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## Ukraine's European aspirations

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Ukrainians have always been aware of the fact that they belong to the European cultural sphere. As Serhiy Plokhyi, professor of Ukrainian history at Harvard University, points out, "*...times change, ideologies change - liberalism is replaced by national-communism... or the idea of human rights emerges. But Europe remains a constant as an example of that something else that is par excellence necessary for the survival of the Ukrainian national project.*"

Before Ukraine was absorbed by Muscovy in the 17th century, the fact that Ukrainian lands were then part of the *Rzeczpospolita* ([Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth](#)) opened up a natural cultural window onto Europe. It was thanks to this lively cultural exchange (albeit not without its problems) that "[Ukrainian Baroque](#)" yes amongst other trends, came to be. However, once Ukraine became part of the Russian Empire, new ideas from Western civilisation only reached Ukraine by way of the Russian language, thereby condemning Ukrainian culture to secondary status. Politically, as an independent subject, Ukraine simply disappeared from European consciousness.

The emergence of an independent Ukraine in 1991 offered Ukrainians new opportunities to re-establish direct cultural and political contacts with Europe. Immediately, the need to "return to Europe" emerged in Ukrainian public debate. Politically, this had an initial consequence: Ukraine found itself at the end of a fairly long queue of states waiting to join the European Union "club". It was assumed that these states would join as they went along (legislative reforms, economic modernisation, the fight against corruption, etc.). It was not all plain sailing, nor was it without its pitfalls, but the vector of the European vocation (and accession to the European Union) in Ukraine's development was undoubtedly the most powerful, even if it was rivalled by the attachment of eastern Ukrainians to Russia's cultural and political landscape.

The impact of Russia's large-scale aggression against Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022, primarily affected the pro-Russian part of the country. It is members of this population who now

constitute the majority of refugees and displaced persons. It is their vision of the world that has been turned upside down against a backdrop of atrocities and genocidal crimes committed by the Russians. Accession to the European Union and NATO has therefore become the sine qua non of Ukraine's aspirations, as confirmed by several documents of national importance. In addition to historical memory and purely cultural preferences, security priorities are now clearly visible. Ukraine has begun to implement the European Union's recommendations and to adapt its legal framework to that of Europe. Any campaign against European integration, or simply questioning the need for it, would be perceived by Ukrainian society as a betrayal of national interests.

Recently, however, opinions within the European Union have diverged somewhat. Alongside those States that were shocked by the brutality of the Russian aggression and have declared their solidarity with the Ukrainian people and their willingness to accept our country into the Union, there are also States such as Hungary and Slovakia that consider Ukraine's accession to the European Union to be premature, or even wrong. We can be both optimistic and pessimistic. Optimistic, because European leaders and the majority of Member States are increasingly in favour of Ukraine's accession. Pessimistic, because the chances of Ukraine's accession remain slim as long as the European Union retains its current decision-making rules.

As war continues, the reactions of Ukrainian society to the reticence of Hungary and Slovakia and to the blocking of the borders by Polish, Slovakian and

Romanian farmers have remained discreet. Ukrainians are aware that their country's accession to the European Union would be a long-term solution, and that a certain amount of restraint is therefore advisable. However, since nobody knows the future, in unfavourable circumstances, resentment and therefore rancour might erupt in Ukrainian society.

This is why it would be useful to examine this situation not only from the point of view of the formal concordance of conflicting economic and political interests, but also from a broader perspective.

### PARTICULARITIES OF THE UKRAINIAN EUROPEAN DIMENSION

Ukraine's European choice remains both obvious and specific. Many Ukrainians are aware that their country lies on a cultural fault line that separates radically different civilisations. As Serhiy Plokyi puts it: *"As for Ukraine, its desire for independence has always had a European dimension. This dimension has integrated Ukraine's experience as a country situated on an East-West watershed, i.e. between Orthodoxy and Catholicism, between the empires of Central Europe and Eurasia, as well as the specific political and social practices implemented by these empires."*

In other words, Ukraine's European choice does not contradict the empirical fact that two identities legitimately coexist in this country, which condition different political and social practices. We really are Europe, but we are a particular kind of Europe, born of East and West. This phenomenon is partly explained by the fact that the eastern border of the cultural zone of application of Roman law passes through present-day Ukrainian territory. Territories that were once part of Austria-Hungary border on those that were part of the Russian Empire, where Roman law and its traditions did not apply or, at best, were only assimilated insofar as they did not contradict the principle of monarchical supremacy. Thus, the social contract in Ukraine probably combines elements of two incompatible social contracts.

