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The Evolution of Ukrainian National Identity

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Abstract

This thesis explores how national identity is reshaped during war, using Ukraine as a case study. Drawing on process tracing and nine in-depth qualitative interviews conducted during the ongoing Russian invasion, it identifies five core mechanisms of identity transformation: identity rupture, civic reorientation, symbolic rebuilding, European alignment, and intergenerational transmission. The findings reveal that national identity has become stronger and more civic, yet remains fragmented across regional, generational, and linguistic lines. Crucially, transformation was not primarily state-led but emerged from personal ruptures—displacement, informational awakening, or betrayal by institutions—leading individuals to renegotiate belonging through everyday actions, symbolic practices, and cultural realignment. Youth emerge as key agents of forward-looking identity, while tensions persist in contested territories. The study contributes to the literature on nationalism and conflict by offering a mechanism-based model of identity change and highlighting the interplay of trauma, memory, and civic participation. It concludes by stressing the need for inclusive, pluralistic approaches to post-war reintegration and democratic renewal.

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INTRODUCTION

Since gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine has experienced a turbulent process of nation-building, shaped by profound political, cultural, and territorial disruptions. (Miller, 2022; Kosmachev, 2015). From the Orange Revolution and the Euromaidan protests to the annexation of Crimea and the ongoing war with Russia, each moment of crisis has challenged, and redefined, what it means to be Ukrainian. (Sasse & Lackner, 2018; Kuzio, 2015; Arel, 2014)

The 2022 Russian invasion threatened Ukraine's territorial borders and it accelerated a deeper internal transformation. As millions were displaced or mobilized, questions of national identity became not only abstract or symbolic, but urgent and embodied. Identity became urgent because it was no longer a distant academic debate—it was directly tied to survival, resistance, and the defense of statehood in the face of existential threat. It became embodied as citizens were forced to make tangible choices about who they were and where they stood—through language use, participation in civil society, volunteering, or rejecting Russian affiliations. In a country long marked by regional, linguistic, and historical divides, the war turned identity into a lived and immediate problem: something negotiated through action, risk, and daily experience, rather than inherited or imposed from above. This thesis investigates how Ukrainian national identity is being reshaped through war. (Chernysh & Horbolis, 2021; Lazarenko, 2020)

Ukraine's regional, linguistic, and generational differences, shaped by competing historical narratives and decades of Soviet and post-Soviet rule, complicate the task of building a unified national identity. (Miller, 2022; Onuch et al., 2022). In this context, the redefinition of Ukrainian identity is not only a response to external aggression, but also a test of the country's capacity to reconcile its internal pluralism with the demands of national unity. (Zhurzhenko, 2010).

This thesis explores these tensions by combining theoretical insights with empirical data from qualitative interviews. Through a process tracing approach, it identifies the key casual mechanisms that drive identity transformation during wartime and analyzes how these processes unfold across time, space, and demographic groups.

The thesis is structured as follows. *Chapter 1* outlines the relevance of the study, identifies the research gap, and presents the research question and objectives. *Chapter 2* provides a comprehensive literature review. It begins by discussing key theoretical frameworks on social identity, nationalism, and wartime transformation, then draws comparative insights from the Balkan region, and finally traces the historical evolution of Ukrainian national identity from imperial legacies to the post-2014 shift. *Chapter 3* explains the methodological approach, including the rationale for process tracing and the structure of the interview-based empirical analysis. *Chapter 4* presents the core empirical findings, organized through a five-stage model of identity transformation. *Chapter 5* discusses the broader implications of these findings for post-war social cohesion, policy, and future research. The conclusion offers final reflections on the stakes of identity in wartime and the possibilities for a resilient, inclusive, and democratic Ukraine.

CHAPTER 1.

1.1 Relevance of the Study and Research Gap

Identity, whether civic or ethnic, emerges through the interplay of individual experiences and wider cultural frameworks. (Assmann, 2012; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). It provides individuals and communities with continuity, belonging, and meaning, yet becomes especially salient in moments of threat, when its preservation is perceived as existential. (Kelman, 1997; Brewer, 1991). In such contexts, identity is not a neutral category but a site of struggle: it can unify or divide, mobilize or alienate, foster resilience or perpetuate exclusion. (Korostelina, 2007; Bar-Tal, 2000a; Zick, 2003). This duality makes identity a central variable in understanding how societies experience and respond to violent conflict. (Wilmer, 1997; Smith, 1998).

Ukraine offers a particularly revealing case of identity formation in contested geopolitical space. Since its independence, the State has had to navigate overlapping identity legacies — Soviet, Russian, and Ukrainian — within a fragile geopolitical environment. (Miller, 2022; Kuzio, 2015; Zhurzhenko, 2010). Russian aggression has intensified these tensions, forcing individuals to reassess their attachments and accelerating the reconfiguration of what it means to be "Ukrainian." (Chernysh & Horbolis, 2021; Lazarenko, 2020). Nationalism has functioned both as a unifying civic project and as a divisive framework, mobilizing solidarity while also reinforcing boundaries. Tracing these shifts is essential not only to understand the present conflict, but also to anticipate the prospects for post-war cohesion, state legitimacy, and reconciliation. (Bar-Tal, 2000a; Onuch & Hale, 2022; Sasse & Lackner, 2018).

Existing scholarship has provided valuable insights into how war affects identity through memory, trauma, and nationalist discourse (Smith, 1997; Kelman, 1999; Ricarte, 2022). However, most studies remain at the conceptual level: they demonstrate that identity does change under pressure, but rarely explain how it changes — through what mechanisms, across which temporal stages, and under what specific conditions. Without mapping the causal processes that connect war-related experiences (e.g., invasion, displacement, repression) to identity transformation, we lack the analytical tools to assess resilience, anticipate political realignment, or design effective peacebuilding strategies.

This thesis seeks to address that gap by examining identity transformation in wartime Ukraine through a process-tracing approach— an analytical method used to uncover causal mechanisms by systematically tracing how specific events or conditions produce change over time (Beach & Pedersen, 2013; Bennett & Checkel, 2015). By focusing on causal mechanisms such as perceived threat, trauma, disrupted social ties, and symbolic reframing, it moves beyond static explanations and highlights identity as a dynamic, evolving process. (Bar-Tal, 2000a; Hammack, 2015; Lazarenko, 2020; Chernysh & Horbolis, 2021). In doing so, the study contributes not only to the literature on Ukrainian nationalism but also to broader debates in political science and international relations about how conflict reshapes individual and collective self-understandings.

Analyzing how identities shift during conflicts is vital not only for understanding the roots of violence, but also for laying the foundation for lasting peace. In deeply divided societies like Ukraine—where civic, regional, linguistic, and historical cleavages intersect—rebuilding cohesion will require fostering a shared national identity that embraces internal diversity rather than suppressing it. This will mean enabling the coexistence of multiple identity narratives within a broader civic framework—one that integrates previously marginalized or ambivalent groups without alienation or coercion. Without such a pluralist yet cohesive vision of belonging, national unity risks being enforced rather than genuinely adopted, undermining social trust, state legitimacy, and long-term stability.

Understanding the mechanisms through which identity reconfigures during war—such as perceived threat, trauma, symbolic rupture, and social mobilization—offers critical insight into how inclusive post-conflict communities might be built. The ways in which individual, communal, and national identities interact shape how societies endure conflict, interpret collective trauma, and rebuild after violence. Crucially, identity is not a fixed category; in wartime it becomes fluid, redefined through fear, loss, resistance, and shifting allegiances. This thesis unpacks these dynamics, offering both analytical clarity and practical insights for Ukraine's reconstruction and for broader debates on identity formation in societies marked by war.

1.2 Research Question and Objectives

This thesis investigates how war reshapes national identity by focusing on the Ukrainian case. The central research question guiding the study is:

How has the war reshaped Ukrainian national identity?

The aim is to complement general claims that war changes identity by uncovering the specific ways in which such transformation occurs—through which mechanisms, at what stages, and under which contextual pressures.

To address this question, the thesis traces the evolution of Ukrainian national identity from 2014 to 2025, a period marked by intensifying Russian aggression and deep societal ruptures, including displacement, regional fragmentation, shifting language practices, and intergenerational divides. The analysis focuses on how individuals and communities have responded to war-related experiences—such as invasion, displacement, repression, and resistance—by renegotiating their sense of national belonging through nine original qualitative research based on semi-structured interviews with Ukrainians who experienced the war directly. The sample was purposefully constructed using a non-probability strategy that combined convenience and snowball sampling.

Particular attention is given to the role of perceived threat, trauma, disrupted social ties, and symbolic reframing as mechanisms that mediate identity change. These mechanisms are situated within a process-tracing model that captures the sequential and cumulative nature of identity transformation in wartime. (Beach & Pedersen, 2013; Bennett & Checkel, 2015)

The interviewees reflect diversity across key dimensions—including geographic origin, generational background, gender, and professional background. This diversity enhances the study's ability to capture a broad spectrum of identity experiences and transformations, offering a nuanced and situated understanding of how war reshapes national belonging across different social and regional contexts.

In doing so, the thesis aspires to make both an academic and practical contribution. Theoretically, it offers a nuanced and empirically grounded account of how identity transforms during war contributing to broader theoretical debates in social identity theory, nationalism studies, and the literature on conflict and trauma. (Bar-Tal, 2000a; Kelman, 2004; Lazarenko, 2020; Hammack, 2015). Practically, it provides insights that are relevant for peacebuilding, post-war reconstruction, and civic cohesion in Ukraine and beyond, highlighting the importance of identity as both a resource for resilience and a potential site of tension in the recovery process.

CHAPTER 2.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of War and Identity

2.1.1 Social Identity Theory and the Dynamics of Ethnic and Civic Identities

Identity, both individually and collectively, is shaped by a dynamic interaction between internal personal elements and exterior cultural forces. (Assmann, 2012). Identity is fundamental not just to individuals but also to national and ethnic groups, where shared attributes such as language, collective history, symbols, and culture unify individuals into a community. This relationship establishes the basis for collective awareness and a sense of belonging to a specific "nation" (Assmann, 2012). Threats to identity are perceived as immediate threats to the existence of both the person and the community (Kemp, 2001). This perception is not merely symbolic, it has real-world implications for how individuals and communities react under pressure. When identity is threatened, communities may respond with heightened cohesion or, conversely, with fragmentation, exclusion, or conflict. On an individual level, identity insecurity can lead to alienation, trauma, or political radicalization. At the collective level, perceived threats can mobilize resistance, reshape narratives of belonging, and fuel long-term shifts in national or ethnic boundaries. In conflict settings, these shifts are not only emotionally charged but politically consequential: they influence public support for institutions, the legitimacy of the state, and the prospects for reconciliation or further polarization. Understanding how identity is reshaped in response to threat is therefore essential for peacebuilding, civic integration, and long-term societal resilience.

In the context of conflict, such as the present war in Ukraine, **Social Identity Theory** helps explain how national identity may be transformed when individuals either align or resist dominant political ideas in response to perceived threats to their group's standing (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). SIT, initially formulated by Tajfel and Turner (1979), offers a paradigm for comprehending how

belonging to a group, such as a nation, shapes an individual's sense of self and behavior. In the context of war or political violence, national identity often becomes a central dividing line: people define themselves and others in terms of who belongs to the nation and who does not. This can intensify in-group solidarity and out-group hostility, contributing to both individual attitudes and large-scale mobilization during conflict. This framework is particularly relevant for understanding the Ukrainian case, where national identity has been both a target and a tool in the context of Russian aggression. The war has heightened distinctions between in-groups (e.g., "Ukrainians") and out-groups (e.g., "Russians" or perceived internal sympathizers), reinforcing symbolic and behavioral boundaries. Social Identity Theory helps explain how individuals may reassess or strengthen their national identification in response to external threats, and why such identity shifts can lead to broader social mobilization, resistance, and even redefinition of national belonging. By examining these dynamics, this research seeks to uncover the mechanisms through which identity is reshaped during conflict and how these changes influence long-term societal cohesion and post-war reconstruction.

SIT theorizes how individuals form their identities through processes of group membership, categorization, and comparison. It suggests that belonging to a social group, such as an ethnic or civic community, influences both how people see themselves and how they relate to others. This matters because, in contexts of war or political upheaval, these identity-based affiliations often become heightened. Understanding how individuals draw meaning and self-worth from group membership helps explain how national identity can shift rapidly in response to external threats, and how such shifts affect social cohesion, mobilization, and post-conflict reconciliation.

Ethnic identity is influenced by a combination of ancestral heritage and collective cultural traits, which include language, historical memory, and cultural traditions. Ethnic identity is established through a shared origin, culture, and the collective memories that connect individuals to their communities. This identity is rooted in the concept of belonging to a specific group, typically characterized by external impressions of shared traits (Baumann, 2004). Ethnic identity is generally fixed, profoundly entrenched in historical myths and social narratives that highlight the group's distinctiveness in contrast to others (Hutchinson & Smith,1996).

Civic identity, on the other hand, is more dynamic and comprehends various dimensions, including an individual's sense of belonging to a political society and their association with the values and obligations inherent in citizenship (Hart, Richardson, & Wilkenfeld, 2011). Civic identity is intrinsically linked to the principles of democracy, citizenship, and social cohesion, and it develops via interaction with national institutions, legislation, and civic responsibilities (Hammack, 2015). The idea includes a moral and ethical dimension to contribute positively to society (Hart, Richardson, & Wilkenfeld, 2011). The dichotomy between ethnic and civic identity matters because it shapes how national identity is constructed and experienced, especially during conflict or periods of political transition. In moments of rupture, individuals may lean more heavily on one form of identity over the other, influencing patterns of inclusion, exclusion, and societal resilience.

The notion of **collective identity** is also essential for comprehending national identity, especially in post-conflict contexts. While ethnic identity is rooted in shared ancestry and culture, and civic identity reflects political belonging and engagement, collective identity encompasses both by representing a broader, emotionally charged sense of unity among group members. It binds individuals through shared experiences, narratives, and symbols — often emerging or intensifying during periods of collective threat.

In post-conflict societies, national identity is often reconstructed through the lens of collective identity, which draws on both ethnic and civic elements. This process is influenced by external pressures, such as the need for national survival or support from international allies, and internal mechanisms like the reaffirmation of group values and resilience. In such contexts, Social Identity Theory (SIT) offers a useful framework to examine how identity is redefined, not just individually, but collectively, to foster cohesion and a sense of purpose in the aftermath of violence (Hammack, 2015).

2.1.2 Nationalism and Identity Formation in War Contexts

Nationalism plays a critical role in shaping national identities, especially during times of war. In conflict contexts, the need for group cohesion and psychological security intensifies, making national identity a powerful mechanism through which people seek belonging and stability (Gaertner et al., 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner et al., 1987). **Social Identity Theory** suggests that in moments of external threat, individuals are more likely to reinforce in-group identification, and nationalism often becomes the narrative vehicle through which this identification is articulated. In this sense, nationalism matters not only as a political discourse but as a lived experience that gives meaning and purpose during moments of rupture.

Nationalist ideas, however, are shaped by their historical, social, and political environments. In fragile or newly independent states, where national identity is still in formation, conflict accelerates the need to define who belongs to the nation and under what terms (Korostelina, 2007). Nationalism can be inclusive and civic-oriented, fostering solidarity and resilience; but it can also become exclusionary and ethnic-based, reinforcing boundaries and justifying marginalization. This dual potential is particularly important in war settings, where the stakes of identity formation become existential.

Post-communist states provide key examples of how nationalism and identity formation unfold in contested contexts. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many newly independent countries sought to construct cohesive national identities. Yet this process was often complicated by enduring attachments to Soviet identity, particularly among older generations. These attachments were not merely nostalgic, they reflected deep-rooted emotional, cultural, and symbolic frameworks that continued to shape people's sense of belonging even after state structures had changed (Korostelina, 2007).

At the same time, emerging governments often redefined citizenship and identity through a territorial and ethnic lens. Efforts to consolidate national unity sometimes led to exclusionary practices aimed at reinforcing ethnic homogeneity (Brubaker, 1996). In such cases, nationalism was not just a unifying force but a trigger for tension, especially when individuals' self-understood

identities did not align with the State's imposed narratives (Kelman, 1997; Stein, 1998). This disjuncture between top-down identity frameworks and bottom-up experiences creates fertile ground for both resistance and realignment.

In Ukraine, these dynamics are particularly relevant. The post-Soviet state had to navigate competing identity legacies (Soviet, Russian, Ukrainian) while facing escalating external threats. The war has intensified debates about who counts as "Ukrainian," reactivated dormant nationalist sentiments, and placed pressure on citizens to choose between overlapping cultural affiliations. Understanding how nationalism operates under these conditions is key to tracing the mechanisms through which identity changes in wartime.

By exploring the role of nationalism in identity formation, this section contributes to the broader goal of the thesis: to uncover how war reshapes individual and collective understandings of nationhood. It underscores the importance of examining not only what identities emerge, but how and why they are mobilized — and with what implications for post-war cohesion and reconstruction.

2.1.3 War and Identity Transformation

Conflict profoundly disrupts social and political structures, often triggering transformations in both personal and collective identity. In times of war, identity becomes a site of struggle: people reevaluate who they are, who belongs, and what values define their group. This transformation can be deeply personal, manifesting in changed beliefs, behaviors, or affiliations, but it also has broader collective consequences for national cohesion and post-conflict reconstruction. Understanding these shifts is crucial for tracing the causal mechanisms through which war reconfigures identity — a key focus of this thesis — and for explaining why certain communities emerge more unified or fragmented in the aftermath (Todd, 2024; Lamont & Mizrachi, 2012).

