

## The European identity of Ukrainians: origins and transformations in a historical perspective

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### Abstract.

**The purpose** of the article is to analyse the historical evolution and transformation of Ukrainian European identity, adopting a *longue durée* perspective and the mechanisms through which ideas of Europeanness were constructed, transmitted, and reinterpreted across different historical periods. **Research methodology.** The study is based on an interdisciplinary methodological framework that combines historical analysis with the theory of social constructivism and the concept of imagined communities. It demonstrates that an interdisciplinary approach enables the reconstruction of the historical origins and transformations of identity and the assessment of its impact on contemporary cultural and political orientations, as well as social relations in Ukraine. The application of social constructivist theories and the concept of imagined communities explains how Ukrainians perceived themselves as part of the European cultural space in various historical configurations. **Scientific novelty.** The novelty of the study is the understanding of European identity as a historically shaped and evolving phenomenon based on earlier political, cultural, and civilizational interactions with Europe, rather than as a result of contemporary European integration. Accordingly, the research provides a comprehensive perspective on identity analysis by uniting regional, social, intellectual factors within a European historical context. **Conclusions.** The study demonstrates that Ukrainian European identity emerged under both internal and external influences and was formed through historical events that involved inclusion and exclusion in European political and cultural domains. Therefore, the process of identity formation involves three dimensions, which include political, cultural, and value-based elements that people use to define themselves. At the same time, it is examined how historical and contemporary factors at both the local and international levels, affect the development of identity. In this context, the study shows that the formation and transformation of European identity across successive historical periods – particularly in light of the current security and political context – play a significant role in shaping Ukrainians' contemporary foreign policy orientations.

**Keywords:** European identity, Ukrainian society, social constructivism, the concept of imagined communities, European integration, democratic transformations.

## Європейська ідентичність українців: витоки та трансформації в історичній перспективі

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### Анотація.

**Метою дослідження** є проаналізувати історичну еволюцію формування та трансформації української європейської ідентичності, з акцентом на чинниках конструювання ідеї європейськості, її передачі та переосмислення в різні історичні періоди. **Методологія дослідження.** Дослідження спирається на міждисциплінарний підхід, що передбачає застосування історичного аналізу у поєднанні з теорією соціального конструктивізму та концепцією «уявлених спільнот». У такому контексті міждисциплінарний підхід дозволяє дослідити історичні витоки та трансформацію ідентичності, оцінити їхній вплив на сучасні культурно-політичні орієнтації українського суспільства та відповідні соціальні взаємодії в Україні. Відтак застосування обраної методології пояснює, як українці усвідомлювали себе частиною європейського культурного простору в різні історичні періоди. **Наукова новизна** дослідження полягає в концептуалізації української європейської ідентичності як історично зумовленого та динамічного явища, сформованого під впливом тривалих політичних, культурних та цивілізаційних обмінів з Європою, а не лише як продукту сучасних процесів європейської інтеграції. Відповідно у статті запропоновано цілісне бачення аналізу ідентичності шляхом поєднання регіональних, соціальних та інтелектуальних складників у межах європейського історичного контексту. **Висновки.** Дослідження показує, що становлення і розвиток української європейської ідентичності відбувались у процесі тривалої взаємодії внутрішніх і зовнішніх чинників, а також з урахуванням історичного досвіду включення та виключення в європейські політичні та культурні простори. Відповідно процес її формування поєднує політичні, культурні та ціннісні аспекти самоідентифікації крізь призму аналізу історичних і сучасних, локальних і міжнародних впливів. Так, дослідження демонструє, що становлення і трансформація європейської ідентичності впродовж різних історичних періодів, із акцентом на ролі у цьому процесі сучасної безпекової і політичної ситуації, має вагомe значення для розуміння сучасних зовнішньополітичних орієнтацій українців.

**Ключові слова:** європейська ідентичність, українське суспільство, соціальний конструктивізм, концепція «уявлених спільнот», європейська інтеграція, демократичні трансформації.