It is even more difficult to draw a clear line along this divide. In one historical period, it ran along the river Zbruch (marking the border between Poland and the USSR until 1939); in another, it was the line of the

Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact; a few centuries earlier, it was the eastern limit of the expansion of Catholicism in its *"Greek Catholic"* the link is in French version, when Magdeburg Law reached as far as Kharkiv (a city in eastern Ukraine close to the border with Russia). So we can see that this line has been historically fluid. But this is not the only aspect of the question. It is said that the Chinese have a particular curse: *"May you be born at the turn of the century"*. Ukrainians live under a slightly modified curse: *"May you be born at the crossroads of civilisations"*. Why is this so difficult? Because throughout our history, we have not stood still, we have swung on a civilisational pendulum.

In democratic countries, a certain pendulum swing exists, but it operates at the level of internal governance (economic freedom versus state intervention in the name of social protection) and does not constitute a significant threat, because the external security of the state is guaranteed. In Ukraine, the situation is different, because we are living on a civilisational fault line. As a result, this pendulum swings between two civilisational choices: pro-Western or pro-Russian. So, for us, it is not so much a question of moving from one form of governance to another as of having fallen, constantly and tragically propelled, into successive forms of civilisation that we didn't like. And our idea of national unity consisted in thinking that the other side had to assimilate into ours. As the Ukrainian writer Yuri Andrukhovych puts it, *"it's our Ukrainian version of the Let My People Go LP"*.

It would seem that Russia's war against Ukraine has stopped the pendulum in its tracks, leaving only one possible national strategy: *"away from Russia and together towards the European Union"*. The war has greatly changed the position of the European Union, which is beginning to realise the importance of Ukraine for its future. However, the unanimity rule hangs over Ukraine like the sword of Damocles, because all it would take is a veto from a single Member State to prevent its accession. As a result, unfortunately, no one can say with any certainty whether Europe has finally overcome the logic of Realpolitik mentioned by Ukrainian researcher Mykola Riabchuk: *"A typical example of this Realpolitik is a secret report prepared in 2000 by the German and French Foreign Ministries: 'Accepting Ukraine', says this*

report, 'would mean isolating Russia. Consequently, we should simply limit ourselves to close cooperation with Kyiv. The European Union should not expand further to the East.'

### HOW DO UKRAINIANS PERCEIVE EUROPE?

According to Ukrainian diplomat Oleksandr Chtcherba, "Ukraine loves a Europe that doesn't really exist". Europe's founding fathers fought for European values and deemed them worth a certain amount of sacrifice. Today's generations of Europeans take these values for granted, but we are also witnessing a growing number of Europeans who see them as an unnecessary burden that stands in the way of certain commercial interests. This is when the temptation arises to organise the world in a more 'intelligent' way by rejecting all eternal values as outdated.

Nothing better illustrates the latest challenges to European principles than the clear infection of the continent by the logic of national egoism, the egoism that led Europe to disaster in the twentieth century. And even if the current infatuation with this logic is temporary, it has the potential to do a great deal of damage.

Of course, I am not offering readers a conclusion along the lines of the "[Russian world](#)"<sup>[1]</sup> whereby the West is in spiritual decline, while we live in the realm of noble values. It is not for Ukrainians, who are waging a relentless battle against corruption, nepotism and paternalism, to blame Europe for the loss of its values. However, as we chart our course towards Europe, it is important that we assess the state of the destination. The Munich Security Conference 2020 did this explicitly, when it named its report "[Westlessness](#)".

We seem to be in a sort of counter-phase: Ukrainians are striving to move towards European values, while Europeans, affected by the threats to their security, seem to be turning away.