In conflict situations, identity is influenced by the **desire** for **belonging** and the **need** to **differentiate** oneself from others. The recollection of historical injustices or disputes profoundly affects the perception of contemporary struggles and the dynamics between groups. The narratives derived from these historical experiences, form a foundation for collective identity and influence community interactions with the persistent conflict (Smith, 1997). Nonetheless, identity in conflict encompasses not only inclusion but also exclusion. The **"negative dimension"** of identity, emphasizing alienation from others and the creation of distinction, is particularly evident in conflict scenarios. This mechanism matters because it reinforces rigid group boundaries, justifies hostility, and may escalate violence by dehumanizing the out-group or portraying them as existential threats (Kelman, 1999). Comprehending the historical evolution of these identities, especially in conflict scenarios, is essential for recognizing their potential to fuel conflict and, in certain instances, promote peacebuilding initiatives (Ricarte, 2022).

Constructivist theory emphasizes that individuals actively shape their identities, especially in crisis settings where traditional roles collapse (Todd, 2024). The concept of agency in identity formation enables individuals to actively participate in the reconfiguration of both personal and collective identities. Such agency matters because it opens space for change: people can challenge divisive narratives and realign toward more inclusive forms of belonging. In crisis zones, individuals frequently contest conventional identities, choosing alternative modes of action or realigning their loyalty between ethnic and civic identities, they are not passive consumers of social

systems but active participants who contribute to the ongoing reconfiguration of social interactions (Fierke, 2013).

At the same time, scholars have warned that the end of war does not automatically resolve identity struggles. Although **peace** is typically regarded as a positive force, in the context of enduring wars, it may instigate an "*identity dilemma*," as individuals are required to redefine their identities that were previously shaped by opposition to the enemy (Lederach, 1997; Rumelili, 2015). Peace can be "ontologically challenging," as individuals, having adapted to violence during the conflict, may encounter significant grief and disorientation once peace is accomplished, particularly if did not process the trauma of conflict (Lupovici, 2015; Rumelili & Todd, 2017). Identity transformations, whether via individual agency or significant societal change, can either sustain divisions or create opportunities for peace (Ricarte, 2022; Fierke, 2013).

Comprehending the dynamics of identity transformation during conflicts is essential for tackling the underlying causes of violence and facilitating post-conflict reconciliation initiatives. The interaction of personal, collective, and national identities influences individual and communal responses to warfare, the processing of wartime trauma, and the reconstruction of societal cohesion in the aftermath. Yet, identity is not static. In war settings, it becomes particularly malleable, reshaped by fear, loss, resistance, and shifting allegiances.

Existing literature has provided important insights into how war affects identity through mechanisms such as trauma, memory, or nationalist discourse (e.g., Smith, 1997; Kelman, 1999; Ricarte, 2022). These contributions help explain how identities can become polarized or solidified under threat. However, many studies stop at the conceptual level: they describe that identity does change, but do not show *how* it changes, over time, through what specific steps, or under which conditions. This matters because understanding the process of identity change, not just its presence, is essential for both theory and practice. If we know how conflict-related experiences (e.g., repression, displacement, or invasion) translate into transformed identities, we can better assess societal resilience, political realignment, and potential for reconciliation. In particular, this allows researchers and policymakers to anticipate which conditions foster inclusive forms of national identity — and which reproduce exclusion, division, or instability.

To do this, we must move beyond static explanations and examine the **causal mechanisms** that drive identity transformation. In political science and international relations, causal mechanisms refer to the step-by-step processes that link macro-level events to micro-level outcomes. (*Figure 1*) (Friedrichs, 2016). In this thesis, mechanisms such as perceived threat, emotional trauma, disrupted social ties, or symbolic re-framing will be analyzed as potential connectors between war-related events and shifts in identity (Friedrichs, 2016; Wimmer, 2016).
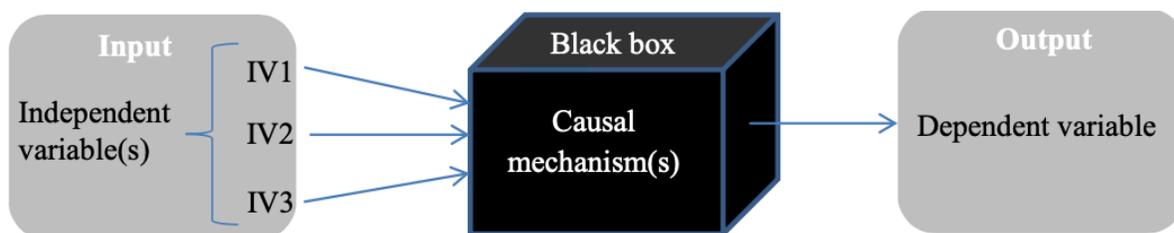
Causal mechanisms help to "open the black box" between cause and effect, showing, for example, how the 2022 invasion may have triggered a shift from ambivalent national attachment to active patriotic identification. They provide explanatory depth and temporal clarity: identity is not simply the outcome of war; it is transformed through specific interactions and experiences that can be traced.

This approach is particularly relevant for the case of Ukraine. While there is rich literature on Ukraine's linguistic, regional, and geopolitical divisions (e.g., Arel, 1995, 2002; Sasse, 2010), there is still limited understanding of how war operates as a catalyst for identity change. How do threats, narratives, and emotional experiences interact over time to shape how individuals define being "Ukrainian"? How does this transformation differ across regions, generations, or displaced populations?

Moreover, identity is not just shaped by politics, it also shapes politics. As Wimmer (2016) argues, changing identity landscapes can influence voting behavior, civic engagement, and attitudes toward integration or secession. In this way, identity is both an outcome of war and a driver of future political directions. Yet most comparative conflict research still focuses on identity as a static background variable, rather than treating it as a dynamic and evolving process (Sambanis, 2002; Esteban & Schneider, 2008; Kalyvas, 2008).

Even in prominent case studies across the Balkans scholars have tended to highlight the polarization of identity rather than map the step-by-step processes of transformation. As such, the existing literature often neglects to ask *how* new identities emerge, consolidate, and reconfigure societal allegiances post-conflict. In this sense, there is a methodological and empirical gap: we need more studies that explain how people come to see themselves differently because of conflict, and what this means for social cohesion, state legitimacy, and long-term peace.

To better contextualize the Ukrainian experience, it is useful to examine how identity has evolved in other conflict-affected regions. The Balkans, with their long history of war, imperial legacies, and political fragmentation, offer valuable insights into how national identities are constructed, fractured, and reshaped over time. Rather than comparing cases directly, the following section draws on patterns from the Balkans to shed light on the broader dynamics and mechanisms through which identity responds to conflict, external influence, and historical rupture.

2.2 Identity Formation in Times of War: patterns from the Balkans

2.2.1 Historical Drivers of Identity Transformation in the Balkans

The transformation of identity during war is rarely spontaneous. Instead, it builds on longer historical processes of rupture, negotiation, and external alignment. In this sense, the Balkans provide a valuable precedent for understanding wartime identity change because they represent a region where identity was forged, and repeatedly contested, in the context of imperial collapse, violent conflict, and shifting geopolitical influences. Studying the Balkan experience allows us to

identify broader patterns and mechanisms through which identity becomes politicized, fragmented, or reconfigured in periods of crisis, and why this matters for countries like Ukraine undergoing a similar process of rupture and realignment.

In Southeastern Europe, national identity did not emerge as a stable, ethnic-based formation. Rather, it developed through layered and non-linear processes shaped by shifting political regimes and evolving notions of cultural belonging. During Ottoman rule, for example, identity was organized primarily along religious lines through the millet system — an imperial framework where Orthodox Christians shared a sense of belonging based more on faith than on ethnicity or language (Mishkova, 2020). This highlights an important point: identity was not fixed, but institutionally constructed and contextually defined. Understanding this is crucial because it shows how group belonging can be deeply shaped by institutional structures, a dynamic also relevant for post-Soviet Ukraine.

The 19th century marked a turning point. As the Ottoman Empire weakened, local actors across the Balkans redefined belonging in ethnonational terms, catalyzed by both internal resistance and the influence of European nationalist thought. Language and ancestry, rather than religion, began to serve as primary markers of legitimate nationhood (Todorova, 2004). However, this shift was not simply imposed from above or copied from Western Europe. It was actively interpreted and adapted by local intellectuals. For example, Vuk Karadžić's linguistic reforms reframed folk culture as a source of national authenticity, blending Romantic ideals with political aspirations (Mishkova, 2020). This produced what Mishkova calls "national-Romantic liberalism" — a hybrid ideology that fused democratic ideals with cultural essentialism. This shows that nationalism and identity are not automatic outcomes of ethnicity or history; they are strategic constructions, shaped by elite actors, state agendas, and geopolitical pressures. This has implications for the study of Ukraine, where national identity today is also shaped by contested narratives, war mobilization, and external alignment with European institutions.

Another crucial insight from the Balkans is the fragmented nature of national imaginaries. Identity formation was never uniform across regions. Conflicting historical memories, denominational divides (e.g., between Catholics, Orthodox, and Muslims), and regional rivalries created competing claims over what it meant to be "Bulgarian," "Serbian," or "Croatian." These tensions were not only bottom-up; they were often instrumentalized by political elites, who used state media, school curricula, and symbolic rituals to construct and consolidate national narratives (Daskalov, 2004). This demonstrates the performative and contingent nature of identity, shaped not only by history but by its interpretation through institutional and discursive practices.

This is particularly relevant when thinking about identity as a site of political contestation, rather than a background variable. In the Balkans, wars, regime changes, and international interventions activated processes of memory reconstruction, identity polarization, and realignment of belonging. These mechanisms were rarely linear. Instead, identity transformation occurred through a mix of top-down reforms (e.g., education systems), bottom-up mobilization (e.g., civil resistance or ethnic militias), and external influences (e.g., the EU, Russia, or former imperial centers) (Mishkova, 2020). These same dynamics are at play in Ukraine today, where national identity is being shaped not only by war and trauma, but by deliberate political narratives, international alignment, and generational memory. The Balkan case shows that identity change during war is not simply

reactive; it is constructed, negotiated, and deeply consequential for post-war rebuilding and societal cohesion.

2.2.2 Mechanisms of Identity Construction: Language and Religion

In the Balkans, language and religion have historically functioned not merely as cultural features, but as central mechanisms through which national identity was constructed, politicized, and contested—especially during periods of state formation and conflict. In multiethnic, post-imperial societies, these markers became tools for defining national membership, asserting sovereignty, and excluding perceived "others." Their politicization enabled elites to consolidate group cohesion while drawing sharp boundaries between in-groups and out-groups.

Language was a core instrument of nation-building. Despite linguistic overlap across the region, nationalist elites pursued deliberate codification projects to demarcate linguistic boundaries. The re-Latinization of Romanian, the codification of Serbo-Croatian variants, and the standardization of the Albanian alphabet were not culturally neutral acts. They served to assert political autonomy, reinforce group cohesion, and reject imperial or neighboring influences (Mishkova, 2020; Skendi, 1975). Skendi highlights how the promotion of vernacular languages—such as Bulgarian in opposition to Greek ecclesiastical dominance—symbolized both cultural revival and national defiance. In each case, language standardization became a proxy for deeper struggles over sovereignty, identity continuity, and geopolitical orientation.

Religion operated in parallel as a key mechanism of identity construction. While the Ottoman millet system organized populations by confessional lines, the 19th century reinterpreted religious affiliation through the lens of nationalism. The 1870 establishment of the Bulgarian Exarchate, for instance, marked not only ecclesiastical independence but also a national declaration. In many cases, religious institutions became symbolic anchors of identity, with alignment to particular churches signifying national loyalty (Mishkova, 2020). In more fragmented cases like Albania, the absence of religious cohesion led to the elevation of language and mythology as alternative unifying principles. Their politicization enabled elites to consolidate group cohesion while drawing sharp boundaries between in-groups and out-groups.

Both language and religion were thus recast as exclusionary categories, mechanisms of internal consolidation and boundary enforcement. Formerly shared or fluid identities were redefined in national terms, marginalizing those who did not conform to the dominant linguistic or confessional standard.

These identity markers are not only politicized but emotionally and psychologically charged. Identity formation involves symbolic boundary-setting between self and other. During crises, this boundary hardens, producing binary oppositions—us versus them, victim versus enemy. Traumatic memory, historical grievance, and fear fuel this regression, enabling nationalist elites to mobilize support through emotionally resonant narratives of sacrifice and persecution. In Serbia, for example, the invocation of historical trauma (e.g., Jasenovac, Kosovo) became central to nationalist identity, legitimizing violence as defensive retribution (Wilmer, 1997)

This dynamic was reinforced through state institutions. School curricula, popular media, and cultural rituals in post-Yugoslav states systematically encoded nationalist myths and adversarial identities. Symbols of heroism and martyrdom were elevated, while cross-ethnic solidarities were erased or vilified. Such emotionally charged identity constructions, grounded in unresolved trauma and institutional reproduction, set the stage for interethnic violence.

These examples illustrate that identity formation in times of political rupture is not merely a top-down imposition of symbols or policies. It is a dynamic process involving cultural instruments (language, religion), emotional registers (trauma, fear), and institutional reinforcement (education, media). As such, the Balkan experience demonstrates how national identity becomes a politically and psychologically mobilized framework, especially relevant during and after violent conflict. This has profound implications for understanding how identity operates in times of war, and for recognizing how similar mechanisms might be unfolding in contemporary Ukraine.

2.2.3 Identity Transformation and the Role of European Conditionality

Having examined the internal cultural and emotional foundations of identity in conflict-affected societies, this section turns to the role of external actors—particularly the European Union—in shaping or constraining national identity transformation. While historical ruptures and emotional narratives remain central to national identity shifts, another crucial factor in post-conflict identity formation is the influence of **external conditionality**—especially as shaped by the European Union. In transitional contexts, the EU does not merely offer institutional incentives; it acts as a mirror, exposing whether national identity is flexible enough to absorb external norms or resistant to them. Therefore, studying this mechanism matters because it helps explain why some societies consolidate around inclusive civic identities, while others remain trapped in exclusive or fragmented frameworks, even when exposed to the same external pressures.

In this light, identity transition is not simply the result of elite negotiation or external alignment. It depends on whether collective actors, states, political elites, and civil society, accept and internalize new identity frameworks. As Freyburg and Richter (2010) argue, **national identity precedes and shapes how countries perceive and respond to EU demands**. Their model *(Figure 2)* highlights how compliance with EU democratic requirements is not determined only by material incentives, but also by whether those requirements resonate with pre-existing identity configurations.
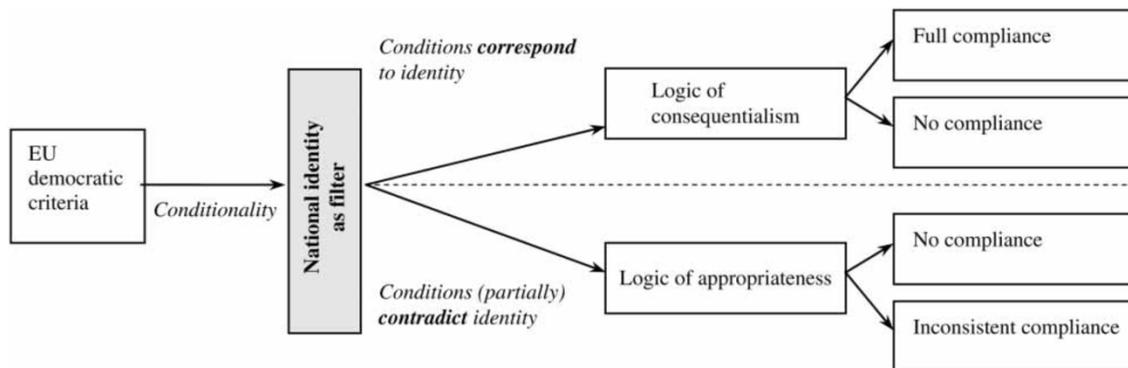
Figure 2. National identity as prior explanatory factor.
Source: Freyburg & Richter (2010)

When a state's identity already aligns with civic or democratic values, EU conditionality may lead to norm internalization through what the authors call "appropriateness"—a process where reforms are embraced because they feel legitimate. Conversely, when identity is grounded in exclusive, ethnic, or victimhood narratives, compliance becomes inconsistent or superficial, often pursued only through cost-benefit logic and resisted at the societal level (Freyburg and Richter, 2010).

This distinction matters because it clarifies why EU engagement has yielded such uneven results across post-conflict and post-authoritarian regions. When a state's prevailing identity already aligns with civic and democratic values, or at least contains strands that can be mobilized toward that direction, then EU conditionality can lead to genuine norm internalization. Reforms are adopted not simply out of strategic interest, but because they are felt to resonate with who the society believes it is, or aspires to become. Conversely, where identity is grounded in ethnic exceptionalism, victimhood, or sovereignty-based resistance, reforms tend to be shallow, instrumental, or openly contested. In these cases, identity acts as a brake rather than a bridge, and reform trajectories stall despite formal accession or conditionality frameworks.

In the Western Balkans, for example, this variation is evident in how different states have responded to similar EU accession pathways. Croatia and North Macedonia, which cultivated more civic-inclusive national narratives at key historical moments, showed greater responsiveness to EU criteria. By contrast, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina—where political actors leaned heavily on ethnic or grievance-based identity frames—exhibited weaker reform commitment and deeper social resistance to external norms. These outcomes cannot be explained purely by material incentives, institutional capacity, or geopolitical alignment; they require attention to how national identity scripts shape the perceived legitimacy of external influence.

Understanding these dynamics matters because it reveals the **limits of external leverage** in contexts where identity remains contested or anchored in exclusion. The EU's role is not only technical—setting benchmarks or distributing funds—but symbolic. It offers a model of political belonging and moral order. Whether this model is embraced or rejected depends on its compatibility with a society's internal narratives. This interaction helps explain why reforms imposed from above often fail without complementary shifts in identity at the societal level.

This insight is particularly relevant for the Ukrainian case. As Ukraine pursues deeper integration with Europe during war, the extent to which its evolving national identity can internalize EU values becomes a decisive factor in the country's political future. The Balkan precedent offers a conceptual lens to anticipate both possibilities and constraints. Studying how identity conditions the effectiveness of EU conditionality in Southeastern Europe equips us to better analyze how Ukraine's civic and national self-understanding might shape—rather than simply reflect—its reform trajectory. It also allows us to identify the mechanisms through which normative alignment with Europe can either consolidate democratic institutions or remain superficial.

