aided by its Western allies. The reconstruction is framed not only as a one-off help to bring post-war Ukraine to the pre-war level, but a qualitatively novel input that will advance Ukraine's economy to the international standards.

FOR EUROPE

⁴⁵ Hardig, "Defending Europe: How Cultural Identity Shapes Support for Ukraine".

⁴⁶ "Reconstruction of Ukraine. Building Blocks for a Recovery", *European Commission*, accessed March 30, 2023, https://eu-solidarity-ukraine.ec.europa.eu/eu-assistance-ukraine/reconstruction-ukraine_en

LONG HISTORY

Kyivan Rus (the 9th – 14th centuries). *Kyivan Rus hindered the conquest of Europe by the Mongol-Tatars. The Mongol-Tatar invasion of Kyivan Rus in the 13th – 14th centuries led to the inclusion of its lands into the Mongol Empire. Kyiv was destroyed. Kyivan Rus opposed the Mongol-Tatars and, at the cost of great sacrifices, decelerated their conquest of Europe.*⁴⁷

After Kyivan Rus (the 13th century – 1654). *Ukrainian Cossacks' state fought for Europe against the Osman Empire. The Cossacks, as a military stratum of the society, became a leading force in the development of an independent state – the Hetmanate. The roots of the Cossack military organization should be sought in the history of the European army, in particular, in the Netherlands, Spain and France. Europeans knew about Ukraine and the courage of the Ukrainian Cossacks who were defending Europe from the Ottoman Empire.*⁴⁸

PRESENT TIME

Russia's military aggression against Ukraine (2022 – present). *In the war with Russia, Ukraine defends itself and European democracies. At the cost of huge sacrifices, Ukraine defends not only its sovereignty and its democratic choice, but also the independence and democracy of European countries. Melinda Simmons, the Ambassador of the UK to Ukraine, noted: "I admire the resilience and courage of Ukrainians. Even under such dire circumstances, they maintain a sense of humour and daily give birth to new symbols of their resistance. But the most important thing is the understanding that by defending its independence, Ukraine defends the main values of the whole world – freedom and democracy".*⁴⁹ These words resonate with those of Ukrainian president Zelenskyy: "Ukraine will

⁴⁷ Alona Ratushniatiak. "Storinky spotvorenoi istorii" ("Pages of Distorted History". – In Ukrainian), *Facebook*, December 6, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/watch/?extid=CL-UNK-UNK-UNK-AN_GK0T-GK1C&mibextid=1YhcI9R&v=1079257242740161).

⁴⁸ Oksana Polenska, "Ukrainian Cossacks: Myths and Reality", *Radio Svoboda*, April 14, 2014, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/30214615.html>

⁴⁹ @UK in Ukraine, August 24.2023, #Independence Day, <https://twitter.com/i/status/1562305061845405696>

definitely be able to protect Europe from any Russian forces, and it doesn't matter who commands them. We will protect. The security of Europe's eastern flank depends only on our defence. And that is why every manifestation of support for our defence is support for your defence, everyone in the free world".⁵⁰

The war in Ukraine is about Europe's future, since Russia's invasion of Ukraine has global implications for energy, food supplies, and global alliances. That is why Ukraine's victory would make Europe more stable and secure. Without this goal in mind, the European continent will be unstable, divided and weak, unable to act strategically, and unable to deal with the immense challenges exacerbated by Russia's two invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. The war is a test for Europe in particular, and the West in general. It is about security, conviction, and trying to uphold values based on the pursuit of democracy. Ultimately, that is what the Ukrainians are fighting for.⁵¹

Summary

Table 1 and the further extensions of its narrative formulas show that Ukraine's historical self-narrative marked by a distinct European perspective is two-pronged. *First*, it is about Ukraine IN, OUTSIDE and BACK TO Europe: Ukraine as a geo-political entity which is geographically, normatively and culturally belonging to Europe as a continent, idea and cultural-normative space; once being excluded from that space due to historical circumstances, Ukraine is currently coming back to where it used to belong. Importantly, the narrative of the 'return to Europe' is not unique for Ukraine. Research into liminal identity of the Baltic states has also registered a similar narrative of a 'return to Europe' accompanied by a storyline of a 'reliable' European 'periphery' but never the

⁵⁰ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, "Ukraine Will Definitely Be Able to Protect Europe from any Russian Forces, and it Doesn't Matter Who Commands Them". *President of Ukraine / Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Official Site*, 24 June, 2023, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/ukrayina-tochno-zmozhe-zahistiti-yevropu-vid-bud-yakih-rosij-83781>

⁵¹ Judy Dempsey, "The war in Ukraine is about Europe's future", *Carnegie Europe*, August 29, 2023, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/90444>

‘core’.⁵² A rich literature in this case argues an identity of ‘liminal Europeanness’⁵³ in the Baltic states, also found in Central and Eastern European post-communist countries (i.e., “Europe but not Europe” that is “ever becoming European”). Arguably, what makes Ukrainian emerging narrative of European / Euro-Atlantic integration somewhat different to the narratives of the liminality, is the second, pro-active dimension of Ukraine’s current self-narrative: Ukraine FOR and WITH Europe.