During my speech at the Robert Schuman Foundation in Paris on 24 October 2023, I shared the following thoughts. The European Union is a successful project of the second half of the 20th century. As Oleksandr Chtcherba said, it "achieved the impossible: it made

values more important than borders and placed politics above national egoism". But now the world and Ukraine are debating another question: will this project be just as successful in the 21st century in the new geopolitical construct that is beginning to take shape? The more the European Union expands, the more cultural areas it will cover. As a result, procedural unification in some respects contradicts the heterogeneity of the European area, particularly its cultural, economic and, to some extent, value-based heterogeneity. Brexit and the threat of many other similar problems have become striking illustrations of this, although the older earlier debates about "[a multi-tiered Europe](#)" has already pointed to the emergence of profound structural shifts within the Union.

Historically, the European Union has been organised around a Western (Latin) core, while representatives of the former Byzantine world, such as Greece and Bulgaria, have merely joined it, recognising and adopting its rules. From then on, unity around this core has become increasingly unstable. Misunderstandings have taken various forms: not only between the Latin West and the Byzantine East, but also between the Protestant North and the Catholic South. It would seem that a united and cohesive Europe needs some restructuring.

Even before the current Russo-Ukrainian war, this situation was causing some confusion and fragmentation among pro-European Ukrainians. One group believed that there was no alternative to the European Union. Another group, like the Ukrainian writer Tarass Prokhasko, observed European hesitations before the war and became disillusioned, even pessimistic: "*The Ukrainian genes have clearly set two agendas. Firstly, we have always been in Europe and we will undoubtedly remain Europeans forever. Secondly, we must not rely on so-called Europe, because it is ignoring us and abandoning us. Like a kind of betrayed outpost experience. The dilemma lies in the border zone, in the frontier zone. If it weren't for us, you [Europeans] would know who Russia and the Ottomans really are.*"

A final group, which we can consider as intermediate, understands that a certain solution to global problems can and must be found in Ukraine. Here is what Ukrainian journalist Yulia Mostova wrote about this in 2020: "*Ukraine's vocation is not to foolishly copy Russia or the*

[1] Russian world a doctrine as well as a mindset frequently implemented by the rulers of modern Russia as justification of its military aggression of neighbouring countries, most significantly Ukraine since the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

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*European Union. Neither we nor the world can oscillate in this worn-out amplitude between dictatorship and liberalism. It's time for creativity on a grand scale".*

No doubt the contradiction between these vectors is only apparent. After all, Ukraine's membership of Europe, and therefore its "European choice", are the same thing. But membership of the European Union is something quite different. Europe's future will depend on how it is transformed.

In the modern era, two fundamental, albeit dialectical, patterns are emerging simultaneously:

- The development of nations cannot follow arbitrary trajectories and completely ignore their cultural determinants;
- Nations are not hostages to their history and can therefore make significant changes to their development.

Each of these configurations, examined in isolation and without taking the other into account, leads to a dead end. Cultural matrices cannot be ignored or overestimated. Unjustified hope in one case is no better than profound despair in the other.

Ukraine did not participate in the formation of the current European Union and has not found much of a place in the global security system on which the European Union has been built. However, it is entirely possible that the future (and hypothetical) reorganisation of the European security system will give rise to other operating models, in which Ukraine will then be able to participate. We can assume that the revolt of cultural identities is already underway, notably through the interesting process of multiplying alliance treaties. For example, the "Anglo-Saxon" alliance of the

United States, the United Kingdom and Australia (AUKUS). In other words, cultural dividing lines can be the source not only of cracks in European unity, but also of new structural unions. Turmoil in Europe is not inevitable. Ukrainian historian Yaroslav Hrytsak is right: "*Faced with competitors like China or the United States, European countries have no chance of competing individually; Europe can only compete as a large community.*" However, this does not mean that the current model is the only fair and the only possible one. Europe has more than once found the strength to overcome the challenges it has faced. As long as there is freedom of thought and a spirit of inquiry, it will be possible to emerge from the current difficulties with honour.

For Ukraine, Europe remains "*a necessary constant for the survival of the Ukrainian national project*" (Serhiy Plokyi), but Ukraine's place and role in Europe will depend mainly on two factors. Firstly, Ukraine must join united Europe as a state subject in its own right, an entity that understands its identity and has an elite that is aware of the country's national interests. Secondly, it is likely that the European Union will then undergo a certain reformatting, in particular that its future structure will be more clearly marked by cultural particularities. This is, of course, a hypothesis, and the near future will show just how realistic this is.

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