In sum, the Balkan case highlights that identity is not just an outcome of post-conflict reconstruction—it is a precondition for the success of that reconstruction. The resonance between national self-perception and external norms is a crucial determinant of whether reforms will be sustained, contested, or reversed. By foregrounding identity in the study of European conditionality, we gain a deeper, more realistic understanding of how external influence operates under conditions of political and cultural fragmentation.

2.3 Ukrainian National Identity: Historical Evolution and Modern Shifts

2.3.1 Imperial and Soviet Foundations of the "One People" Myth: Russian Ideology and the Roots of Ukrainian Identity

The subordination of Ukrainian identity to Russian imperial narratives began in the 17th century after the 1654 Pereiaslav Agreement, which brought central and eastern Ukraine under Muscovite control. To legitimize this, Moscow promoted the idea of a shared Slavic nation, portraying Ukrainians as "Little Russians" within a broader Russian identity (Miller, 2022; Plokhy & Sysyn, 2005).

This narrative of "one people" helped both Ukrainian church leaders and Cossack elites (autonomous military-political groups in early modern Ukraine), who wanted to fit into the Muscovite power system. By the 18th century, many Cossack officers joined the Russian aristocracy, more for status than shared identity (Miller, 2022, pp. 96–97). But these elite-driven expressions of regional identity were not the same as modern Ukrainian national consciousness. Cossack leaders lacked solidarity with peasants and had little sense of a distinct Ukrainian identity. Identification remained ambivalent; it was not totally Russian or obviously Ukrainian in the national sense.

Russian imperial ideology pushed a single identity that saw Ukrainians as part of a larger Slavic brotherhood. However, the way Ukrainians saw themselves changed a lot depending on who was in charge. The Ukrainians (then known as Ruthenians) that lived in Galicia, a section of western Ukraine that was controlled by Austria, had relative political and cultural liberties under a constitutional monarchy. This setting made it possible for Ukrainian-language media, schools, political parties, and civic groups to thrive, which helped create a sense of national identity (Himka, 2006, pp. 486–487). On the other hand, language bans, tight censorship, and a lack of legal space for political expression suppressed Ukrainian identity in the Russian-controlled areas, especially in the Dnieper area (central-eastern). As a result, national identification mostly stayed with intellectual elites and didn't easily spread to rural or working-class areas. The revolutionary years (1917–1920) revealed this divergence: Galician Ukrainians favored independence, while leaders in Russian Ukraine first wanted autonomy inside a federated Russian republic, reflecting uneven identity development (Himka, 2006 pp. 488–489). Understanding this historical ambiguity is crucial because it demonstrates that national identity is not simply inherited—it is shaped by political inclusion, cultural opportunity, and power dynamics. In the Russian Empire, Ukrainian identity was systematically suppressed.

In the 19th century, the idea of imperial unity changed because of the rise of nationalism in Europe. Russian elites sought to unify Slavic populations under one identity, using education and language reforms to Russify Western provinces after uprisings (Miller, 2022 p. 96). After the Polish revolution of 1830–1831, the Empire started to break down Polish cultural institutions and restore Russian authority over language and education in the Western provinces. This program of Russification got worse. The Polish-language University of Vilnius closed in 1834, while the Russian-speaking University of Kyiv opened. The Cyril and Methodius Society, Ukraine's first nationalist group, formed in Russian-controlled Kyiv as part of a broader de-Polonization effort before evolving into a distinct Ukrainian current (Miller, 2022, p. 98).

The Russian empire used history and archaeology, like the rediscovery of Kyiv's Church of the Tithes, to frame Ukraine as inherently Russian (Miller, 2022). Yet figures like Kostomarov resisted, advocating for Ukraine as a distinct nation. The imperial government, on the other hand, was still unsure of what to do. It went back and forth between stifling Ukrainian cultural expression and bringing in elites from Little Russia into the imperial system.

Russification intensified in the late 1800s, banning Ukrainian language and promoting a single Russian identity. Meanwhile, Galician intellectuals, under Habsburg tolerance, developed competing national visions (Himka, 1999). By the early 20th century, Russian nationalist groups framed Ukrainian identity as a threat to unity. Debates in the Duma portrayed Ukrainian recognition as a path to disintegration (Miller, 2022).

Before World War I, this **"identity equilibrium"** was clearly weak. As more people went to school and peasants started to migrate, the creation of national identity became a widespread event. Activists like Chykalenko pushed Ukrainian culture in Russified areas, recognizing identity as a political battleground (Chykalenko, 2004). The imperial era laid the foundations for Ukraine's contested identity.

During WWI, Ukraine became a geopolitical focal point for ethnic mobilization. Berlin and Vienna supported Ukrainian nationalist groups like the Union for the Liberation of Ukraine, which operated in POW camps, leveraging external propaganda and separatist agendas (Miller, 2014). The disintegration of the Russian Empire after 1917 enabled multiple, short-lived Ukrainian statehood attempts, all weakened by limited grassroots support and organizational fragility (Miller, 2014). In this instability, the Soviet-Polish War of 1920 further marginalized Ukrainian actors, highlighting their peripheral role in a struggle dominated by external powers.

After the Bolshevik victory, Soviet nationality policy rejected the "Little Russian" concept, adopting korenizatsiya (indigenization) to institutionalize ethnic identities. In Ukraine, this included Ukrainian-language education and recognition of the Ukrainian SSR's cultural boundaries, aimed at fostering loyalty to the Soviet regime (Martin, 2001; Kaiser, 1994).

This initial promotion of Ukrainian identity was repressed **during Stalin's terror in the 1930s**, targeting intellectuals advocating autonomy. The period exposed the volatility of identity under Soviet rule, used instrumentally when convenient, then violently repressed when perceived as a threat (Miller, 2014). Soviet policy left a paradox: while creating institutions that later legitimized Ukrainian nationhood, it also promoted a narrative of "brotherly peoples" that blurred distinctions

between Ukrainians, Russians, and Belarusians. This duality produced a depoliticized, ambiguous identity (Himka, 2006).

WWII intensified this East-West divergence. Some in Galicia initially welcomed Nazi Germany as a counterforce to Soviet repression. Postwar Soviet reoccupation led to harsh restrictions on nationalist groups, but a distinct regional identity persisted, especially among diaspora and religious networks (Himka, 2006).

Under **Soviet rule**, ethnic identity remained flexible and politically instrumental. Figures like Brezhnev exemplified shifting ethnic labels for convenience, from Ukrainian to Russian based on his political context. Following the dissolution of the USSR, this uncertainty continued: the Russian population in Ukraine decreased by three million from the final Soviet census (1989) to the inaugural Ukrainian census (2001), primarily due to self-reidentification rather than migration (Miller, 2014).

Consequently, the Soviet period both formalized and destabilized Ukrainian nationality. It formalized ethnicity without completely clarifying its significance, paving the way for the identity disintegration that arose in the post-Soviet era following 1991.

By analyzing these historical mechanisms, we can better understand the challenges and possibilities of identity transformation in contemporary Ukraine. This background provides essential context for tracing how national identity is being reshaped in the wake of the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 full-scale invasion, events that brought latent tensions into sharp political focus and triggered a new phase of identity consolidation.

2.3.2 Civil War of Identities: Post-1991 Ukrainian Nation-Building

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in **1991** provided Ukraine a critical chance to solidify its national identity. This process was neither linear nor unchallenged. From the beginning, Ukrainian nation-building was influenced by conflicting historical legacies, regional disparities, and an ongoing effort to solidify Ukrainian identity. Former President Leonid Kuchma remarked during the 30th anniversary of independence in 2021 that the major achievement was that the majority of Ukrainians no longer desired reunification with Russia (Miller, 2022, p. 109).

The impact of the Ukrainian diaspora was essential in formulating early post-independence identity policies. Diaspora intellectuals see independence as an achievement that Ukraine had not actively pursued and so had not fully assimilated. Historian Omeljan Pritsak believed that warfare was an essential component in legitimizing national sovereignty, highlighting how the lack of conflict hindered the definition of collective identity (Miller, 2022).

The post-Soviet Ukraine inherited two very different identity traditions. **Western Ukrainian nationalism**, sustained by an engaged diaspora, perceived Russophone eastern Ukrainians as entities requiring transformation, individuals in need of "Ukrainianization." Simultaneously, Ukraine's demographic makeup comprised about **eight million ethnic Russians**, primarily situated in the southeastern regions. The presence of these disparate identities generated a political

tension that characterized Ukraine's initial two decades of independence, with elections fluctuating between pro-Western and pro-Russian platforms (Miller, 2022, pp. 110–111). This ambiguity matters because it shaped how Ukrainians interpreted their statehood—not as the culmination of a centuries-long struggle, but as a political inheritance many had not fully internalized.

Survey data reinforces these regional divides. Schulman (2005) illustrates a **significant gap between the western and eastern areas** regarding Ukrainians' conceptualization of their national identity. Western and central Ukrainians typically adopt a civic conception of national identification, based on common political principles and citizenship, while eastern and southern inhabitants are more inclined to link identity with language, culture, and ethnicity, often in a Russified context. This disparity is not only symbolic; it has direct consequences for institutional legitimacy. In areas with a robust civic identity, such as Galicia and central Ukraine, citizens generally exhibit more faith in Ukrainian governmental institutions. In contrast, in the eastern and southern regions, diminished identification with the Ukrainian state is associated with increased institutional skepticism and political ambivalence (Schulman, 2005, pp. 250–257). The persistent regional disparities also disadvantaged the establishment of a cohesive post-Soviet identity, creating an environment where identity creation remained disjointed and politicized.

These findings are essential for understanding why national identity in post-Soviet Ukraine remained fragmented and contested. Without a shared understanding of what it meant to be Ukrainian, attempts at institution-building or foreign alignment (e.g., with the EU or NATO) were continually undercut by internal disagreement. This disjointedness created an environment where identity could not function as a stabilizing force, it became instead a site of political struggle.

The post-1991 period was thus characterized less by nation-building than by what could be described as a "civil war of identities"—a prolonged internal contest over the meaning, direction, and values of Ukrainian statehood. These tensions, long simmering beneath the surface, shaped the state's vulnerability to external manipulation and internal division.

However, the outbreak of conflict in 2014—and its escalation in 2022—functioned as a turning point. Whereas the early independence period revealed the weaknesses of identity cohesion, the war catalyzed a profound rearticulation of national belonging. As external threat replaced internal ambivalence, identity began to consolidate around a more inclusive, civic-centered definition of Ukrainianness. This transformation will be the subject of the next subchapter.

By tracing the fractured landscape of post-1991 Ukraine, this section reveals the conditions that made wartime identity transformation both necessary and possible. It underscores that national identity is not only shaped by foundational events like independence, but also by the ability—or inability—of the state to integrate its plural communities into a coherent political project.

2.3.3 Ukrainian Identity Shift Through Data, 2014–2022

The events initiated by Russia's **annexation of Crimea in 2014** and the outbreak of military conflict in the **Donbas** were a central moment in Ukraine's nation-building process. The removal of approximately six million citizens from the political process—many of whom identified with Russian, Soviet, or hybrid identities—narrowed Ukraine's demographic base, enabling a more

cohesive identity to emerge. (Miller, 2022, p. 109; Voronovici, 2020). This demographic shift, while tragic, inadvertently allowed a more coherent Ukrainian identity to consolidate in the remaining polity. The war functioned not just as a geopolitical rupture, but as a catalyst for accelerated identity realignment.

This transition initiated a wave of **de-Sovietization** and **de-Russification**, visible in memory politics and the eradication of the Russian language and symbols from the public domain. The symbolic foundation of Ukrainian identity increasingly derives from Western Ukrainian narratives associated with resistance, martyrdom, and cultural autonomy. As Miller (2022) notes, public consensus increasingly framed the war with Russia not as civil conflict, but as an external aggression. Ironically, what diaspora intellectuals like Omeljan Pritsak had previously perceived as absent in Ukraine's independence, a cohesive wartime experience, emerged after 2014. Initial military confrontations incurred minimal human expenses, yet enabled Ukraine to reinforce its identity in resistance to Russian invasion (Miller, 2022).

The full-scale invasion by Russia in **February 2022** escalated this latent conflict into a global war, resulting in catastrophic repercussions. The extensive devastation of urban areas, the relocation of millions, and the fatalities of both troops and civilians precipitated a profound transformation in public opinion. A poll by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology revealed that favorable perceptions of Russia among Ukrainians decreased from 34% in early February to merely 2% by mid-May 2022 (KIIS Dynamics, as reported in Miller, 2022, p. 110).

In 2010, more than 85% of Ukrainians expressed minimum social distance from Russians; however, this opinion underwent a significant transformation with the annexation of Crimea and the battle in Donbas. By 2018, merely 47% had a good perception of Russians. The drop intensified with the full-scale invasion in 2022: by August of that year, only 3% of Ukrainians reported good sentiments, and 81% held hostile views towards Russia (Marukhovska-Kartunova et al., 2025). *Figure 3* illustrates the **transformation** of **Ukrainian sentiments** towards Russians, revealing how external aggression and perceived treachery have prompted a collective redefinition of Ukrainian identity, shifting from shared post-Soviet ties to a distinctly separate national consciousness.
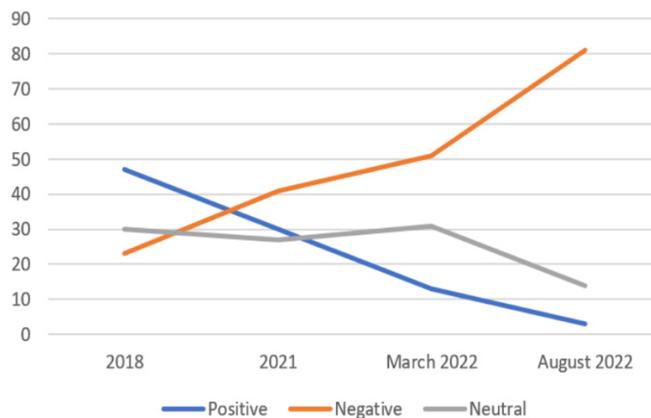
Figure 3. *Ukrainians' Attitudes Towards Russians Dynamics*
Source: "Seventeenth National Survey: Identity. Patriotism. Values" (2022)

Since 2014, especially with heightened fervor after the full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukrainians have significantly distanced themselves from Russian language, culture, and religious organizations. These alterations extend beyond governmental policy and have profoundly infiltrated daily life, resulting in a significant **cultural realignment**. As illustrated in *Figure 4*, the proportion of Ukrainians identifying with Ukrainian cultural norms increased from 56.3% in 2006 to over 81% in 2023, whilst those aligning with Russian cultural values fell from 11.3% to a mere 0.5%. Likewise, Soviet cultural affiliation decreased from 16.4% to merely 3.6% throughout the same timeframe (Marukhovska-Kartunova et al., 2025). This abrupt shift exemplifies a societal movement towards cultural autonomy and separation from the Russian-Soviet heritage.
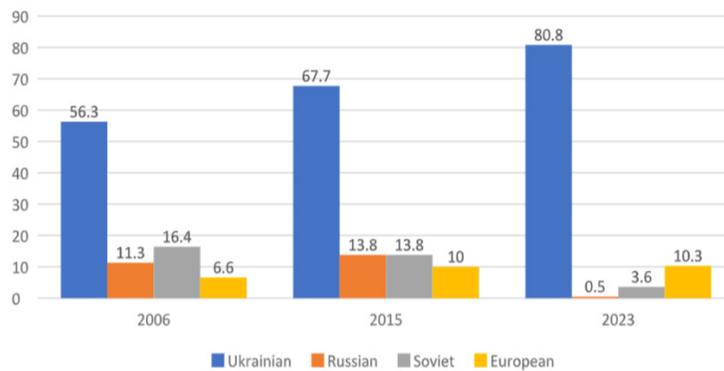
Figure 4. *Dynamics of Ukrainians' Cultural Self-Identification*
Source: "Seventeenth National Survey: Identity. Patriotism. Values"(2022)

This trend is also seen in **consumer behaviors**. *Figure 5* indicates that 84% of Ukrainians have ceased or reduced their consumption of Russian visual media, while 71% have discontinued listening to Russian music. The transition transcends mere entertainment; it signifies a widespread repudiation of cultural mechanisms traditionally employed to bolster Russian soft power (Marukhovska-Kartunova et al., 2025).
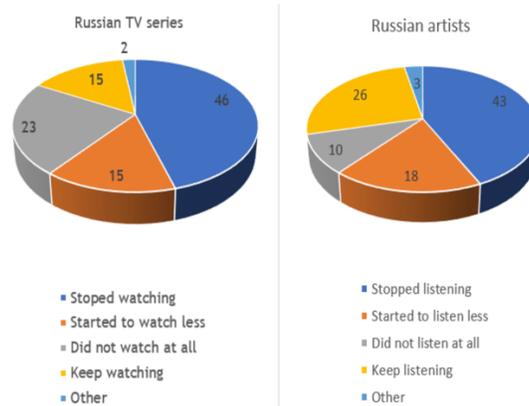
Figure 5. *Perspectives of Ukrainians on Russian Television Shows and Music*
Source: "Seventeenth National Survey: Identity. Patriotism. Values"(2022)

In parallel to these large-scale cultural and political transformations, research indicates that **displacement** serves as a significant accelerator for identity reconfiguration. Lazarenko (2020), utilizing qualitative interviews and mental sketch maps produced by internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Donbas residing in Kyiv, contends that Ukrainian identity in these instances is influenced by the convergence of geography, trauma, and agency. The act of mapping one's hometown, frequently influenced by conflict, and contrasting it with the disjointed spatial logic of Kyiv initiates a multifaceted reflective process. This process frequently results in the emergence of what Lazarenko characterizes as a "resettlement identity," a hybrid self-conception that amalgamates past emotional connections, displacement, and re-establishment within the Ukrainian civic sphere.