**Statement of the problem.** The issue of Ukrainian European identity occupies an important place in contemporary humanities and social sciences. However, its relevance extends far beyond the current political context. Within the domestic scholarly discourse, European identity is often interpreted as a product of the recent transformations following Ukraine's independence. As a rule, it is also considered to be a product of the processes of European integration, which took place at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries, hence reducing the understanding of it to an institutional or normative framework. This approach, which is common to many studies, limits the scope of analysis and makes it hard to comprehend the historical origins of Ukrainian European identity, which are based on values.

For historical and political understanding, it is not sensible to conceptualize European identity as a permanent attribute or an identity that could be adopted on the basis of political decisions. It has developed over the lengthy, erratic process that has been shaped by the interplay of political, cultural and civil interrelations, which occurred both in the past and at present. In this perspective, the scholars examining European identity of Ukrainians are discussing the topics of the history of empires and the analysis of the identity transformation in the border areas of Europe.

At the same time, European identity awareness of the original past enables individuals to identify the way in which generations have passed down their distinct Ukrainian perception of the Europeanness through cultural models, political partnerships and value systems. A historical-comparative approach reveals both central and peripheral influences through the evaluation of social elites, intellectual circles and mass media in building European identity. Thus, the historical evolution of European identity allows researchers to understand better the present political and cultural issues that Ukraine has to deal with as it attempts to either integrate with Europe or international expansion.

This perspective enables interdisciplinary comparative analysis that integrates historical, sociological, and cultural approaches to provide a better understanding of how European identity is created. The research on this subject has academic value and it also provides a better understanding of how Ukrainians identify themselves at present (as well as the historical factors that influence this process). In particular, the study of Ukrainian identity allows scholars to find out the structural patterns and local factors that have influenced the way contemporary Ukrainians perceive European values.

The analysis of these processes is therefore important for the development of policies in the fields of education, culture, and international relations that take into account historical memory and the identity-specific features of society.

**Analysis of sources and recent research.** The formation of Ukrainian European identity has been most comprehensively examined within domestic multidisciplinary research, drawing on the methodological approaches of history and political science, as well as sociology and cultural studies. The theoretical foundations of identity research were laid in the works of Western scholars who conceptualized identity as a social and discursive construct shaped through historical interactions and cultural transfers (Anderson, 1991; Hall, 1996). A substantial contribution to understanding identity as a dynamic phenomenon has been made by studies focusing on the concept of imagined communities, the symbolic boundaries of Europe, and the relationship between centre and periphery, as well as the mechanisms through which particular communities have been incorporated into the European space (Delanty, 1995; Delanty, 2006; Pagden, 2002; Risse, 2010). Moreover, theoretical approaches grounded in social constructivism emphasize that identity should be understood not as a static condition but as the outcome of long-term processes of cultural communication, and shifting political contexts (Smith, 1992; Therborn, 1995; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). At the same time, Western historiography has devoted considerable attention to the study of historical mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, which makes it possible to analyse how communities in different historical periods came to perceive themselves as part of the “European space” (Delanty, 1995; Neumann, 1999; Pagden, 2002; Risse, 2010; Wimmer, 2013).

In Ukrainian historiography, the issue of European identity began to receive systematic scholarly attention after the state gained independence in 1991. Scholars have examined the European orientations of Ukrainian political thought, patterns of intellectual borrowing and cultural transfer, the impact of imperial and Soviet narratives on the transformation of identification models, as well as the role of historical memory in shaping contemporary forms of self-identification (Hrytsak, 2011; Yakovenko, 2006; Sydorenko, 2005; Myronenko, 2010; Pavlenko, 2008) and preservation of Ukrainian identity in the conditions of the imperial policy of russification (Hedo & Ivaniuk, 2025). Simultaneously, a substantial portion of these studies has focused on specific historical periods (most notably the contemporary era) thereby underscoring the need for a more comprehensive interpretation of the historical evolution of Ukrainian European identity. It is worth emphasizing that Ukraine’s aspirations for closer alignment with Europe and the prospects of European integration in the early 2000s have intensified scholarly interest in this subject. In this context it is important to understand that Ukraine’s pursuit of EU membership is not just about institutional or legal changes, but also about a convergence of values. This idea has become especially clear and socially significant during the full-scale russian-Ukrainian war, when an external threat has not only strengthened political and security cooperation between Ukraine and European countries but also deepened a sense of commonality based on fundamental norms and beliefs. That is why it is important to pay attention to the value orientations of contemporary Ukrainian society and to see how much they align with European values.