In this dimension, Ukraine is self-narrated as a key political actor who defended Europe against external threats throughout the history, thus warranting the existence of the European normative and cultural space throughout long-, medium- and short-term history. Moreover, currently and in the future, Ukraine is a like-minded partner collaborating with Europe, *central* for testing the vitality and reason of European / Western norms and values. Suggesting the matrix of intersections in between the two prongs of Ukraine’s self-narrative vis-à-vis historical periods, we argue that they constitute Ukraine’s emerging narrative in the 21st century as a pivot of European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Here, a ‘pivot’ is understood as a ‘central point’ and ‘rotation shaft’ with the implication of Ukraine’s integration with the EU and NATO, and the further consolidation of the EU and NATO due to their understanding of the necessity to support Ukraine in its fight against Russia.

Concluding discussion

Ukraine’s European choice was based foremost on the perceptions of kindred values and norms with the project of European integration. Ukraine’s civilisation choice highlighted by the Euromaidan 2013 and its ultimate sacrifice proved it was a correct normative choice, and even more visible in the light of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine unleashed since 2014, including the annexation of Crimea, the war in Donbas and the full-scale military invasion in 2022.

⁵² Dovilė Jakniūnaite, “Permanent Periphery of the Baltic States”, in *Centres and Peripheries in the Post-Soviet Space: Relevance and Meanings of a Classical Distinction*, eds. Alexander Filippov, Nicolas Hayoz, and Jens Herlth (Bern: Peter Lang, 2020).

⁵³ Janina Šleivytyė, “Russia’s European agenda and the Baltic States”, review by Viatcheslav Morozov, *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 42, no. 2 (2011): 305–307. Alexander Filippov, Nicolas Hayoz and Jens Herlth, eds, *Centres and Peripheries in the Post-Soviet Space: Relevance and Meanings of a Classical Distinction*. (Bern: Peter Lang, 2020).

Leading to 2022, Ukraine has clearly formulated several key strategic visions and communicated them to the EU, other Western partners, as well as to the Russian Federation. In its own narrative, Ukraine demonstrates a firm following of the course on the democratisation of its society. This vision still includes a realistic storyline that Ukraine is a fledgling democracy, with multiple problems, including a challenged rule of law and corruption. Indeed, it is not described as ‘full’ or even ‘flawed’ democracy – it is still in the category of the ‘hybrid regimes’,⁵⁴ in the bottom 30-40% of the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index. Nevertheless, Ukraine’s strategic narrative of democratisation on the system-, identity- and policy-specific levels has got a further boost from Ukraine’s Revolution of Dignity 2013-14. The latest publications by Ukrainian journalists uncovering corruption at war times demonstrate that the role of the civil society – as a major influence on the political life of the country – has been re-imagined both in Ukraine and outside it. Another important input to shaping the present-day narrative is Ukraine’s comparison to other post-Soviet states, which frames Ukraine as a society not afraid to oppose and battle autocratic anti-democratic regimes.

The input into the present-day narrative of Ukraine’s European integration is an evolving attitude among the general public towards the EU and NATO, as well as perceptions of benefits brought by Ukraine’s European and Euro-Atlantic choice for themselves and the country.⁵⁵ As discussed above, these perceptions and attitudes were earlier less homogenous and regionally divided. Yet in 2022 and onwards, the public opinion has become predominantly unified in its positivity towards the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of Ukraine. This is specifically important, as Russia’s attempts to resuscitate the USSR have often targeted older population (and Ukraine’s population has an older demographics)⁵⁶, appealing to the feelings of nostalgia for their youth and enthusiasm which coincided with the USSR times. However, today 63% of Ukrainians believe that

⁵⁴ “A New Log for Global Democracy”, *The Economist*, February 9, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/02/09/a-new-log-for-global-democracy>; V-Dem Institute, *Defiance in the Face of Autocratization. Democracy Report 2023* (Gothenburg, Sweden: University of Gothenburg, 2023), https://v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf

⁵⁵ Hrushetskyi, “Geopolitical Orientation”.

⁵⁶ “The World Factbook”, *CIA.gov*, Google, accessed February 10, 2023, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/ukraine/#people-and-society>

the nation closest to them is Poles; 64% of Ukrainians believe that Ukraine was a colony of Russia; 60% of Ukrainians believe that in 1991 they did not gain, but renewed independence; 69% of Ukrainians believe that Ukraine is the ideological successor of the Ukrainian People's Republic. This shows that due to the events of 2013-2023, the political formation of the nation has been finalized, since two thirds of the society are aware of their national identity.⁵⁷