Significant spatial markers, including monuments (e.g., Lenin statues, the Maidan, or the Motherland Monument) and components of the urban grid, evolved into emotionally resonant sites, "*traumascapes*", that facilitate the visualization of the psychological shift from one identity phase to another. Notably, although interviews were frequently conducted in Russian, participants generally annotated their mental maps in Ukrainian—a symbolic expression of civic and cultural affiliation with the national initiative. This action underscores that language, like location, functions as a medium for identity expression: its utilization serves as both a sign of affiliation and a form of defiance. The experience of displacement engendered a twofold process: lamenting the absence of a cohesive sense of place, while concurrently forging new affiliations through symbolic selections—linguistic, spatial, and ritual—integrated into quotidian urban existence.

This linguistic aspect is important to the comprehensive reinforcement of Ukrainian national identity. **Language** fundamentally influences individuals' perceptions of their position in the world and their interactions within a collective cultural context. It serves both as a communication instrument and as a medium for the transmission of collective memory, values, and national narratives, so promoting a coherent sense of belonging and societal togetherness (Marukhovska-Kartunova et al., 2025; Smith, 2002). These dynamics illuminate a broader process: identity is not only restructured by state narratives or enemy aggression, but also actively reimagined by displaced individuals negotiating new civic environments. Understanding this agency is key to tracing how identity transformation takes root in everyday practices and space.

The Ukrainian language, increasingly regarded as a national symbol, gained substantial ground. Within six months of the 2022 invasion, 19% of Ukrainians transitioned to exclusively using Ukrainian in daily life, while an additional 41% of bilingual or predominantly Russian-speaking individuals began to prefer Ukrainian over Russian. Support for Russian as an official language decreased from 27% in 2014 to merely 3% in 2022 (Marukhovska-Kartunova et al., 2025). In the summer of 2023, survey results indicated that over 60% of respondents interacted only in Ukrainian, 30% utilized both Ukrainian and Russian, whilst merely 9% primarily spoke Russian in their regular interactions.

Religious identity has experienced a comparable evolution. Affiliation with the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) increased from 48% to 58% between 2019 and 2021, while support for the updated Julian calendar—congruent with the majority of European Orthodox churches—escalated from 15% in 2016 to 63% by 2023. These changes signify a symbolic separation from the Moscow Patriarchate and further integrate Ukraine into a pan-European cultural and spiritual context.

The conflict has also inspired a significant **civic awakening**. National pride escalated, as the proportion of individuals feeling pride in Ukrainian citizenship increased from 34% in 2021 to 75% in 2022. Civic identity subsequently increased, attaining up to 85% in certain metrics. Ukrainians are not merely asserting their identity in contrast to Russia but are actively redefining the nation as democratic, resilient, and oriented towards Europe (Marukhovska-Kartunova et al., 2025).

Theoretical analyses of these changes highlight the significance of "the Other" in the construction of identity. According to Triandafyllidou (2001) and Stavrakakis (2007), national identity frequently solidifies in contrast to a prominent external antagonist. In Ukraine's situation, Russia has progressively assumed that role, transforming from a supposed familair nation into an existential threat. The myths of common Slavic brotherhood have disintegrated, supplanted by a pressing initiative for cultural distinctiveness rooted in Europeanization, resilience, and civic solidarity. This is not a transient mobilization but seems to indicate a more enduring realignment of values and self-perception, strengthening national resilience as both a psychological and political force. These advancements reflect Fukuyama's (2018) assertion that national identity, rooted in inclusive principles and civic dedication, serves as a significant catalyst for state cohesion and democratic resilience. The evolution of Ukrainian identity during wartime is not merely a protective response but a deliberate reconstitution of a national self that is ethically, culturally, and politically differentiated from its imperial history.

This reinterpretation has emerged in various domains—language, religion, cultural narratives, historical memory, and symbolic landscapes—indicating a definitive departure from the enduring legacy of the "Little Russian" identity and its related subjugation. For younger generations, especially those who matured during the conflict, anti-Russian feeling has solidified into an essential aspect of national identity. The cohorts, raised in a environment of civic defiance and cultural restoration, now comprise the armed forces and grassroots nationalist movements. Their perspective, influenced by educational reform, de-russification programs, and a collective memory of wartime trauma, embodies a novel civic and cultural alignment with European principles and democratic self-determination (Miller, 2022).

The consolidation of Ukrainian identity has produced repercussions in Russia, where individuals of Ukrainian origin are now increasingly regarded with distrust or animosity.

In a final twist of historical irony, while Lenin played a crucial role in creating the institutional framework of Ukrainian statehood, Vladimir Putin may finally be recognized as the architect of its symbolic and emotional cohesion. In this environment, war has demonstrated itself as both a destructive force and a catalyst for national unity, reinforcing Ukraine's identity as a sovereign, self-determined nation with a unique trajectory and purpose in the contemporary world.

While recent studies have robustly documented the immediate shifts in national identity following Russia's 2014 aggression and the 2022 full-scale invasion, these insights are primarily grounded in quantitative surveys and cultural trend analyses. However, much less is known about how these transformations are sustained, deepened, or contested as the war endures. It remains critical to examine whether the symbolic, linguistic, and civic realignments observed in the first phases of the war are persisting or evolving in new directions.

CHAPTER 3.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Approach

This thesis adopts a qualitative research design centered on Ukraine to investigate how national identity transforms in the context of war. Grounded in process tracing and enriched by qualitative interviews, the research aims to uncover the causal mechanisms that explain identity shifts under conditions of invasion, trauma, and resistance. This design enables a detailed, within-case analysis of Ukraine's wartime experience, focusing not only on macro-level events but also on the meanings individuals assign to these changes. By combining theoretical attention with rich empirical insight, this approach captures the complex and evolving nature of identity in a time of conflict.

Addressing this gap requires a **process-oriented methodology** that traces the mechanisms of identity transformation through a temporal and context-specific lens. This thesis adopts such an approach, focusing on the Ukrainian case to explore how identity shifts during war are mediated by concrete sequences of threat perception, mobilization, and realignment. In doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of identity as both a product and driver of conflict—and ultimately, as a key variable in post-war reconstruction and political stabilization.

Process tracing is particularly suited to uncovering how identity shifts take place in real time, especially in conflict contexts where structural disruptions, political violence, and symbolic narratives interact. Rather than inferring causality through correlational patterns across multiple cases, this method allows the researcher to engage in deep within-case analysis, observing how hypothesized mechanisms unfold over time and across stages of escalation and resistance (George & Bennett 2005) (Checkel, 2008) (Hauter, 2023).

As Checkel (2008) argues, process tracing is essential for connecting abstract theorization with empirical realities, allowing researchers to move beyond broad correlations to assess whether a hypothesized mechanism is actually observable in the data. This method is particularly effective in settings of rapid and contested change, such as Ukraine, where the mechanisms of national identity transformation unfold in real time and are shaped by dynamic interactions between war, governance, and society. The approach treats identity transformation not as a linear or purely structural outcome but as a dynamic interplay of agency, structure, and emotion. Causal mechanisms such as collective trauma, symbolic reframing, civic mobilization, and institutional delegitimation, are not merely assumed—they are traced empirically through interviews, archival

records, and contextual data. This method thus enables the identification of both intended and unintended effects of war on collective identity formation (Checkel 2008)

Process tracing, in this context, serves not just as a method of historical narration but as a structured, inferential tool for identifying how identity is reshaped during war. By combining this approach with qualitative interviews, the research is positioned to capture both top-down discursive framings and bottom-up lived experiences. The aim is not only to describe Ukraine's evolving identity landscape, but to build a generalizable model of identity transformation applicable to contemporary conflict zones.

To enrich this approach, the research integrates a qualitative methodology to access the depth and nuance of participants' lived experiences. Qualitative inquiry, as described by Marshall and Rossman (2014), is particularly valuable when exploring complex phenomena in fluid, real-world contexts. This method enables a detailed, in-depth investigation of how individuals make sense of identity under pressure, especially when traditional categories and affiliations are reshaped by wartime dynamics.

Following Gubrium and Holstein's (1997) concept of "active interviewing," the study positions the interview as an interactive event where meaning is co-constructed. Rather than treating responses as static facts, this approach emphasizes dialogue and context, allowing the interviews to surface subjective interpretations and contested narratives of identity. This is essential in the Ukrainian context, where memory, trauma, and identity politics converge.

As Burke (2016) and Burke et al. (2023) argue, the richness of qualitative data lies in its ability to reflect emotional depth and capture personal meaning. By applying this framework, the interviews serve not only to collect empirical material but also to refine theoretical assumptions and clarify causal mechanisms identified in the process tracing model. The qualitative strategy is thus instrumental for unpacking how identity transformations are perceived, internalized, and narrated by civil society actors and individuals embedded in a war-torn society.

This integrated design—merging process tracing with active, qualitative interviewing—offers the thesis to investigate identity formation as both a structural process and an individual experience. It provides the analytical tools to trace causal mechanisms while grounding them in real-world perceptions and narratives.

3.1.1. Process Tracing Model for Identity Evolution in Ukraine

The research begins by conceptualizing a five-stage model of identity evolution based on the theoretical foundations developed in the Literature Review. Each stage includes an independent variable—such as Russian aggression, civic mobilization, or EU conditionality—linked to one or more hypothesized causal mechanisms, including perceived threat, symbolic reframing, identity resilience, or socialization. These mechanisms are grounded in existing scholarship on nationalism, trauma, and identity but are adapted specifically to Ukraine's historical and geopolitical context.

STAGE NAME	Identity Rupture	Civic Reorientation Under Weak Institutions	Symbolic Rebuilding	European Alignment	Identity Entrenchment and Transmission
INDEPENDENT VARIABLE	External aggression (Crimea 2014, invasion 2022)	State failure and institutional weakness	Civic mobilization and trauma memory	External conditionality (EU integration, DCFTA)	Prolonged war conditions and time
CAUSAL MECHANISMS	Perceived existential threat; Trauma Mobilization; Myth Driver Identity Consolidation	State Failure Local Solidarity Networks; Hybrid Warfare and Identity Resilience	Symbolic reframing; Trauma reframing; Cultural memory construction	Identity-Norm Compatibility; Logic of appropriateness	Trauma consolidation; Youth socialization; Resettlement identity formation; Cultural reinforcement
EXPECTED OBSERVABLE OUTCOMES	Language shift to Ukrainian; Rejection of Russian culture; Expressions of betrayal; Patriotic sentiment	Volunteer networks; Civic hero narratives; Reframing of Ukrainianness as ethical action; Maidan symbolism	Proliferation of national symbols; Cultural rituals; National literature and songs; Public use of Ukrainian language	EU-aligned reforms; Support for EU/NATO; Civic narratives linking Ukrainian identity to democratic values	Long-term language shift; Civic pride; institutionalized memory; National rituals; Youth driven identity convergence

Figure 6. *Process Tracing Model for Identity Evolution during war*

Stage 1 – Identity Rupture

The first stage of the model, *Identity Rupture*, explores how large-scale crises—such as Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion in 2022—trigger a moral and psychological break from previous identity affiliations, particularly Soviet and hybrid Ukrainian-Russian identities. This stage begins with the independent variable: **external aggression**, which initiates a **perceived existential threat** (Kemp, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) that activates defensive identity mechanisms. At both the individual and collective levels, this threat disrupts the stability of identity and forces re-evaluation of belonging, allegiance, and national orientation.

Grounded in **Social Identity Theory (SIT)**, this stage explains how individuals realign their identity through in-group/out-group dynamics under pressure. (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The war created a clear "Other"—Russia and its perceived sympathizers—against which Ukrainians could contrast and strengthen their national identity (Hammack, 2015). This aligns with Kemp's (2001) insight that threats to identity are experienced as existential, prompting mobilization, resistance, or identity polarization.

The mechanism at play here can be termed the **Trauma Mobilization Mechanism**, in which collective trauma serves as a psychological accelerator of identity change (Wilmer, 1997; Ricarte, 2022). The perceived betrayal by a culturally close out-group—Russians—generates emotional rupture, moral outrage, and a rejection of previously held hybrid or ambiguous identities. As noted by scholars like Assmann (2012) and Smith (1997), this break is not just strategic or rational; it is deeply symbolic and emotional, tied to memory, trauma, and the need for belonging.

This mechanism is also consistent with the **Myth-Driven Identity Consolidation** process, where the shock of aggression creates the space for reframing national narratives around resistance,

sacrifice, and rebirth. Maidan, Donbas, and Bucha become national myths that symbolize a turning point—a foundational rupture that justifies the redefinition of Ukrainian identity as civic, values-based, and distinct from Russia (Fukuyama, 2018; Marukhovska-Kartunova et al., 2025).

Expected observable outcomes of this first stage include rapid shifts from Russian to Ukrainian in everyday language use, a public and symbolic rejection of Russian culture, media, and historical narratives, and frequent expressions of moral rupture—such as statements emphasizing separation or betrayal. These developments often coincide with a strengthening of in-group identity, heightened patriotic sentiment, and a growing psychological distance from pre-war or hybrid identity   attachments.

This stage sets the foundation for the rest of the model: once identity rupture occurs, space is opened for civic realignment, symbolic redefinition, and intergenerational transmission of a reconfigured Ukrainian identity. Without the rupture, these subsequent processes would lack the emotional and symbolic clarity required to activate enduring identity change.

Stage 2 – Civic Reorientation Under Weak Institutions

The second stage in the process tracing model—*Civic Reorientation under Weak Institutions*—captures the critical shift wherein national identity begins to reorganize not through top-down state structures, but via bottom-up civic engagement. Following the rupture caused by external aggression, Ukrainian society encountered a second, compounding challenge: **institutional fragility**. The collapse of trust in political elites, pervasive corruption, and the military's initial unpreparedness in 2014 contributed to what Korostelina (2007) calls an "identity vacuum"—a moment when state institutions fail to provide coherent identity cues, forcing citizens to look elsewhere for belonging and resilience.

This vacuum activates a **State Failure → Local Solidarity Networks** causal mechanism. In the absence of effective central governance, civic identity begins to consolidate through **horizontal ties**, such as grassroots volunteerism, territorial defense units, diaspora aid channels, and community-led resistance. These forms of solidarity reinforce shared norms, foster emotional resilience, and create alternative sources of political legitimacy. As noted in Balkan precedent (Mishkova, 2020; Daskalov, 2004), similar civic dynamics emerged in times of imperial collapse, where fragmented state authority created space for local actors to redefine identity around practical cooperation, mutual aid, and symbolic resistance.

In Ukraine, this mechanism is also observable in the widespread **civic mobilization after 2014**, particularly among youth, religious organizations, and volunteer (Marukhovska-Kartunova et al., 2025). These initiatives helped to reframe Ukrainian identity not just in contrast to Russia but as a **lived civic practice**—rooted in local action, emotional bonding, and moral commitment to a shared cause. According to Hart, Richardson, & Wilkenfeld (2011), such civic identity emerges not through ethnic lineage but through shared values, public service, and interaction with political and social institutions. However, when state institutions are weak or illegitimate, these values are nurtured instead in parallel civic spaces.

This pattern reflects what Bērziņš and Vdovychenko (2022) call the **Hybrid Warfare and Identity Resilience Mechanism**. In hybrid conflict settings, where the state is attacked both militarily and informationally, societies with strong civic engagement can resist subversion and build resilience through **non-state structures**. Even in low-trust environments, citizens form moral communities that uphold national identity through self-organized means, sustaining identity despite or even because of institutional weakness.

Expected Observable outcomes of this stage include the rapid growth of volunteer networks and grassroots civic initiatives following 2014, alongside widespread narratives celebrating "ordinary people saving the country," which reinforced bottom-up legitimacy. Civic figures—such as medics, teachers, and soldiers—came to be seen as more representative of national identity than political elites. This period also marked a shift in the definition of "Ukrainianness," increasingly understood as grounded in ethical action and civic commitment rather than ethnicity or bureaucratic affiliation. The Maidan, in particular, emerged as a central symbolic reference point— a moment when national identity was reclaimed through collective civic mobilization.

This stage shows that identity reorientation is not just a top-down process—it can be rooted in everyday practices, mutual aid, and emotional solidarity under pressure. Echoing findings from the Balkans, civic identity consolidation often occurs when state legitimacy collapses and identity becomes anchored in **what people do**, not just **who they are**. In Ukraine, the war catalyzed a transformation of national identity from an ambivalent, fragmented category into a **civic-centered project**, maintained by horizontal trust and community-driven resistance. This transformation laid the foundation for later stages of symbolic consolidation, institutional realignment, and intergenerational reproduction.

Stage 3 – Symbolic Rebuilding

After the initial rupture and grassroots civic mobilization, the third stage in the process of identity transformation—*Symbolic Rebuilding*—marks a cultural and narrative consolidation of the Ukrainian national self. This stage is characterized by the reframing of trauma and resistance into cohesive national myths, symbols, and rituals that give emotional and historical continuity to the wartime experience.

The primary **causal mechanism** in this phase is **symbolic reframing**, a process by which collective suffering and historical disruption are transformed into narratives of meaning, purpose, and moral order. Drawing on Assmann's (2012) theory of *cultural memory*, this stage involves encoding recent traumatic events—such as the Maidan, the Donbas war, and the 2022 invasion— into stable symbolic forms that can be transmitted, ritualized, and commemorated. These forms— flags, monuments, anniversaries, and media representations—serve to anchor a shared narrative of nationhood.

Importantly, symbolic reframing is not merely commemorative—it is constitutive. As Ricarte

(2022) argues, identity in post-conflict societies is actively reconstructed through selective remembering and forgetting, often led by cultural and political actors who recode violent rupture into a national origin myth. In Ukraine's case, this involves elevating moments of civic resistance into symbols of collective virtue and sacrifice, while distancing the national narrative from the Soviet and Russian past. Unlike in the earlier stages, where identity was reactive or mobilizational, here identity becomes narrative: it is told, taught, and lived.