Nevertheless, within the domestic scholarly discourse, studies addressing the cultural, social, and identity-related dimensions of integration remain comparatively underrepresented. Among contemporary studies, peculiar attention should go to those that directly look into the value orientations of Ukrainians in the context of European integration (Kalinichenko, 2023; Kuzio, 2016; Pakhomenko & Shulha, 2009). Also important are works dealing with the role of security-related factors in boosting pro-European attitudes, as well as the links between trust levels and how people see the prospects of European integration during the russian–Ukrainian war (Fakhurdinova, 2023; Hrushetskyi, 2023; Kalinicheva, 2024; Marchuk, 2024; Nosova, 2023; Palahniuk, 2025). Another group of studies looks at how the conversation has shifted from being mostly about pragmatic discourse to a more civilization- and value-based framing of European integration (Fesenko, 2011; Rusakov, 2025; Sokur, 2015; Kozlovets, 2025; Khudaverdieva, 2022).

All in all, current research shows ongoing interest in the European side of Ukrainian identity and gives useful insights into its political, cultural, and value-related sides. At the same time, the investigations are a bit fragmented. Quite many studies focus on certain times, topics, or recent integration processes. This means there is a need for a more thorough, historically-rooted view that takes into account long-term trends and how imperial legacies, cultural exchanges, and changing value systems interact over time. Addressing this gap requires an approach capable of synthesizing

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 diverse historiographical insights, thus enabling a more coherent understanding of the historical dynamics shaping Ukrainian perceptions of Europe.

**The purpose of the article** is to analyse the historical evolution and transformation of Ukrainian European identity in a *longue durée* perspective and the mechanisms through which ideas of Europeanness were constructed, transmitted, and reinterpreted across different historical periods.

**Methodological framework.** To examine the dynamics of the formation and transformation of Ukrainian European identity, this article employs an interdisciplinary approach that integrates Western theoretical frameworks with insights drawn from domestic historiography. This synthesis can track a connection of a political, cultural and social hit of different historical periods and how they affected the growth of the corresponding value conceptions and representations. The approach also presents an opportunity to identify regional diversity and compare Ukrainian experience to a broader European historical framework. Due to the purpose of the study, the research methodology is based on social constructivism and the concept of imagined communities. Accordingly, identity can be studied as a time-dependent, changeable social and cultural phenomenon over the *longue durée*.

Social constructivism interprets identity as the outcome of social processes, transformations of local forms of communication, and historical context (Smith, 1992; Therborn, 1995; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002), in contrast to approaches that treat identity as a fixed or static attribute. From this perspective, Ukrainian European identity has to be considered a construct that emerged through historically contingent connections, cultural exchanges, and intellectual collaboration. Thus, the chosen methodology is used to demonstrate: 1) the formation of Ukrainian European identity through the contacts between Ukrainian territories and European political and cultural spaces; 2) the role of inclusion and exclusion mechanisms shaped by imperial and Soviet influences in creating localized models of identity; 3) the dynamic and multidimensional essence of Ukrainian European identity, encompassing political, cultural, and value-based aspects, which change according to social contexts and historical circumstances.