Ukraine's decisive course towards the European and Euro-Atlantic integration, confirmed by the Constitution, has led the country to the status of an EU candidate in June 2022. The escalation of the war by Russia has facilitated and fast-forwarded the granting of the candidate status to Ukraine by the EU. Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, noted, "Ukrainians are ready to die for the European perspective... We want them to live with us the European dream".⁵⁸ In response, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of Ukraine, remarked that granting this status to Ukraine is a "unique and historical moment in UA-EU relations ... Ukraine's future is within the EU".⁵⁹ At the 2020 EU-Ukraine Summit, he said: "Ukrainians are quintessentially European in terms of the values we believe in. We are European in our instinctive embrace of freedom and in our deeply felt democratic principles."⁶⁰ Considering these traits, Ukraine, as Timothy Snyder notes, "has a very typical European history".⁶¹

However, the fast-track member state status for Ukraine remains an open question, with Ukraine expecting a speedier move towards the membership. In February 2023, at the Ukraine-EU summit attended by 15 EU commissioners, it was acknowledged that, despite the tragic war circumstances testing Ukraine's survival, the country has met seven criteria on its road to the full membership. These include the reform of the Constitutional Court, the continuation of the judicial

⁵⁷ KIIS, *Istorychna pamiat*.

⁵⁸ @European Commission, June 17, 2022, https://twitter.com/EU_Commission/status/1537778168161001474

⁵⁹ Jenifer Rankin, "Ukraine's Future is in the EU": Zelenskiy Welcomes Granting of Candidate Status", *The Guardian*, June 23, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/23/eu-leaders-ukraine-candidate-status-russian-attack>

⁶⁰ Hardig, "Defending Europe".

⁶¹ Snyder. "Ukrainian History, European Future".

reform, anti-corruption measures, battle against money laundering, anti-oligarch reform, and new laws on media as well as revision of the legal framework on national minorities. At the same summit, the EU announced its 545 million Euro aid package to Ukraine.

The two years of 2022 and 2023 have presented a major update to Ukraine's narrative. In structural terms, if we conceptualize Ukraine as a protagonist of this narrative, it has changed its role from a state who seemed to be permanently outside of the "exclusive club" of the EU, or the one who tried to "sit on two chairs" of the two regional integration scenarios at the same time, to a state who diverges and fences itself off the so-called Eurasian integration vector towards full unequivocal association with the EU. Importantly, this narrative is substantiated by the decisive changes in the mentality of the civil society spearheaded by the Revolution of Dignity in 2013-2014, which is being held in high esteem both in Ukraine and around the world. Russian aggression, contrary to its goals and expectations to divide Ukrainian people and annihilate Ukraine's statehood, has triggered the consolidation of the nation, and not lastly in re-formulating Ukraine's strategic narratives on the systemic, identity and policy-specific levels.

On the socio-humanitarian level, today's strategic narratives communicated by Ukraine's government, officials and its leading media commentators represent Ukraine as no longer a victim, but a pro-active protagonist who takes responsibility for its destiny and fights for its survival against an evil force while skilfully negotiating with its allies. News media publications around the world often resort to comparing Ukraine to David who fights a Goliath of Russia. In parallel, and following the barbaric bombardments of the civilians and Ukraine's energy infrastructure, the narrative of a stoic, determined Ukraine ready to sacrifice for its victory also comes to the fore. In another dimension, and this time following massive migration from Ukraine, a narrative of hard-working, educated, patriotic Ukrainian people emerges in the societies that opened their borders to host Ukrainian refugees. However, with no end of the war in view, global public attention and media spotlight is turning away from Ukraine to other major conflicts (e.g. the escalation of the conflict in

the Middle East). How a long-lasting war and the fading global attention will affect Ukraine's self-narratives is a question to the future studies.

Ukrainians' vision of themselves, grounded on the long and eventful history of their country, is represented in the story which says:

Every day, every minute for Ukrainians is a struggle for life, a struggle for existence, a struggle for their future and the future of their children. We are a nation that has not been broken by famines, terrible destructive wars, deportations and other crimes committed against us. Not broken, because we know and respect our history well, value freedom, strive to create a successful future, skilfully manage our own land and live peacefully with other communities. And when in danger, we tend to rally quickly to give the enemy a decent fight back. Today, the Ukrainian people actually protect not only their state, but also the values of the entire civilized world, paying for it with the highest price – their own lives. Despite all the grief and inhuman trials that the Ukrainian people are going through, the Ukrainian nation continues to be tempered in the fire – the nation of the unconquered, the nation of the victors.⁶²

Ukraine's self-narrative of its history confirms Braudel's considerations as to the importance of long history in the nation's image of its past. In its past, Ukraine was much longer IN Europe than OUTSIDE it. Therefore, Ukraine's reminiscences of the European past become the bridge to the country's self-narrative of its European future, where it will be IN Europe, working and standing WITH it FOR the prosperity of Ukraine and European nations.

⁶² Vladislav Kanevskyi, "Ukrayina – forpost svobody ta demokratychnyx cinnostej" ("Ukraine is an Outpost of Freedom and Democratic Values". – In Ukrainian), *LB.ua.*, August 23, 2022, https://lb.ua/blog/vladyslav_kanevsky/527116_ukraina-forpost_svobodi.html