This mechanism aligns with what Wilmer (1997) terms **trauma reframing**, where the memory of violence is integrated into a broader story of redemption or rebirth. In the Balkans, similar processes were seen in the reframing of martyrdom and victimhood into foundational myths (e.g., Kosovo for Serbia). In Ukraine, the Maidan and subsequent wars have come to represent not just resistance but the moral "awakening" of the nation—a break from ambiguity toward clarity and purpose.

The **expected outcome** of this stage is the emergence of a **cohesive national story**: one that binds civic, historical, and emotional elements into a shared framework of belonging. This symbolic narrative provides legitimacy to the new civic identity that emerged during Stage 2 and strengthens its resilience over time. At this stage, **expected observable outcomes** include the widespread display of civic and national symbols in public spaces—such as flags, memorials, and artwork—accompanied by the reframing of cultural rituals and holidays to emphasize sacrifice and national pride. War-related literature, songs, and films gained popularity, reinforcing cohesive national narratives. There was also a mass-scale shift toward the use of the Ukrainian language, particularly in symbolic gestures like the renaming of streets. These developments reflect an emotional convergence around a shared story of survival, resistance, and moral clarity that binds the national community together.

This stage highlights how identity transformation is not only institutional or civic—it is also **narrative and symbolic**. What emerges is a **shared national story**, crafted through memory, myth, and meaning-making. In Ukraine's case, this story replaces Soviet and Russified symbols with a homegrown narrative of democratic resistance, cultural resilience, and European belonging. These symbolic shifts not only reinforce internal unity but also signal externally a **mature and self-authored national identity**.

Stage 4 – European Alignment

The fourth stage in the process tracing model—*European Alignment*— marks a decisive shift in how Ukrainians perceive their national identity in relation to Europe. After the rupture of the Russian-oriented past and the internal consolidation of civic identity through mobilization and symbolic reframing, this stage reflects a normative reorientation: the adoption of European values as integral to Ukrainian self-understanding.

The **independent variable** in this stage is **external conditionality**, primarily from the European Union. This includes association agreements, visa liberalization, and institutional cooperation through frameworks like the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement and the Deep and

Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) (European Commission, 2016). These are not simply political or economic arrangements—they function as symbolic and normative references against which national identity is judged and reshaped.

The key **causal mechanism** here is what Freyburg and Richter (2010) call **Identity–Norm Compatibility**. When national identity aligns with the civic and democratic norms promoted by the EU, conditionality produces not just formal compliance but *norm internalization*. This happens through what they define as the **"logic of appropriateness"**: reforms are accepted not for material gain, but because they are perceived as legitimate expressions of who "we" are becoming. In Ukraine, this logic has become increasingly visible since 2014, and dramatically intensified after the full-scale invasion in 2022.

Crucially, this alignment is not uniform or automatic. It requires that the emerging civic identity—already shaped by trauma, resistance, and symbolic reframing—finds **resonance** with European narratives of democracy, human rights, and rule of law. When such resonance exists, identity transformation accelerates, and the EU becomes not just a geopolitical goal but a moral and cultural reference point. This is what differentiates the Ukrainian case from more resistant examples like Serbia, where EU norms often clash with dominant identity scripts and thus result in **symbolic or instrumental compliance**.

The outcome of this stage is the reframing of Ukrainian identity around democratic and pluralistic values associated with the European Union. Rather than claiming a fixed European identity, Ukraine increasingly aligns itself with the civic, legal, and institutional norms that characterize European democracies. Europe becomes the aspirational reference point for political culture, governance, and societal values—a model of what Ukraine strives to embody. At the same time, Russia is recast not only as a geopolitical adversary but as the antithesis of these democratic ideals, reinforcing a civilizational boundary rooted in principles rather than geography alone.

At this stage, **expected observable indicators** include civic reforms aligned with EU standards—such as anti-corruption measures, education reforms, and protections for minority rights. There is strong public support for Ukraine's EU membership and NATO accession, reflecting a broader societal shift. Civic narratives increasingly frame "Ukrainian" identity in terms of democratic, pluralist, and resilient values, implicitly contrasting these traits with Russia's autocratic model. These transformations are also reflected in changes to educational curricula and public discourse, both of which increasingly emphasize European values and a sense of belonging within the European community.

As Marukhovska-Kartunova et al. (2025) document, post-2022 survey data confirms an overwhelming increase in public identification with European values, accompanied by a sharp rejection of Russia not only as a state but as a cultural model. This aligns with Triandafyllidou's (2001) insight that national identity often emerges through *contrast with the Other*: in this case, Europe serves as the positive pole, and Russia as the negated past.

Thus, **European Realignment** is not a simple policy shift—it is a **normative repositioning** of the Ukrainian nation within a different symbolic geography. It consolidates the new civic identity by giving it **direction, affirmation, and external validation**.

Stage 5 – Identity Entrenchment and Transmission

The fifth and final stage in the process tracing model—*Identity Entrenchment and Transmission*—examines how the transformed Ukrainian identity becomes **durable** and **reproduced** across generations and social structures. This stage is crucial because it indicates whether identity change triggered by war is temporary or consolidated into a long-term collective consciousness.

The **independent variable** in this phase is **time under war conditions**, specifically the prolonged nature of the conflict and the steady reinforcement of identity through institutions, trauma, and youth socialization. Unlike the rupture of earlier stages, this stage is about **stability and reproduction**.

Several causal mechanisms contribute to identity entrenchment in this final stage. The first is the **Trauma Consolidation Mechanism**, as described by Wilmer (1997) and reaffirmed by Marukhovska-Kartunova et al. (2025), which suggests that enduring trauma fosters rigid group boundaries and a reinforced collective identity built around survival and shared pain. In Ukraine's context, the lasting effects of displacement, war casualties, and the ever-present memory of existential threat deepen this psychological anchoring. A second mechanism is **Youth Socialization**, outlined by Hammack (2015) and Smith (2002), which emphasizes the transmission of identity through formal and informal learning. Educational reforms, including de-russification of curricula, increased emphasis on national history, and youth engagement in civic or military efforts, all contribute to internalizing a durable sense of Ukrainian-ness. A third mechanism is **Resettlement Identity Formation**, as illustrated by Lazarenko (2020), where displacement fosters hybrid civic identities among internally displaced persons (IDPs). These identities are stabilized through symbolic practices such as adopting new linguistic norms, developing spatial routines, and participating in commemorative rituals. Lastly, the **Cultural Reinforcement Mechanism** plays a critical role, whereby national myths, symbols, and rituals—especially those rooted in the Maidan, the 2014 conflict, and the 2022 invasion—become embedded in the national narrative. As Triandafyllidou (2001) notes, such myth-symbol complexes are powerful vehicles for intergenerational identity transmission, ensuring the persistence of a collective ethos over time.

These mechanisms collectively contribute to the consolidation of a durable, civic national identity in Ukraine. **Expected observable indicators** of this stage include long-term shifts in language use, particularly among youth and displaced populations, reflecting deeper alignment with Ukrainian cultural norms. Postwar surveys reveal sustained levels of civic pride and political engagement, suggesting that national belonging has become a salient and mobilizing force. The institutionalization of memory—through museums, revised schoolbooks, and official remembrance days—further embeds this identity within the public consciousness. Additionally, national rituals of mourning and resistance have become integrated into everyday civic life, reinforcing collective memory and emotional solidarity. Notably, there is increasing cross-regional convergence in how Ukrainians perceive themselves, especially among younger generations, signaling that a once-fragmented identity is now coalescing into a shared and future-oriented national ethos.

Importantly, this phase links identity formation to the **future**, showing how the war is not just a moment of crisis but a **foundational episode** in the creation of a new national ethos. As Mishkova (2020) and Fukuyama (2018) suggest, post-conflict identity, when anchored in inclusive and democratic values, can act as a **driver of state legitimacy and democratic consolidation**. By tracing this entrenchment process, the research not only maps how identity changes during war—but how it **lasts**. The Ukrainian case, in this final stage, demonstrates that national identity is not simply a reflection of past trauma but a **forward-looking project**, capable of defining a nation's trajectory well beyond the battlefield.

The next step is to translate the abstract causal mechanisms of the model into concrete, observable indicators. This process of operationalization allows each mechanism to be empirically tested through qualitative interview data. These indicators will inform both the structure of interview questions and the analytical coding of responses, enabling the model to be grounded in lived experience. To validate and refine the proposed model of identity transformation, this thesis conducts qualitative interviews with individuals who directly experienced the war. While the model offers a structured theoretical lens, it must be empirically tested against real-world narratives to ensure its explanatory power. The interviews serve this purpose by capturing how causal mechanisms—such as perceived threat, trauma, symbolic rupture, and social mobilization—manifest in lived experiences. This integration of theory and empirical data allows the model to remain grounded, dynamic, and responsive to the complex realities of identity shifts during war.

3.2 Sampling Strategy & Case Selection

This study employs a **purposeful sampling strategy**, combining **convenience sampling** and **snowball sampling** techniques. Given the qualitative and exploratory nature of the research, the goal was not statistical representativeness, but rather the **purposeful selection of individuals who could provide rich, first-hand insight** into how Ukrainian national identity has evolved during the ongoing war.

Convenience sampling was the primary method used to recruit participants. As the researcher is part of the Ukrainian diaspora with family connections in Ukraine, initial participants were contacted through personal and family networks. These participants were selected based on their **residency in Ukraine during the 2022 full-scale invasion**, ensuring that their experiences and perspectives were directly relevant to the study's core inquiry. Participants received an introductory message detailing the purpose and scope of the research and were provided with a topic guide and informed consent form (*see Appendix 1*).

Following the initial interviews, snowball sampling was employed to recruit two additional participants. These individuals were identified during earlier interviews as particularly relevant to the study and were contacted through referrals. This approach enabled the expansion of the sample while preserving its relevance to the research focus.

The **selection criteria** aimed to ensure diversity along several key dimensions:

- **Geographic origin**: Participants were chosen from various parts of Ukraine, including **western regions** (Lviv, Dubliany, Mykolaiv, Khmelnytskyi), **central regions** (Kyiv, Poltava), **eastern regions** such as Donetsk in the Donbas area and the **Crimean Peninsula**. This regional breadth allows the study to capture different identity dynamics shaped by varying historical, linguistic, and geopolitical contexts.

- **Generational background:** Recognizing that different age cohorts may interpret national identity in distinct ways, the sample includes participants aged between 19 and 88. This range comprises individuals aged 19, 27, 28, 31, 42 (two participants), 55, 81, 88.

- **Gender**: While gender balance was considered, the sample skews toward female participants. This reflects a **practical limitation** of recruitment, as many Ukrainian men are either on active duty at the front or have been displaced. Nonetheless, **three male participants** were included to broaden the perspective.

- **Professional background**: Participants represent a wide array of professions, including a **photographer, engineer, economist, singer, student, professor, and winemaker**. This occupational diversity contributes to a more holistic understanding of identity formation across different segments of society.

The recruitment process was voluntary and respectful of participants' willingness to share potentially sensitive experiences. All participants gave informed consent and were assured of anonymity and the right to withdraw at any time.

This is a **single-case study**, focused exclusively on Ukraine, with the aim of tracing identity transformations as they occur in real time in response to war, occupation, and political violence.

Challenges during recruitment primarily involved difficulty in reaching male participants, many of whom are serving on the frontlines or have been relocated. This gender imbalance is recognized as a limitation of the sample. However, the study benefits from the **depth and diversity of lived experiences**, offering valuable insight into how national identity is shaped and reshaped during periods of existential threat.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

Data for this study were collected through **semi-structured interviews**, a method well-suited for exploring deeply personal and context-dependent experiences such as national identity transformation during wartime. This approach provided a flexible structure that balanced consistency across interviews with the freedom to pursue unexpected insights, reflections, and emotionally rich narratives.

The interviews followed a **seven-theme topic guide** (see *Appendix 1*), which was developed in line with the process tracing model constructed during the literature review phase. These themes included: (1) participant background and context; (2) key triggering events and perceptions; (3) community and institutional trust; (4) symbolism and national narratives; (5) European alignment;

(6) intergenerational identity transmission; and (7) reflections on identity change. The structure allowed for comparative consistency while also encouraging participants to shape the conversation based on their unique experiences.

All interviews were conducted in **Ukrainian**, as participants explicitly expressed their preference to share sensitive memories and reflections in their native language, where responses would feel more **natural and spontaneous**. The researcher is a native speaker and conducted the interviews accordingly. The recordings were later **transcribed and translated into English** by the researcher to ensure consistency and clarity during the coding and analysis phase.

Approximately **90% of the interviews were conducted remotely** via video conferencing platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet. This modality offered flexibility and allowed the researcher to reach participants across different regions of Ukraine, some of whom were still in active warzones or displaced. **One interview was held in person** in Rome, as the participant was temporarily visiting a personal connection residing in the researcher's city.

The interviews ranged from **45 to 70 minutes** in length, depending on the level of depth each participant chose to share. The interviews were intentionally designed to resemble **open, conversational exchanges** rather than rigid questionnaires. Participants were encouraged to speak freely, and the researcher avoided interrupting the flow of thought in order to maintain the authenticity and emotional coherence of the narrative.

Due to the sensitive and deeply personal nature of the topics discussed—including war trauma, displacement, and national belonging—many participants became **emotional** during the interviews. The researcher acknowledges that the **affective dimension** of these conversations is a critical component of the data. Personal history, sentiment, and lived experience were inseparable from the way identity transformations were expressed and narrated. Nevertheless, all participants engaged voluntarily, and many conveyed strong interest in the research, viewing it as a meaningful opportunity to reflect on their own experiences and contribute to a broader understanding of Ukraine's wartime transformations.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to each interview. Participants were provided with a clear description of the research goals, the voluntary nature of their involvement, their right to withdraw at any point, and the measures in place to protect confidentiality. **All interviews were audio recorded with explicit consent** and stored securely. Identifying information was removed during transcription to ensure anonymity and compliance with ethical research standards.

This method allowed for the collection of a **rich and nuanced dataset**, grounded in the personal voices of individuals who lived through the war. By facilitating a space for reflection and emotional expression, the study captures not only the content but also the **texture of identity transformation**—as shaped by memory, trauma, resilience, and evolving civic consciousness.

3.4 Data Analysis

The analysis of interview data will be conducted using NVivo, a widely used software for qualitative research that facilitates the organization and interpretation of various types of unstructured data, including interviews, field notes, and web content (QSR International, 2025), In this study, NVivo will support the systematic coding of semi-structured interviews, helping to structure and interpret complex narratives related to identity change during wartime.

As noted by NVivo (QSR International, 2025), the software enables researchers to manage, visualize, and uncover patterns within qualitative data, offering a structured approach to exploring emerging themes. Coding is a fundamental step in this process. It entails breaking down the data into meaningful segments and assigning labels or "codes" that reflect theoretical constructs or empirical observations (Bell, Bryman, & Harley, 2022). These codes may be developed deductively—based on the theoretical model and existing literature—and inductively, as new insights emerge from the interview data itself.

The coding process will follow the three-step model introduced by Strauss and Corbin (1990): open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. During open coding, interview transcripts are examined line-by-line to identify recurring themes or categories. Axial coding builds connections between these categories by exploring the conditions, interactions, and consequences they entail. In the final stage—selective coding—a central category is identified that integrates the findings and provides a cohesive narrative of identity transformation during wartime. This iterative process ensures that interpretation remains grounded in the data while also aligned with the theoretical framework.

The goal of this analytic approach is not only to categorize responses, but to trace the causal mechanisms and patterns of identity change proposed in the process tracing model. Maintaining a strong link between empirical material and conceptual meaning is essential for drawing robust and meaningful conclusions.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in full adherence to established ethical research standards, with particular attention to protecting participants' anonymity, privacy, and well-being throughout the process of data collection and analysis. Given the emotionally sensitive nature of the research topic—identity transformation in wartime Ukraine—special care was taken to ensure that participation was both informed and voluntary, and that the risk of psychological distress was minimized.

Prior to each interview, participants were presented with a detailed informed consent form outlining the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of participation, and the procedures involved. The form explicitly stated that participants could decline to answer any question, stop the interview at any time, or withdraw from the study entirely without providing a justification or facing any consequence. Consent was also obtained for audio recording the interviews to facilitate accurate

transcription and analysis. Participants were reassured that no identifying information would appear in the thesis or any related publications unless they provided explicit written permission.

To guarantee confidentiality and anonymity, all identifying data—including names, organizational affiliations, and specific personal circumstances—were removed from the transcripts and replaced with pseudonyms or general descriptors. This measure helped ensure that individuals and communities could not be traced or recognized in the final analysis.

Data were stored securely accessible only to the researcher. Audio recordings, transcripts, and notes will be deleted after the conclusion of the study, and no personal data will be shared with third parties. Participants were also informed that they could request the deletion or correction of their data within two weeks of the interview.

Care was taken to minimize the psychological risks of discussing topics such as displacement, war trauma, and loss. Interviews were conducted in a respectful, empathetic tone, and participants were encouraged to share only what they felt comfortable disclosing. Questions were open-ended and non-leading to foster a safe and open environment.

Finally, researcher reflexivity was an ongoing component of the study design. Given the qualitative and interpretive nature of the research, the researcher regularly reflected on their positionality and the potential influence of personal biases during interviews and data analysis. This approach aimed to maintain analytical rigor and ensure that participants' voices remained central in the representation of the findings.

The study followed the ethical guidelines proposed by Bell, Bryman, and Harley (2022) and incorporated best practices for qualitative research involving vulnerable or conflict-affected populations.

CHAPTER 4.

FINDINGS

Stage 1: Open Coding

The analysis began with **open coding**, the foundational stage in which raw interview transcripts were imported into NVivo for systematic examination. Each transcript was read line by line, and **discrete concepts, expressions, and experiences** were coded to capture the full diversity of participants' narratives. At this stage, the objective was to remain as close to the data as possible, identifying **meaningful fragments of text without imposing premature structure**. (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Open coding allowed for the emergence of themes grounded in the participants' language and experiences, following principles of inductive, data-driven analysis (Charmaz, 2014).