The concept of imagined communities addresses the symbolic and cultural dimensions of identity, interpreting nations as social constructs whose members may never meet in person but feel a sense of belonging to a shared identity through symbols, language, historical narratives, and cultural communication. This concept allows for an analysis of how historical memory, literature, education, and cultural communication have shaped the sense of belonging to the European community (Pagden, 2002; Risse, 2010; Delanty, 2006). In this study, its application aims at 1) conceptualizing Ukrainian European identity as an “imagined community”, whose members perceive themselves as part of a broader European cultural and value space; 2) analysing how intellectual and cultural exchanges, educational programmes, and participation in transnational networks shaped perceptions of Europe and Ukraine’s place within it; 3) highlighting how historical memory, literature, education, and political relations sustained a sense of belonging to the European community even during periods of political or ideological exclusion, particularly under Soviet rule (Kuzio, 2002; Fitzpatrick, 2000).

The combination of social constructivism and the concept of imagined communities provides a complementary theoretical framework for analysing the historical dynamics of Ukrainian European identity. In this context the identity is understood as the product of long-term processes of interaction, cultural exchange and political transformation, but not as a static or externally imposed attribute. In particular, social constructivism explains the mechanisms of identity formation through social, cultural, and political processes, while the imagined communities framework demonstrates the symbolic and cultural dimensions of this identity, showing how Ukrainians over the centuries perceived themselves as part of the European community. The synthesis of these approaches allow this study 1) to trace the historical dynamics of Ukrainian European identity; 2) to identify the relationship between local traditions and transnational influences; and 3) to describe contemporary Ukrainian European identity as the result of a historical development.

**Research Results.** The sources of European identity in Ukrainian territories originated during the period of Kyivan Rus and through the incorporation of Ukrainian lands into the political and legal systems of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and during the early modern era. Thus, European identity exists as a complex phenomenon which requires multiple historical epochs and political initiatives to understand fully and cannot be reduced to a single historical period (Yakovenko, 2006).

During the period of Kyivan Rus’, the incorporation of Ukrainian territories into the broader European cultural and political space was evident through Christian traditions, dynastic connections, and legal borrowings. Although these activities did not create European identity in the present context, they established the basis of the region being considered an element of a common civilizational space. The Ukrainian lands under the Lithuanian-Polish Commonwealth and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania were the primary components that were integrated into the Central and Eastern European political and legal space. The combination of the European political and cultural spaces of Lithuania and Poland and the Ottoman Empire enabled the people to accept the legal regulations, educational systems and

cultural patterns that established the beginning of their identification with the larger European cultural space (Yakovenko, 2006). These processes demonstrated a complex dynamic of cultural transfer and mutual enrichment. Political alliances, commercial transactions, religious contacts, and educational exchanges all created conditions where ideas of Europeanness could develop (Kiaer, 2001; Magosci, 2010). The concept of imagined communities allows us to see how Ukrainian elites identified themselves as part of a European space despite the conditions of political peripherality (Anderson, 1991).

Participation of the Ukrainian nobility in European intellectual currents, adoption of European legal and political norms, and the spread of Magdeburg law contributed to the formation of elements of political culture that later became important markers of Europeanness. In the early years of Modern Times, Ukrainian thinkers embraced European concepts regarding legal framework as much as philosophical principles and religious faith. As a result, they decided Europe was an essential component to their social and cultural identity (Sydorenko, 2005). The educational establishments in Ukraine specifically the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy assisted the dissemination of humanist thought and legal framework and civil society concepts throughout the country. European universities received Ukrainian students who brought along European concepts with them which established the foundations of European integration. The social constructivist framework demonstrates how Ukrainian identity evolved through a continuous combination of cultural and political elements instead of existing as an immutable element (Hall, 1996).