This process generated **920 open codes**, reflecting the **breadth and heterogeneity of identity-related experiences** reported by participants. These included references to personal ruptures

caused by war, experiences of displacement, civic mobilization, symbolic practices such as language use or cultural rituals, perceptions of leadership, and aspirations toward European integration.

During this stage, **irrelevant or tangential information** (such as small talk or unrelated biographical details) was noted but set aside, ensuring the analysis remained focused while retaining the ability to revisit this material if needed.

The open coding phase produced a **dense and multifaceted dataset**, which served as the empirical foundation for deeper thematic exploration in the subsequent axial coding stage. Importantly, this stage highlighted the **complex and layered nature of Ukrainian identity under wartime conditions**, capturing the **raw material** of participants' emotional reactions, civic actions, symbolic practices, and long-term reflections.

Name	Codes
Interview_01_Mykolaiv_50s	89
Interview_02_Lviv_27	72
Interview_03_Poltava_42	88
Interview_04_Kiev_31	114
Interview_05_Dubliany_28	149
Interview_06_Crimea_42	66
Interview_07_Lemko_88	128
Interview_08_Donetsk_19	102
Interview_09_Khmelnytskyi...	113

Figure 7: *Open Codes*

Stage 2: Axial Coding

The second stage of analysis involved **axial coding**, which sought to uncover relationships and underlying patterns within the initial 920 open codes. While the open coding phase had preserved the richness and diversity of participants' narratives, it also generated a high level of redundancy, with multiple codes capturing overlapping or closely related phenomena. Axial coding addressed this challenge by **consolidating and reorganizing codes into broader thematic categories**.

Through an iterative process, the 920 open codes were reduced to **22 axial codes**, each representing a distinct thematic cluster. These axial codes captured recurring dynamics across interviews. A **second round of axial coding** was then conducted to refine these categories further and align them with the overarching structure of the research. In this stage, the 22 axial codes were systematically reorganized into the **five stages of the process tracing model for identity evolution in Ukraine**:

1. **Identity Rupture** – capturing themes of emotional shock, fractured identities, displacement, and the sense of betrayal linked to Russian aggression.

2. **Civic Reorientation** – highlighting how identity was rebuilt through bottom-up civic action, resilience, and moral duty within institutional weakness.
3. **Symbolic Rebuilding** – reflecting the role of cultural tools, language, and religion in consolidating a shared national narrative.
4. **European Alignment** – addressing the reorientation of Ukrainian identity toward European values and institutions, alongside episodes of disillusionment.
5. **Identity Entrenchment & Intergenerational Transmission** – showing how identity transformations were stabilized, transmitted across generations, and reflected upon in participants' long-term perspectives.

This two-step axial coding process ensured that the analysis moved beyond description to capture the **causal mechanisms and trajectories of identity change**. By embedding each of the 22 axial codes into the five-stage model, the analysis preserved the complexity of participants' lived experiences while producing a structured framework that directly connects the empirical material to the theoretical foundation of the thesis.

Selective Code	Axial Codes	Themes (from Open Codes)
Evolution of Ukrainian National Identity	**1. Identity Rupture**	Identity Shock & Emotional Rupture
		Fractured Identity & Strategic Ambiguity
		Unfulfilled Past & Missed State-Building Moments
		Background Context and Pre-War Identity
		Displacement, Exile, and Border Experiences
		Informational Sovereignty and Media War
	2. Civic Reorientation	Wartime Civic Resilience & Adaptation
		Political Disillusionment and Realignment
		Identity as Moral Duty and Civic Responsibility
		State Fragility & Institutional Failure
		Perceived Betrayal and Internalized Imperial Legacy
		Perceptions of Leadership and Institutional Trust
		Economic Strain & Resilience

		Language as Identity Tool
	3. Symbolic Rebuilding	Religious & Cultural Adaptation
		Art and Culture as Identity Tools
	4. European Alignment	European Norms & Postwar Projection
		European Alignment and Disillusionment
	5 . Identity Entrenchment & Intergenerational Transmission	Youth, Education & Identity Formation
		National Pride
		East-West Identity Narratives
		Reflections on Identity Transformation

Table 1: *Codes*
Source: *Author*

4.1 Identity Rupture

The first stage of Ukrainian national identity transformation — *Identity Rupture* — describes the collapse of pre-war certainties following the escalation of violence in 2014 and, above all, the full-scale invasion of 2022. Across interviews, this rupture was experienced as immediate shock, existential threat, and fragmentation of previously stable attachments.

Identity Shock & Emotional Rupture

The invasion of February 24, 2022, was consistently described as a moment of disbelief and paralysis. Everyday life was suddenly interrupted, and respondents recalled being unable to act or even process what was happening. One participant summarized: *"The full-scale invasion was a real shock… I just didn't know what to do at all."* Fear quickly shifted into intensified national identification, as another noted: *"When the war started, I felt Ukrainian in a way I never had before. It was survival, not choice."* These accounts illustrate how the immediate experience of violence catalyzed both emotional collapse and accelerated belonging.

Fractured Identity & Strategic Ambiguity

Alongside unity, the rupture destabilized identities and relationships. Several interviewees described conflicts with relatives or peers who trusted Russian media, leading to painful breaks in family ties. Others spoke of ambivalence, caught between inherited cultural links to Russia and

the pressure to embrace a civic Ukrainian identity. These experiences reflect how the rupture did not simply reinforce one national narrative but often unsettled multiple, competing layers of belonging.

Unfulfilled Past & Missed State-Building Moments

The crisis was also narrated against a longer trajectory of unfinished nation-building. Respondents argued that independence and post-Maidan reforms had left unresolved gaps in cohesion and preparedness. As one stated: *"We should have prepared better as a country; this collapse shows what was never built."* The invasion was therefore experienced not only as a military rupture but as the exposure of historical fragilities in state and identity formation.

Background Context and Pre-War Identity

To grasp the depth of rupture, it is necessary to situate it within pre-war attachments. Many emphasized the taken-for-granted stability of ordinary life — careers, family, education — and their disbelief that large-scale war could ever reach Ukraine. One recalled dismissing warnings with the words: *"Come on, what are you talking about? War will never happen. We're civilized people."* These pre-war illusions underscore how the invasion dismantled everyday normality, transforming routine into vulnerability.

Displacement, Exile, and Border Experiences

For those forced to move, rupture was embodied in mobility itself. Escape was often described as chaotic and traumatic — *"Running to the border with no plan, only panic"* — while resettlement abroad generated both alienation and new anchors of belonging, such as diasporic patriotism and ritual practices. Displacement thus amplified rupture by embedding it in geography and space.

Informational Sovereignty and Media War

Finally, rupture extended into the informational domain. Several participants described the collapse of shared information environments, as propaganda and misinformation created irreconcilable divisions within families and communities. As one noted: *"My acquaintances watched Russian channels and said there was no war. I stopped calling because it hurt too much."* The war of narratives thus intensified emotional rupture and contributed to the fragmentation of personal relationships.

Stage 1: Identity Rupture was therefore not a single moment but a multi-layered process of breakdown across emotional, social, spatial, and informational dimensions. The sudden invasion deepened long-standing contradictions and frustrations, forcing Ukrainians to renegotiate belonging in conditions of trauma, loss, and contested meanings.

4.2 Civic Reorientation

The second stage of identity transformation, *Civic Reorientation*, shows how Ukrainians responded to institutional fragility not with collapse but with horizontal forms of resilience. Across the interviews, people described losing faith in the state but simultaneously discovering new strength in collective volunteerism, moral obligation, and shared responsibility

Wartime Civic Resilience & Adaptation

The first weeks of invasion were narrated as a surge of grassroots action: "*Everyone did what they could — cooking, weaving nets, collecting clothes. It wasn't the state, it was us.*" Fundraising, improvised shelters, and creative initiatives like making camouflage or Molotov cocktails substituted for absent institutions. Volunteerism became normalized: "*Now it's not even considered special anymore. It would be strange if someone wasn't helping.*"

Political Disillusionment and Realignment

This civic energy unfolded alongside disillusionment with politics. Many respondents framed the invasion as proof of systemic weakness: "We should have prepared better as a country; this collapse shows what was never built." Yet disillusionment often redirected trust toward society itself: "Complaining wouldn't help — everyone just did what they could." Identity was re-anchored in people's actions, not in institutions.

Identity as Moral Duty and Civic Responsibility

Helping others was described not only as practical but as ethical. "You couldn't just sit and wait; everyone had to do something, even if it was small." Small acts — bringing food to a shelter, donating salaries, or weaving camouflage nets — were narrated as duties, not choices.

State Fragility & Institutional Failure

Institutions were remembered as fragile, negligent, or complicit. "We entered the war unprepared, with no real army. People had to fill the gap." Volunteer networks were repeatedly contrasted with years of corruption and disarmament, reinforcing the view that civic society, not the state, ensured survival.

Perceived Betrayal and Internalized Imperial Legacy

Several participants linked reorientation to the sense of betrayal — both by Russia and by past complacency: "For years we lived with their television and their songs. And then we saw what they really think of us." This realization fostered what many described as a conscious cultural break, with civic identity framed as an act of decolonization.

Perceptions of Leadership and Institutional Trust

Views of leadership were deeply ambivalent. Some had distrusted Zelenskyy before 2022 but shifted after his refusal to flee: "When we saw he stayed in Kyiv, it meant we were not abandoned." Others remained skeptical: "He plays the role of a patriot, but I can't forget how he misled us before the invasion." For most, legitimacy depended less on office than on presence, transparency, and visible solidarity.

Economic Strain & Resilience

Economic hardship was a constant backdrop, yet also a source of civic strength. One respondent recalled donating even when money was scarce: "We gave even when we had nothing — because everyone gave." Teachers, doctors, and workers described their daily jobs as patriotic contributions, demonstrating how survival itself became part of civic belonging.

Stage Two reveals how Ukrainians reoriented identity around civic action, moral obligation, and grassroots resilience. In the absence of reliable institutions, belonging was practiced through doing — volunteering, sacrificing, organizing — which became both the substitute for and the counterweight to state fragility.

4.3 Symbolic Rebuilding

The third stage of identity transformation, *Symbolic Rebuilding*, captures how Ukrainians reframed wartime trauma into cultural, linguistic, and religious symbols that stabilized identity in narrative form. After rupture and civic reorientation, identity moved from survival to active meaning-making, where language, culture, and ritual became tools of belonging and resistance.

Language as Identity Tool

Language emerged as one of the clearest markers of symbolic rebuilding. For many, switching from Russian to Ukrainian was experienced as both a personal transformation and a civic obligation. As one participant explained: *"Language plays a huge role in self-determination, self-respect, and national identity. If you speak Russian with your children, then you respect Russian more… You cannot identify yourself with Ukraine if you do not speak Ukrainian."*

For others, the switch was a conscious act of loyalty even when difficult: *"In Donetsk, everyone spoke Russian. But I decided to start speaking Ukrainian with everyone. I read books in translation and made my own dictionary. Ukrainian is our language."*

The symbolic revaluation was striking: *"Before, Russian was seen as the 'urban' language, Ukrainian as rural. Now, speaking Ukrainian is finally in trend. Speaking Russian is no longer seen as elite."* Yet this shift was not without tension. As one respondent reflected, *"For someone from Lviv, it's easy to say 'just switch.' But if your mother sang you lullabies in Russian, it's much harder. It requires breaking yourself down and rebuilding."*

Language thus became both a boundary marker and a field of empathy, binding civic identity to symbolic practice.

Religious & Cultural Adaptation

Religion and ritual also became powerful sites of symbolic realignment. Several participants emphasized the de-Russification of the church: *"In the Moscow Patriarchate, people didn't even understand the words — it felt like a show. But when the priest switched to Ukrainian, suddenly everyone understood. Before, they just stared, like he was a shaman swinging incense. Now they hear him."*

Calendar reforms were accepted as cultural sovereignty: *"We've long wanted to celebrate like all Europeans do, not when Russians do. When we finally celebrated Christmas on December 24, we welcomed it with joy."* For others, rituals served as psychological anchors: *"Through March and April, we were waiting for Easter. It kept us going — 'maybe by Easter, something good will happen.'"*

Even for the less devout, holidays took on renewed symbolic power as national markers: *"I've never been religious, but I love cooking Ukrainian dishes and gathering the family for holidays. For me, that's our tradition, that's our strength."*

Art and Culture as Identity Tools

Artistic life shifted radically, from silence in the first months to an explosion of cultural expression. *"At the beginning, there were no cultural performances — everyone was volunteering. Later, new songs and plays appeared, a whole new repertoire."*

Artists described this as both coping and resistance: *"People didn't want glamorous photo shoots anymore — they wanted to document grief and resilience. Art became a way of holding on to identity."* Cultural spaces were explicitly politicized: *"In theaters and concerts, everything turned Ukrainian. Russian touring companies disappeared. Distancing from Russian culture was painful for some, but it was necessary."*

A broader cultural revival was also noted: *"This is the first war being broadcast live. New books were published even when people didn't know where the shelters were. Suddenly forgotten classics are being republished. It's a cultural boom."*

For many, this revival reached beyond Ukraine's borders: *"Our singers and artists perform abroad now — it's not just about surviving, it's about showing the world who we are."*

Stage Three illustrates how identity, once ruptured and reoriented civically, became narratively consolidated through symbols.

- **Language** was reframed as a civic and emotional boundary — switching to Ukrainian marked loyalty and belonging.
- **Religion and ritual** provided cultural sovereignty and coping strategies, with calendar reform and de-Russification turning tradition into resistance.
- **Art and culture** encoded trauma into shared narratives, transforming everyday grief into memory, testimony, and global recognition.

Through symbolic rebuilding, Ukrainianness was no longer just lived or acted — it was spoken, sung, ritualized, and performed, ensuring its continuity across generations and its recognition beyond Ukraine's borders.

4.4 European Alignment

The fourth stage of identity transformation, *European Alignment*, reflects how Ukrainians re-situated themselves within a wider normative and symbolic geography. After the rupture with Russia and the consolidation of internal cultural symbols, Europe emerged as both an aspirational horizon of belonging and a source of critique and disappointment. Interview evidence reveals two central dynamics: **alignment with ambivalence** and **normative projection.**

European Alignment and Disillusionment

For many participants, Europe was no longer primarily about economic or geopolitical benefits but about values — democracy, freedom, dignity. An elderly respondent stated: *"I'm 88 years old. I lived through the entire Soviet period. When Ukraine finally became independent in 1991, I cried from joy. And I don't want to see that stolen again. That's why I believe now, more than ever, that Ukraine must be part of Europe."*

At the same time, disillusionment was strong. A young respondent captured this tension: *"Before 2022, I would have said yes, absolutely. But now, after almost three years of war, I sometimes feel that Europe doesn't stand by its values. If Europe had come together, maybe this war would have ended sooner."* Another participant echoed this frustration: *"Europe applauds our courage, but leaves us fighting alone."*

This mixture of pride and disillusionment shows how alignment was affirmed, but also reframed with greater political realism. As one participant observed: *"On paper, EU diplomacy is built around values. But in practice, everyone looks after their own interests."*

European Norms and Postwar Projection

Alongside critique, respondents also internalized Europe as a **benchmark for reform.** A Kyiv-based interviewee explained: *"Europe is homework — we must prove we deserve it."* Others highlighted anti-corruption and institutional accountability as prerequisites, recognizing that belonging required internal transformation.

This projection was also existential. A displaced participant emphasized: *"It's heartbreaking to admit, but our country cannot protect itself alone from Russian totalitarianism. The only way for us to survive, to remain free, is to become part of Europe."*

For others, Europe became a moral mirror: *"Historically, Ukraine is part of Europe. But if Europe really stood for its values, maybe this war wouldn't have dragged on so long."*

Lived Contradictions

Experiences abroad also shaped ambivalence. One respondent noted: *"Personally, I've never really felt separate from Europe. We traveled there often, worked with foreigners. But then you hear what Orbán says, or see pro-Russian narratives in Germany, and you realize even the EU is full of contradictions."*

Another interviewee stressed feelings of second-class belonging: *"Yes, I do feel like a citizen of Europe. But at the same time, right now we're still treated like some poor relatives. Our people don't want that kind of status."*

Taken together, the findings illustrate that **European Alignment is both aspirational and reflexive**. Ukrainians overwhelmingly identify with Europe as their civilizational and normative home, yet they approach this alignment with a realism born of broken promises, delays, and geopolitical bargaining.

Two dynamics stand out:

1. **Alignment with Ambivalence** – Europe is embraced as a moral and cultural reference, even as disillusionment with its political contradictions deepens.
2. **Normative Projection** – European integration is internalized as both a necessity and a self-imposed standard, shaping how Ukrainians envision their postwar identity.

Thus, European Alignment functions less as a fixed endpoint than as a **negotiated identity horizon**, where belonging to Europe is continuously affirmed through both pride and critique.

4.5 Identity Entrenchment and Intergenerational Transmission

The final stage of identity transformation, *Identity Entrenchment and Intergenerational Transmission*, illustrates how wartime experiences are consolidated into durable forms of belonging. Identity here is not only reactive but stabilized through national pride, regional convergence, and intergenerational socialization.

National Pride

Respondents consistently emphasized that after 2022, being Ukrainian became more than a legal status — it was an existential stance. One participant explained: *"Today, being Ukrainian means something much deeper than before 2022. It's about choices, values, and standing your ground."* Another framed it as duty: *"For me, being Ukrainian is a great pride and a great duty. I want to repay what my parents lived for, what they hoped to see in me."*

International recognition also reinforced pride: *"Before, when you'd say you were Ukrainian, no one cared. Now the world knows who we are, and that we're fighting for freedom. I'm proud to be Ukrainian now more than ever."* Mourning was equally central. The memory of fallen soldiers and civilians elevated sacrifice into a collective marker of belonging: *"Children are growing up knowing their fathers died so that Ukraine could be free."*

East–West Narratives and Convergence

The interviews reveal ongoing **regional divergences**, particularly between eastern and western Ukraine, but also highlight growing mechanisms of **cultural bridging**. Participants noted long-standing stereotypes—Western Ukraine as the nationalist epicenter, Eastern Ukraine as more Russified—but also described how shared rituals and displacement blurred these divides.

Although stereotypes of East and West persisted, displacement and shared trauma created new forms of convergence. A displaced respondent reflected: *"When I moved west, I expected distance. Instead, I found people who had also lost family. That's what unites us now."*

At the same time, participants acknowledged ongoing fractures in occupied areas: *"If I go to Donetsk now and tell people they're being lied to, no one will believe me. For them, Ukraine is the enemy."* Such testimonies reveal both the persistence of division and the potential of lived suffering to build bridges where politics could not.

Such testimonies illustrate how **trauma and shared sacrifice create convergence across regions**, even while some pro-Russian sentiment remains entrenched in occupied areas. For younger participants, the **contrast effect of exile** (seeing Ukraine from abroad) reinforced national belonging, showing how diaspora contexts can sharpen attachment rather than dilute it.

Youth, Education, and Generational Transmission

Perhaps the most striking finding concerns how children and adolescents are internalizing identity. Multiple interviewees emphasized that the war created a generational baseline: *"We don't know a normal Ukraine without war. For us, Ukrainian identity is natural, not something to debate."*

Education plays a central role in this process. Parents and teachers described deliberate cultural transmission through schools, holidays, and rituals. One participant recalled: *"There's Vyshyvanka Day, when everyone — children and adults — goes out in embroidered shirts. We didn't have that before. Now it's become something very important."* Another noted the language shift: *"In my family we used surzhyk or Russian before. Now my niece prefers Ukrainian. For the younger ones, it's the default."*

Yet these processes were not without trauma. As one respondent warned: *"Imagine being six years old, hiding in a school basement during an air raid. We don't yet know how this will shape them in 20 years."* Still, resilience emerged even in vulnerability.

Reflections on Identity Transformation

Finally, many participants reflected on how their identity evolved across decades. A respondent with Soviet childhood roots admitted: *"In the '80s and '90s, identity wasn't something we talked about. Now, young people are growing up in a country defending itself. Their identity is forged through survival and courage."* Others highlighted a sense of historical continuity: *"This is Ukraine's third attempt at independence. We must focus and succeed now, or there won't be another."*

Many described a **shift from uncertainty in 2014 to certainty in 2022**, framing the war as the definitive break with ambiguity. Intergenerational dynamics also emerged: grandparents who had lived under the USSR often transmitted resilience, while youth articulated a civic and forward-looking national identity. This indicates not just persistence but **recalibration of Ukrainian-ness across generations**.

The findings suggest that **identity entrenchment in Ukraine is occurring through three reinforcing dynamics**:

1. **National Pride and Sacrifice** – war has intensified emotional attachment to sovereignty, transforming pride into a permanent marker of belonging.
2. **Regional Bridging** – while East–West divergences persist, shared trauma and displacement foster convergence across regions.
3. **Youth Socialization** – younger generations are internalizing Ukrainian identity as default, embedding memory and resilience into family, education, and everyday rituals.

In this stage, Ukrainian identity is no longer reactive but **durable and self-sustaining**, anchored in intergenerational memory, cultural continuity, and lived sacrifice. What emerges is not only a consolidated sense of who Ukrainians are today but also a **blueprint for who they will be tomorrow**.

CHAPTER 5.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Assessing the Process Tracing Model

The process tracing model provided a valuable framework for conceptualizing Ukrainian identity transformation under war, but the interviews demonstrate that several of its assumptions require revision. While the overall trajectory of rupture, civic reorientation, symbolic rebuilding, European alignment, and entrenchment broadly resonated with lived experiences, the evidence revealed important deviations that complicate the linearity of the model.

First, the model anticipated a relatively uniform rupture linked most clearly to the full-scale invasion in 2022. The interviews, however, show that rupture was not experienced simultaneously or in the same intensity across the population. For some, especially in the East, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 was remembered as the decisive break, while others described 2022 as a continuation of long-building disillusionments. This suggests that rupture is better understood as a layered and regionally contingent process, not a single turning point.

Second, the model assumed that weak institutions and low trust would open a vacuum for civic mobilization. Respondents did confirm the extraordinary role of volunteerism and grassroots solidarity, but this was not framed as a substitute for the state. On the contrary, many participants emphasized that the war consolidated trust in national institutions—particularly the army and

Zelensky—rather than undermined it. Civic action thus operated alongside, not against, institutional resilience. This nuance alters the causal pathway: identity reorientation was anchored in a combination of bottom-up solidarity and renewed top-down legitimacy.

Third, the model highlighted European conditionality as a driver of alignment. Yet participants rarely referred to EU agreements or policy mechanisms. Instead, Europe was narrated as a moral horizon and cultural mirror—"homework" to be lived up to—rather than a technocratic framework. This points to a symbolic rather than institutional mechanism: Europe mattered less as conditionality and more as aspiration and contrast to Russia.

Finally, the long-term stage of entrenchment and transmission remains partly speculative. While interviews revealed evidence of linguistic shifts, cultural rituals, and displacement-driven identity awakening, the durability of these changes cannot yet be verified. What emerged more strongly than anticipated was the role of displacement as a catalyst of identity transformation: leaving occupied territories often triggered the most radical redefinitions of self.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the model captured the broad architecture of identity change but underestimated its variability. Rupture was layered, not uniform; civic reorientation was complementary to, rather than a substitute for, institutional trust; European alignment was moral before it was institutional; and entrenchment remains in progress, with displacement acting as an unanticipated driver. The process tracing model therefore provides a useful framework, but the interviews show that Ukrainian identity transformation is less linear, more regionally and generationally differentiated, and more contingent on lived experience than the theoretical sequence implies.

Therefore, the process tracing model was refined by moving beyond its initial generalized framework and integrating the diverse subjectivities revealed in the interviews. While the original model assumed a relatively uniform trajectory, the evidence demonstrated that identity transformation unfolded differently depending on regional and generational contexts. To capture this variation, the mechanisms of identity change were reconstructed empirically, tracing how external aggression, civic responses, symbolic practices, and European alignment were narrated and lived in specific settings. This refinement led to the development of four distinct process tracing mechanisms: one for the Eastern population, one for the Western population, one for the older generation, and one for the younger generation. As a result, the analysis advances from a schematic model toward a more differentiated and empirically grounded account of Ukrainian identity evolution, showing how regional histories and generational outlooks shape divergent pathways of rupture, reorientation, and entrenchment.

5.2 Empirically Revised Process Tracing Model: Regional and Generational Variations

The revision of the process tracing model reveals that Ukrainian identity transformation unfolded along differentiated pathways shaped by both regional and generational contexts. Rather than following a uniform sequence of rupture, civic reorientation, symbolic rebuilding, European alignment, and entrenchment, the interviews demonstrated that these stages were experienced unevenly depending on proximity to conflict, historical memory, and outlook toward the future.

Presenting these variations not only strengthens the explanatory power of the model but also underscores how identity change is contingent, plural, and grounded in lived experience.

At the regional level, the contrast between West and East is particularly striking. The Western respondents underscore that 2014 was remembered as politically important but not identity-shaping, with the decisive rupture occurring only in 2022. The invasion produced shock and paralysis, quickly reframed as an existential struggle for survival. This rupture mobilized widespread volunteerism, which was narrated less as heroism than as moral obligation. Identity consolidation was further reinforced through a cultural revival that rejected Russian symbols while elevating Ukrainian art, holidays, and rituals. Europe appeared as a reference point, framed more as a moral horizon than as a political project, while pride, resilience, and intergenerational continuity marked the stage of entrenchment. The refined mechanism reflects this sequence: external aggression in 2022 triggered identity shock and rupture, generated existential threat, mobilized solidarity networks, reframed Ukrainianness as civic duty, stimulated symbolic revival, anchored European alignment, and consolidated identity through pride and transmission. *(Figure 8)*
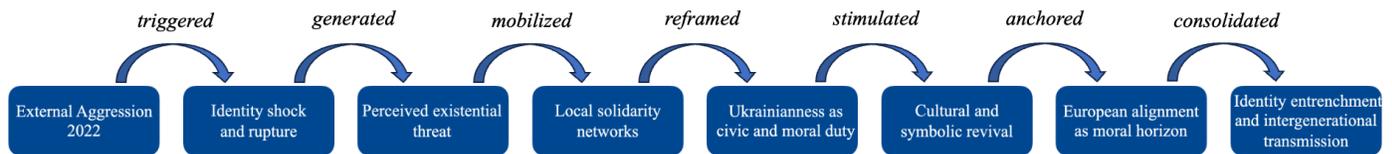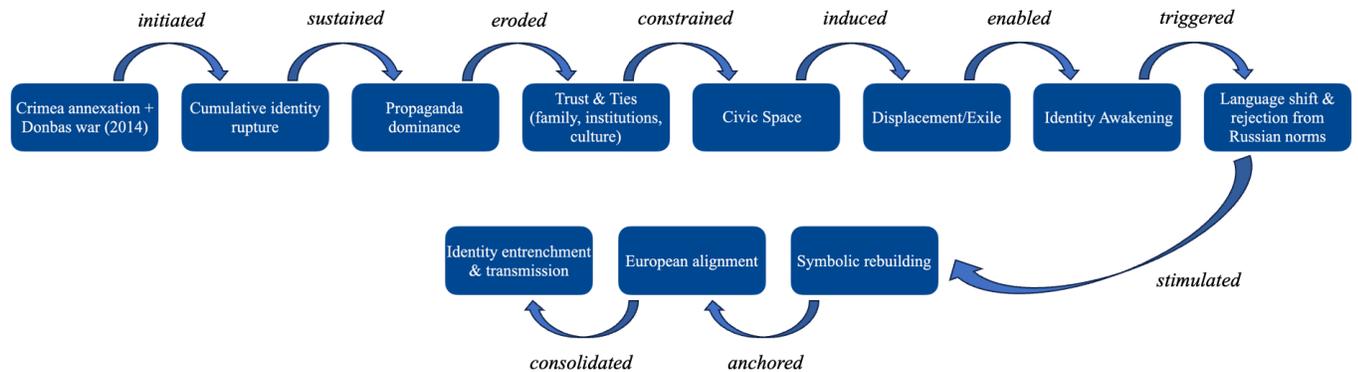

Figure 8. *Process Tracing Mechanism of Identity Transformation in Western Ukraine*

The Eastern respondents emphasized a very different trajectory of identity change compared to the West. Instead of a sudden rupture in 2022, identity was narrated as a cumulative process beginning with the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the Donbas war in 2014. This earlier rupture was sustained through the dominance of Russian propaganda and the erosion of trust in institutions, family ties, and local culture. In occupied zones, civic space was constrained, leaving little room for grassroots mobilization. For many, displacement and exile became the decisive turning point: leaving these controlled environments broke the information bubble and enabled an identity awakening. One younger respondent from Donetsk captured this awakening through the metaphor of the anime *Attack on Titan,* explaining that growing up under Russian media felt like "living within walls," unaware of the wider truth. Displacement, he said, was like discovering "the book outside the walls," which shattered inherited narratives and allowed him to reconstruct his identity on new civic and cultural foundations.

This awakening frequently triggered a deliberate language shift toward Ukrainian, accompanied by the rejection of Russian norms and even estrangement from relatives who remained aligned with Russian narratives. For others, such as those from Crimea and Poltava, the foundational rupture was already 2014. The annexation and loss of territory were remembered as unresolved traumas, making the full-scale invasion in 2022 feel less like a new break and more like the continuation of a wound that had never healed.

The process further stimulated symbolic rebuilding through rituals, cultural memory, and decolonizing practices, while European alignment was framed less in terms of formal

conditionality than as a duty or "homework," tempered by disillusionment at Europe's slow support. Finally, identity was consolidated through intergenerational transmission, with younger cohorts adopting Ukrainian as the default and trauma serving as both a fracture and a bridge to national solidarity. *(Figure 9)*

Figure 9. *Process Tracing Mechanism of Identity Transformation in Eastern Ukraine*

At the generational level, the divide between older and younger cohorts was equally significant. Older respondents narrated identity change primarily through continuity rather than rupture, emphasizing historical depth over sudden shock. External aggression in 2014 and 2022 activated long historical horizons, framed as the "third attempt at independence" after 1917 and 1991. These framing revived memories of imperial oppression, famine, repression, and the unfinished reforms of the post-Soviet period, situating the present conflict within a cycle of missed opportunities. The war further reinforced deep mistrust in political institutions and elites, with Zelenskyy often viewed as unreliable despite his wartime presence in Kyiv. Instead, civic duty was channeled into traditional forms of volunteering, such as donations and material contributions, understood as obligations rather than innovations. Identity consolidation was also reinforced by a moralized rejection of Russian culture, including criticism of Russian-speaking IDPs and condemnation of the Moscow Patriarchate church. At the same time, older respondents preserved religious and cultural traditions, maintaining attachment to established calendars, rituals, and local practices such as songs and pysanky. European alignment was reframed as a necessity: while earlier generations believed Ukraine could survive independently, the war reshaped this conviction into the recognition that Europe was indispensable for sovereignty. Finally, identity was consolidated through intergenerational duty, with older respondents stressing the transmission of memory, rituals, and moral responsibility to children and grandchildren as a way to ensure continuity of the national struggle. *(Figure 10)*

Figure 10. *Process Tracing Mechanism of Identity Transformation among Older Generations*

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For younger respondents, identity transformation was narrated less through memory and continuity and more through adaptation, practice, and projection into the future. The full-scale invasion of 2022 triggered adjustments to daily life, from working in shelters to maintaining digital routines, normalizing disruption as part of everyday resilience. This experience reinforced trust in state leadership, with Zelenskyy's decision to remain in Kyiv reframing him as a credible figure who embodied national endurance. Civic reorientation was marked by widespread volunteering and crowdfunding, described not as heroic but as routine obligations of citizenship. At the symbolic level, younger voices emphasized accelerated language shifts, rejection of Russian cultural symbols, and the reconfiguration of religious and cultural traditions, such as adopting December 25 Christmas or reframing holidays as anchors of resilience. European alignment was anchored as a normative horizon: democracy and freedom were embraced as core values, though often tempered by frustration at the perceived insufficiency of European support. These processes generated national pride expressed as everyday practice—volunteering, adapting, and resisting— while projecting identity toward the future, with an explicit desire to shield younger generations from inherited traumas. Unlike older respondents, whose narratives carried moral disappointment over wasted chances, younger voices displayed pragmatic resilience, normalizing disruption and projecting identity toward renewal rather than decline. For this cohort, Ukrainianness was no longer debated but embedded as a default, shaped by disruption yet oriented toward resilience and continuity. *(Figure 11)*

Figure 11. *Process Tracing Mechanism of Identity Transformation among Younger Generations*

Taken together, these four mechanisms show that Ukrainian identity change is best understood not as a uniform wartime trajectory but as a constellation of regionally and generationally differentiated pathways, converging only partially through shared trauma and displacement.

5.3 Theoretical Contributions to Identity and War Studies

This thesis advances the study of identity and war by opening the "black box" of how national identity transforms under conditions of protracted conflict. Existing scholarship frequently demonstrates that identity shifts during war (Kelman, 1999; Triandafyllidou, 2001), yet tends to treat identity as either a background variable or a post-conflict outcome captured through surveys and retrospective memory. By contrast, this study employs process tracing and qualitative interviews to capture mechanisms of identity change as they unfold in real time. It demonstrates that wartime transformation is not a uniform consolidation but a generationally and regionally differentiated process: elderly respondents narrated identity in terms of historical continuity and cultural preservation, whereas younger cohorts articulated it as rupture and reorientation toward civic, future-oriented belonging. This nuance complicates prevailing accounts of "identity consolidation" in Ukraine, revealing instead a layered and sometimes contradictory

reconfiguration.

Moreover, the findings extend Social Identity Theory by showing that in-group/out-group dynamics are mediated not only by external threats but also by informational environments, displacement, and symbolic practices in everyday life. The Donetsk interviewee's "Attack on Titan" metaphor, for instance, illustrates an epistemic rupture—an awakening to deception—that catalyzes identity realignment beyond conventional in-group solidarity. In parallel, the Balkan comparison underscores that language, religion, and trauma operate as recurrent mechanisms across cases, but with the Ukrainian material we see how these mechanisms are lived and narrated during conflict rather than reconstructed afterward.

Theoretically, this suggests that identity should not be conceptualized as a fixed resource mobilized by elites in times of war, but as an evolving, reflexive process actively renegotiated by individuals under rupture. Finally, by situating generational turnover at the center of identity transformation, the thesis highlights how young Ukrainians—socialized amid war, de-russification, and European integration—embody a civic and democratic national identity that projects resilience into the post-war future. In doing so, the study not only contributes to debates on nationalism and identity formation but also reframes war as a catalyst for long-term reconstitution rather than short-term mobilization.

5.4 Implications for Post-War Ukraine and Social Cohesion

The findings of this study point to a dual reality: Ukraine's national identity has undeniably strengthened under the pressure of war, yet it remains deeply fragmented along regional, generational, and experiential lines. While many participants expressed a renewed sense of belonging and civic purpose, their narratives also revealed ruptures that cannot be resolved through military victory alone. The process of post-war recovery will depend not just on reconstruction, but on addressing these internal divisions—rebuilding trust, bridging fractured communities, and fostering a shared national vision. Without deliberate efforts toward social reintegration, the resilience demonstrated during the war risks being undermined in the aftermath.

The challenge of reintegration will be most acute in regions that have undergone intense russification, such as Crimea and Donbas. Interviews with displaced individuals from these areas reveal deep emotional fractures—many spoke of feeling like outliers in their own families, surrounded by people who remained loyal to Russian narratives. One participant from Crimea recounted being the only person in his community to vote against the 2014 annexation referendum. *"I had a goal to go to the referendum and take the ballot as a souvenir,"* he said. *"So that I could later tell my children and grandchildren about the nonsense that happened in Crimea and show them this piece of paper."* After fleeing to avoid conscription, he lost contact with his mother and sister, who accepted the new regime and now live in Russia. Another interviewee from Donetsk described growing up in a media bubble dominated by Russian propaganda, where Ukrainian language and history were erased from schools. Only after being displaced to Central Europe did he experience an identity awakening—one that alienated him from old friends and family who could not understand his shift in allegiance.