The nineteenth-century social conditions created new personal identity formation and European identity ambiguity. The Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires divided Ukrainian territory which led to distinct social and cultural development paths. The Ukrainian intellectual community supported European intellectual movements, but imperial power structures made Ukrainian heritage appear as an insignificant European outpost. European identity was (re)developed in intellectual circles as a scholarly-cultural project that linked to cultural liberation instead of public self-identity. During the national revival in the nineteenth century and subsequent interwar transformations in the twentieth century, this identity was largely expressed through participation in international academic, political, and educational exchanges. Ukrainian intellectual elites developed European concepts by using Western statehood principles and human rights models which they transformed to fit Ukrainian social and cultural conditions (Hrytsak, 2011). Additionally, the Ukrainian regions developed strong cultural and educational ties with Western Europe through Ukrainian students attending universities in Vienna and Krakow and Warsaw and Prague. In particular, the participation of Ukrainian students in international scientific congresses and cultural societies established vital links to Western European culture (Magosci, 2010). And through these international connections the concepts of civil society, legal awareness and cultural pluralism entered Ukrainian intellectual traditions (Risse, 2010).

Therefore, European identity in Ukraine emerged as a combination of cultural and social factors rather than just a political or normative framework (Pagden, 2002). This period also witnessed the gradual construction of value-based and cultural orientations that combined local traditions with European norms of law, education, and political culture (Therborn, 1995). Between these years, people started constructing value and culture-based frameworks which integrated indigenous customs with European legal, educational and political cultural standards (Therborn, 1995). The historical records during this period show European identity was not a fixed concept because it developed through political struggles and cultural boundaries and international influences which made it a dynamic identity that changed according to its surrounding environment (Delanty, 2006).

The influence of the Soviet era rendered it difficult to strengthen a European identity because of monistic Soviet ideology and the centralized control of educational and cultural standards. The functioning of scientific, educational and cultural institutions under totalitarian control rendered it impossible for people even to learn about Western European ideas (which might provide the minimal basis for the development or supporting European identity). They were made to embrace Soviet forms of identity that were not compatible with the European values (Fitzpatrick, 2000). Nevertheless, Ukrainian intellectuals lost their contacts with Western European academic and cultural circles and hence retained a European mentality (Sydorenko, 2005), they continued to promote European educational, legal and cultural norms by diplomatic and cultural interaction, even under ideological control (Therborn, 1995). The Ukrainian community living abroad, particularly scientific, cultural and political organizations based in Western Europe and North America, functioned as vital facilitators of international cultural exchange between Ukraine and the rest of the world. These organizations promoted Ukrainian historical traditions while supporting intellectual discussions about European identity within Ukraine (Magosci, 2010), and maintaining historical memory (Telehuz & Telehuz, 2025). Thus, the Soviet period demonstrates two distinct aspects of European identity development. On the one hand, it was centralized ideological control restricted direct educational and cultural contact between Europe and Ukraine. On the other hand, Ukrainian communities maintained their European way of thinking through international communication channels, local intellectual traditions and cultural

practices (Risse, 2010). Thus, the Soviet era transformed Ukrainian national identity. These changes resulted in the formation of European mentality models that modified themselves to fit the new political and cultural environment of independent Ukraine (Myronenko, 2010).

European identity evolved in new directions after Ukraine attained self-rule as it assimilated the outcomes of historical shifts with the contemporary political, economic and cultural environment of democratization. Ukrainian population during the 1990s did not consider European integration a priority because the primary focus was on establishing post-Soviet democratic systems and market-based economic frameworks. Under these circumstances mostly linguistic and regional identity influenced people's support or opposition to democratic development during that time. And consequently, to express or not pro-European political orientations. In the early 2000s, after a period of so-called "imbalanced identity" and political marginalization (Reznik, 2022), political mobilization surrounding the 2004 presidential election and the Orange Revolution intensified pro-European rhetoric among politicians and strengthened pro-European sentiments among the electorate of democratic political parties. The Euromaidan demonstrations together with the annexation of Crimea, and the start of the Donbas war, established European Union membership as a powerful European identity among pro-integration advocates. European identity of the value-based or worldview dimension is a vital aspect in this context because before the full-scale war it was mostly perceived on the basis of the economic and legal indicators that included good wages and freedom of speech and equality before the law and rights of minorities. European values were considered based on the rule of law and economic prosperity and freedom rather than on a spiritual or cultural or ethical context (Kotensky, 2021).