These testimonies reflect a broader problem: years of divergent information, language, and education policies have created parallel realities. For many still residing in occupied regions, the war has not triggered a shift in identity but instead reinforced existing attachments to Russia. Reintegration, therefore, will require more than physical return. It will demand a deliberate and long-term process of bridging incompatible worldviews, overcoming mutual distrust, and creating shared civic foundations in a society where even memory and truth have become contested.

Generational divides further complicate the landscape of national identity in post-war Ukraine. While younger Ukrainians tend to embrace a more civic, forward-looking conception of belonging, many older individuals—particularly those from the East—remain anchored to Soviet-era memories and shaped by decades of russified education. The interviews revealed that young people were more likely to shift political perspectives, change language practices, and engage actively in volunteering or digital advocacy. Their access to diverse media environments and their exposure to peers beyond their immediate regions made them more adaptable and more engaged with the values of democracy, resistance, and European integration.

In contrast, older respondents often expressed a desire for stability over sovereignty. For some, especially those displaced from Russian-occupied areas, peace was framed as the return to normal life—regardless of which state ultimately governs their region. Several participants recounted how elderly relatives dismissed the Maidan revolution or blamed Ukraine for the war, seeing recent events as a disruption to the relative comfort of the past. These generational differences—rooted in information access, historical memory, and trust in institutions—create serious challenges for societal cohesion.

Yet it is precisely in this generational shift that the greatest potential for renewal lies. The youth of Ukraine are not merely adapting to war—they are actively reshaping national identity through practice: switching languages, creating new symbols, and embedding civic responsibility into daily life. As this generation comes of age, it is poised to become the backbone of a more democratic, resilient, and united Ukraine.

Sustaining social cohesion in post-war Ukraine will require more than cultural alignment; it demands comprehensive policy efforts in trauma recovery, structural reform, and civic inclusion. Millions of Ukrainians have been physically and psychologically scarred by the war. By the end of 2024, over 5.2 million people were displaced or stateless, 3.8 million were internally displaced. Among them are thousands of veterans, amputees, and survivors of prolonged front-line exposure, many of whom will return with invisible wounds. Dedicated programs for psychosocial support, veteran reintegration, and trauma-informed education will be crucial to rebuilding trust across society. The emergence of specialized prosthetic clinics in Kyiv and the growing expertise of Ukrainian doctors—now sought after across Europe—demonstrate the country's capacity to innovate under pressure. But without systemic state support, these efforts risk remaining fragmented. (UNHCR, 2024).

At the same time, Ukraine's recovery will depend on harnessing its human capital. The past decade has produced a highly educated, adaptive population—particularly among youth and urban dwellers. The strength of Ukraine's IT sector, civil society networks, and grassroots entrepreneurship points to a society capable of rebuilding itself from below. However, this

resilience must be matched by renewed institutional trust, transparent governance, and meaningful electoral accountability. In interviews, many participants—especially older ones—expressed long-standing skepticism toward political elites, citing decades of corruption and missed opportunities. A functioning democratic system, grounded in civic participation and legal predictability, is therefore not just a political ideal but a precondition for national healing.

Finally, peacebuilding must actively cultivate solidarity across regional, generational, and linguistic divides. This includes sustained investment in education, inclusive public narratives, and spaces for dialogue between those who stayed, those who fled, and those returning. UNHCR surveys show that 73% of internally displaced people and 61% of refugees are interested in returning home—but only if conditions such as safety, housing, and job access are met. Ensuring these conditions, while also addressing the deep identity fractures uncovered in this study, is essential to avoiding a divided peace and laying the foundation for a cohesive, post-war Ukraine. (UNHCR, 2024).
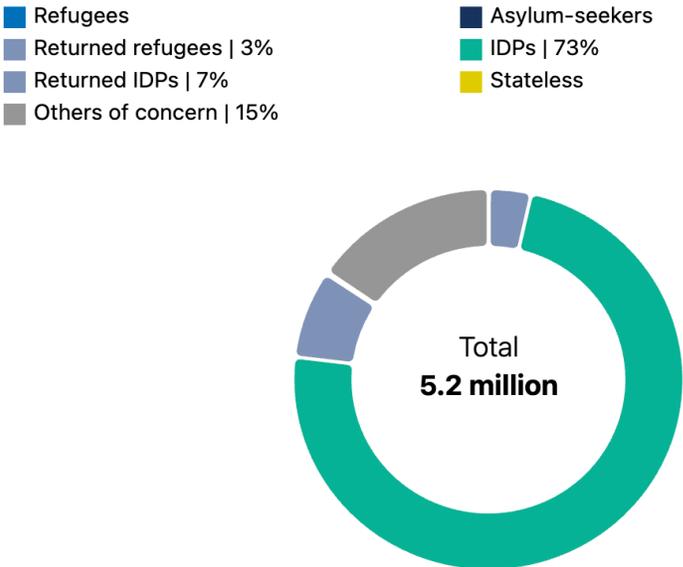
Figure 12. *Displacement Breakdown in Ukraine: Composition of 5.2 Million Affected Individuals*
Source*: UNHCR 2024*

Despite the immense losses suffered, the Ukraine that emerges from this war may be smaller, less demographically diverse, and economically strained—but also more united in purpose, more civically engaged, and more deeply anchored in democratic values. It will be a country of survivors: people who have adapted under pressure, innovated through necessity, and held fast to their sense of national belonging in the face of occupation, displacement, and trauma. Identity transformation remains incomplete and uneven, yet the findings of this thesis reveal that the seeds of a resilient civic Ukraine are taking root—especially among the youth and the displaced, who are reimagining what it means to belong. The path forward will be challenging: peacebuilding

must go beyond infrastructure and territorial recovery. It must prioritize the healing of relationships, the restoration of trust, and the weaving of a shared narrative strong enough to hold together a society marked by pain, rupture, and renewal.

5.5 Limitations and Future Research

This study examines Ukrainian national identity during an ongoing and unresolved war. While the findings offer valuable insight into how identity is being reshaped under conditions of rupture and displacement, they necessarily reflect a period of transition. Many of the mechanisms identified—such as civic mobilization, symbolic reframing, and intergenerational transmission—are still unfolding. As such, this thesis cannot offer definitive conclusions about the long-term trajectory of identity transformation or its eventual outcomes for national cohesion.

This research relied on qualitative, semi-structured interviews, which were designed to capture the depth and complexity of individual experiences rather than to produce statistically generalizable findings. The use of non-probability sampling—primarily through convenience and snowball techniques—enabled access to participants with relevant wartime experiences, but also introduced certain imbalances. Notably, the sample was skewed in terms of gender, with only three male participants out of nine. This reflects broader demographic constraints, as many men were on active duty or displaced during the research period. Moreover, the regional distribution of participants—while diverse—underrepresents voices currently residing in Russian-occupied territories.

Temporally, the findings are shaped by the war's ongoing nature. While the process-tracing model captures key mechanisms and stages of identity transformation, the final stages—particularly those related to long-term entrenchment and generational transmission—remain difficult to verify in real time. These developments require sustained observation over time and across future political transitions, meaning that this study offers an informed interpretation rather than a conclusive map of Ukraine's post-war identity landscape.

A major limitation of this study lies in the inherent unpredictability of war. The trajectory of Ukrainian national identity cannot be fully understood without considering how the conflict ultimately ends. Whether the outcome takes the form of military victory, a frozen conflict, negotiated settlement, or de facto partition, each scenario will shape identity consolidation in markedly different ways. In contested regions such as Donbas and Crimea, peace conditions will determine whether identities converge around a shared national project or harden along opposing lines. A future that includes reintegration will demand different strategies for cohesion than one that accepts permanent loss. As such, this thesis must be read as an analysis of identity under wartime conditions, not as a proper projection of post-war realities.

Future studies should extend the temporal horizon of this research by tracking how identity continues to evolve after the war. Longitudinal research following displaced individuals, returnees, veterans, and youth cohorts could offer crucial insight into how trauma, migration, and reintegration shape long-term identity formation. Cross-national comparisons with other conflict-affected societies would also illuminate how similar mechanisms of rupture and recovery unfold in different political and cultural contexts. Finally, institutional-level analysis is needed to assess

how schools, media, religious institutions, and civil society actors contribute to embedding the emergent Ukrainian civic identity. Understanding how these identity narratives are taught, reinforced, or contested will be key to supporting social cohesion and democratic renewal in Ukraine's post-war future.

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis has investigated how war reshapes national identity by analyzing the Ukrainian case during an ongoing conflict. Through a process-tracing model and qualitative interviews, the study identified five core mechanisms—identity rupture, civic reorientation, symbolic rebuilding, European alignment, and identity entrenchment and intergenerational transmission —that together explain how identity transformation unfolds during wartime.

The findings reveal a paradox: Ukraine's national identity has grown stronger, yet identity remains deeply uneven and fragmented across regional and generational lines. In Western and central Ukraine, the war accelerated existing civic sentiments into everyday practice. In contrast, respondents from the East and annexed regions described identity as something fractured and reconstructed, often only after displacement, and frequently in tension with family members or local communities who remained attached to Russian narratives.

Crucially, the study finds that identity transformation was not primarily driven by official state narratives. Instead, it emerged from personal ruptures: disorientation at the invasion, betrayal by trusted institutions or family, confrontation with propaganda, or exile into unfamiliar places. These ruptures catalyzed a shift from inherited identities to self-defined belonging, often first experienced through civic action—volunteering, language switching, or digital resistance, and later reinforced by symbolic and ritual practices. In this way, identity was not merely rediscovered, but actively rebuilt from below.

Generational differences further complicate this transformation. Older respondents viewed national identity through historical lens, emphasizing continuity, survival, and moral responsibility. On the other hand, young Ukrainians framed identity as practical, adaptable, and tied to civic values and participation. Their narratives showed a willingness to reinterpret what it means to be Ukrainian in more inclusive, democratic, and future-oriented ways. These differences suggest that the consolidation of a unified post-war identity will rely heavily on youth as carriers of civic norms, media consciousness, and cultural innovation.

Symbolic rebuilding emerged as a critical mechanism. Language, holidays, and cultural rituals became tools for both healing and resistance. Informational sovereignty, the act of reclaiming truth in a polluted media environment, was itself a form of identity work, particularly for those raised in Russified or propagandized contexts. For children and adolescents, this transformation was embedded in education, language use, and family rituals, indicating a powerful intergenerational transmission of wartime identity.

Yet, this process is far from complete. The study finds that many identity shifts are still unfolding, especially in contested territories where Ukrainian civic identity competes with Russified institutions, fragmented memory, and emotional disconnection from the state. The task of

reintegration will therefore require more than infrastructure or security guarantees. It will require long-term social investment in trauma recovery, veteran support, civic education, and cross-generational dialogue. Peacebuilding will need to rebuild not only communities, but also relationships, shared meanings, and institutional trust.

Notably, this research shows that identity transformation is not always linear or irreversible. While some displaced individuals adopted a stronger Ukrainian civic identity, others struggled to reconcile it with their past experiences or familial ties. The persistence of exclusionary narratives, whether ethnic, linguistic, or ideological, risks undermining cohesion if not addressed through inclusive policy reforms. State strategies for language, education, and memory must reflect the plural realities of the population, not enforce a singular national ideal. As the war continues, there remains a window to shape civic identity in a way that reconciles rather than suppresses difference.

In conclusion, the war has reshaped Ukrainian national identity not through a uniform rise in nationalism, but through a diverse and lived renegotiation of belonging. Identity became embodied in action, narrated through sacrifice, and transmitted through ritual. This transformation has produced a more self-aware, civic, and resilient form of Ukrainianness—rooted not in ethnic exclusion or state propaganda, but in shared suffering, mutual aid, and cultural reinvention. Ukraine's future identity will depend not only on how the war ends, but on how the country chooses to manage diversity, rebuild institutions, and center its citizens, especially its youth, as active agents of reconciliation and democratic renewal. The challenge ahead is to preserve this plural, civic identity beyond the urgency of war, to integrate it into Ukraine's democratic future without flattening its diversity.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Interview Topic Guide

TOPIC GUIDE – UKRAINIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY DURING WARTIME

INFORMED CONSENT

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview.

You are invited to take part in a research study exploring how the war in Ukraine has **reshaped national identity** across different regions, generations, and communities. The goal of this study is to understand the mechanisms through which individuals experience changes in their sense of national belonging, identity, and values during times of armed conflict and external pressure.

This interview is part of a master's thesis focused on wartime identity transformation and civic resilience, particularly in response to the Russian invasions of 2022. Your experience and insights will help us analyze how personal narratives, symbolic practices, displacement, and civic action influence identity formation. The findings may contribute to a better understanding of how identity shifts affect **social cohesion, political inclusion, and post-war reconciliation.**

Participation will last approximately one hour, depending on the level of detail you wish to share. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded to ensure the accuracy of your responses. You are free to decline to answer any question, stop the recording, or withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

All information you provide will remain **confidential and anonymized**. No identifying information, such as your name, will appear in any reports or publications unless you explicitly consent. Only the researcher will have access to the raw data, which will be stored securely and used solely for academic purposes.

You may withdraw your data within two weeks following the interview. In that case, all related materials (recordings, notes, transcripts) will be permanently deleted.

There are no known risks to participating in this research. Your contribution will support a broader understanding of how war reshapes national identity and help inform academic, policy, and civic engagement discussions in Ukraine and beyond.

If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact the researcher:

Martina Mach di Palmstein

m.machdipalmstein@studenti.luiss.it

Consent:

By signing this form, you acknowledge that you understand the purpose and nature of the study, and you agree to participate under the conditions outlined above. You also acknowledge

that you can withdraw from the study at any time.

• I, _____, voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
• I understand that I may withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any questions without consequences.
• I agree to have my interview audio recorded.
• I understand that all information provided will be treated confidentially.
• I understand that I can withdraw permission to use my data up to two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher Signature: _____ Date: _____

INTRODUCTION

The war in Ukraine has reshaped not only the geopolitical landscape but also the ways in which individuals perceive themselves and their nation. This research investigates how **national identity evolves during periods of crisis and armed conflict**, focusing on Ukraine as a key case. The goal of this study is to understand **how ordinary people across different regions, generations, and backgrounds experience identity transformation** in real time, in response to political violence, displacement, symbolic change, and civic mobilization.

The research is part of a master's thesis in political science and uses a **process tracing approach** to uncover the causal mechanisms behind identity change. Previous literature has often treated national identity as static or elite-driven; in contrast, this project aims to understand identity as dynamic and co-created, especially in moments of rupture and survival. By examining how identity shifts unfold and what meanings people attach to them, the study also explores what these changes may imply for **post-war reconciliation, political inclusion, and the rebuilding of a democratic civic community.** The central research question guiding this interview is:

How has the war influenced your sense of national identity and belonging?

We are particularly interested in how your experiences before and after 2014 — and especially after the full-scale invasion in 2022 — may have shifted your relationship with ideas of "being Ukrainian," your region, language, values, or affiliations.

Your responses will remain confidential and will only be used for academic purposes. You are welcome to skip any question, stop the interview at any time, or share only what feels comfortable.

Although you've already reviewed the informed consent form, is there anything you'd like to clarify before we begin?

Topic 1: Participant Background & Context

1. **To start, could you introduce yourself?**

   (Your age range, the region you're originally from, and your current occupation or activity.)

2. **Where were you living during the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine?**

3. **Have you ever lived abroad or outside your home region?**

   If so, how did that experience influence your views about identity or belonging?

Topic 2: Key Triggering Events & Perceptions

4. **How you remember feeling during the key turning points — Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion in 2022?**

   (What do you remember about people's reactions around you?) (Are there any specific phrases, symbols, or memories that stayed with you from those events?)

5. **Did either of those events affect the way you think about your identity, or about Ukraine and Russia?**

   (In what ways? Did it change your sense of belonging to your country, region, or community?)

Topic 3: Community & Institutional Trust

6. **Have you or people close to you participated in any community or volunteer efforts during the war?**

   (Did those local efforts feel more impactful or trustworthy than national responses?)

7. **Has your trust in Ukrainian institutions (like the government, police, or media) changed since the invasion in 2022?**

   (What do you think in general of the Ukrainian government? Zelensky? Would you vote for him again?)

Topic 4: Symbolism & National Narrative

8. **Has cultural life in Ukraine changed since the beginning of the war? Have you noticed any changes in theater, music, literature, or art in general?**

9. **Has your use of language (at home, work, or in public) changed since 2022?**

10. **Have your religious practices or beliefs changed as a result of the war?**

(For example, attending different churches, observing holidays differently, or feeling a stronger connection to faith?)

Topic 5: European Alignment

11. **Do you see Ukraine's future as part of Europe — not just politically, but in terms of values and identity?**

(Has your view changed since the 2022 invasion?)

Topic 6: Identity Entrenchment & Intergenerational Transmission
12. **Do you think younger generations in Ukraine are growing up with a different sense of identity than your own?**

(What values or messages do you think are being passed on to them — through schools, families, or society?)

13. **Within your family, have there been different views on identity, language, or political belonging — and do you think the war has changed how they understand what it means to be Ukrainian?**

(How do you see those generational perspectives evolving in the future?)

Topic 7: Reflections on Identity Change

14. **What does "being Ukrainian" mean to you today — and has that meaning shifted since 2022?**

Thank you very much for your time and for the valuable insights you've shared about your experiences and sense of identity.

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Figure 6. Process Tracing Model for Identity Evolution during war

Source*:* author elaboration using KeyNote

Figure 7. Open Codes

Source: author elaboration based on NVivo output

Figure 8. Process Tracing Mechanism of Identity Transformation in Western Ukraine
Source: author elaboration using KeyNote

Figure 9. Process Tracing Mechanism of Identity Transformation in Eastern Ukraine
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Table 1. Codes

Source: author elaboration based on NVivo output