The full-scale war against Ukraine has transformed Ukrainian understanding of the European Union and European values through its influence on public opinion. In 2013, Western countries were visited by only 21 % of Ukrainians but after February 2022, over eight million refugees escaped to the EU, showing how migration and contact with host populations affects people's experiences. The perception of Western support for Ukraine during the war stands as another essential factor that influences Ukrainian society. Thus the Russian war has created a turning point which strengthened Ukrainian support for the EU because public approval of EU membership grew from 68 % to 86 %, and reached 91 % in March 2022, while staying steady despite current confrontation with some member states (Rating Group, 2022).

Today, European identity in Ukraine emerges as the result of political choices, cultural engagement, and social expectations, shaped by the EU's political and economic influence, international educational programs, globalization, and security contexts. Regional and generational differences in foreign policy preferences show that there is a common understanding of the society and political identity of the society that were once major factors of divergence have started to merge. Further integration of Ukrainian society into European political and cultural discourses – facilitated by transnational and global processes as well as contemporary security challenges – will continue to reinforce the development of a modern, value-oriented European identity.

**Conclusions.** The present study leads to the conclusion that Ukrainian European identity is neither a recent phenomenon nor an exclusively political construct tied solely to the processes of European integration in the late twentieth and early 21st centuries. The development of the Ukrainian national identity has intellectual, cultural and social origins which were developed by the long-term relations of Ukrainian society with various European political and cultural centers.

European identity of Ukrainians was shaped by the interaction of learning-experiences, and the exposure to European legal, political and philosophical concepts, as well as the fact that Ukrainian intellectual elites became part of transnational cultural and educational networks. These processes supported the feelings of belonging to the larger European cultural and civil communities, even in epochs when national statehood did not exist. The historical period of Kyivan Rus established Ukrainian lands as part of the European civilization through religious traditions, dynastic relationships, legal frameworks, and cultural exchange. The early modern period shaped European identity through educational exchanges, the reception of Western European political ideas and the integration of Ukrainian elites into transnational intellectual networks. The 20th century in Europe transformed Europeanness into a core element of modern national projects which leaders used as a significant symbolic tool for nation-building. The study demonstrates that European identity was not lost during the Soviet era, but it became less strong, divided, and removed from public visibility. At the same time, some parts survived through informal intellectual contacts and cultural remembrance. Thus, the European concepts and value systems were transformed, but they did not completely vanish and reappeared across different historical periods. After Ukraine gained independence, European identity of Ukrainians emerged, as a stronger and more visible force through public, political, and social channels. The Revolution of Dignity together with the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine has had a powerful impact on strengthening European identity by assigning the concepts of freedom, dignity, and sovereignty. Therefore, the results of the research allow historians to establish a timeline of Ukrainian

European identity development based on changes in political power, cultural traditions and social environments that act as either support or modified or restricted factor.

The division of Ukrainian development in the relationship between Ukraine and Europe proposed in this article demonstrates the evolution of Ukrainian European identity by means of various phases of civilizational inclusion followed by the modern national reconstructions and Soviet suppression of the modern national identity followed by the current re-articulation of the national identity. The modification of these periods occurred due to the transformation of the political regime along with institutional opportunities and the way in which Ukraine became integrated into the European society. The research demonstrates how contemporary Ukrainian European identity evolved through time rather than being a result of temporary circumstances. Its revival in the post-Soviet period has deep historical preconditions, and its striking importance today has been significantly influenced by security and political challenges, which provide additional socio-cultural legitimacy to the current processes of European integration in Ukraine and help explain their persistence in the public consciousness.

Prospects for future research include an analysis of regional differences in the formation of European identity, as well as a study of the relationship between historical memory, local models of self-identification, and contemporary political, social, and cultural processes. Such studies will not only enhance an understanding of the dynamics of Ukrainian European identity but also contribute to the development of interdisciplinary approaches for assessing its role in the context of European integration and globalizing transformations.

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